

# Power Dynamics and Spatial Hierarchies' in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions'

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## Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prominent Indian-American author recognized for her significant creative accomplishments. Her distinguished oeuvre comprises acclaimed novels including *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Oleander Girl* (2012), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions' intricately examines the interplay of spatial hierarchies and power dynamics, underscoring the limitations imposed on women by entrenched patriarchal systems. The novel reimagines the Mahabharata through Draupadi's perspective, focusing on her quest for identity, autonomy, and agency within a male-dominated world. Spatial hierarchies, represented by palaces and other physical domains, symbolize both her empowerment and confinement, revealing the paradoxical roles assigned to women. Draupadi's resistance to societal norms—through her pursuit of education, defiance of traditional gender roles, and assertion of voice—establishes her as a feminist icon challenging patriarchal oppression. Her experiences illustrate the psychological and social toll of systemic marginalization, as well as the enduring struggles of women for recognition and autonomy. By interweaving mythological and feminist elements, Divakaruni critiques long-standing structures of power and gender inequality. Divakaruni's works frequently examine themes of gender and community strife, intricately interlaced with mythological motifs, while also emphasizing the harsh reality encountered by women in Indian society. In her novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, she highlights the feminine perspective inside a multifaceted society. This study analyzes the complex links and connections among individuals as they traverse their arduous journeys of identity and space. This paper examines how the deprivation of space might foster empowerment in the context of the conflicts between personal identity and the stringent reality dictated by society norms. Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions' symbolizes the spatial hierarchies and power dynamics within the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Individuality, Connection, Retribution, Patriarchy, Power Dynamics, Subjugation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works vividly illustrate the human quest for identity and personal space. All conflicts for destiny involve the acquisition and reclamation of specific entities, as well as the relinquishment of predetermined aspects of nature.

To establish identification, one must be recognized after demonstrating the uniqueness of 'identity.' This is the compelling epic novel by Divakaruni. All the characters are seeking their identities within the context of their actions in the narrative. In their quest for self-reflection, they are profoundly shattered by the harsh facts of life. The female characters in the tale, such as Draupadi, Sikkhandi, Ghandhari, Kunti, and Madhri, experience profound oppression throughout their lives. In 'The Palace of Illusions,' the central role was performed in establishing and demonstrating their identity and supremacy in a comprehensive manner.

From ancient times to the contemporary era, women have been revered as goddesses, a concept referred to as 'Shakti' in Hinduism. They embody the Goddess, the creator of the cosmos, akin to women who serve as the divine source responsible for creation, preservation, and destruction of the planet, albeit not entirely, but within their own limitations. God manifests in many forms, although in the case of the feminine, it is a clear divination expressed through love and care for others. Water is the essence of life and civilization, and its characteristics and flavor are influenced by its geographical origin. These women symbolize the Goddess and water. And be recognized based on their place of origin. Indian society is characterized by patriarchy. Although women are revered as Goddesses, they endure several hardships in society, akin to Goddess Durga's destruction of demons and monsters. In antiquity, Goddess Durga, having attained the powers of knowledge and valor, slew the demon representing control, contempt for women, lust, and greed. In contemporary culture, individuals are predominantly influenced by the affluent, while male dominance and female harassment have become prevalent under the harsh scrutiny of the public. Women are facing both biological and psychological stress and are challenged to navigate their identities for successful survival. Slavery and oppression perpetually contend for emancipation. Divakaruni's works, including 'The Palace of Illusions,' 'Queen of Dreams,' 'The Vine of Desire,' and 'Sister of My Heart,' profoundly explore the female voice in relation to self-identity and liberty. Draupadi, the princess of Panchala, was born as a boon to Drupada from the sacred fire. The neglect and indecision intensify the fervor of the identity search. Drupad anticipates the birth of a male soldier rather than a female. This represents the most significant split in women's history; Draupadi embodies both feminine oppression and self-enlightenment. Her forceful voice signifies female equality amidst male dominance. "My years in my father's house would have been intolerable had it not been for my brother." I will always remember the sensation of his hand gripping mine, his determination not to forsake me. (TPI, 7-Draupadi). Draupadi's anguish from separation and alienation is plainly evident in her words. Anticipation and an inability to confront reality that destabilizes her mentality. Blutcher and Williams (2000) describe parental alienation as characterized by an unwillingness to acknowledge even minor imperfections, an unrealistic assertion of virtue, claims of adherence to excessively elevated moral standards, naivety regarding self-perception, a deliberate attempt to mislead others about motives or adjustments, and a personality adjustment issue marked by significant repression of conflict. (p-51) Parental Alienation, edited by Demosthenes Lorandos, William Bernet, Charles C. Thomas Publishers Ltd, USA, p. 170. Upon Draupadi's arrival in this world, her father refused to acknowledge her birth. This initial denial persisted as a lasting wound in her psyche throughout her survival.

Draupadi's dark complexion has instilled an inferiority sense in him. A belief in fair complexion will foster love for one's own desires and wholeheartedness. She harbors no doubt regarding the notion that 'Beauty attracts love.' A darker complexion and a yearning for love have become integral to her identity. "Gazing down from my rooms at the desolate compound below, I would feel despondency envelop me like a mantle of iron. Upon acquiring my own palace, I vowed that it would be entirely distinct. TPI-7 The aforementioned words illustrate her enduring desire for personal space. She desired her solitude and stability to be established within her own domain.

Gender differences are inherently acknowledged in Indian society. From the Vedic period to the present, women have been aspirationally comparing and contrasting themselves with men. Due of the societal partiality and treatment towards women. It is a recognized truth that men and women are analogous in their internal and exterior natures, as well as in the degree of exposure and articulation of their perspectives and convictions. Upon their celestial arrival from the fire, Drupad named his son 'Dhristadyumna,' signifying the destroyer of adversaries, and his daughter 'Draupadi,' denoting the daughter of Drupad exclusively. Men are anticipated to establish objectives and attain them independently, while women are supposed to serve as supporters and providers of sexual gratification.

According to Hindu mythology, an individual's social rank and vocation should be determined by the caste into which he is born. It is categorized into four groups: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. The Brahmin's responsibility is to study and impart scriptures and to perform sacrificial sacrifices to the sacred fire for the benefit of the sovereign and the nation. The Kshatriya's obligation is to govern the nation through his sovereignty, protect it from adversarial kingdoms, and administer the realm justly. Vaisiga's responsibility is to connect businesses for the welfare of the populace and to remit taxes to the king, so contributing to the transient portion of the king's treasury. The role of a Sudra is to serve the three primary types of individuals: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. Drona serves as the royal instructor for both the Pandavas and Kauravas. Prior to becoming the royal preceptor in the Hastinapur kingdom, he was deeply affected by a tragic past replete with disappointment and insult, akin to treachery from a once-loyal friend, which left an indelible wound in his psyche. Drona and Drupad were close friends during their time at Gurukula. During that naive phase of college life, they shared all that they possessed. Prince Drona has assured his schoolmate that he will not forget him. Drupad affirmed his promise with the words, "Come to me when I ascend to the throne of Panchaal, and all that I possess shall be yours." (TPI, 15) The affectionate words etched in his memory resurfaced as his beloved son Asvatama wept for milk due to the harshness of poverty.

On that significant day, Drona, the esteemed instructor, arrived in Panchala and expressed a strong desire to visit King Drupada. The king has repudiated the previous transparent camaraderie between them. This repudiation of previous memoirs and relationships ignited a fervor of anxiety, which then transformed into a need for retribution. In the royal court, Drupad dismissed Drona's foreign appearance, igniting a sense of self-respect and altering his temperament. His friendship has been undermined by the king's arrogance and mistreatment of the impoverished. "He instructed a councilor to escort the stranger to the treasury, where daily donations were distributed to the impoverished, but the Brahmin rejected the man's grasp." (TPI, 16) The Brahmin's dignity confronts the King's disparaging gaze, seeking retribution for future transgressions.

Drona proclaimed assertively, "I am no beggar!" I expect you to fulfill your pledge of friendship. You once requested that I reside with you, assuring me that anything you possessed would also belong to me. I do not desire your wealth; rather, I request that you secure a position for me at your court. TPI-16 Drupad has neglected the former innocent relationship, which serves as the foundation of Drona's anguish. The denial perpetuates the unhealed hurt, continually manifesting in his consciousness until it is extinguished by the revenge he vowed to pursue. When self-respect is undermined by another's pride and disrespectful treatment, one's identity is called into question, prompting the mind to adopt methods to validate it. King Drupad has demonstrated his royal authority rather than familial connection to Drona. Drona demonstrated his virtuous and authoritative presence when he accomplished his objective by securing the Kampilya kingdom through Arjun, his favored pupil. Arjun brought Drupad to the feet of his guru as a form of 'Gurudakshina.' Suffering begets suffering; offense culminates in retribution. "He is the preeminent

instructor of military strategy,” he stated. He instructed us princes for numerous years. Our studies are now concluded, and as his dakshina, he has requested that we apprehend you. You are likely familiar with him. His name is Drona.(TPI, 19) At that moment, Drona exacted his retribution by inquiring who was the beggar now, despite possessing the entire country. Drupad implored him not to ridicule him; he would have preferred death over such mockery. Drona has maliciously tarnished his ego, preventing Drupad from reconciling with his old friend. Friendship represents a balanced collaboration between two intellects. In society, one must establish relationships of equal standing, which becomes the prevailing norm. “As you stated that friendship can only exist between equals, I required a kingdom.” I will now return half of your land. South of the Ganges River, you shall govern. The north shall be mine. (TPI, 20) Drupad has completely submitted to the authority of Drupad. Friendship requires submission of the heart and head, not of the feet. He has successfully established his identity and avenged the insult to Drupad, but this success has proliferated like a tree, casting its toxic shadows. The king is allied with the Brahmin’s friendship. This is an atypical tradition from that era. Childhood friendships must be acknowledged and cherished indefinitely. Drona resembled our father precisely.(TPI, 21) The identical demeanor and insult exchanged between Drona and Drupad culminate in vengeance, representing yet another distinct manifestation of friendship.

“When the Supreme Being revealed Himself, the brahmin emerged from His head, the kshatriya from His arm, the vaishya from His thigh, and the sudra from His foot.”(TPI, 22)

The aforementioned comments of the Royal Teacher of Panchaal were directed to Draupadi and Dhristadyumna. It demonstrates the dominance of monarchs over the Brahmin, Vaishya, and Sudra communities. The physical parts referenced—Head, Arm, Thigh, Foot—ultimately represent wisdom, protection, prosperity, and servitude. Wisdom governs all human actions. The Brahmin guides the King, and the King must govern the realm solely based on their counsel. All riches acquired by the Vaishyas should be transferred to the ruler’s authority. One must go towards their destination alone through the services provided by the widely dispersed Sudra across the nation. They are regarded as superior to Sudras. The sutra community is indeed oppressed by the aforementioned triad of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas. They encountered neglect at that moment. Sudras are forbidden from associating with non-Sudras and from obtaining an education. Draupadi was destined to alter the trajectory of history. During that period, women were disregarded as equals to men. They encounter disparate treatment from both family members and society. In this novel, Draupadi serves as an iconoclast from a feminist perspective. She desires to attain education and martial arts on par with her brother Dhristadyuma. Women are governed by both men and women, and they are anticipated to adhere to and support men, with restrictions on exercising their autonomy. They are admonished to receive an education equivalent to that of men, including training in combat arts. They are anticipated to adhere to male authority, assume the role of a domestic leader, and manage family responsibilities. Dhai Ma has criticized Draupadi for being excessively assertive, overly combative, and exhibiting a manner of speech that is too masculine. (TPI, 25) This incident demonstrates that women are forbidden from articulating their opinions and desires, with no exceptions, even if they are a queen or princess. A woman is merely a woman, not a queen or princess, but men are consistently men, ranging from kings to beggars. ‘Changingness’ is an inherent characteristic of women that persistently accompanies them from birth to death. The lives of women are unpredictable. Each one is distinct from the others in terms of their qualities and attitudes. ‘Being different’ is not the issue; rather, ‘treating differently’ is the challenge. The fundamental role of women is to assist warriors rather than to assume the role of a warrior themselves, while also nurturing their masculine ties, such as those with their father, brother, spouse, and kids. Draupadi challenges conventional notions of femininity; she seeks

to transcend traditional barriers and assert her own identity and intrinsic value. The concealed animosity between Drona and Drupad stems from their former friendship, highlighting societal divisions.

Draupadi has born to 'change the course of history'. In those days women are neglected to become equivalents with men. They are faced unequal treatment by family members as well as society. For example in this novel, Draupadi plays the role of iconoclast of world by the feminist point of vision. She also wants to get education and martial arts as equal as her brother Dhristadyuma. Women are controlled by men as well as women and they are expected to follow and support men not allowed acting by their will. They are reprimanded to get education equal to men, learning martial arts. They are expected to follow men and be a kitchen queen and maintain the household works. Dhai ma has complained about Draupadi as 'too hard handed argumentative, too manlike in my speech. (TPI,25) This incident shows that women are prohibited to speak and express their views and willingness no exception even if it is the queen or princess. A woman is the women not queen or princess but men are the men always from king to the beggar. 'Changingness' is the inseparable quality of women constantly follows like shadow from her cradle to tomb. Women's life is mercurial. Of course each one is different from one another by their qualities, attitude sensationally. 'Being different' is not the problem but 'treating different' only the complication. The highest purpose of women is to support warriors not to become a warrior and to support her masculine relationships like father, brother, husband and sons. Draupadi violate this customary idea of women, she wants to break out this tread old barrier of women and stand by her own stand and individual worth. Drona and Drupad's hidden background of the vengeance towards them is their friendship in the past days, which marks the partitions in the society.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skillfully combines the themes of spatial hierarchies and power dynamics to emphasize the limitations placed on women by patriarchal systems. While the palace represents Draupadi's prestige and power, it also represents her imprisonment in gendered roles and social norms. The narrative highlights the conflict between agency and enslavement through her movement across various areas, finally exposing the fortitude and inner strength needed to oppose long-standing authority institutions. As Draupadi traverses these hierarchies, it becomes a moving examination of the larger challenges women confront in achieving autonomy and identity in a dominance-shaped world.

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