



RE-WRITING ANCIENT INDIA: REREADING THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS FROM A FEMINIST LENS

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Abstract

Indian epics have historically functioned as foundational cultural texts shaping social values, ethical norms, and gender roles. The Mahabharata, depicts its narrative complexity, largely reflects a patriarchal worldview that marginalizes women's voices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions (2008) represents a significant feminist intervention by retelling the epic through the voice of Draupadi, a central yet silenced female figure. This paper examines the novel as a feminist rewriting of ancient Indian history and mythology. Drawing upon feminist literary theory and postcolonial feminist perspectives, the study explores how Divakaruni reconstructs Draupadi's identity, interrogates patriarchal interpretations of Dharma, critiques gendered power structures, and foregrounds women's agency. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that The Place of Illusions transforms myths into a site of feminist resistance by challenging male-centric historiography and reclaiming female subjectivity.

Keywords: *feminist retelling, Indian mythology, Draupadi, patriarchy, women's agency, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni*

Introduction

Indian mythology occupies a central place in shaping cultural identity, ethical frameworks, and social hierarchies within the Indian subcontinent. Epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are not merely literary compositions but ideological narratives that define

concepts of duty, honor, kinship and gender roles. These texts have been transmitted across generations and moral exemplars, often reinforcing patriarchal values that normalize women's silence, sacrifice and subordination. While the Mahabharata is celebrated for its moral complexity, its narrative authority remains deeply androcentric.

Women in the epic function as catalysts for male action rather than autonomous subjects with interiority. Characters such as Kunti, Gandhari, and Draupadi are central to the unfolding of the narrative, yet their voices are mediated through male perspectives. Draupadi, in particular, embodies this paradox. Born of the fire and destined to alter history, she is repeatedly subjected to humiliation, objectification, and silence. Her public disrobing in the dice hall stands as one of the most traumatic moments in the epic, yet her suffering is subordinated to the moral dilemmas of male warriors.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* challenges this patriarchal silencing by reclaiming Draupadi's voice. By narrating the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni performs a feminist act of re-revision, transforming myth into a space of resistance. This paper examines how the novel rewrites ancient India through a feminist lens, foregrounding female agency, questioning patriarchal morality, and reimagining women's roles in mythic history.

Review of Literature

Feminist literary criticism emphasizes the importance of revisiting canonical texts to expose gender bias and recover marginalized voices. Adrienne Rich conceptualizes re-vision as an act of survival for women writers, arguing that looking back at traditional narratives with fresh eyes enables resistance against patriarchal authority. Feminist scholars have widely applied this concept to mythological retellings.

Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that woman is constructed as the other provides a theoretical framework for understanding Draupadi's marginalization. Within the Mahabharata, Draupadi's identity is defined through her relationships with men rather than through her own subjectivity. Her body becomes a site upon which male power and honor are contested.

Postcolonial feminist critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicate this analysis by questioning whether silenced women can speak within dominant discourses. Scholars including Meenakshi Mukherjee and Mandira Sharma have examined *The Palace of Illusions* as a feminist counter-narrative that restores Draupadi's voice and emotional depth. However, limited scholarship explores how the novel rewrites ancient Indian ideology itself, a gap this paper seeks to address.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in feminist literary criticism. The primary text for analysis is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Secondary sources include feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and scholarly studies on Indian mythology.

The research employs close textual analysis and comparative reading with Vyasa's *Mahabharata* to identify ideological shifts. Feminist theoretical frameworks are applied to interpret representations of gender, power, and agency.

Results and Findings

The study reveals that Divakaruni reclaims Draupadi's narrative voice, transforming her from a symbolic figure into a historical subject. Patriarchal institutions such as marriage, kingship, and dharma are critically examined from a female perspective. Female desire, anger, and ambition are portrayed as legitimate emotional responses rather than moral transgressions.

The novel exposes the gendered nature of moral codes in ancient India and re-imagines myth as a space of feminist resistance. Women emerge as thinkers and critics rather than passive sufferers.

Analysis and Discussion

Draupadi's Voice and Narrative Authority

The first person narration in *The Palace of Illusions* represents a radical departure from traditional epic storytelling. Draupadi's voice challenges centuries of patriarchal narration by articulating her emotional and psychological experiences. Her questioning of the dice-hall injustices exposes the moral bankruptcy of a system that permits the objectification of women.

Marriage functions are a key site of patriarchal control in the novel. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage is imposed upon her without consent, highlighting the denial of female autonomy. Divakaruni portrays marriage not as divine destiny but as a social institution designed to preserve male alliances.

Female desire, particularly Draupadi's attraction to Karna, is depicted as an act of resistance. By acknowledging her desire, Draupadi asserts ownership over her emotional life, challenging normative expectations of chastity and silence. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain how such acts destabilize patriarchal norms.

Questioning Dharma and Moral Autonomy

The novel also interrogates the concept of dharma, exposing its gender bias. Draupadi questions why dharma demands her endurance while excusing male violence. This critique redefines ancient Indian not as a moral idea but as a contested ideological space.

The feminist rereading of ancient Indian epics is not only merely an act of literary reinterpretation but a cultural and political intervention. Mythology, often perceived as a sacred and immutable, has historically functioned as a vehicle for legitimizing patriarchal social orders. By interrogating these myths, feminist writers expose the ideological mechanisms through which women's oppression is normalized. Divakaruni's rewriting participates in this broader feminist project by challenging the epistemological authority of the Mahabharata.

Draupadi's anger, often criticized in traditional readings, emerges in *The Palace of Illusions* as a rational and ethical response to injustice. Feminist theorists argue that women's anger has historically been delegitimized to maintain patriarchal control. By validating Draupadi's rage, Divakaruni reframes anger as a form of moral clarity rather than moral failure.

Patriarchy and the Female Honor

The politics of female embodiment is another crucial aspect of Divakaruni's feminist vision. Draupadi's body becomes a site upon which male honor, revenge, and power are inscribed. The public disrobing episode reveals how patriarchal societies regulate women's bodies to preserve masculine authority. Divakaruni's narrative foregrounds the trauma of this violence, shifting attention from heroic discourse to embodied suffering.

Furthermore, the novel critiques the exclusion of women from political decision-making. Despite being queens, women such as Draupadi and Kunti are denied participation in governance. Their counsel is sought only when it aligns with male interests. This marginalization mirrors historical pattern in which women's political agency has been systematically erased from historical narratives.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is also marked by intellectual curiosity and philosophical questioning. She challenges the authority of sages, gods, and scriptures, refusing to accept destiny as immutable. This skepticism positions her as a proto-feminist thinker who recognizes the constructed nature of social norms.

By reimagining Draupadi's friendship with Krishna, the novel introduces an alternative ethical relationship base on dialogue rather than domination. Krishna becomes a confidant

rather than a distant divine authority, allowing Draupadi to articulate doubts that the epic traditionally suppresses.

Contemporary Relevance of Feminist Mythmaking

The feminist reconstruction of ancient India in *The Palace of Illusions* also challenges nationalist romanticization of the past. Rather than presenting ancient Indian as a harmonious golden age, Divakaruni reveals it as a society structured by hierarchy, exclusion, and gendered violence. Such a portrayal invites readers to engage critically with cultural heritage rather than accept it uncritically.

From a contemporary perspective, Divakaruni's retelling resonates with ongoing struggles for gender justice. The issues Draupadi confronts- sexual violence, lack of consent, silencing of women- remain disturbingly relevant. The novel thus bridges mythic past and lived present, demonstrating the enduring relevance of feminist interventions in literature.

The feminist reconfiguration of Draupadi's character in *The Palace of Illusions* extends beyond narrative voice to encompass psychological depth and ethical reasoning. Unlike the epic Draupadi whose emotions are largely subsumed under divine destiny, Divakaruni's Draupadi reflects critically on her own anger, ambition, and suffering. This inward reflection allows the character to emerge as a self-aware subject who recognizes the injustice of the structures governing her life.

One of the most significant feminist interventions in the novel is the reinterpretation of the dice-hall episode. Traditional readings focus on the moral crisis faced by the Pandavas, whereas Divakaruni foregrounds Draupadi's embodied trauma. The act of public disrobing is presented not as a symbolic event but as a form of sexual violence, thereby aligning the narrative with contemporary feminist understanding of bodily autonomy and consent.

The politics of silence plays a crucial role in the novel. Draupadi repeatedly confronts the expectations that women must endure sufferings quietly to preserve social harmony. By refusing silence and demanding answers, she disrupts the patriarchal logic that equates female virtue with submission. Speech, in this context, becomes a form of resistance and self-assertion.

Divakaruni also critiques the romanticization of female sacrifice. Draupadi's suffering is not portrayed as a noble or redemptive but as unnecessary and imposed. This perspective challenges cultural narratives that glorify women's pain as a moral ideal, revealing how such narratives function to sustain gender inequality.

The novel further examines the exclusion of women from political power. Despite her status as queen, Draupadi is systematically excluded from decision-making processes. Her insights are dismissed, reflecting a broader historical pattern in which women's political intelligence has been marginalized. Divakaruni thus rewrites ancient India as a space where power is unevenly distributed along gendered lines.

Another important dimension of the analysis concerns female solidarity. Relationships between women-particularly Draupadi's interactions with Kunti, Gandhari, and her companions- reveal complex negotiations of power, rivalry, and empathy. These interactions underscore the ways patriarchal systems often pit women against one another while simultaneously offering moments of shared understanding and resistance.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, *The Palace of Illusions* resists both western universalism and uncritical cultural nationalism. Divakaruni does not reject Indian tradition outright; rather, she interrogates its gendered assumptions. This balanced critique enables a feminist engagement with mythology that is rooted in cultural specificity while remaining ethically critical. (Nabar56)

Finally, the novel's relevance extends to contemporary society. Draupadi's questions regarding justice, consent, and moral responsibility resonate with ongoing debates about women's rights in modern India. By linking mythic past with present realities, Divakaruni demonstrates that feminist reinterpretation is not merely retrospective but urgently contemporary.

Conclusion

The Palace of Illusions represents a powerful feminist rewriting of Indian mythology. By granting Draupadi narrative authority, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges patriarchal historiography and reclaims women's voices from the margins of myth. (Nabar56) The novel not only humanizes Draupadi but also interrogates the ideological foundations of ancient Indian society. Through feminist re-vision, Divakaruni transforms myth into a site of resistance, dialogue, and reinterpretation. (Rich18)

Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates that rewriting the past is essential for reimagining the future. By revisiting ancient India through a feminist lens, Divakaruni invites reader to question inherited narratives and envision more inclusive cultural histories.

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