



# Flouting Patriarchal Hegemony through the Lens of Myths: A Critical Appraisal of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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## Abstract

Every social thought, history and philosophy considers women secondary though speaking about her. The skills of women are often deliberated too trifling to hold any sturdy depiction in the literature. Myths generally set up the rudimentary patterns and structures that divulge the minds of the people. On the contrary, such myths have depicted patriarchal hegemony as the governing crux of laws, beliefs, rules and norms in the mythical writings. Hence countless women writers have attempted to address such gaps and incongruity in the mythical writings through their revisionist writings. In that context of patriarchal hegemony, Draupadi, the protagonist of the *Mahabharata*, is no such exception and has been the victim of such dominion by losing her own self. To publicize these concerns of women into the limelight, Divakaruni has delved into the role of Draupadi through her book *The Palace of Illusions* in an autobiographical vein. In her re-narrative, the author has disclosed the experiences of women not just merely as emotions, but as feelings of self-respect and self-assertion. Therefore, this paper reveals the purpose of re-writing the myth of the *Mahabharata* in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, where Draupadi has been the exemplary icon of humiliation and suffering.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal Hegemony, Humiliation, Myth, Suffering, Identity.

## Introduction

Revisionist narrative, the sub-genre of literature in the postmodern epoch, establishes narrations to be rhapsodically re-written to which they were not originally meant to be. The term account for more than the historiographic metafiction that includes fictional writings as both the fictional and historical writings have the potential to exemplify countless probable depictions. Myth and mythical narratives are still relevant to Hindu society and, re-written renditions have specifically disclosed the realistic logic to the contemporary world. In her foundational book, *Medea's Chorus: Myth and Women's Poetry Since 1950*, Veronica House (2014) asserts:

Myth is neither inherently misogynistic nor paternalistic. It is an imaginative rendering of a culture's beliefs, which implies that as a culture changes, the wellsprings of the culture's imagination should change along with it to remain viable. When women in this study engage in mythic revision, they are doing far more than re-writing stories. They are embarking on the radical work of cultural transformation, work that confronts latent assumptions and drives modern culture to venture into new psychological landscapes. (House Xv-xvi)

It is to be acknowledged that, the myths, in order to remain relevant in modern society, need to change as they are the cultural touchstones for the levitation of the society as a whole, and women in particular. The Indian mythologies have seldom rendered a voice and space to the women, marginalizing them to the periphery. With this refutation, the current epoch is witnessing a rapid spurt of narrations rendered with the reappraisal of myth from the feminine point of view. Among the most vibrant revisionist writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an eminent Indian American poet and author who has proffered the readers with her fictional works. The author has penned numerous novels, namely, *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *The Vine of Desire* (2000), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), etc. Moreover, it has been stated about *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) that, though myriads of works have been rendered based on mythical women who have been the icon of culture in the Indian epics, the work rendered by author Chitra Divakaruni in her book *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is an iconic novel in the literary world. The author delves the readers deep into the life of the protagonist of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, into whose character the Indian culture and patriarchal hegemony are ingrained. *The Palace of Illusions* delineates Draupadi as a very potent and puissant character and retells the *Mahabharata* from her perspective. The author, through her rendition, endeavours to comprehend the eccentricity of Draupadi from a new-fangled perception. The author has attempted to rectify the mythological and historical unjust to which women are subjected, and Draupadi in specific. A biographic rendition of Divakaruni in the autobiographical vein avows the patriarchal hegemony, exploitation, oppression, denial of rights and humiliation to which the protagonist Draupadi was subjected.

Chitra Banerjee has accentuated flouting in the select novel, *The Palace of Illusions* with the epic *Mahabharata* to critically scrutinise the patriarchal hegemony through the character Draupadi. Like any other epics, *Mahabharata* also extols the gallantry, honour and valour of its male leads while the female protagonists are consigned to the background; but Divakaruni interprets the *Mahabharata* from a new feminist angle, giving voice to the marginal female character, Draupadi. A critical exploration of the classical works will illustrate that the motives, emotions and thoughts of females on no occasion emanate to the world except for situations where they are allied with the male heroes of their lives. By far and large, the lives of women are depicted as a daunting saga that is submissive to either their husbands or fathers. Women in the classical epics are depicted to possess the capability to trigger, instigate and motivate a series of events that by and large end in a war and the role of women in the epics is never indorsed to the position of a gallant combatant. Women are profoundly depicted as mere initiators who are inept at executing arduous responsibilities. To salvage or protect the reputation and honour is the task of men, and it is also depicted as their privilege. While women have been given a shallow presence in the epics that have led to the wrapped comprehending and blurred perception of both their sense of eccentricity and lives. The *Mahabharata* is no such an exception to this, and hence the select work, *The Palace of Illusions* delves deeply into the quintessence of patriarchal hegemony asserted over the life of the protagonist Draupadi leaving her to be without a genuine companion. Divakaruni writes:

If I ever wrote a book, I remember thinking (though at that time I didn't really believe this would happen), I would place the women in the forefront of action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them to tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchali? (Divakaruni p.xv)

The current article, therefore, scrutinises the re-writing of the magnum opus *Mahabharat* from the protagonist Draupadi's point of view in the select work of author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. This brings into spotlight the deeper and broader insights of Draupadi's state of mind, which lies inundated in the grandiose sweep of hegemony through the men in her life.

### **The Iconoclastic Woman: Draupadi in the Select work *The Palace of Illusions***

As the novel *The Palace of Illusions* is the complete autobiography of Draupadi, who was also known as Panchali, commences right from the birth of Draupadi, will make the novel even more appropriate. The relegation of women was considered to be the significant part of the social pattern is demonstrated at the start of the novel, right after when Draupadi and her brother had their birth from the fire when her father joyfully welcomed only her brother with wide-open arms. This act of choosing a male child over a female child depicted how a girl child is made to feel uninvited or unwanted, and the happiness of her birth was not cherished by the king. Hence, the point which hit hard was the class didn't create any better position for a woman. As the rituals and traditions travel along with the ages, women are likely expected to live and learn by the rules that are written by the codes of patriarchal society without considering their desires and needs.

In the big group of feminists, Divakaruni tried to take the term woman to the next level of honour from the chaos of negative implications about women by the patriarchal society. To make it simple, the author has made an extraordinary attempt to portray the character of Draupadi from a new holistic view. In attempting so, Divakaruni has been magnificently dealt with tussling the contradiction that appeared in the concept of character representation. Judith Butler too, has shared the issues that abide in the representation of women in literature in her seminal-work *Gender Trouble* (1990).

The novel has immensely illustrated the level of education that has been offered to Draupadi and her valiant transformation from a zealous princess to a vindictive queen in the detail of the subject. By hearing out the lessons of her brother and husband, she was also capable of yielding many details on her own (that is, by a sage, a sorceress, incarnation of Lord Vishnu and Krishna). On account of the multifaceted concept of femininity, Divakaruni's narration happens to stand in several ways purely staunchly sculpted on the actual source but up-fronts the entire novel by offering the readers the perception of Draupadi. The commencing of chapters dictates Draupadi's fascination regarding her origins. The novel has a beautiful portrayal of Draupadi's defiant character and her hurdles for a self-assembled feminine. Observing the life history of her birth and her divinations about her doom seem to connate as the very one evocative activity of her. She dreamt about leaving her father's palace to a choking place of hers which shrugged around me until I was left breathless. The nurse who treated her labelled her as the girl who was not invited as she was born as a daughter of one of the richest kings in India in the mythological fashion who rose from the fire snuggled along with her brother. Her brother was named "Dhristadyumna" which means slayer of rivals, and she was named Draupadi, the daughter of king Draupadi. The patriarchal dependency had its roots and unfitting odds with the prophecy of divinity at her birth. She was capable enough with the eminence to change the world.

The author, right from the commencement of the novel, emphasised the significant correlations among gender, name and identity. Draupadi spites the supremacy and agency that continues to inherit her brother's name, who was named with an errand of killing the nemesis Drona, whereas her name adhered to the patriarchy.

Panchali insurgents against the education offered to her, which was a typical feminine skills like painting, poetry and sewing that she considered to be a useless education, whereas her brother was equipped with knowledge powers like the royal ruling, power and justice. Again she used a metaphor to describe her predictions that were awaiting to suffocate her with the noose shrinking around her neck. Even after her father's approval for her to take part in the Dhri's classes, she observes the transformation that she has attained and compares the basic education given earlier to sustain her femininity. She felt that she was becoming too hard-headed and confrontational and too manly in her speech and behaviour and she also realised that it was harder to discharge herself from such a manly attitude and get back to the restricted royal womankind. Replying to the novelist's notion that the basic purpose of a woman is to submit their support to the warriors in her existence, Panchali recognised that her ambitions make her stand out of the box of her kind. She felt that each day she thought less and less like the women who surrounded her. In repetition, the novel kept depicting the thoughts of Panchali that, for worse or better, she was a woman. Vemsani (2021) has also clected Draupadi as a fierce fire born woman, "similar to Durga Mahishashuramardini to whom she is compared frequently in the *Mahabharata* and other classical tales" (Vemsani 71). She also learnt to use her femininity as a strategy to manipulate or amaze others through her outlook. She coerces herself, to be surrounded by both men and women and thought that she eschewed because of her weirdness, yet she was celebrated for her beauty. Later, a sorceress makes Panchali realise her vanity, the eminence of women and her central flaw in spite of all their dependencies on patriarchy. She added that Panchali was wrong in contemplating women as an acquitted organism. But the actual lesson she attempted to teach Panchali is to bind her passion, and her power of destruction prompts her to not possess the luxury of acting like a usual star buck girl. In the entire novel, Divakaruni kept her heroine dwelling on unavoidable fate and incongruity between the others perception and her idea. The main tautness was between her plea for being independent and the endeavours to ensure and please that are boosted up by the repetitive skirmishes with the dissimilarities in gender.

### **The Rhapsody of Draupadi's Wedlock in the Select work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

Divakaruni expresses the suppressions of Draupadi curbed within housewifery with respect to her role as portrayed in the select work *The Palace of Illusions*. When it was time for Draupadi's marriage, a condition was set by her father that disguises his political intention to make the most potent combatant as his dispel. On understanding her father's masquerade act, Draupadi wept. She also asked why would it then be called a swayamvar (marriage). It also becomes apparent that woman is used as an instrument to resolve the political mark. Swayamvar has also not given the actual rights to Draupadi for choosing her spouse, instead, it was



being decisioned by her father. The subtle, tactful motive hid behind the shallow liberal defiance. Till this stage of her life, she did not get any option to choose anything for herself.

Thus, she placed all her optimism of being glad on her marital life. Draupadi expected a wedding life with complete and mutual acceptance of love. She loved Karna. However, when Krishna told her to avert him, this woman obeyed without interrogation. Later, she got married to Pandavas. Further, the Pandavas' mother, Kunti, treated Draupadi as an object by making her live a life as a thing amongst the Pandavas. She was not able to make decisions of her own. She missed Karna. Thus, she questioned herself about conforming to the words of Krishna. Draupadi was aware of her position in the dilemma of living with five husbands (Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Sahadeva, Bhima, Nakula) though it was not her fault. However, her status has turned weak within *Mahabharata* and future generations. Within this epic, her frailty becomes severe in the pinnacle scene in Kaurav court. At this stage, Karna, a friend of Dushasan, said, there must be no opposition to undressing Draupadi. He also talked ill about Draupadi. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni writes about this: "By accepting five husbands, she has discarded her modesty, shame and womanhood" (Divakaruni 240).

The above quotes explore the insults and sufferings undergone by Draupadi as a woman. On the other hand, Draupadi deprecates the dual standard prevailing about the physicality of a woman. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008) has written about this: "Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way, why don't the scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's hearts made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them?" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.94). In the novel, we find Draupadi quite vocal against the injustice hurled at women. She says:

When that wicked man (Dushasan) was stripping me, helpless like chaste Sita I could have disappeared into the depths of the earth to hide my shame. If I had prayed, would not the earth have opened? But I did not do so. If I had done so my modesty would have been protected but the wicked would not have been punished. In the future this problem would remain unresolved for women (Divakaruni 251).

Further, Draupadi goes to enquire about the prejudice against women intrinsic in the moral code of Kshatriya. She also emphasises the pertinence of uttering exasperation against injustice instead of silent objection against it. After seeing her spouses after her wedlock, she prepared herself to make use of her power differently. Following this, she was recognised for her discrimination and reputation. Though she was liberated from the status of being a queen and submissive daughter to her father, her eccentric polygamy nuptial holds the pain of being viewed as a voluptuous object. Besides, in accordance with the special arrangements made for her marriage, Draupadi was split amongst her partners, spending each year with a husband wherein her chastity was refurbished each time while sharing her life with the new spouse. She also turned conscious about her lack of choice with whom she had shared her life and when. Thus, Draupadi's life encompasses the memories of humiliation, anger and desires of her ancestors like Amba, Sita and many other woman like Draupadi in the past and present. Comprising all such memories within a woman originates from generations leading to the development of collective memory representing the grief and pain experienced due to womanhood.

Flaws of masculine society became evident when the opinion of Draupadi was not asked, and she was exposed to polyandry by making her the spouse of all Pandavas. This condition of Draupadi was revealed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the select work *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi grumbles about her situation. She says,

My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine. That seemed to be the nature of boons given to women—they were handed to us like presents we hadn't quite wanted (Divakaruni, 120).

Draupadi lived a life filled with exploitation, deprivation and disgrace. She was unfairly treated and experienced violence due to patriarchal intimidation. Injustices faced by Draupadi with her marriage being vindicated are intolerable, and myths accusing her chastity are obstructive. She could be seen as a subversive woman who evolves as a champ. Such incidents in her life did not daunt Draupadi from remaining strong as she persisted to battle patriarchy. Finally, Draupadi utilises the same tool that brought her down as a weapon to revitalise herself. It shows the ultimate strength of her womanhood. On the contrary, it is clear that men used to wage wars and play dice in Mahabharata. Nevertheless, it is the female counterpart who exerts stimulus and power.

Thus, it is clinched that silence disempowers womanhood as a man is aware that most women will agonise in silence, and they persist to progress their despotic actions. Through the select work *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni makes the bibliophiles understand that, life of a woman is all about learning the mannerisms of mankind towards womankind. From her spouse's negligence at the time of Draupadi's disrobing, she understood that, though the Pandavas loved her, they had few additional things which they treasured more.

The concept of reputation and honour were more significant for the five brothers than her anguish. Vengeance for it would also be achieved in the period that would bring them valiant eminence. She stored all these lessons in her reminiscence. Thus, in between such agony, abuse, misery and humiliation, Draupadi spotted strength within herself for combatting the injustices dispensed on her by the brutal males in the dominant patriarchal society. Towards the end of the novel, Draupadi asserts:

At his (Krishna's) touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchali (Divakaruni, 360).

### Conclusion

In *The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*, Alicia Suskin Ostriker (1982) observes that feminist rewritings are “the challenge to and correction of gender stereotypes embodied in myth” (Ostriker 73). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to do the same; she challenges the archetypes of femininity through the lens of myth and literature. Rewritings and reinterpretations of Draupadi prevail in many different folks and oral traditions in the regions of India and the Far East. Many poets and novelists in many Indian and foreign languages have attempted to retell the story, and made comparative research of these depictions would demand a separate study. This novel has its focuses on the two central re-annexations of the research of Draupadi that are obtainable in English and are new-fangled in their fabrication. The recreation of the image of Draupadi as the authoritative, pivotal and at times boisterous and vengeful woman with a direction and mind of her can be glossed in many public avatars and has been highlighted by modern feminists. In addition, this re-writing is to regain the epic positions of women in the Vedic and post Vedic period that accepted the women's supremacy which was later forgotten. Divakaruni has bestowed the character with a futuristic life, in which one differs from another, still manages to be a sole self-image and an intervention that has its root elongated in time and stands an ideal example for a determined and earnest woman with optimistic desires from Indian mythology. Though women have their flags hoisted on greater heights, their status in certain regions is deprived. Mythologies have portrayed women as a weak character or a character that needs to be saved, which educates the upcoming generations to lock women in a cage in the name of culture and traditions. So this portrayal should be changed in order to change the perception of the society on womankind. Women are more than the characters depicted in mythologies. Thus, these retellings that emphasize their eminence as gallant combatants are in the mission of re-writing the women's fate tied up with patriarchy.

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