

Draupadi: Modern Woman Voice in *The Palace of Illusion* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract- Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* offers a refreshing retelling of the Mahabharata from a distinctly female perspective. In this work, Divakaruni gives voice to Draupadi also known as Panchaali who has long been sidelined in traditional, male-centered narratives of the epic. While earlier versions of the Mahabharata largely emphasized male heroes and relegated women to the background, this novel brings Draupadi to the forefront, portraying her as a complex, modern woman. The author reimagines Draupadi not merely as a supporting character, but as the central figure whose thoughts, desires, and struggles drive the story forward. This paper explores how Draupadi's voice in *The Palace of Illusions* embodies the sensibilities of a contemporary woman, challenging patriarchal norms and asserting her place in a traditionally male-dominated saga.

Indexed Terms- Feminism, Identity, Suppression of woman

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a celebrated Indian-American author, offers a fresh take on the Mahabharata in her bestselling novel *The Palace of Illusions*. Told from the perspective of Draupadi, the story reimagines the ancient epic through a female lens. Traditionally, epics like the *Ramayana* and the Mahabharata have been passed down with a strong male focus, often sidelining women's experiences and voices. Recognizing this imbalance, Divakaruni along with other contemporary female writers seeks to reshape these narratives, placing women like Draupadi at the heart of the story.

In many of our sacred texts, women appear only in supporting roles, a reflection of the patriarchal values deeply rooted in society. For generations, women have

lived under norms that favor male dominance, often silencing their voices. In contrast, Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as a powerful, multi-dimensional character one with strength, vulnerability, and a voice of her own. Through *The Palace of Illusions*, she redefines Draupadi's journey, giving her a distinct identity and emotional depth that challenge traditional depictions.

While rewriting a revered mythological tale could have drawn criticism, Divakaruni's novel was widely praised and became a national bestseller in India. Unlike earlier telling especially that of Ved Vyasa, who centered male heroes and left little room for female agency Divakaruni's version actively works to break that pattern. She brings Draupadi's inner world to life, removing the gender bias and celebrating her role as a central figure. As Divakaruni herself writes in the book's prologue: "I would uncover the story that lay invisible between lines of men's exploits. Better still, I would have her tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heart breaths, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and place in it."

King Drupad, the powerful ruler of Panchaal and one of the most prosperous kings in the land of Bharata, was the father of Draupadi. However, her birth was far from what he had hoped for. Longing for a son who could take revenge on his rival Drona, Drupad had fervently prayed to the gods not for a daughter, but for a warrior son. When Draupadi was born instead, she arrived as an unanticipated gift, and her father's disappointment was palpable. He struggled to accept her, offering her little warmth or affection.

From an early age, Draupadi was acutely aware of the difference between being a son and a daughter in a patriarchal world. She grew up knowing she was not the child her father had wanted, a realization that shaped much of her emotional world. Yet, her destiny was no less extraordinary. It was foretold that she

would alter the course of history: “You will bring about the death of evil kings, and of your children and your brother. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history” (p. 39).

This prophecy cast a long shadow over her life, but it also underscored her power and significance. Her experience echoes Simone de Beauvoir’s iconic assertion: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” Draupadi’s journey from an unwanted daughter to a pivotal figure in a great epic illustrates the making of a woman shaped by struggle, destiny, and strength.

In a patriarchal society where gender roles are sharply defined, the differences between men and women are deeply ingrained. Although Draupadi was born into royalty as the daughter of King Drupad her upbringing did not reflect the status of a princess. Her father’s attention and admiration were primarily reserved for her brother, Dhristadyumna, while she was often sidelined. As she grew older, Draupadi became more aware of the societal expectations placed on her as a woman.

Her education was limited to skills deemed appropriate for girls: music, dance, painting, and other arts. These lessons, though considered graceful, felt empty and unfulfilling to her. What Draupadi truly desired was the knowledge imparted to boys training in governance, statecraft, and the responsibilities of ruling. Yet, such learning was denied to her. Her father and tutors dismissed her interest in political matters, reinforcing the idea that women had no place in affairs of the kingdom. Even within the royal household of Panchaal, girls were treated as secondary. As one line in the novel captures it, “Boys are different from girls...When will you accept that?” (p. 25).

Despite this discouragement, Draupadi’s close friend, Krishna, saw her potential and helped prepare her for the future. The gender bias embedded in education became yet another challenge she had to confront. Still, as the novel shows, Draupadi was not one to quietly conform. She displayed strength and determination, refusing to accept an inferior role or be overshadowed by her brother.

Later, when King Drupad organized Draupadi’s *Swayamvara* a traditional ceremony where a princess chooses her husband it became clear that the event was more symbolic than sincere. In reality, Drupad had already hoped Arjuna would win. Initially, Draupadi felt excited about the idea of choosing her life partner, but that excitement faded once she realized the *Swayamvara* was a competition, where she was treated like a prize to be won. Karna, who first succeeded in the challenge, stirred feelings of admiration in her. However, upon questioning his lineage and learning of his lower caste, he felt deeply insulted and withdrew from the contest.

Ultimately, Arjuna emerged victorious, and Draupadi was married to him. But instead of feeling joy, she felt reduced to an object, a reward in a game orchestrated by others. Her experience echoed the broader theme of how women were often viewed in ancient texts not as individuals with agency, but as possessions. As she poignantly reflects, “I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole” (p. 57).

Draupadi felt a deep fascination for Karna, drawn not just to his exceptional prowess in battle but also to his dignified and commanding presence. Although he was the son of the sun god Surya and Kunti born of divine heritage society knew him only as a *Sutaputra*, the child of a charioteer, due to the secrecy surrounding his birth. Draupadi admired him and had once hoped to choose him as her husband. However, her father, King Drupad, disapproved, favoring Arjuna instead, whose victory would serve his personal vendetta against Drona. The *Swayamvara*, a ceremony meant to give Draupadi the power to select her groom, in truth offered her no real choice or agency.

Her lack of control over her life didn’t end there. After her marriage to Arjuna, Kunti his mother insisted that Draupadi become the shared wife of all five Pandava brothers. Draupadi, who had only desired to wed Arjuna, was again denied the right to choose. Bound by tradition and familial duty, she had no option but to comply. In a moment of reflection, she expressed disbelief at how drastically her life had changed, saying, “I couldn’t quite believe what a transformation in my life had undergone or that I helped to bring about this new destiny we were living” (p. 139).

Her relationship with Karna remained emotionally layered. Although she had publicly rejected him during the *Swayamvara* because of his supposed low status, she later regretted that decision deeply. Karna continued to hold a special place in her heart, and she mourned the way she had dismissed him. Karna, wounded by that rejection and shaped by years of exclusion, nursed a quiet resentment toward Draupadi and her husbands. His loyalty lay with the Kauravas, whom he saw as allies against the Pandavas.

Their strained relationship reached a breaking point during the infamous dice game. After the Pandavas gambled away their wealth and kingdom, they ultimately staked and lost Draupadi herself. This horrific moment underscored the entrenched patriarchy of the era, where a woman could be treated as mere property. In the Kaurava court, Draupadi faced public humiliation. Karna, consumed by bitterness, joined the attack on her dignity. In one of the most brutal moments, he declared: “Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too. A woman like Draupadi who married five men is not a wife but a whore, and a whore has no honor” (p. 192).

When Dushasana dragged Draupadi into the royal court, nearly stripped of her dignity, the silence was chilling. The assembled elders pillars of wisdom and moral authority chose silence over justice. No one dared to intervene. In that moment, the patriarchal underpinnings of their society where women were treated as possessions, mere pawns in men's games were laid bare. Draupadi herself posed a devastating question that cut through the quiet: “If Yudhishtira first lost himself in that wager, how could he stake me afterward?” But no one answered. The *Mahabharata*, in its traditional retelling, rarely champions justice for women. Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, flips that script. She gives Draupadi not just a voice but a stage.

Though Draupadi became the wife of all five Pandava brothers, only they had the freedom to marry again if they chose. Draupadi, however, was confined to the expectations of her role. A clear double standard prevailed: she would have been harshly punished if she had sought another partner. Divakaruni frames this

as a direct critique of a world where women live under rules that men neither create nor follow.

Draupadi's life was no fairy tale. A divine boon restored her virginity year after year, so that she could cycle through husbands without tarnishing her purity. But this magical reset did not guarantee her any autonomy. Her life and her body were not her own. Even her lingering feelings for Karna, the man she could never have, were controversial. When her eyes found him in the court, it was seen as scandalous. According to patriarchal scripture.

Yet this demand for emotional purity was a hypocrisy of patriarchal law: a man's affection is his alone; a woman's heart, however, belongs to everyone but herself.

The book's title, *The Palace of Illusions*, is both poetic and profound. In Sanskrit, *maya* means illusion a façade. Indraprastha, the magnificent capital city the Pandavas built, along with their courtly lives, all looked splendid on the outside. But it was fragile. Compound interest in human pride and divine charisma could still collapse spectacularly. A single game of dice brought it all tumbling down.

Yudhishtira loses everything his kingdom, his brothers, his own freedom and finally, even Draupadi is wagered away. Humiliated and powerless, she is summoned to the court as if she were a prize to be claimed. She is treated like a courtesan, a toy to be shown off.

In that moment, the elders again look away. Draupadi speaks out; she demands recognition of her humanity, her rights. But society's structures are defined by men, and women are expected to silently submit. A life of submission. A tradition of obedience. Draupadi's words fall on deaf ears.

Even Karna once her ideal of a noble warrior smirks at her public disgrace. His bitterness, long fueled by shame and abandoned pride, finds an unholy outlet in her shame. Draupadi becomes the tragic symbol of a world where women are commodities, stripped of both dignity and agency. That very injustice becomes the spark that ignites the War of Kurukshetra. Draupadi,

overcome by rage, rises. She unleashes a promise born from agony. Standing before the court, she proclaims.

Her grief gives her strength. She vows not to tie her hair until she has washed it with the blood of the Kauravas. It is an oath made in pain and resolve, marking her not as a helpless victim, but as the catalyst for destiny. Her words set the stage for the epic war that reshapes Bharata's future.

This speech marks a turning point: Draupadi's suffering transforms into defiance. Alongside her five husbands, she enters a twelve-year exile, enduring hardship and hunger. Yet she continues to stand not as a silent adjunct to their pain, but as a voice of fierce integrity and rebellion.

CONCLUSION

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses Draupadi's journey as a lens to explore modern feminism. Far from being a passive victim, Divakaruni recasts Draupadi as a fully realized protagonist complex, defiant, and determined. In a patriarchal society that reduces women to roles daughter, wife, or mother she refuses to be confined. These roles aren't chosen; they're assigned. Divakaruni challenges that by giving Draupadi a bold, modern voice one that demands recognition as an individual, not an accessory.

Through vivid snapshots her humiliation in the court, her internal conflict over forbidden love, her oath in blood Divakaruni illustrates what it means to demand agency in a world built to deny it. It's not just reform it's a resurrection. Draupadi becomes the author of her own story. A woman remembered not for what men decreed, but for the spirit she embodied the power to speak, to demand, and to endure.

In retelling this ancient tale from the heart of a woman who dared to speak back to silence, Divakaruni builds a bridge between myth and modernity. And in doing so, she offers a lesson for our own time: that history belongs to those who have a voice and that silence is the only oppression more devastating than overt violence.

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