

A Voice of Modern Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a bold feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata by giving Draupadi a voice that resonates with modern sensibilities, agency, and emotional complexity. Through first-person narration, psychological depth, and narrative restructuring, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi from a mythological symbol into a fully realized woman grappling with desire, destiny, injustice, and identity. This paper examines how Divakaruni constructs a "modern" Draupadi whose assertion of selfhood challenges patriarchal narratives embedded in classical mythology. Through a close reading of Draupadi's interior monologues, her negotiation of female desire, her resistance against humiliation, her emotional conflicts, and her re-evaluation of relationships, this study argues that Divakaruni's novel becomes a site of feminist reclamation. The modern voice of Draupadi emerges not only through her articulation of suffering and anger but also through her awareness of love, ambition, and selfhood. The paper concludes that Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes an emblem of contemporary feminist consciousness, demonstrating how ancient myth can be re-interpreted to reflect the quest for autonomy and the power of female agency.

Keywords: injustice, autonomy, jealousy, multidimensional

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a transformative retelling of the Mahabharata by placing Draupadi, one of the epic's most compelling yet historically silenced female figures, at the forefront of the narrative. In traditional versions of the epic, Draupadi's voice is mediated through male narrators, and her identity is often defined by her relationship's daughter of Drupada, wife of the Pandavas, object of humiliation, and catalyst of war. Divakaruni's novel, however, breaks this silence by allowing Draupadi to narrate her own story in the first person. This shift fundamentally alters the reader's perception of the character. Instead of viewing her as a mythic emblem of righteousness or misfortune, we encounter a woman endowed with introspection, desire, vulnerability, and audacity. This modern voice emerges through Draupadi's candid revelations of her thoughts and emotions and her questioning of societal norms. It constructs her not as an epic figure bound by destiny but as a contemporary feminist subject who interrogates the conditions imposed on her by patriarchy, tradition, and fate. Through this narrative strategy, Divakaruni accomplishes more than a mere retelling; she reconstructs Draupadi as a voice of resistance and self-definition.

Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes a modern voice primarily through her assertion of individuality and personal desire. In the epic, Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas is treated as a matter of fate, obedience, and family honour. In the novel, however, Draupadi's perspective humanizes this event by presenting it as a source of emotional conflict, humiliation, and suppressed desire. She expresses her frustration at being shared among brothers and articulates an emotional longing for a singular and exclusive relationship. Her secret attraction to Karna, which Divakaruni amplifies through lyrical introspection, adds further complexity to her emotional landscape. For the first time, Draupadi is allowed to express romantic desire and erotic imagination, qualities conventionally denied to mythological heroines. By allowing Draupadi to admit these forbidden feelings, Divakaruni gives her the kind of agency and emotional freedom associated with modern women. The expression of desire itself becomes a form of rebellion against patriarchal norms that seek to restrict female sexuality. Draupadi's private conflicts and inner turmoil reveal how deeply she craves recognition and fulfilment not merely as a queen or wife but as a woman with her own passions and dreams.

A crucial dimension of the novel's modern Draupadi is her political consciousness and anger. The infamous scene of her humiliation in the Kaurava court becomes one of the most powerful



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moments in Divakaruni's novel because it is told from Draupadi's interior perspective. Instead of being a passive victim stripped of agency, Draupadi narrates the humiliation as an act of profound injustice that transforms her understanding of power and duty. Her anger becomes a form of political agency, fuelling her desire for revenge and justice. In the traditional epic, Draupadi's vow to not tie her hair until it is bathed in Dushasana's blood is portrayed as a pivotal moment. In Divakaruni's retelling, this vow is given psychological depth: it becomes a symbol of her resistance against the structures of power that allowed her public degradation. Her rage is justified, analysed, and contextualized within the larger patriarchal system that objectifies women as property to be gambled away. Through her reflections, Draupadi emerges as a modern feminist figure who recognizes the intersections between personal violation and social injustice. She challenges male authority figures Yudhishtira, Bhishma, and even Krishna for their failure to protect her. Such questioning of patriarchal power is symptomatic of modern feminist thought, and through it, Divakaruni reframes Draupadi not just as a victim of circumstances but as a commentator on gendered injustice.

Another important aspect of Draupadi's modern voice lies in her critique of social structures, especially marriage and duty. Draupadi repeatedly challenges the expectations placed upon her as a queen and wife. She questions the institution of arranged marriage, the imposition of silence upon women, and the constant relegation of women's desires to the background. Her reflections on how mothers, wives, and daughters are shaped by tradition reveal a critical awareness that aligns with contemporary feminist critiques of patriarchy. She considers how women are trained to obey, sacrifice, and silence themselves to maintain social order. Draupadi refuses to accept these norms passively. She often disobeys, questions, or emotionally detaches herself from situations where she feels her individuality is compromised. Her modern consciousness becomes most evident in the way she interprets her relationships: instead of viewing her husbands as divine warriors, she sees their flaws. Yudhishtira's obsession with dharma, Arjuna's emotional distance, Bhima's impulsivity, and the twins' loyalty that often comes at the cost of her own needs. This frank, sometimes critical, assessment of her husband's transforms her from an idealized epic queen into a real woman negotiating the complexities of marriage, expectations, and autonomy.

Divakaruni also uses the theme of storytelling to give Draupadi a modern voice. Draupadi constantly reflects on how history and myth remember women. She worries that her story will be told incorrectly or incompletely by male storytellers. This self-awareness that stories can erase, distort, or marginalize women places Draupadi in dialogue with contemporary feminist literary discourse. She recognizes that reclaiming one's story is an act of empowerment, and by narrating her own life, she resists being reduced to a symbol or stereotype. Her narration becomes an act of authorship: she controls the lens through which her experiences are viewed. This focus on narrative ownership is central to modern feminist writing and positions Draupadi as a figure who challenges the authority of traditional epics.

Moreover, Divakaruni's Draupadi is modern in the way she embraces ambition and acknowledges her desire for power. Unlike the epic, which often portrays Draupadi's pride as a flaw leading to catastrophic consequences, Divakaruni reinterprets her ambition as a natural and justified aspiration. Draupadi wants more than domestic happiness; she desires influence, recognition, and the ability to shape her own destiny. She questions why women are discouraged from harbouring ambition and why their thoughts are constantly monitored. Her longing for a palace "of illusions" symbolizes both her dreams and the constraints she battles. This palace becomes a metaphor for the illusions women must maintain: beauty, perfection, obedience even as they struggle internally. Draupadi's self-awareness regarding these illusions gives her psychological depth and connects her struggles with those of modern women who face similar societal pressures.

Female solidarity is another theme that strengthens Draupadi's modern voice. While the epic often depicts women as rivals, Divakaruni introduces moments of shared understanding



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between Draupadi and women such as Kunti, Gandhari, and even the servant women in the palace. Draupadi's interactions with these women reveal her empathy and awareness of shared suffering under patriarchal structures. She recognizes the silent endurance of women around her and reflects on how their lives mirror her own in different ways. This acknowledgment fosters a sense of female community that transcends class and status. Draupadi's ability to see other women's pain and resilience makes her a more relatable and modern figure, embodying contemporary feminist ideals of solidarity, mutual support, and collective resistance.

Divakaruni adds complexity to Draupadi by portraying her not as a flawless hero but as a woman capable of mistakes, conflicting emotions, and moments of introspection. She admits her jealousy, pride, insecurities, and regrets. She questions her choices and reevaluates her actions, especially when they affect others. This emotional honesty contributes significantly to her modern voice. Rather than portraying her as a mythic ideal, Divakaruni presents her as a human being struggling to balance emotion and duty. The novel thus exposes the double standards imposed upon women, both in the ancient world and in contemporary society. Draupadi's flaws become a source of strength because they make her authentic, allowing her to express vulnerability without losing dignity.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's reimagining of Draupadi serves as a feminist act of reclamation. By giving Draupadi a voice rich in introspection, emotional depth, and critical thought, the author challenges the patriarchal narratives that have shaped the Mahabharata for millennia. Draupadi becomes a modern woman not because she lives in a contemporary time, but because her consciousness, desires, questions, and resistance reflect timeless struggles of women across cultures. She articulates the trauma of humiliation, the longing for love, the burden of expectations, and the thirst for self-definition. She also recognizes the power of her own voice in shaping how future generations remember her. This consciousness transforms her from a mythic character into a feminist icon.

In conclusion, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* gives Draupadi a modern voice that resonates deeply with contemporary readers. Through first-person narration, psychological depth, exploration of desire, critique of gendered norms, and reclamation of narrative agency, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a multidimensional figure of strength, vulnerability, and resilience. Her voice challenges traditional depictions of women in mythology and illuminates the ongoing struggle for female autonomy and recognition. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own story, Divakaruni not only reinterprets an ancient epic but also contributes to a broader feminist project: the restoration of women's voices in historical and literary memory. The Draupadi of *The Palace of Illusions* stands as a powerful symbol of modern womanhood defiant, reflective, emotional, ambitious, and deeply human. Her story reminds readers that reclaiming silenced voices is essential for understanding the complexities of female experience and for challenging the structures that continue to shape women's lives.

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