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## Gender Representation and Identity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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### Abstract

This research article analyzes gender representation and identity construction in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective. The novel reimagines Draupadi not as a passive mythical wife but as a powerful and emotionally complex woman navigating a patriarchal world. This paper explores the performative aspects of gender roles and how Draupadi subverts, questions, and redefines traditional expectations of femininity, power, and agency within the mythological structure. It also investigates the historical and cultural influences that shape Draupadi's social identity, challenging essentialist notions of gender. The study demonstrates how mythological fiction can serve as a site of gender resistance and introspection. By situating Divakaruni's novel within contemporary feminist theory and mythopoeic criticism, this paper underscores the continued relevance of mythology in conversations around gender justice.

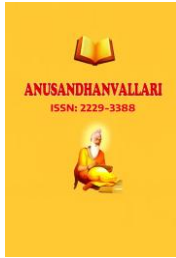
**Key Words:** Performative, mythical, gender resistance, introspection, mythopoeic criticism

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### Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reconstructs the grand epic of the *Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi, a character often caught in the crossfire of dharma, war, and patriarchy. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own story, Divakaruni not only humanizes a larger-than-life mythological figure but also reclaims her agency from a male-dominated tradition. This retelling presents an alternative gender narrative—one that reflects the social construction of feminine roles and the limitations imposed by patriarchal interpretations of mythology.

Draupadi's identity, shaped by expectations of purity, obedience, and silence, is juxtaposed with her inner turmoil, assertiveness, and constant quest for justice. As both a mythic figure and a reflective narrator, Draupadi is portrayed as someone who challenges and redefines the boundaries set for her. This paper aims to explore how the novel embodies performance and construction of gender within the framework of mythology, and how Draupadi's voice challenges conventional binaries. It further investigates how storytelling from a woman's perspective can alter mythological discourse and illuminate new dimensions of identity.



## Background

*The Palace of Illusions* is rooted in ancient Indian mythology, yet its narrative voice and thematic emphasis are unmistakably modern and feminist. Draupadi, born out of fire, is burdened with divine expectations from the beginning. Her supernatural origin sets the stage for a life shaped by grandeur and tragedy. As a wife to five husbands and a queen with little real power, she becomes a symbol of womanhood shaped by societal pressures. Her fire-birth is symbolic it grants her distinction but also isolates her from normative femininity.

Divakaruni, by rewriting the epic from Draupadi's point of view, creates space to question the historic marginalization of women in Hindu epics. Draupadi's story has traditionally been told by others sages, poets, historians almost always men. These interpretations often erase her emotional depth and rationalize her suffering as moral necessity. By reclaiming her narrative, Divakaruni allows Draupadi to critique her own myth, adding nuance and depth to the portrayal of female identity within a mythological context.

Furthermore, Divakaruni does not merely invert the gaze but reshapes the myth itself by embedding Draupadi's narration with introspection, irony, and emotional authenticity. The novel questions foundational values of the epic tradition sacrifice, honor, dharma through a gendered lens. Draupadi, thus, becomes a prism through which the contradictions of ancient Indian society are made visible.

## Objectives And Scope

This paper aims to:

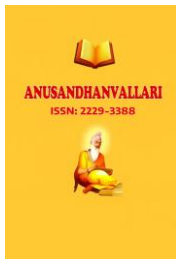
- Analyze how Draupadi's identity is socially constructed through roles imposed on her by family, society, and scripture.
- Examine the performative nature of gender in Draupadi's character, using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.
- Discuss the psychological, cultural, and political dimensions of Draupadi's experiences and decisions.
- Explore the rewriting of mythology as a feminist intervention in historical narrative.
- Investigate how *The Palace of Illusions* offers an alternative to traditional portrayals of women in Hindu mythology.
- Examine the symbolic and narrative implications of Draupadi's self-awareness as a narrator.

The scope of this study includes a close reading of Divakaruni's novel, supported by feminist theory, gender studies, and comparative references from the *Mahabharata*. It also considers the implications of mythological reinterpretation in a postcolonial and contemporary context.

## Historical Perspective

Draupadi has been interpreted historically as a woman of strength and misfortune. However, the epic tends to valorize her suffering while minimizing her resistance. Her polyandrous marriage, humiliation in the court, and demand for justice place her at the center of ethical debates in the *Mahabharata*, yet her voice remains largely unheard.

*The Palace of Illusions* reverses this historical silencing. It presents Draupadi as a woman acutely aware of her socio-political environment and the constraints of her gender. Her critical reflection on dharma, fate, and her



relationships with Krishna, Karna, and the Pandavas deepens her representation beyond traditional archetypes. Karna's character is particularly reimagined—no longer simply an antagonist, he becomes a complex figure of forbidden desire and mutual recognition, complicating Draupadi's moral landscape.

The historical reading also shows that while ancient India had fluid representations of gender (e.g., Shikhandi, Ardhanarishvara), women were often relegated to idealized roles. Divakaruni's Draupadi contests these roles through introspection, defiance, and emotional realism. By giving voice to doubt, fear, attraction, and ambition, she becomes a historically conscious figure, aware of the legacy she inhabits.

Additionally, this historical lens invites comparison with the treatment of other women in epics Kunti, Gandhari, and Sita each of whom experiences power and loss in gendered ways. Draupadi's uniqueness lies in her refusal to accept silence as virtue. The text revisits traditional values like chastity, obedience, and sacrifice, and exposes their gendered underpinnings.

### Exploration Of Societal Attitudes Towards Gender And Identity

Divakaruni's novel serves as a critique of the rigid gender expectations prevalent in both ancient and contemporary society. Draupadi's story challenges the ideals of purity, loyalty, and silence expected from women. She struggles with conflicting identities as a daughter, wife, queen, and woman each of which demands different performances.

Her inner voice exposes the conflict between societal expectation and personal desire. Her emotional landscape desire for Karna, frustration with the Pandavas, guilt, ambition, and love gives her a human complexity often denied to mythological women. By voicing these conflicts, Divakaruni gives her readers a Draupadi who is not just heroic but deeply relatable.

The text also questions the role of myth in sustaining patriarchal norms. Draupadi's disrobing is not just a moment of humiliation but also a turning point of feminist resistance. Her refusal to forgive, her demand for justice, and her nuanced relationships highlight the gendered nature of power and morality. Draupadi becomes a symbol of agency within a space where women are traditionally denied it.

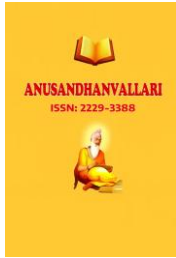
This exploration extends to the emotional economy of the epic Draupadi's longing, pride, defiance, and sorrow create a fuller picture of womanhood than the binary of goddess/victim. The novel engages with societal scripts around shame and honor, and Draupadi's refusal to internalize her shame becomes an act of radical defiance.

Moreover, the novel draws parallels between Draupadi's constrained freedom and the contemporary reader's gendered experiences, showing that while context may shift, structures of oppression often persist. This connection underscores the continued political and educational relevance of such feminist reinterpretations.

### Narrative Strategy And Voice As Feminist Tool

One of the most powerful aspects of *The Palace of Illusions* lies in its narrative structure Draupadi herself speaks, remembers, and reflects. The first-person voice radically alters the reader's engagement with the myth. This narrative choice is a deliberate feminist act, reclaiming authorship over experience and allowing for introspection, ambiguity, and vulnerability. Unlike the *Mahabharata*, where Draupadi's story is filtered through male narrators and patriarchal framing, Divakaruni's version prioritizes her thoughts, desires, and regrets.

This internality is critical to feminist literature. As theorists like Elaine Showalter have argued, female-centered narration disrupts patriarchal modes of storytelling by emphasizing emotion, psychological complexity, and the personal as political. Draupadi's voice does exactly that it deconstructs her own myth, acknowledging her



complicity in ambition, her envy toward Kunti, her restrained affection for Karna, and her fury toward her husbands.

In choosing a retrospective and confessional tone, Divakaruni allows Draupadi to claim authority over her life's interpretation. Memory becomes an act of resistance. Her regrets over Karna, over her pride, over the suffering of war are not presented as moralizing lessons but as dimensions of a woman who was, for centuries, reduced to a symbol.

This shift also interrogates the nature of myth itself: who tells the story, and whose truth gets preserved? Draupadi's narration becomes an intervention, not only into the past but into the very act of myth-making. By telling her story with wit, sadness, and irony, she challenges the permanence of the epic's lessons and creates space for alternate understandings of justice, power, and femininity.

### **Expanding The Feminist Implications**

Divakaruni's novel contributes to a larger body of feminist mythological retellings that seek to destabilize normative gender hierarchies. Similar to Madeline Miller's *Circe* or Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, *The Palace of Illusions* reclaims a previously voiceless or marginalized female figure and centers her in the narrative. This literary tradition aligns with what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision" the act of seeing anew, through a lens that acknowledges oppression but seeks possibility.

In the context of South Asian feminism, *The Palace of Illusions* intersects with questions of historical memory, religious authority, and cultural transmission. Draupadi is not simply a feminist symbol for the West but one rooted in indigenous resistance to patriarchy. The novel's appeal lies in its dual function: it is both literary fiction and cultural critique.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's choice to maintain Draupadi's divinity while emphasizing her humanity mirrors the feminist pursuit of recognizing women's strength without demanding perfection. Draupadi is not idealized but realized. Her inner contradictions love and resentment, courage and fear render her deeply authentic.

### **Contemporary Relevance And Legacy**

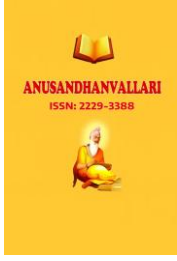
In an era where gender identity and narrative ownership are under renewed scrutiny, *The Palace of Illusions* serves as a reminder of the importance of revisiting cultural foundations. The gender discourse that surrounds Draupadi is far from resolved. Women in many societies still grapple with similar burdens of representation, expectation, and silence.

The educational and sociocultural value of such literature is immense. By engaging with Draupadi's struggle, readers are encouraged to reflect on how ancient texts shape contemporary gender ideologies. In academic, literary, and activist spaces, works like Divakaruni's form bridges between mythology and modernity.

As feminist writers continue to rewrite mythology, they assert not just literary agency but historical reclamation. *The Palace of Illusions* is thus not only a novel but a declaration: that women's voices are integral to the myths that have defined cultures, and that these voices must be heard, believed, and preserved.

### **Conclusion**

*The Palace of Illusions* is not merely a retelling; it is a re-visioning of Draupadi as a subject, not an object, of history. Divakaruni challenges mythological and societal constructions of womanhood by giving Draupadi a voice



that reflects upon her constraints and contradictions. The novel underscores the idea that gender is both performed and constructed, and that mythological narratives can be reclaimed to reflect contemporary struggles for identity, justice, and equality.

Draupadi's journey from fire-born princess to disillusioned queen is marked by constant negotiation with power, agency, and identity. Her voice, filled with passion and doubt, speaks across centuries to women still navigating societal expectations. Divakaruni's narrative thus becomes both a literary intervention and a sociopolitical statement. It insists on the right to retell, to resist, and to reimagine.

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