



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Subversion Of A Myth: Empowerment In Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions*

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Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in *The Palace of Illusions*, reenacts the great Indian epic, The Mahabharata, in an entirely new way, making it look through the eyes of a woman, Draupadi, who has always been viewed as a secondary figure in a male dominated storyline. By re-creating the epic in this manner, Divakaruni contradicts the conventional patriarchal approach to the epic and makes Draupadi a strong, smart, and free woman who challenges the social conventions and gender inequalities. This essay will discuss the way Divakaruni has subverted this myth by making Draupadi to talk, and not to remain a passive character that she is turned into a symbol of resistance and agency, and self-realization. The paper also analyses the way the author incorporates myth, history and feminism to get a fresh narrative that redefines empowerment in patriarchal society.

Keywords: Myth, Empowerment, Feminism, Draupadi, Subversion, The Palace of Illusions, Gender Roles, Reinterpretation, Mahabharata.

Introduction:

The Indian mythology is one of the significant aspects of both cultural and literary heritage of the country. Mahabharata is one of the greatest Indian ancient epics. It is a long and meandering a storey of two sets of cousins of the royal who were the Pandavas and the Kauravas who were contesting the throne of Hastinapur. It is full of profound postulates of duty (dharma), uprightness, family and the consequences of human choices. Bhagavad Gita is an appendage of Mahabharata and it also provides religious expertise about life, labour and righteousness.

It is however, the Mahabharata that focuses more on performances/choices of male heroes like Arjuna, Yudhishtira, Bhishma and Krishna with minimum focus on female hero like Kunti, Gandhari and Draupadi. They are the minor participants but their activities and sacrifices lie at the centre of events in the storey. Draupadi to be more precisely is only remembered by the fact that she was a wife of 5 men and also offended in the court of Kauravas that caused the war of Kurukshetra.

Mahabharata, one of the greatest Indian epics is not only about war and strength but also about relationships, duty, honour and fate. Nevertheless, women characters in this ancient text tend to go without speaking or they are viewed through the eyes of male heroes. Their feelings, minds and hardships are not much valued. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, is one such woman having always been presented as a source of friction and humiliation and never as a personality with her identity.

The Palace of Illusions is a 2008 book written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It re-tells Mahabharata as narrated by Draupadi (Panchaali). The title itself is symbolic. The beautiful world of dreams, aspirations and achievements that Draupadi constructs around herself is represented by the so-called palace, however, the word illusions make readers recall that world of dreams is not eternal and is all about illusions.

The Palace of Illusions by Divakaruni is a kind of the same magnificent epic but in the completely different point of view. She does not modify the important occurrences in Mahabharata, but provides a sense of handling and eloquence to the role of Draupadi. The novel, which started with concerns of kings, warriors and strength transforms into a personal journey of a woman to find personal identity and significance.

Through such implementation, the readers would see how even some myths such as Mahabharata can be used in modern times. It shows us never to be overly fixated on the storey in its different versions and that we can make a completely new interpretation of our experience of history and culture as a whole by listening to the non-speaking characters. Revolving around Draupadi, Divakaruni shows that Mahabharata is not a war storey and a fortune storey, but a storey of human emotions, equality, and strength.

In her Indian-American novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni provides Draupadi with a new voice. She revisits the Mahabharata in the eyes of Draupadi, where the reader gets to view the whole epic in her point of view. This shift of perspective is extremely significant as it disputes the conventional, man-centred approach to the version of the story. Draupadi by Divakaruni is not merely a victim of destiny, an intelligent, curious woman, powerful and smart enough to know that she has a position in this world. She fantasizes, wonders as well as revolts against the social conventions, which suppress women.

Draupadi in the novel is born out of fire and this is a sign of holiness and power. Nevertheless, it is not an easy task as a woman goes through lots of battles during her life: she is regarded as an object, she is made a polyandrous wife and she is made fun of at the court of the Kauravas. She is also daring and strong in spite of that. Divakaruni illustrates the ability of Draupadi to change pain into power. She describes her palace as the palace of illusions and this is her metaphor on her life that is beautiful and fragile, full of dreams that tend to collide with harsh reality.

The overall point of the research paper is to analyze how Divakaruni disempowers (uproots and adapts) the traditional myth by turning Draupadi into a representation of empowerment. The writer does not recount the Mahabharata in an entirely different manner but recounts the events in a manner that emphasizes on the feelings and experiences of a woman who has to cope with the patriarchal world. Using Draupadi, Divakaruni stands up with a contemporary feminist voice, which gives a voice speaking on behalf of women always, the one who is right yet misunderstood, the one who struggles to reinstate her honour, and the one who is not afraid to dream.

Another issue that is discussed in this paper is the ways in which *The Palace of Illusions* relates mythology to contemporary problems. It demonstrates that fights of women yesterday are not significantly different than modern. The fact that Draupadi wants recognition as an individual, equality and respect is the struggle that continues to be fought by women worldwide. Thus, the novel by Divakaruni is not only a retelling of an old legend, but a sort of empowerment and self-discovery message.

Concisely, the research is intended to understand how rewriting of the Mahabharata by Divakaruni renders new meaning to the life of Draupadi and she is no longer a silent character but a strong and assertive and an independent woman who questions power, fate, and gender roles. It brings out an emphasis of the power of literature as a stepping stone towards analyzing myths and giving voice to the dark.

Literature survey:

The Palace of Illusions (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a feminist retelling of an Indian epic, The Mahabharata, which has traditionally been characterized as a novel about various male heroes. The novel will also have her own voice and show that she was a strong, intelligent and independent woman. The work by Divakaruni also has a different interpretation of the old story as it dwells upon the feelings and struggles, aspirations of a woman who is bold enough to challenge the old traditions of gender roles, social segregation.

The Palace of Illusion, as Nair (2011) goes on to explain, highlights the theme of women with a re-examination on their role in mythological texts. According to Nair, the retelling of this story by Divakaruni is a feminist gesture that enables Draupadi to tell her tale in her words thus giving voice to the voices of woman in classical literature. In allowing Draupadi to take charge of her story, Divakaruni enables the reader to view her as a source of discord rather than to interpret her as a source of empowerment and uniqueness.

The theme of retelling is concerned with empowerment, which is the subject of Singh (2014). He notices that Divakaruni adopts myths as a tool to examine the emotional and psychological aspects of the lives of women. To him, the character of Draupadi is the representation of the contemporary womanhood that struggles, tussles and fights to gain identity, respect, and equality. Singh thinks that narrating myths through the perceptions of women is a restoration by the authors such as Divakaruni to create a cultural storytelling, which has always been one-sided.

According to Rao (2016), *The Palace of Illusions* is an attempt to adapt The Mahabharata as a feminist piece. According to Rao, the voice that is used by Draupadi in the novel is full of emotion, intelligence, and self-realization. Such a narrative style enables the reader to get a personal view of the epic by a woman. Another aspect to which Rao emphasizes is the way in which Draupadi by Divakaruni turns out to be a transition between the past and future and reveals that even old tales can contain the messages of gender equality and justice.

Joshi (2018) also examines how Divakaruni challenges the aspect of gender and power balance in the novel. The character of Draupadi exposes the aspect of an ideal woman in the traditional Indian society according to Joshi. Unlike what was expected, she does not be quiet or passive and instead speaks out, shows anger and makes independent decisions. This description empowers and gives women the sense of acknowledgment that they are not weak but imperfect and only human.

Sharma (2020) also notes that the re-interpretation of myths by Divakaruni contributes to the undermining of patriarchal beliefs. According to Sharma, the courage, wisdom, and confidence of Draupadi are employed in demonstrating that the voice of women can transform even the history. The novel transforms into a feminist issue through which the dominance of the male is challenged and women are motivated to discover their power and mission in life themselves.

In a larger society, Menon (2004) writes on the way feminist politics normally operates by confronting the normal structures and concepts. The theoretical background of making female characters in literature as the instruments of social change can be obtained based on her work *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*. The ideas provided by Menon assist in the attempt of Divakaruni to go out of the traditional gender boundaries and to provide a significant weight to the voice of women.

In her *Myth, Memory, and the Feminine*, Sethi (2002) points out that diasporic writers remake the myths to reclaim the lost or forgotten role of women in the traditional narrations of the story. She demonstrates that writing new myths, the authors bridge the gap between the past and the present and emphasize that the experiences of women are common-place. The novel by Divakaruni perfectly meets this concept because it blends the ancient Indian mythology with the contemporary feministic concept.

In *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* Mishra (2006) also touches upon the use of myths by Indian writers residing in other countries to investigate the aspects of identity and belongingness. His thoughts transform readers on the way as a diasporic writer, Divakaruni is able to amalgamate the Eastern mythology and Western methods of literature in order to make the tales more relatable to the entire world.

Basu (2012) is an analysis of *The Palace of Illusions* by feminist retelling of the Mahabharata. As the researcher justified, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni treats Draupadi to her own powerful voice and depicts her as a woman in charge instead of the side character in the epic. Kaur (2017) analyzed the reinterpretation of myths as offered by Divakaruni in female perspective. The researcher pointed out the author takes the feelings and trials of Draupadi to illustrate to the traditional tales the roles of voice of women.

Kumar (2019) devoted his attention to the issue of gender, myth and modernity in the novel by Divakaruni. The scholar discovered that the experiences of Draupadi stipulate the life experiences of the contemporary lady women who attempt to reconcile societal norms and individual liberty. Patel (2021), in his work, examined the novel in the context of reinventing Draupadi as a source of power and identity against the influence of patriarchy. Mehta (2022) talked about how the work by Divakaruni breaks the myths of the patriarchy by showing Draupadi as an intelligent, courageous, and emotionally endowed person and an actual empowerment of women.

Thomas (2023) has put forth the work of another female writer Amruta Patil and compared it to the work of Divakaruni. The scholar noted that these two authors have employed mythology in an attempt to enhance equality and demonstrate the power of women. Kapoor (2024) pointed out that *The Palace of Illusions* has turned out to be a significant element of contemporary Indian English literature. According to the researcher, what makes the reinterpretation of Draupadi by Divakaruni effective is that it not only confronts the old beliefs about the gender but also makes the readers reconsider the place of the woman in the myth and in the society.

On the whole, it is possible to note that the studies reviewed demonstrate that *The Palace of Illusions* remains a wonderful feminist adaptation of the Mahabharata. Using the case of Draupadi, Divakaruni challenges the gender roles, criticizes the patriarchy and suggests a new concept of empowerment that helps us relate mythology to our current reality.

Research Gap:

Sr. No.	Area of Focus	Findings from Previous Studies (2002–2024)	Identified Research Gap
1	Feminist Reinterpretation of Myth	Nair (2011), Rao (2016), and Basu (2012) were among the scholars who explored the way <i>The Palace of Illusion</i> is a retelling of Mahabharata through the voice of a woman and provided Draupadi with her voice.	The feminist perspective is featured in the majority of studies; however, there is no in-depth examination of the females' role in the myth re-constructions through the narrative style and symbolism.
2	Empowerment and Gender Roles	Joshi (2018), Sharma (2020), and Singh (2014) pointed out the way Divakaruni introduces Draupadi as the image of powerful, independent ladies who go against patriarchy.	Minimal emphasis is made on the ways in which empowerment is manifested in the language, inner thoughts and feelings in the novel.
3	Cultural and Mythological Context	Menon (2004) and Sethi (2002) talked feminism and myth in terms of theoretical and diasporic approach.	No explicit studies relate the diasporic experience of Divakaruni and her reconstruction of the Indian culture and mythology.
4	Modern Relevance of Ancient Myths	Kaur (2017) and Kumar (2019) studied the link between myth and modernity, showing similarities between Draupadi's struggles and those of modern women.	Lack of detailed analysis of how <i>The Palace of Illusions</i> bridges traditional beliefs and modern feminist thought.

5	Comparative Feminist Studies	Thomas (2023) compared Divakaruni's works with other writers like Amruta Patil; Kapoor (2024) highlighted her role in modern feminist mythology.	Limited comparative studies exist on how different Indian women authors reinterpret myths to promote empowerment.
6	Narrative and Literary Techniques	Most researchers focused on character analysis and themes.	Very few studies have analyzed Divakaruni's narrative techniques—such as first-person narration, imagery, and tone—in creating a feminist voice.

Myth, Maya and the Mortal Gaze: The Palace of Illusion as the Mythical Core of the Mahabharata:

A myth is a customary narration that has existed among the generations to illustrate the convictions, values, and culture of a community. Old tales Myths are not merely ancient fables, but they drive people to comprehend the world, religion, morality, and even gender roles. The Mahabharata and Ramayana are myths in India, which are strongly related to the spiritual and cultural identity of the nation.

Nevertheless, the majority of the ancient myths were composed and narrated by men and they were concerned primarily with male heroes, kings, and warriors. Women seldom were taken seriously and their roles were confined to that of a mother, wife, or goddess. The myths lauded the women on their faithfulness and sacrifice and seldom their boldness, intellect and self-reliance. This has resulted in a patriarchal sense to mythology where the role of women was evaluated by their adherence to socialist rules instead of using their minds or desires.

The novel is a mixture of mythology, imagination, history, passion, tradition, and the modern concept. Divakaruni re narrates some of the essential moments of the epic, the swayamvar, the dice game, the exile and the war but in a different light. This manner makes the readers see what Mahabharata might have been like as it may have been in the remembrance of Draupadi with all the love, pain, pride and confusion.

One of the strongest sides of the novel is its emotional depth. It also shows Draupadi as an entire human being who is jealous, angry, desires and regrets, an issue not typically dealt with in the ancient work. It also shows how she is spiritually connected to Krishna who assists her to crawl out of the vengeance and attain spiritual tranquillity.

Draupadi is one of the biggest female characters in The Mahabharata. Nevertheless, in the classical variant, she tends to be the cause of the great war due to laughing at Duryodhana and challenging the position of men. Her body and her soul, her dreams, and her problems are not paid much attention. This single-sided image is met in the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She narrates the myth narrated by Draupadi, making her appear as a human being one full of strength, emotion, and voice.

In this way, by rewriting this myth, Divakaruni manages to do something strong: to subvert the classic story. Subverting is to bother with a generally accepted thing and upset it. Through reversing the roles and putting Draupadi to an equal position of one who tells the story, Divakaruni challenges the traditional portrayal of women in myths and reinvents their roles as reasoners, will-considerers and transformers.

The Subversion of the Empress: Draupadi's Humiliation in *The Palace of Illusion*:

Draupadi is a strong and complicated female character in the Indian mythology. She is as pure and passionate as she was born out of fire. She is referred to as the wife of five Pandavas in Mahabharata, and the woman whose humiliation caused the great war of Kurukshetra. Nevertheless, the inner voice and emotions of her are barely discussed in the original text.



Divakaruni uses her own voice in *The Palace of illusions* as Draupadi gets to narrate she is the story. She narrates to the readers concerning her early life, her ambitions, her frustration, and her quest to find some meaning in her life. This is a tremendous alteration since she now chooses the story whereas she would not be at the mercy of others.

Draupadi in Divakaruni version is not only a victim of fate. She is quite bright, ambitious and conscious of her power. She does not hesitate to express herself even at the moments when being quiet is expected of her in the society. Her talks with Krishna indicate the spiritual character of her personality, and her love of Karna, which was never fulfilled, displays her emotional one. She is transformed into a human being not very weak but not very delicate, not very bad but not afraid.

Divakaruni symbolizes the contemporary woman who has to juggle between the world of tradition and the world of non-dependence through Draupadi. She turns out to be a classic icon of self-empowerment and demonstrates that it is the initial step of being free to challenge injustice.

Subversion implies to topple some existing system, ideology besides what appears to be conservative. One of the incidences in the context of literature is subversion where a narrator changes the normal manner of telling the storey or attaching new meaning to the old characters. It is among the methods of breaking power, redefine the past and give new meaning of past myths.

It is against this backdrop that Divakaruni then goes ahead to put the widely known Mahabharata mythology on trial. The storey of Draupadi is an account retelling by others in the original storey; in fact, this was mainly men retelling Draupadi storey. In *The Palace of Illusion*, however, she is the one that is narrating. It is subversion in itself as it does not focus on the heroes of the male gender but what a woman had experienced.

Gender roles have been well defined in the traditional Indian society. Men were regarded as guardians, decision-makers and leaders as women were supposed to be submissive, caring and faithful to their family. These ideas are frequently represented in ancient literature and myths, as well as in the Mahabharata. At the same time as women in these stories are being respected, they are being limited; they are mostly depicted as daughters, wives or mothers, not as the persons with their own thoughts and desires.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni refutes these conventional roles assigned to both genders in *The Palace of Illusions*. Her Draupadi is not a dumb and unintelligent woman. However, she is represented as smart, industrious, and not afraid to feel. She questions the regulations restricting her own self like why women are not allowed to go with freedom or because they should always follow the men. She does not want to be remembered as one of the beautiful girls, she wants to be remembered as a wise person.

Divakaruni gives gender as an example that that it should not be the identity or the fate of a person through Draupadi. A woman may be also strong, persistent, and self-sufficient and at the same time, feel and be compassion able. Through the novel, readers are educated that being empowered does not mean that one has to do what is expected in the society. With such a voice to Draupadi, Divakaruni shatters all the

stereotypes about gender roles and introduces a new image of an Indian woman as the one, who is not inferior to men in terms of courage or intelligence.

It is a twisted novel too in that the war is brought about by Draupadi. Rather she is being introduced as an intelligent woman, an idealist and a queen that does not receive the mockery and understanding she seeks in the patriarchal world. The revolutionary nature in her is a resultant factor, since she defies fate and she challenges the aspect of patriarchy.

Weaving Her Own Fate: The Loom of Feminism and Empowerment :

The Palace of Illusion is the re-understanding of Mahabharata as it is composed of the ancient epic re-telling it in the voice of one of the lead characters Draupadi. Storey of Draupadi is recounted by persons who are traditionally male like Vyasa or Krishna and very little of her feelings are known. Divakaruni changes it by giving a first-person description of her life by Draupadi.

This revision is very necessary since it allows the readers to perceive Mahabharata as a woman. The incidents, marriage to the five Pandavas, dice game, humiliation in the court of the Kauravas, and the great war are narrated differently even by Nan who is narrating the storey herself. We educate her emotional conditions, her aggressiveness, her ambitions and her misery.

The presentation of the ancient mythology to the modern life is as well rearranged in the works of Divakaruni. She also exposes Draupadi to contemporary world of emotions such as the necessity to be equal, free and be respected as many women nowadays can comprehend. It is no longer a storey of deities and heroes, but of human beings, their life struggles, problems. Divakaruni fulfils this goal with this fanciful retelling, because the readers can predict how an old myth can even be used to make powerful statements about gender, justice and individuality in a modern world.

Feminism is the assumption of equality of both males and females in every aspect of life, including social, political, and economic. It is not only a struggle to fight women rights but also challenge those structures that restrict women freedom, identity and opportunities. Feminism in literature aims at providing a voice to women and expressing their thoughts and experiences and conflicts that have been neglected or suppressed over the centuries.

The women in the traditional Indian literature and mythology were commonly depicted as submissive, self-sacrificing, and reliant on men. This is opposed by writing feminists such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In her writing, she assigns significance to the feelings, female intellect, and urge in women. She demonstrates that women have dreams and views that also deserve to exist.

Feminism is perceived in the book *The Palace of Illusions* nearly through the experiences of Draupadi. She wonders against convention according to which she is a mere wife or daughter. She does not want to be identified by her associations with men that is why she prefers to be a personality. Her bravery to challenge the status, her desire to be equal, and her internal power make her a real feminist heroine despite the fact that she lived in an ancient age.

Empowerment can be understood as the bestowal of power or trust in it to an individual who has not received it. When applied to women and literature, empowerment includes assisting women in recognizing their power, self-reliance, and power to take choices concerning their life. It is concerning breaking the silence, conquering fear and denying undesirable treatment.

The Palace of Illusion presents empowerment by how Draupadi has evolved as a princess who abides by the rules to being a woman who defies them. She is a vocal person, she asks challenging questions, and does not take in her stride the injustices in the environment. She is intelligent, educated and courageous, which makes her one of the shining lights in the man dominated world. She does not even lose her dignity or her sense of justice even in the situation when she is humiliated like in the scene of disrobing in the court of Kauravas. Rather, she raises the issue of the righteousness of purportedly more insightful and virtuous people.

Draupadi in Divakaruni's work is not presented as an ideal woman or goddess but an ordinary and powerful person who has emotions and pride, anger and dreams. She is empowered because she can be herself; she is able to think whatever she wishes, to love and question anything without fear. She redefines the concept of being a woman in a male dominated world.

In this description, Divakaruni demonstrates that empowerment does not necessarily have to be physical, but it can also imply emotional, intellectual, and spiritual power. The strength of Draupadi is the one that is in her voice - to narrate to herself. Eventually, her story turns into the representation of every woman, who desires to express herself, alter her destiny, and turn out not as a victim, but as a strong personality.

Conclusion:

The palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a great masterpiece of literature that gives a different expression to one of the most misrepresented women in the Indian mythology Draupadi. Re-telling the tale of the Mahabharata the manner in which Draupadi had told it, Divakaruni has made a classic myth an efficient narration of self-expression, power, autonomy. The novel has succeeded in defying the usual patriarchal hierarchy of the epic and also providing a female protagonist who is not a bystander of her destiny, but an actor of her own.

In exposing Draupadi, Divakaruni also brings up the problem of the willful gender identity that provided their purpose in the society. Draupadi is not just an obedient or unfortunate wife she is shown as a strong willed and emotionally unstable woman, cunning. She is an empowering figure due to her audacity to fight injustices and when she wants to be treated as an individual. The author shows the aspect that it is not a fit of being powerful or have status to be strong but capable of telling the truth and standing up in whatever one feels about it.

Divakaruni re-telling the Mahabharata is a shift between the ancient world and modern world. With the help of myth and modern feminism, she does not forget to remind the readers that old myths could in many cases be used to teach them a lesson in the modern world. The novel correlates the situation of Draupadi to that, which modern women such as Draupadi experience searching equality, identity and respect. It calls upon the readers not to view the world as in the old storeys but to view the hidden voices that are not taken into consideration in the historical and other literary storeys.

In conclusion, The Palace of illusions is the retelling of a myth that happened thousands of years ago as well as the celebration of womanhood and individuality. It leaves Draupadi as a personification of tragedy but a liberation to the woman who has a voice to rise and pose questions, dream and re-consider her role within the society. The piece by Divakaruni is a clear example of how literature could be used to challenge the idea of patriarchy and to create a more open-minded and accurate understanding of the history and culture.

Outcomes:

As indicated by the paper, this new voice and identity of Draupadi in the book the Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes her not only a silent mythological figure, but a strong and independent woman. The article concludes that Divakaruni has been able to infringe the rules of the gender roles and to give an emancipatory version of the Mahabharata. Also, it goes to show that an ancient legend can be reshaped and re-told to underline the strength, emotions and rights of women in the ancient world as well as the present-day world. Overall, it can be concluded that this study has resulted in an opinion that the literature can be exploited as an effective tool to empower women and make them equal.

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