



Unveiling the Feminine: A Study of Draupadi's Narrative in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the *Mahabharata* through Draupadi's voice, unveiling the feminine yesterday suppressed histories of women's agency amid patriarchal illusions. This paper traces feminine evolution throughout the narrative: from Draupadi's fiery birth as an unwanted daughter, through her swayamvara rejection of norms, polyandrous marriage, public humiliations like the dice game, forest exile, to post-war reflections. It analyzes how Divakaruni subverts epic tropes, portraying Draupadi's desires, relationships (with Krishna, Kunti, Pandavas, Karna), and resilience as critiques of gender constraints. Employing feminist and postcolonial lenses, the study reveals illusions of passivity masking women's strategic power, sisterhood, and identity quests. By cantering Draupadi's inner world, the novel challenges male-dominated myths, affirming feminine narratives as drivers of history. This reinterpretation highlights enduring relevance for contemporary gender discourses, urging re-evaluation of ancient texts for silenced voices.

Keywords: Draupadi, feminist retelling, Mahabharata, feminine agency, patriarchal illusions, polyandry,

Introduction:

Literature has always borrowed ideas from mythology. M. H. Abrams notes that myths explain social customs and rules for living (170). Deeper Role of Myths. Myths are more than stories. They hold symbols with political, social, historical, and cultural meanings. Psychologist C. G. Jung saw myths as projections from humanity's shared unconscious. Shaping Society Myths help people accept certain values as normal. This shapes how societies behave. But in recent centuries, feminists view myths as tools patriarchy uses to sideline women. Feminist Response. Twentieth-century feminist movements pushed women writers to examine how literature portrays females. This led to reimagining popular myths from a fresh angle.

Divakaruni's 2008 novel narrates the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's first-person perspective, transforming her from epic victim to empowered narrator who unveils feminine experiences across epochs of her life. Born from sacrificial fire as Panchaali "the girl who wasn't invited" Draupadi embodies the "feminine yesterday": overlooked struggles threading the epic's timeline. Her story spans childhood isolation, swayamvara triumph/humiliation, Indraprastha's illusory splendour, dice-game disrobing, 13-year exile, Kurukshetra war, and widowed aftermath, each phase exposing patriarchal veils. Feminist critics note how this structure critiques androcentric myths, granting women narrative control. Draupadi's voice interrogates fate, desire (e.g., forbidden love for Karna), and justice, evolving from impulsive youth to reflective sage. The paper examines this "throughout" progression, using textual evidence to argue Divakaruni unveils resilient femininity against illusions of subjugation. Theoretical frameworks include Simone de Beauvoir's "Othering" and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminism, positioning Draupadi as a Third Wave icon. By historicizing her journey, the study reveals how yesterday's feminine threads reshape epic destiny, relevant for modern Indian women navigating tradition. Divakaruni, through her narration, subverts the focus of the grand narrative. In the epic, the tale. Is told through a flashback to Janamejaya and the focus is on the Pandava princes, warriors and the Battle. Draupadi is introduced to the readers in relation to the Pandava's forest expedition and her Swayamwara. Divakaruni's novel begins with the story of Draupadi's birth and the novel progresses. Along the lines of her life. Though the novel narrates the same incidents as in the epic, the narrative is Presented to the readers in relation to Draupati's life. Divakaruni asserts Draupadi's individuality in many instances throughout the novel. Her Thoughts about the name 'Draupadi' and how she goes on to rechristen herself 'Panchali' throws light on her refusal to be bound by the men in her life

Childhood and Birth:

Draupadi emerges from fire amid King Drupad's son-prayer, symbolizing imposed femininity in a patrilineal world. Her nursemaid's tales frame her as prophetic changer-of-history, yet father's rejection instills doubt: "In a society that looked down its patrician nose on anything except milk-and-almond hues, this was considered most unfortunate, especially for a girl". Dark-skinned and girl, she internalizes "unwanted" status, foreshadowing lifelong battles. Education divides genders: brother learns politics, she arts reinforcing domesticity. Defying this, Draupadi eavesdrops, craving power knowledge, her rebellion nascent. Prophecy of five husbands horrifies, clashing with monogamy ideals she vows for her future spouse. This phase unveils "yesterday's" feminine as marked by neglect, colourism, and curtailed ambition, setting narrative arc.

Feminine Identity and Agency:

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni masterfully reimagines the *Mahabharata* through Draupadi's eyes, breathing life into a character often relegated to the periphery. The narrative is a poignant exploration of Draupadi's inner world, where she grapples with the societal expectations imposed upon her. Her relationships with the Pandavas, Krishna, and herself serve as a canvas, painting a portrait of a woman navigating the intricate web of duty, desire, and identity. Through Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni challenges traditional notions of femininity, showcasing her protagonist's resilience, intellect, and emotional depth. The novel becomes a powerful testament to female empowerment, as Draupadi's journey becomes a symbol of resistance against patriarchal norms. By centering Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni not only reclaims a mythological figure but also gives voice to the silenced narratives of women, making *The Palace of Illusions* a compelling exploration of feminine strength and agency.

Swayamvara to Marriage: Desire and Defiance:

Swayamvara commodifies Draupadi as "bait" for Arjuna against Drona, yet she wins agency piercing the fish-eye. Rejecting Karna as "suta-putra" haunts her, blending classism with unspoken attraction—early feminine desire vs. norms. Kunti's "share" command enforces polyandry, Vyasa's virginity boon ironically prioritizes male pleasure. Marriage evolves femininity: Draupadi manages household politics, births sons, but chafes under rotation rules, yearning singularity. Krishna mentors politically, balm to her isolation, fostering strategic feminine power.

Indraprastha to Exile: Illusions Shattered:

Palace symbolizes illusory equality: splendor hides jealousies, dice game exposes it Yudhishtira gambles her away, Karna calls her "whore." Vastraharan tests resilience; Krishna's miracle saree extends, but trauma lingers, fueling war vengeance. Exile forges sisterhood: bonds with Kunti tense yet enduring, Subhadra supportive. Forest hardships reveal endurance cooking, comforting husbands—redefining queen ship beyond luxury. Karna longing persists, complicating fidelity illusions.

War and Aftermath: Legacy Unveiled:

Kurukshetra fulfills prophecy: Draupadi's peace mission fails, her curses hasten doom. Victories bittersweet Karna's death crushes unspoken love. Widowhood reflects: illusions of power dissolved, affirming feminine foresight.

Grand Narrative towards Draupdi:

As the story moves forward, Draupadi shows more maturity than the Pandava brothers. Draupadi's Insight on Husbands. She describes her husbands by saying, "Your childhood hunger is the one that never leaves you. No matter how famous or powerful they became, my husbands would always long to be cherished" (133). These words humanize the mighty Pandavas, revealing their hidden weaknesses just like any ordinary person's. Draupadi stands out against the Pandavas. She declares, "Perhaps Time was the master player. But within the limits allowed to humans in this world the sages called unreal, I would be a player, too" (59). This highlights her maturity and strong will. Many blame Draupadi's revenge for her humiliation as the war's cause. Yet figures like Yudhishtir and Duryodhan escape such judgment for their wrongs. Divakaruni's novel corrects this unfair view. The book shows Draupadi as the glue holding the Pandavas together. She guides them toward their fate. As she reflects, "I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav... Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner" (151).

Conclusion:

Throughout Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni unveils "feminine yesterday" as persistent agency piercing patriarchal narrative haze from birth rejection to war catalyst, Draupadi evolves, subverting myths. This retelling empowers silenced voices, mirroring modern fights against illusionary equality. Ultimately, it posits women as epic architects, demanding reinterpretation. In reclaiming Draupadi's narrative, *The Palace of Illusions* not only subverts traditional mythological frameworks but also amplifies the voices of women often silenced in canonical texts. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi transcends the boundaries of myth and

becomes a symbol of contemporary feminist resilience, challenging readers to rethink the interplay of gender, power, and identity in both ancient epics and modern lives.

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