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## The Feminine Voice Reimagined: Draupadi's Perspective in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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### Abstract

**Aim:** This paper explores the theme of power and identity in the novel by focusing on how the narrative subverts patriarchal structure. Through Draupadi's pursuit of self-identity and empowerment, Divakaruni reasserts female agency within a patriarchal epic, providing a nuanced critique of gender dynamics and reinterpreting history from a feminist perspective. This paper aims to analyse how *The Palace of Illusions* navigates the intersections of myth, gender, and power, ultimately redefining the role of women in mythology and literature.

**Methodology and Approach:** This research paper employs a qualitative, feminist literary analysis of *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The study uses close reading to explore themes of gender, power, and identity through the lens of Draupadi, reimagined as a protagonist with agency.

**Outcome:** This research highlights how *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines Draupadi as a complex, empowered character, challenging patriarchal narratives of the Mahabharata. The study contributes to feminist literary discourse and provides a framework for analysing similar retellings in contemporary literature.

**Conclusions and Suggestions:** The novel challenges traditional gender roles and highlights issues of power, identity and autonomy, making it a significant contribution to feminist literature. Future research could explore comparative studies with other feminist retellings, or examine its impact on contemporary feminist discourse in mythology and literature.

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In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni selects segments featuring Draupadi from the epic and recounts the entire narrative from her perspective. The novel is an earnest endeavour in the history of Indian epics and sets Divakaruni as an ambassador of women's rights. The author has re-created and retold the epic with the addition of some fictional characters and with an impressive language and inimitable style and she is successful in riveting the readers to the novel. Myths, as cultural creations, unite individuals into communities globally. Human groups have a crucial role in transmitting myths between generations and eras, and literature extensively draws from these narratives. Revisionist mythmaking is a frequent technique employed by authors who wish to revalue the experiences of marginalized people and challenges hegemonic narratives. Reinterpreting ancient texts reveals new critical perspectives. Revisionist texts undermine patriarchal and other dominant portrayals by prioritizing marginalized individuals. Revisionist works depict women's progression from the periphery to the core, in contrast to mainstream narratives that often marginalize them.

Even though Divakaruni has stuck to the original story, occasionally she has wielded her creative ability to make her work spicy and enthralling. Draupadi, the protagonist, pours out her heart to the readers, as to her sufferings, trauma, pain and the injustices she faces, right from her birth. The narration of Draupadi's birth is assigned to Dhairya Ma, a fictional confidant and Divakaruni makes a beautiful word picture of the birth and has helped the readers visualise the birth of Draupadi from fire.

Draupadi's origin signifies a transference from the celestial realm to the terrestrial plane. Drupad conducts a yajna to beget a son capable of avenging Drona, resulting in the birth of a son, Dhristadyumna, and a daughter from the sacred fire. Draupadi, the daughter, is bestowed with a prophecy that she would alter the path of history. Draupadi, like a migrant reaches the palace and is not accepted there. Divakaruni brings forth clearly the migration and displacement of Draupadi and the trauma followed by that. Her expulsion from heaven and subsequent residence in King Drupad's castle shapes her perspective on life. She endeavours to assimilate and adapt to the lifestyle of the palace, even attempting

to emulate the graceful Queen Sulochana. While meeting other princesses, she feels like an alien and finds the atmosphere distressing, “If someone addressed me – a guest or a newcomer, usually, who didn’t know who I was – I tended to blush and stammer and (yes, even at this age) trip over the edge of my sari” (Divakaruni 9). She is exclusively devoted to her brother, Dhrishtadyumna, and in the tale, Divakaruni elucidates the depth of Draupadi’s love and admiration for him. She states thus:

My years in my father’s house would have been unbearable had I not had my brother... We shared our fears of the future with each other, shielded each other with fierce protectiveness from a world that regarded us as not quite normal, and comforted each other in our loneliness... I wrote him letters in my head, looping the words into extravagant metaphors. I’ll love you, Dhri, until the great Brahman draws the universe back into Himself as a spider does its web (Divakaruni 7).

Draupadi tries to accustom with the new society she has entered by connecting herself with others. She finds a similarity between her brother and herself as both of them are born from fire and this creates a strong bond between them. She has a special friendship with Krishna whose complexion is dark like her. Draupadi adores him and is very intimate with him and her close relationship with Krishna is seen throughout the novel. Even though she is not happy with her dark complexion initially, she accepts it since Krishna’s complexion is also the same. “I, too, might have despaired if it hadn’t been for Krishna,” (Divakaruni 8) she says. She also adds, “It was clear that Krishna, whose complexion was even darker than mine, didn’t consider his colour a drawback” (Divakaruni 8).

When Draupadi grows up to be a charming maid, her extraordinary beauty attracts everyone towards her. She is exclusive among other women due to her sparkling beauty and she is viewed as an alien. She says:

I began to notice things, though. My maidservants — even those who had been with me for years — kept their distance until summoned. If I asked them anything of a personal nature — how their families were, for instance, or when they were getting married — they grew tongue-tied and

escaped from my presence as soon as they could...Even my father was uneasy when he visited me and rarely looked directly into my eyes. I began to wonder whether Dhri's tutor's nervousness at my interruptions had a less flattering cause than my beauty (Divakaruni 32).

One day Draupadi overhears some maids discussing a sage who foretells future. She becomes curious and visits the sage, who is Vyasa himself. He restates the prophecy of her birth, indicating that she will alter the trajectory of history. In addition, he prophesizes:

You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it. You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the deaths of evil kings – and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widows because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history (Divakaruni 39).

The whole prophesy is almost the story of Draupadi in a nutshell. Even though Vyasa appears in the original epic several times to give advice and guidance at the time of crises in the original, he does not foretell the future happenings explicitly. In *The Palace of Illusions* these prophesies serve as a prelude to the entire story. Divakaruni has also given some space to Sikhandi, daughter of Drupad in her novel. Sikhandi, who is Amba in her previous birth is now reborn in order to avenge Bhishma. This episode of Sikhandi is introduced to reiterate the fact that not only Draupadi, but many women face injustice and they too have desire for revenge. Many a woman, who experiences trauma and subjugation try to rise up and avenge their perpetrator, as most of the time women are not protected and their plea for justice is ignored. Sikhandi's words to Draupadi reveal the fact that a woman should never wait for a man to protect her honour and a woman herself has to defend her. Sikhandi tells Draupadi, "Remember that, little sister: wait for a man to avenge your honour, and you'll wait forever" (Divakaruni 49). These words prove to be true as Draupadi has to wait for several years to avenge the

people who humiliated her in the court and she has to often provoke her husbands to avenge the Kauravas.

When Draupadi comes to know of the arrangement of swayamvar, she is filled with exhilaration and delight that she could choose her husband by herself, but when it is revealed to her that the winner of the tournament is her suitor, she becomes disheartened. She understands that she is a mere bait to get Arjun as her father's son-in-law, to avenge Drona. With heart full of remorse Draupadi agonises: "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (Divakaruni 57). Draupadi is seen as a subjugated, sacrificing woman who swallows her pain and accepts the proposals of her father and brother in order to maintain the reputation of her family and her kingdom.

Divakaruni in her novel shatters the stereotypes and imagines that a secret love develops in the hearts of Draupadi for Karna. Though there is no basis for such love in the original epic, and only hatred is seen between the two, Divakaruni believes that there is a possibility for a secret love as Draupadi finds similarities between Karna and herself based on the strange births of both of them. Having seen Karna's portrait, Draupadi longs to see Karna's face in the swayamvar hall and when she sees him her heart pounds hard and is completely attracted to him. She confesses: "I longed to look into Karna's face, to see if those eyes were indeed as sad as the artist had portrayed, but even I knew how improper that would be. I focused instead on his hands, the wrists disdainfully bare of ornaments, the powerful, battered knuckles. If my brother had known how badly I wanted to touch them, he would have been furious" (Divakaruni 92-93).

When Arjun, masquerading as a Brahmin wins the tournament, Draupadi garlands him and from her queenly position she is pushed into an ordinary life. Now this marriage is a painful displacement from palace to the residence of the Brahmin. To add to her woes, Kunti's inadvertent words make her position all the more miserable. Kunti utters, ". . . whatever you brought should be shared equally amongst all my sons" (Divakaruni 107). Yudhishthir, the eldest brother wants to honour his mother's words and nobody else protests including Arjun. Draupadi in

a pathetic position wants to shout, “Five husbands? Are you mad?” (Divakaruni 108). She explains, “I was uncomfortable, miserable, disillusioned – and most of all angry with Arjun” (Divakaruni 109). She feels that she has been uprooted from her home and in addition to that exposed to a cruel predicament. She wails, “I’d expected him (Arjun) to be my champion. It was the least he could have done after plucking me from my home” (Divakaruni 109). Now the subdued secret love once again erupts when she is isolated and nobody to support her. She hears a voice in her heart whispering, “Karna would never have let you down like this” (Divakaruni 109). When nobody asks for her consent and all the Pandavas decide to marry her, she poignantly points out, “But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit — or harm — them” (Divakaruni 118). She swallows all the pain silently and bears the trauma unquestioningly in order to preserve dharma. Lakshmi Bandlamudi in her *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History* describes the character of Draupadi thus: “In our long literary history, Draupadi remains unparalleled in personifying womanhood in its wholesomeness and uniqueness, with all its glory, horror, retaliation and resilience. Her complex and contradictory nature makes her versatile, and hence has served as an excellent literary device to write commentaries on nation, gender, caste and class” (110).

Draupadi is dragged to the assembly hall and Dussasan tries to pull her sari. When none of her husbands and the elders of the court attempt to stop this heinous act, the heartbroken Draupadi thinks of Krishna and his advice, “No one can shame you, . . . if you don’t allow it” (Divakaruni 193). Divakaruni’s Draupadi believes that dragging a woman in single cloth at the time of her menstrual period and trying to disrobe is an action, which brings humiliation to doer of the humiliating action and the victim need not be ashamed at all. She utters in distress, “Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency” (Divakaruni 193). When she questions the elders about the propriety of wagering

her, even Bhishma cannot give the right verdict. In R.K. Narayan's *The Indian Epics Retold* the scene is depicted as follows:

Karna, Dussasana, and Sakuni laughed at her and uttered jokes and also called her 'slave' several times. She looked at their family elder, Bhishma, pleadingly and he said, 'O daughter of Drupada, the question of morality is difficult to answer... a husband may have the absolute right to dispose of his wife in any manner he pleases, even if he has become a pauper and a slave... I am unable to decide this issue...' (263).

Draupadi's polyandrous position keeps her an alien among the woman folk as polygamy was in vogue but not polyandry. She has to bear the curious staring of people and has to turn a deaf ear to their comments. She describes an encounter with tribal women thus: "The women stared at me with great curiosity. After we passed them, they gathered under a mohua tree to point and giggle, speaking in a local dialect. I thought they said, Five? Are you sure? Five! There was envy in their eyes. But I may be wrong. Maybe it was sympathy" (Divakaruni 135).

Draupadi maintains equanimity when her husband's marry other women. She says, "In truth, I wasn't nearly as upset as I made out to be. I was a practical woman. I knew I couldn't expect my husbands to remain celibate while they waited for their turn as my spouse" (Divakaruni 151). But she can't bear the pain when Arjun marries Subhadra, as she herself admits, "Only once I was truly shaken, when Arjun chose Subhadra" (Divakaruni 152). Irawati Karve in *Yuganta: The End of An Epoch* describes the reaction of Draupadi thus: "She burst out in anger against Arjuna when he married Subhadra. Draupadi's situation in being a co wife was common, her outburst was natural, but in her daily behaviour towards Pandavas' other wives she showed uncommon restraint, never exhibiting her jealousy" (148).

Draupadi swallows her pain when her husband's marry other women and even welcomes them with cordiality. She never loses her dignity even though a rare predicament is imposed on her. M.A. Kelkar in her *Subordination of Woman: A New Perspective* opines thus: "As a wife, she fulfilled all the obligations. On many occasions she welcomed new wives of her husbands and treated them like



her own sisters. Each one of the Pandavas had wives in addition to Draupdi but Draupdi never made herself pitiable. Her conduct exemplified the maturity and dignity of the queen” (61).

Draupadi’s polyandrous marriage, her relationship with her husbands, her special friendship with Krishna, her love for Karna, her raging desire for revenge are also exceptional. Draupadi enter male spaces and lay claim to their stakes and negotiate patriarchy. Draupadi like the fire she is born out of is fiery, vengeful yet reclaims her calm and finds a path and purpose in her tumultuous journey. Draupadi transform them and move beyond the individual realms to more universal realms resisting patriarchal powers not merely for themselves but also for other women. They represent the voice of resistance that’s transformative and address larger societal concerns beyond individual struggles.

Divakaruni has re-created the epic from the female perspective and has taken the readers to the Dvapara Yuga. Even though the episodes are familiar to everyone, Divakaruni’s focus is on the inner feelings of Draupadi. It clearly depicts the pain, trauma, agony and suffering of Draupadi, which she experiences throughout her life. This novel focuses on all stages of Draupadi’s life and her secret love for Karna. Divakaruni ends her novel with a note of fulfilment of Draupadi’s love after death, her union with Karna. Divakaruni has portrayed Draupadi as a dutiful courageous woman, who plays the role of a wife perfectly. Lack of love in the polyandrous marriage pulls her towards Karna, but she constrains herself and is keen that her family honour is preserved. Divakaruni has made a psychological study of Draupadi’s character, delves deep into the psyche by making Draupadi the narrator and agent of action.



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