

# Draupadi: Revisioning the Mythical Character in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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**Keywords:** Mythical Character, Re-Visioning, Retelling, Unconventional, Enigmatic Psyche.

**Abstract:** In mythology, Draupadi is a very significant woman who speaks her mind with an unbending will in the male-dominated world. Her unconventional marriages and her active role in the fatal battle recognized her as different from others. Women's writing is a medium of expression and an outlet for one's emotions and desires. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a judicious retelling, reinterpreting of the Mahabharata myth from a feminist perspective. She analyses the fact that since ancient times women have been cornered and marginalized in society. The events of Mahabharata are narrated by Panchali, whose voice acquires universal significance. It has surely achieved momentum in the present scenario. This paper is going to explore the elaborate implanted in the characterization of Draupadi, the mythical character through the words of the female mind of the author, in this novel. It further discusses the effrontery of Draupadi as the expression of her intricate relationships with Karna, Krishna and her Palace are the incomprehensibility of her enigmatic psyche.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The binary concept of patriarchy and female submissiveness is one of the most prominent themes in Indian Epics. Rewriting and revisioning a mythical character through the lens of modernity and sensibility is a bold step into a new literary world. It portrays a new and refreshed look to the character which is unconventional to the audience and readers. In mythology, Draupadi is a very significant woman who speaks her mind with an unbending will in the male-dominated world. Her unconventional marriages and her active role in the fatal battle recognized her as different from others. Women's writing is a medium of expression and an outlet for one's emotions and desires. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a judicious retelling, reinterpreting of the Mahabharata myth from a feminist perspective. Divakaruni created many women characters in mythology, she said, "I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women characters in ...they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious (Divakaruni xiv-xv)1. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi's life as a series of choices created by herself and not by the people around her, giving her a voice in a male-dominated

society that prevailed in Ancient India. She analyses the fact that since ancient times women have been cornered and marginalized in society. The events of Mahabharata are narrated by Panchali, whose voice acquires universal significance. It has surely achieved momentum in the present scenario. Far from being docile and frail, we now see women as iconoclasts. Draupadi's life is not only troubled by her conjugal concerns but also by the system of patriarchy. She gathers the courage to face the challenges of patriarchal notions which are an aspersion to her womanhood and wins remarkable success when she deconstructs patriarchy. This paper is going to explore the elaborate implanted in the characterization of Draupadi, the mythical character through the words of the female mind of the author, in this novel. It further discusses the effrontery of Draupadi as the expression of her intricate relationships with Karna, Krishna and her Palace are the incomprehensibility of her enigmatic psyche.

## 2 DETAILED REVIEW

*The Palace of Illusion* is about women's discrimination, struggles, identity, male domination,

female perspectives, and status of women during the period of *The Mahabharata*. The humiliation that she experienced was taken as the challenge of life. Draupadi's life indicated and taught in Vyas's epic how women need to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any questions.

The views of Draupadi do not match with these ordinary women and the result was as powerful as she was. Many renderings of her life story especially some particular episodes in it are created, recreated, interpreted and constituted in the larger narrative universe" (57). Divakaruni explains Draupadi's determination and courage throughout the novel. Whether it was ancient or the modern period the life of women has not had any changes, it has had only challenges to face and perform according to the context. It displays how a woman born as a princess suffered in her life. Draupadi seeks to break the shackles of the stereotypical concept of how women can be women. Within the peripheries of patriarchal society, Draupadi is exceptional and singular, as Spivak called her odd, unpaired, and uncoupled.

In this novel, Draupadi brings out her strong trajectory since childhood as her first impact was on education which was not provided to her whereas her brother was given this priority. Her tutor told her brother to inform her that "A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warrior in her life" (Divakaruni 26). Her father and teacher neglected her education. When she questioned her brother "Who decided that woman's highest purpose was to support men?" (Devakaruni 26). The brother replied that is what I'd like you to do. The author wanted to show that the old practice of every woman of those periods whether she was a queen or a normal woman, nobody cared about the education of women and they were bound to do what men wanted them to do. Their duty was to take care of their husbands and to pray that they with glory on the battlefield. Marriage is a custom that is taken as their decision to abide by the social regime and family acceptance. *Swayamwara* means the practice of searching for their own groom. Draupadi was subjected to *Swayamwara*, but she was pledged for Arjuna by her family and Krishna. To value her father's words, she was forced to surrender herself to whatever her father pointed out. Devakaruni gives this message to society that in this male-dominated society, a daughter is a puppet of her own family, a less prioritized creature to the men, the rulers of their house. Women were treated as slaves by men to obey their orders without any question. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi was burning with inner anguish. Draupadi failed to express her views when Kunti asked her to marry all

five sons. She was waiting for Arjun to stand up for her against marrying all the five as they were promised to each other but nobody objected to the words of Kunti. As a result, she became a victim of a social evil polyandry.

In this novel, Draupadi not only exists as a passive being but also rises up to become a symbol of the contemporary woman figure. She raises her voice in Duryodhana's court where she was gambled away by her husband. Ashamed Draupadi questioned the elders in the court that once a person was sold as a slave, they had no right to wager others, but she was mistaken to discover that the laws of men would not save her. The scene portrayed by the author proves that the law which was equal to all would not be the same for women. This attracts the attention of readers and the audience that the representation seems to perpetuate a stereotype. Significantly Draupadi as a character has served as a creative impetus for many writers and painters. Everyone has expressed either an emotional point of view or an ideological position. Subramanya Bharathi, the Tamil poet wrote in *Panchali Sabadam* the disrobing of Draupadi as the tribulation of Mother India, whose body has been "invaded" and "Stripped" of dignity. Bharathi made the nation awake to retaliate using Draupadi as a source of inspiration. He adds that she believed in her inner strength and strong convictions. Unlike these narratives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a reading of the epic story through the gendered eyes of Draupadi offers a new perspective. Draupadi wants to draw her own destiny though within the confines of epic narrative. This action of creativity responding to a former version of a story is deemed Re-visioning. Draupadi remains as a strong persona and shows that she never feels lower herself to them by begging for her dignity and respect. She re-invents herself as a powerful woman who is not dependent on her husband in her hour of need. She never received any answer to any of her questions in court. Her anger and revenge for this unfortunate, shameful act against her were the reason for the war which was finished with the death of *Kauravas*.

The author's Draupadi deconstructs the former narratives in order to establish her 'self', a self that is complex and multi-layered. Her version of self becomes a source of empowerment which finally leads to her emancipation. The process of empowerment starts with the validation of the material itself. Here, Draupadi initially challenges the male dictum and celebrates her femininity. Her life was filled with dual struggle, an attempt to harmonize different, controversial roles into one stable identity on the one hand, and her constant fight to seek

attention from others. She struggled to balance her different roles according to the circumstances, which made her audacious but her complex and contradictory attitude made her unique. She attracts a special presence to the men in her life. She impressed and was influenced by these men, especially the unattainable lover of her dreams Karna, her enigmatic friend Krishna, and her heroic husbands. Her intimate bonding with her twin brother Dhri saves her from the deep despondency of a neglected childhood. His patience with her audacity, self-control, and calmness at her indignation and his support for her quest for learning strengthen their relationship.

In Vyas's Narration of the epic, the Krishna-Draupadi bond is sunk in divinity and devotion. But Divakaruni's Draupadi saw Krishna not as a savior but, as a friend and one who really fathoms the intricacy of her complex mind. His appearance reduced her abhorrence for the lonely life in her father's palace. Even she wonders if they share a similarity as they are both dark-skinned. Draupadi felt how much Krishna was to her during yagna, "When I thought you had died, I wanted to die too"(166) In her final journey she again realized that all men in her life valued their virtue more than hers. There was only one love that existed in the world -her love for Krishna. He made her confused and gave her salvation.

Draupadi's marital life teaches her that a female does not have a choice of freedom from a polygamous wedding. It was a curse for her. Arjun won a difficult test, so she chose him as her husband, and that's why Arjun married her. But later she was insulted by Arjun who remained silent when Kunti asked his brothers to share her. Yudhishtira further degraded her by carrying out their mother's wish by treating her as if she was an object won in a context. Her marriage needed extreme self-control, patience, and a great deal of adjustment. She had to tolerate the wifely responsibilities of five great heroes with equanimous temper. "Dreaded or desired or even demanded by the male, virginity is the highest form of the feminine mystery" (Beauvoir 206). The virginity boon bestowed on Draupadi conserves her nobility both in the epic and in the novel. But she realized that her polyandry was an injustice to her self-esteem. In return, she wished to have a gift of forgetting as she felt the virginity boon benefitted her husbands than her. "If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting (120). The protagonist broke the stereotypes of womanhood through her admiration for Karna, the arch-enemy of her husbands. She appreciated Karna, the quintessential tragic hero who had suffered rejection all through his

life. Her secret love for Karna was no longer illegitimate. The undefined attraction to Karna was caused in her mind long back when she met him. But she was forced to insult Karna and reject her *Swayamwara* only to save her brother's life. He gradually became an unfulfilled desire in her as a mode of retaliation against her polygamous wedding. Her revulsion of being a 'communal cup'(120) in the hands of men triggered her yearning to be the wife of a single man. Karna was more of her dream as well as an imagination. She saw him as an outlet to placate her stormy mind. "As insidious voice inside me said, Karna would never have let you suffer like this" (99). Draupadi's unintentional hurts and mistaken response to her humiliation bring him closer to her. Karna loves her though he gets angry at her insults. "I told myself I hated her [...] but I was only fooling myself" (276).

Rational reading of Draupadi and her relationship with men consults her revolutionary psychological interpretations. Divakaruni's Draupadi's search for her own self was the fundamental search for womanhood, born and brought up in a hegemonic patriarchy. Bandhopadhyaya observes, "In a story of power, politics, and carnage the true portrayal of characters shorn of their divinity and virtuous status gives them a façade of ordinariness. Hence viewing Draupadi as an ordinary woman with extraordinary willpower elevates her to unparallel personifying womanhood. Simultaneously she became a site for affirming and challenging the ideologies of patriarchy as she was a victim of it and a person who wished to free herself from it. "[...] I was surprised at how angry it made me feel and how helpless"(120).

In *The Palace of Illusions*, the episode of Draupadi's disrobing is a fine instance of objectification of womanhood and her quick response to it. When she was compelled to expose her body to the men around her, she became a mere object. Actually, she was hurt because of the indifference of her husband and the lusty eyes of the men around her. "Let them stare at my nakedness. Why should I care? They and I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency"(193). She questions the legality of the transaction when she was pledged like a chattel in the game of dice. Nobody replied to her question if Yudhishtira actually still had the right to lose her after he had already lost himself. So she decided to give up her traditional femininity to restore her challenged dignity, "I will not comb it until then I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (194). Thus, she became both a victim of patriarchy and a threat to patriarchy. She is at once a "palimpsest and a contradiction" (Spivak 388). Draupadi's high temperament was

triggered by her urge for self-esteem. The patriarchal conservative beliefs shackle her attempts at self-realization. But she was uninterested in being inculcated with the stereotypes of femininity. Hence Draupadi's revitalized feminism is observed. Her experiences of refusal and rejection also accelerate her audacity. Family and home are the places where the identities of womanhood are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed regularly. Since childhood, Draupadi has dreams of possessing her own palace. She was seeking a space to hold her identity with rootedness and control over her life. Her search for 'the' palace is indeed her search for herself. "[...] my palace would be like no other"(113). For Draupadi, constructing her identity happens through the exploration of the possibilities of her palace. It was not only an architectural construction but an embodiment of her empowerment. There she achieved the much-deserved space and glory. She believed that her identity was not constituted to fulfill the expectations of others. She appeared visibly liberated when she became the mistress of her palace. This showed her sense of emancipation. It helped her to forgive the treacherous behavior of Arjuna (his other marriages). This encouraged and strengthened her to win over her mother-in-law. "[...] and the palace of illusion was my domain, and she accepted this" (150).

Taking over her palace by Duryodhana was like a cause of shattering of her 'self'. The palace also is a stimulant in connecting the imaginative inner space and domestic outer space of Draupadi. Her struggle to build a magical palace and her capacity to comprehend the potency of the female self -lead her to a self-sufficient and self-engaged individual. Therefore, her palace became a transformational space – a place of performance and a site of resistance.

A Revisionist literary text seeks to reconstruct the traditional characters which have been marginalized in the original text. It encourages the readers an irreplaceable experience of reading the revisionist literary text as the vision and concept are altered.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Divakaruni's best-seller novel of the year in India *The Palace of Illusions* is a re-telling of the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. It is about the clear path sought by the inspiring feminist voice and self-centered voice of Draupadi from Vyasa's *The Mahabharata*. Divakaruni's Draupadi did not wait for any males to protect her from misery.

They help themselves by recognizing and solving problems. They re-write the fate of womanhood by resetting themselves against traditional agreements. This revisionist literary text brings out contemporary issues like identity crisis, marginalization, and gender discrimination of women in the male-dominated society. It is expressed through a mythological character, Draupadi who did not have any voice, choice, or identity in the original text but Divakaruni's Draupadi had the courage and strength to question existing restrictive laws and to show the world that every woman has an identity of her own. By giving a voice and space to the suppressed, it opened new imaginations and possibilities in the literary world. In a review Tariqa Tandon Said, "Divakaruni's interpretation provides a humanistic touch to the epic, making it more realistic, more relatable and more personal" which gives a new insight into the epic.

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