

# Representation of Draupadi in Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions: A Reading*

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## Abstract

*This paper studies the character of Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Palace of Illusions. Told from Draupadi's perspective, the novel reimagines her life, emotions, desires, struggles, and identity in the shadow of patriarchy. By using feminist and narrative perspectives, the research highlights Draupadi's resistance, resilience, and selfhood. The findings reveal that Divakaruni's Draupadi challenges traditional portrayals and emerges as a strong, independent voice within the epic tradition. The study argues that The Palace of Illusions represents an important act of mythological rewriting that destabilizes male-dominated narratives and reclaims space for women's voices within epic literature. Employing feminist literary criticism and narrative theory, the study explores how Draupadi's voice functions as a form of resistance against silence and marginalization. Key moments such as her disrobing, exile, and emotional isolation.*

**Keywords:** Mythology, Draupadi, Feminism, Identity, Patriarchy.

Mythological narratives continue to shape cultural imagination, yet their meanings are never fixed. Each generation revisits these stories to negotiate changing social realities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* represents a contemporary feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, narrated through the voice of Draupadi. Instead of remaining a secondary figure defined by male heroes, Draupadi becomes the central consciousness of the novel. Divakaruni presents her as a woman who reflects on her own experiences, emotions, and silences, thereby transforming a traditionally marginal character into a speaking subject. Scholars have observed that this narrative shift enables Draupadi to reclaim agency and voice within a patriarchal epic tradition.

Indian epics like the Mahabharata have greatly influenced social and cultural values, but they are mostly narrated from a male perspective, often marginalizing women's voices. Draupadi, one of the most important female characters in the Mahabharata, is usually portrayed only through her relationships with men, while her emotions and inner struggles are ignored. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Palace of Illusions* offers a modern retelling of the

epic from Draupadi's point of view. By giving Draupadi a narrative voice, the novel humanizes her character and presents her as an emotionally complex and thoughtful woman rather than a symbolic figure. The novel highlights issues such as patriarchy, gender inequality, female identity, and emotional suppression.

Through first-person narration, Divakaruni challenges traditional versions of the epic and creates space for feminist interpretation. The present study focuses on Draupadi's identity, resistance to patriarchy, emotional conflicts, and relationships, showing how mythological narratives can be rewritten to reflect contemporary concerns about gender and social justice. Several critics read *The Palace of Illusions* as a feminist revision of myth. Bora highlights the significance of first-person narration, noting that it allows Draupadi to reclaim authority over her own story. This narrative strategy enables her to articulate suppressed emotions such as anger, desire, and ambition, thereby challenging male-dominated historiography.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is not merely a historical or mythic figure; she is presented as a self-determined woman navigating life's complexities. Draupadi's feminist awareness becomes visible when she questions the very foundation of patriarchal expectations: "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, p. 26). Draupadi's question about who decided that a woman's purpose is to support men exposes the injustice hidden in patriarchal traditions. Rather than accepting this role as natural, she recognizes it as socially imposed, revealing her early awareness that women possess identities beyond marriage and service. Though her resistance is subtle, it marks the beginning of her inner rebellion against gender hierarchy. By narrating her own story, Draupadi challenges male-centered storytelling, claims control over her identity, and openly critiques patriarchal norms. Divakaruni thus presents her as an active, thinking woman who asserts individuality instead of remaining a passive figure.

The brutal logic of patriarchy is revealed when Draupadi hears the declaration, "The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave" (190). The declaration that a wife is the husband's property exposes the brutal logic of patriarchy by reducing women to objects and commodities. This reflects a social order that denies women individuality and legitimizes control over their bodies and lives. Divakaruni uses this moment to reveal the deep-rooted dehumanization embedded in cultural and legal systems. Draupadi's growing awareness strengthens her inner rebellion, which becomes visible in her outspoken response to the dice game and her demand for justice. These acts present her as a modern woman who challenges male authority and aligns with feminist resistance to gender inequality. "I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies."

This line reflects Draupadi's emotional growth and painful maturity. Having experienced repeated betrayals and silence, she learns that harm does not come only from declared enemies but also from those she once trusted. The statement shows her movement toward self-reliance, where she begins to protect her dignity independently rather than expecting rescue. It marks a shift from dependence to inner strength, highlighting her gradual transformation into a more self-aware and emotionally resilient woman.

Draupadi's life, as narrated in *The Palace of Illusions*, illustrates her ongoing struggle against structures that seek to define her worth and agency through male authority whether through paternal control, marital politics, or social norms, "If perchance a man loses himself, he no longer has jurisdiction over his wife." (190)

Draupadi's statement that a man who loses himself has no authority over his wife transforms her into an intellectual challenger of patriarchy. By questioning a husband's right of ownership, she asserts that a woman is an independent human being, not an extension of male identity. Her logical resistance destabilizes male-centered law and affirms a woman's right to dignity and autonomy.

Divakaruni also exposes marriage as a patriarchal institution that treats women's bodies and futures as instruments of political strategy. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage and her being gambled away in the dice game reveal the extreme cruelty of this system. Yet, her constant questioning shows that while her obedience is outward, her resistance is inward, and this inner defiance defines her enduring strength. Draupadi is treated as a property and gambled away by her husband. Her public humiliation reflects how women's bodies and dignity are controlled by men. Yet, Divakaruni's Draupadi refuses to be entirely constrained by these limits; she constantly interrogates the ethics of her world, making her existential agency the core of the narrative. Divakaruni presents Draupadi's obedience as outward and her resistance as inward. This tension between duty and desire defines much of her suffering. Draupadi's transformation from a silenced victim to a moral force becomes most visible during the disrobing episode. Instead of retreating into shame, she confronts the entire court with prophetic intensity:

All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire Kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenceless woman. (194)

This moment signals a decisive shift in her identity. Draupadi no longer seeks mercy; she speaks with ethical authority, exposing the collective guilt of a patriarchal system that legitimizes violence in the name of tradition. By redirecting shame from herself to her oppressors, she transforms language into a weapon of resistance. Divakaruni thus presents Draupadi as a feminist figure whose strength lies in moral courage and the power to speak against injustice.

Unlike simplistic depictions, Draupadi in Divakaruni's narrative exhibits emotional complexity. She experiences love, jealousy, devotion, frustration, and longing. Her personal relationships with Krishna as friend and guide, with the Pandavas as partners, and with Karna as a symbolic figure contribute to her psychological depth. This nuanced portrayal encourages readers to grapple with the contradictions and inner conflicts of a figure traditionally filtered through male subjectivity. Giving space to the Draupadi's emotions, Divakaruni challenges the traditional image of the ideal woman's silent and emotionless. Desire and emotion are presented as a natural and human. Draupadi's emotional life becomes a source of strength rather than weakness. Divakaruni also presents Draupadi as capable of desire and inner conflict, "Wait for a man to avenge your honor, and you'll wait forever". (49)

This realization marks a painful shift from dependence to self-recognition. As hope in male protection fades, Draupadi begins to locate strength within herself. Her emotional vulnerability thus becomes a source of transformation, reinforcing the novel's feminist vision of inner resilience and self-defined agency. The Mahabharata through a female lens, Divakaruni not only revitalizes a familiar myth but also renders its themes relevant to contemporary discourses on gender, identity, and power. Her Draupadi confronts timeless dilemmas honor, freedom, justice that resonate with modern audiences challenging gender norms across cultures. This bridges the ancient with the modern, demonstrating that mythical narratives continue to carry powerful commentary on societal values.

I curled myself tight under the thorn bush, pressed my face into my dusty, snarled hair, and wept silently for them both, each bound to his hasty, reckless vow. How a promise made to each other or to oneself could paralyze a life! How pride had kept them from admitting their mistakes and thus from the happiness that might have been theirs (Divakaruni, 279)

A woman overwhelmed by grief, exhaustion, and helplessness. Unlike the powerful queen who speaks before kings, this Draupadi is alone with her pain, expressing sorrow in silence. Her tears are not only for the men trapped by their rigid promises, but also for the destructive nature of pride

and ambition. She reflects on how vows and ego imprison human beings and destroy possibilities of happiness. This realization shows Draupadi's psychological maturity. She begins to understand that suffering is not created by fate alone, but also by human choices driven by arrogance and fear of admitting mistakes.

The passage reflects Draupadi's deep emotional conflict as she witnesses the tragic consequences of pride, rigid vows, and unyielding honor. By curling beneath the thorn bush and weeping in silence, she symbolizes quiet suffering and helplessness in the face of inevitable destruction. Her reflection reveals that promises whether made to others or to oneself can become chains that imprison individuals, preventing reconciliation and growth. Draupadi also recognizes her own complicity through a vow of vengeance, understanding that her anger has further cemented hostility between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Thus, the passage introduces a central theme of the novel: how human pride and unresolved grievances perpetuate cycles of suffering, even among those who desire peace.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reclaims Draupadi's narrative from marginalization by amplifying her voice and giving her agency within a patriarchal epic tradition. Through feminist and postcolonial lenses, Draupadi emerges as a complex, multidimensional character who transcends victimhood to assert her identity, resilience, and autonomy. Exile brings suffering but also clarity. At this point in the narrative, Draupadi moves beyond anger as the central force shaping her identity. She begins to understand herself not merely as a wronged woman seeking retribution, but as an individual capable of reflection, wisdom, and moral clarity. The novel thus concludes with Draupadi attaining a form of inner autonomy. Her empowerment is no longer dependent on the defeat of her enemies but on her ability to interpret her experiences and claim ownership of her story. Divakaruni thereby presents Draupadi's final transformation as the highest expression of feminist consciousness— an affirmation that true strength lies in self-awareness, voice, and the freedom to define one's own existence.

Pain deepens her understanding of injustice and strengthens her resolve. The novel's feminist retelling not only challenges conventional mythic structures but also invites readers to reconsider gendered assumptions, cultural narratives, and the power of storytelling. Thus, Draupadi's reimagined persona embodies the ongoing struggle for equity and dignity that remains relevant in contemporary discussions of gender and power.

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