



# MYTHICAL REFLECTION IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS

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*Abstract:* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands as a luminary in Indian English literature. Her novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, a reimagining of Vyasa's *The Mahabharata*, mm of women, their quest for identity, male dominance, unique female perspectives, and the status of women during the era of *The Mahabharata*. It vividly portrays the humiliations faced by women as the inevitable challenges of life. Draupadi's story, as depicted in the epic, illustrates how women were expected to conform to tradition and culture unquestioningly. Draupadi's perspectives, however, starkly contrast with those of ordinary women, resulting in outcomes as formidable as her character. Her determination and courage permeate the novel, enchanting readers with its charm and gripping narrative. Whether set in ancient times or the modern era, the plight of women remains fraught with challenges, demanding them to navigate and respond to their circumstances. Draupadi's life, despite her royal birth, is marked by suffering and resilience. Her journey seeks to dismantle the stereotypical notions of womanhood. Our paper earnestly explores the clash between myth and modernity, birthing a new visage. It offers a fresh interpretation of Draupadi's voice as envisioned by Divakaruni..

*Index Terms* -Gender, Indignity, Selfhood, Folklore, Current trends, Ritual

## INTRODUCTION

In "*The Palace of Illusions*," Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reinterprets myth through a modern lens. The novel merges traditional mythology with contemporary themes, appealing to both those deeply rooted in tradition and those disconnected from their cultural morals. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as a modern woman eager to share her thoughts and ideas. She revitalizes the past by weaving stories of love, betrayal, revenge, war, freedom, and friendship into the narrative.

James Purdoff, in his review of the book, notes that Divakaruni's elegant prose skillfully reimagines the central female character, blending myth with modern language. Revisionist literature aims to reshape traditional characters often marginalized in the original texts, offering a fresh perspective and an enriched reading experience. Divakaruni's novel, a national bestseller in India, retells the Indian epic "*The Mahabharata*" from Draupadi's viewpoint, highlighting the muted feminist voices seeking clarity and strength.

Divakaruni felt dissatisfied with how women were depicted in mythology, often as shadowy figures with their emotions only relevant when impacting male heroes. She wanted to bring women to the forefront of the narrative, revealing their hidden stories. In "*The Mahabharata*," men are the central focus, but Divakaruni gives Draupadi autonomy, portraying her life as a series of her own choices, defying the patriarchal norms of ancient India.

Draupadi is depicted as a strong character who challenges her limited educational opportunities, questioning why women were expected to support men rather than pursue their own education. Her father and tutor prioritized her brother's education over hers, reflecting the broader societal neglect of women's education. Divakaruni highlights the historical practice where women, regardless of their status, were denied education, their primary role being to support their husbands and pray for their success in battle.

Marriage in the novel reflects societal and familial obligations. Though Draupadi's swayamvara (a practice where a woman chooses her husband) was intended for her to find her groom, her family had already decided she would marry Arjun. This demonstrates how women were often treated as objects to fulfill familial and societal desires. Divakaruni emphasizes the lack of agency women had in a male-dominated society, where their emotions were disregarded, and their primary role was obedience. Draupadi's inner anguish and her inability to express her views, particularly when Kunti commanded her to marry all five Pandavas, further illustrate the suppression of women's voices.

Thus, she becomes a victim of the social evil of polyandry, which was common at the time, with many women subjected to it. In the novel, Draupadi not only remains a passive figure from the epic but also rises to symbolize the modern woman. She boldly raises her voice in Duryodhana's court, where her husband gambled her away. Draupadi questioned the elders, arguing that a person sold as a slave had no right to wager others. She was dismayed to find that the laws of men would not protect her. This scene highlights the inequality of laws for women and reveals a society that denied women their rights. Draupadi remains strong, refusing to beg for her dignity, and reinvents herself as a powerful woman independent of her husband in her time of need. Her unresolved questions and her anger and desire for revenge for the shameful act against her were catalysts for the war that led to the Kauravas' death.

In "The Palace of Illusions," Draupadi is portrayed as both a strong woman and a sorrowful figure who wishes to be with Karna, constantly comparing her husbands to him and regretting the insult she hurled at him during her swayamvara. She says as she falls on the way to the Himalayas, "Karna would never have abandoned me thus... He would have happily given up heaven for my sake" (Divakaruni, 317). Till her death, Draupadi holds a special place for Karna, regretting not revealing her feelings to him. Her relationship with Sri Krishna is also depicted more as a deep friendship. He is her companion, caretaker, and guide from beginning to end, possibly leading her to have special feelings for him.

Karna, often depicted as an undesirable character in "The Mahabharata," is portrayed as lovesick after meeting Draupadi. Their love for each other is reinterpreted from Draupadi's perspective. In the novel, Karna confesses to Bhishma about his desire for Draupadi, which is difficult to accept given Bhishma's role as his grandfather. Expressing feelings for his brother's wife was against the law and confessing it to an elder was highly unpredictable, given the respect for elders in those times. Divakaruni portrays Karna as a tragic hero, skilled yet unable to defeat his enemies, longing for Draupadi's love, and dying with the knowledge of the truth, unable to react or accept it.

Kunti is depicted as a scheming mother-in-law, focused solely on her children's honor, health, and happiness. This can be interpreted as a mother's love for her children and her opposition to Duryodhana's betrayal. Kunti does not empathize with her daughters-in-law's sufferings or feelings, instead acting authoritatively. From Draupadi's perspective, Kunti is a trickster; her decisions to lure Karna were successful, and she was even willing to give Draupadi to Karna to save her sons. However, considering Kunti's side, her actions can be seen as driven by a mother's unpredictable love, using any means to protect her children. The secret relationship between Kunti and Karna before the war had a significant impact on the conflict, illustrating the complexities of maternal love.

### ***Conclusion***

"The Palace of Illusion" is a revisionist text that reinterprets women's roles in society and reshapes our perceptions of their lives. Divakaruni clearly portrays Draupadi's liberation from the confines of perfection and supposed divinity. Unlike many female characters who rely on men for rescue, Draupadi takes control of her own destiny by identifying and addressing her problems. She rewrites the fate of womanhood by challenging traditional norms. This literary work highlights contemporary issues such as identity, marginalization, and discrimination faced by women in a patriarchal society.

Draupadi's character was not very prominent in the Mahabharata. In the original text, she lacks a voice, choice, and identity of her own. However, Divakaruni breathes life into Draupadi, portraying her as a person with unwavering courage and strength, capable of facing any situation. In "The Palace of Illusions," Draupadi's bravery in challenging restrictive laws and asserting her identity is evident. Divakaruni uses Draupadi's marginalized character to highlight the failure of a male-dominated society to understand women's suffering and emotions. By giving a voice and space to the suppressed, the novel opens new possibilities in literature and shines a light on neglected female characters in the epic.

Ms. Banerjee, in an interview, emphasized that women should always be strong. However, she added that when strength fails, there should be space for vulnerability. For centuries, men have had the freedom to act as they please, while women have not enjoyed the same liberties.

Vyasa's Mahabharata portrays Draupadi as a character destined to destroy the Kauravas. In contrast, "The Palace of Illusions" presents her as a reasonable person who could not prevent their destruction. Tariqa Tandon, in a review, noted that Divakaruni's interpretation adds a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, relatable, and personal, offering new insights into the story.

Reading the novel allows us to understand Draupadi's personality and power, fostering empathy for her. From her perspective, her actions were justified as there was no other way to stop the unfolding events. These retellings highlight the lack of priority given to women, whose views and ideas are often dismissed. Women are expected to obey their husbands and uphold the family's dignity, often seen as weak and disempowered.

Draupadi is portrayed as having an impressive, brilliant, and strong personality, playing a significant role in the Kurukshetra battle. Her character embodies gender complexity, and her death is explained as a result of ego, jealousy, and lust. The novel shows that human beings, whether main or negative characters, are not perfect. Draupadi emerges as an ordinary woman with many imperfections.

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