



# Draupadi's Unconventional Journey Through *The Palace of Illusions*

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## Abstract:

Literature always tries to share the changes in society. The present paper goes through the life of a mythical woman who has strong cravings of liberation. Retelling an epic character through the lens of contemporary sensibilities is unique creative contributions. Many modern writers have done this successfully. In the context of Indian epic, Draupadi is one of the favourite characters. Her unconventional marriage and instrumental role in the fatal battle made her different from others. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a prominent place in Indian English writing. She has always aimed at giving voices of female characters. *The Palace of Illusions* is about women discrimination, their struggle, identify, male domination, unique female perspectives and position of women during that period. Draupadi's life shows in the epic how women need to accept the concept of tradition and culture without any question. Draupadi's views are totally different and the outcomes are as powerful as she is. Her determination and courage has been explained all through the novel. The novel is a retelling of the *Mahabharata* myth from feminist perspectives. My paper is a sincere attempt to give a new interpretation of the voice of Draupadi as depicted by the novelist.

**Keywords:** Unconventional, Journey, Epic, Gender, Identify, Culture , Tradition.

## Introduction

India is a land of myth and legends. They provide a good number of themes and situations for writing. Many Indian writers borrow their plots from Hindu mythology. *Mahabharata* by sage Vyasa is one of the two most famous ancient epics of India. The other one is *Ramayana*. The narratives of *Mahabharata* occupy a major space in Indian culture. In the words of B. Black, "*Mahabharata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous tellings and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (11). *Mahabharata* is a huge sea of stories. It is not just a collection of stories but it is a storehouse of political wisdom, individual discipline, world peace, philosophical doctrine and a splendid work of literary art. *Mahabharata* has been read from different points of view and is also utilized for the creation of more literary works. The epic remains ever alive due to the translations and renewal process like retelling and recreations. Each retelling becomes an independent creation because the writers take a liberty of digressing a bit from the original and at the same time stick on the facts in the original. They introduce a desired deviation in the tale and evoke interest in the reader.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well known novelist of Indian origin. She uses Hindu mythology at a large scale in her works. She instills courage and determination in her women protagonists through

these myths. She tries to prove how myths guide the immigrant women to overcome their conflicts in life. "From a feminist perspective, when we interpret texts or anything else, the way we deal with our subjectivity is not to try avoid it but to be aware of it as possible..." (Lois Lyson 95). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* centres around Draupadi, the female and key protagonist of *Mahabharata*. The great Indian epic *Mahabharata* celebrates the battle between Pandavas and Kauravas and considers Draupadi as the fundamental cause of it. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uncovered this belief and made Draupadi a powerful woman with great courage and determination. Dr.S.G. Puri writes, "Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace Of Illusions* talks of the social conditioning of a woman who descends her positioning in the cultural paradigm. She also talks of the significance of cultural scripts, which provokes a women to negotiate her with space created through undergoing agency. The agency helps the society to have desired result"(1).

In this impressive retelling, Divakaruni aims at exploring the unconventional journey of Draupadi. A combination of mythology and modernity of the present world is presented here. Divakaruni has shown her as a contemporary woman who want to express her thoughts and ideas to the world. The best thing about the novel is that it has been narrated in autobiographical vein. Divakaruni invokes the reader, "It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into *The Palace Of Illusions*"(P.XV).

Draupadi is a very significant character in mythology. She challenges the traditional formulations of what a woman and wife should be. *The Palace of Illusions* is about the clear path sought by inspiring feminist voices which are powerless and mute. It is about the story and self-centred voice of Draupadi. Divakaruni has tried to bring out the past into present in a different way by showing the story of love, betray, revenge, war, freedom and friendship. Divakaruni says, "If I ever write a book, I remember thinking... I would place the women in forefront of the action... and who would be better suited for this than Panchali ?" (*The Palace of Illusions*, Author's note XIV-XV).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi deconstructs patriarchal notions in order to foreground her 'self', a self which is complex and multilayered. This self of her becomes the reason of her empowerment and emancipation. Within the circles of patriarchy, Draupadi is exceptional and singular. Spivak called her odd, unpaired and uncoupled. The exceptionality of Draupadi is seen in Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* "by placing the tribal woman Dopdi in a comradely activist, monogamous marriage and then in a situation of multiple rape"(387).

Divakaruni was not satisfied with the portrayal of women characters in mythology. The centre of focus is always on men. She says "I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women characters... they remain shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. If I ever write a book ... I would place the women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits" (Divkaruni, XIV-XV). Divakaruni's Draupadi is not as a woman who suffers within herself and is not able to speak about her views. She brings out a new form of her own.

## **Draupadi's Birth And Education**

In order to retell the unconventional journey of Draupadi, Divakaruni goes through the multiple stories in the novel. These stories help in establishing Draupadi's thoughts and emotions. Dhai Ma plays a major role in bringing Draupadi's real identity. Dhai Ma's narration of the story of her birth makes Draupadi think about the discrimination even in the names given by her father to her and her brother- "Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad" (*The Palace of Illusions* 5). Her father and tutor neglected her education. Her tutor told her brother to inform her that "A kshatriya women's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life" (Divakaruni. 26). When she

questioned her brother “who decided that woman’s highest purpose was to support men ?” (Divakaruni,26). The brother replied that is what I’d like you to do. This shows that nobody cared about the education of women. Here Divakaruni tries to bring out the old practice of every woman of those periods.

### **Draupadi’s Fascination For Karna**

Another added story is that of Draupadi’s fascination for Karna. He was a great warrior. Draupadi wants marry him but her father, King Drupad, did not accept Karna. A Swayamber is arranged by her father but it is just like formality because he wants to Arjuna for Draupadi. After getting married to the five pandavas, Draupadi had to deal with the unusual struggles of life. Her life revolves around the prophecies. In an attempt to subvert the patriarchal system, Divakaruni opens up several issues and tries to interpret them through the eyes of a woman. After marriage, the life of Draupadi totally changed and she meditates over, “I couldn’t quite believe what a transformation in my life had undergone or that I helped to bring about this new destiny we were living” (139).

### **Draupadi -Krishna Relationship**

The novel celebrates Draupadi’s relationship with Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu which signifies the glory of God. The epic narraton of their relationship is steeped in divinity and devotion. Divakaruni’s Draupadi sees Krishna not as a saviour but as a friend. Krishna is introduced very early in Draupadi’s life by Divakaruni. He was portrayed as being friend of king Drupad. Since childhood Draupadi is being portrayed as fascinated by Krishna. Draupadi carries some complex for being dark complexioned. But it was Krishna, Who was even darker than Draupadi, raises her self confidence and motivates her not to treat her complexion as disadvantage, but to believe it to be of advantages. He says, “A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself”(Divakaruni,9).

Krishna throughout the novel plays the role of friend, philosopher and guide to Draupdi. At the time of ‘Rajsuya Yagya’, Shishupal attempts to kill Krishna. He rushes at Krishna with a drawn out sword and Draupadi feels that if Krishna is not there in her life, then nothing mattered to her. She realises how much Krishna is important for her. She says, “When I thought you had died. I wanted to die too” (Divakaruni,166). Thus we can see the true and genuine bonding of Krishna and Draupadi throughout the novel. The journey of Draupadi is incomplete without the presence of Krishna.

### **In Sabha**

When Draupadi was taken in half naked condition by Dushashan then all elders were silent at that time. No one can have courage to speak against this involuntary act. In sabha Draupadi asked questions to everyone but no one were able to reply the answers of her questions. Divakaruni’s thoughts and dreams are given emphasis throughout the novel. Draupadi, through the miseries she suffer, tries to understand the world. After the ‘games’ when the padavas lost everything , Draupadi realised the fact that she is alone in this world. She evaluates the incidents occurred in the sabha. She realises the fact that a woman’s mind is also tainted with many negative emotions.

### **After The War**

After the war Draupadi realizes that Hastinapur has become “largely a city of women” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 322). This realization triggers her to form a separate court “a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 323). Here Divakaruni depicts her protagonist as one who is striving to create out of the ruins to rebuild a lost life.

## Death As a Liberation

During the journey, Draupadi was the first one to fall. Death appears to her as a liberation which will solve the contradictions of her identity and she feels, "I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And for the first time, I'm truly Panchali" (*The Palace of Illusions*, 360).

## Conclusion

Thus Divakaruni's retelling of the epic provides a comprehensive picture of Draupadi. Divakaruni has not attempted anything new which was not there in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* but the epic has reshaped in such a way that it appeals to the modern reader. She has raised new questions about the old text of Mahabharata. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given us the understanding of major events of the epic from a female point of view. In this novel, Draupadi's life is presented as a series of choices made by herself. Through this retelling, the theme of feminism is portrayed. Divakaruni creates a narrative world where Draupadi's thoughts and emotions come into question and thus she fills up with an extraordinary new perspective of narration. She has tried to make Draupadi as unique character. We can say that the journey of Draupadi, which is quite unconventional, is portrayed very well.

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