



REWRITING MYTH: A FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION OF DRAUPADI IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

Savitha Velmani S,
Assistant Professor of English,
V.V.Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudhunagar, Tamilnadu, India.

Corresponding author: savithavelmani@vvvcollege.org

ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author whose works foreground women's experiences and lived realities. Her novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the Indian epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi, who is largely marginalized in the original text. By reimagining Draupadi as the narrative voice, Divakaruni reconstructs her identity and challenges her systematic suppression within patriarchal discourse. This paper examines how Draupadi resists patriarchal structures and asserts her agency in terms of selfhood, education, autonomy, and justice. Based on feminist theories proposed by Hélène Cixous, this study analyse Draupadi's evolving consciousness and her negotiation of identity within a male-dominated socio-cultural order.

Keywords: Feminism, Myth Rewriting, Draupadi, Patriarchy, Self identity

Literature has long functioned as a powerful medium for human emotions, cultures, and social realities. Among these all the Gender remains one of the most significant factors a shaping social experiences. Within literary studies, Feminist criticism has emerged as an

important approach for examining the representation of women and gender relations in literary texts.

Women's writings are an expression of their own experiences and emotions. They use their own narratives because they are not satisfied with male narrators. Most of

the epic women characters are narrated by male writers, and this still has an impact on modern society. Very few women in literature have played a central role in society, but they are not aware of it. Therefore, every woman must take steps to rewrite their stories and encourage others to do the same. In *Laugh of Medusa*, Helene Cixous says,

“I shall speak about women’s writing: About what it will do. Women must write herself : Must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history by her own movement” (Cixous 875)

The ideas presented by Helene Cixous provide a valuable framework for examining literary texts that seeks to reclaim female voices within particular traditions. In *Laugh of Medusa*, Cixous encouraging women to inscribe their experience, desires and subjectivities. Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* represents one such attempt, as it reimagines the story from her own perspective. By granting narrative authority

to a character whose voice remains marginalized in the epic *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni offers an alternative interpretation of myth. The novel thus aligns with Cixous’s call for women to write themselves into history and literature.

Chaturvedi Badrinath’s *The Women of the Mahabharata: the Question of Truth* offers a scholarly understanding of Draupadi that complements the study. He argues that Draupadi as a moral conscience of the epic because she holds men accountable to real justice rather than blind obedience to societal rules. Badrinath reinterprets Draupadi not as a passive victim of injustice, but as an active thinker and moral voice.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian contemporary novelist, poet and short story writer whose work primarily focuses on the theme of diasporas, cultural identity, mythology and women’s experiences. Most of her works blends cultural tradition with modern feministic perspectives in south Asian Communities. As a result, her book *The Palace of Illusions* stands as a significant work in feminist mythological retellings.

While several studies have interpreted *The Palace of Illusions* as a mythological retelling, limited attention has

been given to the novel through the framework of Helene Cixous's concept of women's writing. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as a self-defining woman who challenges patriarchal representations rooted within the *Mahabharata*.

Divakaruni chose Draupadi, who was born in fire, as her female narrator in the book *The Palace of Illusions*. Through this character, the author depicts a stereoscopic view of the epic story *Mahabharatha*. By doing this, readers have the opportunity to delve into Draupadi's mind. Through Draupadi's narration, the author portrays her entire life, from her magical birth to her afterlife.

From the beginning, she had boundaries. Throughout the novel, she tries to escape from them and search for her own identity. King Drupad named her brother "Dhristadyumna," the destroyer of enemies, and herself "Draupadi," the daughter of King Drupad. She condemned the name given by her father and felt that the name itself set gender boundaries. "...my attention veered to the meaning of the names our father chose. Dhristadyumna, Destroyer of enemies. Draupadi, daughter of Drupad." (Divakaruni 5)

Women of her time were not allowed to get an education. Draupadi's determination to receive an education led her to learn from her brother Dhri. Dhri received training for royal life and justice, while Draupadi was trained in womanly duties such as painting and sewing. Krishna emphasized the importance of Draupadi's education to her father, who then allowed her to learn from his brother. While receiving lessons from her tutor, she felt aggrieved by his declaration about women. The tutor stated that women were the main cause of world trouble, but Draupadi objected to this. She felt unique because she did not accept this viewpoint like other women of her age did. According to Dhri's tutor's opinion about virtuous women, if they were lucky, they were directly sent to the next birth and reincarnated as men. However, Draupadi has a different opinion. She believes that if good women were lucky, they were sent to a world where men were not allowed. This attitude aligns with Helene Cixous's feminist ideas for Women to challenge male dominated narrative and assert their own perspectives.

Before Draupadi's Swayamvar, she was attracted to Karna's eyes in the portrait. Her attraction was not only rebellious, but it also showed the masculine ideology in

society. Krishna read Draupadi's mind, so Dhri and he downplayed Karna due to his lower caste and untold parentage. However, Draupadi is unconvinced by their words. "I didn't want to argue with Dhri, but I wasn't ready to turn against Karna, not even for the sake of family honor." (Divakaruni 85)

A Swayamvar is a practice that permits the princess to choose her groom from a group of suitors. King Drupad has a secret wish of marrying his daughter to Arjun, and he cleverly planned the contest by knowing Arjun is the only person who can win it. It was merely a political setup. Draupadi was not even consulted; they call it a 'Swayamvar'. How ironic it was.

For the sake of obeying Kunti's words, Draupadi was forced to marry the other brothers of Arjun. Everyone stated their own benefits and harms in the marriage. Again and again, in this Patriarchal society, she was not given a single chance to express her opinion. "But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit---or harm---them." (Divakaruni 118)

The circumstances and situations led Draupadi to marry the Pandavas. During

their marriage, Vyasa gave her a boon that when she went from one brother to another, she would be a Virgin again. She said that this was mainly designed not for her, but for the benefit of her husbands only. "Not was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands' benefit than mine." (Divakaruni 120)

The story moves on as the Pandavas build a palace and name it as "the palace of illusions", which the people call Indraprastha. Draupadi feels a strong connection to the palace and considers it a part of her identity. Her governance in the palace is admired by her husbands many times. Yudhisthir asks for Draupadi's advice in some critical judgments, but only in private, not in front of others. The Pandavas also took other wives for political reasons and their own desires. Obviously, it's just a normal thing when it comes to men. As a practical woman, she accepting this, and she knows she will always be superior to the Pandavas'.

Every version of the *Mahabharata* strongly perpetuates the myth that the world's troubles are always due to women. Divakaruni chose Draupadi as her narrator to show the suffering and downfall caused

by men, and how women rise like a phoenix after enduring it all.

In Hastinapur, Yudhisthir, who had a weakness for gambling, was invited to play a dice game with Duryodhan. Yudhisthir was not an expert in the game, so he ended up losing his assets, his brothers and his kingdom. In the patriarchal society, women are always considered as property, belonging to their fathers and husbands. Here, Draupadi is also considered as property, so when Yudhisthir lost everything he owned, she was also included in that loss. And the question is, who gave him the right to gamble his wife? Merely, the woman was being treated as an object.

I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the great palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. (Divakaruni 190)

As an educated girl, Draupadi knows the rules and she thinks that the elders in the court have come to rescue her. But she has forgotten that the laws of men never favor women. Finally, Dussasan drags her to the sabha. Draupadi's superego controls her to ask for help from Karna because she doesn't want to lower herself. At last, Lord Krishna saves Draupadi from great disgrace.

History has always reserved a place for men only, but Draupadi's vengeance and determination earned her a significant place in history. In the words of Variyar Akhila, Draupadi learned how to navigate the male-dominated society consequently and assert herself throughout her life. Her persistence led her to sacrifice motherhood in order to focus on her goals. Draupadi did not conform to the role of a typical housewife; instead, she trained her husbands to help her achieve her life's purpose.

Vyasa knew that Draupadi was not an ordinary woman. During the war, he granted her a boon to witness the events. After the war, the widows of the fallen soldiers began to humiliate her. However, she faced the consequences bravely and created a court exclusively for women, where they could freely express their sorrows and sufferings. Finally, Divakaruni portrayed Draupadi as an example to show the world that those who search for their identity and fight for it can create a remarkable legacy in history.

In conclusion, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* stands as a significant feminist reinterpretation of Draupadi by reclaiming and foregrounding a voice that remains suppressed in the traditional *Mahabharata*. By reimagining

Draupadi's experiences from a female perspective, Divakaruni transforms myth into a space for questioning established dominant social systems and recovering women's voices.

Examined within the framework of Helene Cixous concept of *écriture féminine*, the novel exemplifies the importance of women's self-representation and narrative agency. Cixous advocates that women must write themselves into history and literature and Divakaruni's retelling responds to this call by enabling Draupadi to narrate her own story and articulate her own experiences.

While Badrinath restores Draupadi's philosophical and ethical significance within the Mahabharata by emphasizing her role as the moral conscience of the epic, Divakaruni extends the reinterpretation by transforming her into the narrator of her own life.

Therefore, *The Palace of Illusions* not only questions patriarchal mythology but also reclaims female agency through the rewriting of myth, presenting Draupadi as an empowered woman whose voice had long remained unheard.

Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* not only rewrites myth but also reclaims a woman's rightful place within history and literature.

REFERENCES

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee (2009). *The Palace of Illusions*, Picador.
2. Badrinath Chaturvedi (2008). *The Women of Mahabharata-The Question of Truth*, Orient Black Swan.
3. Cixous, Helene (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa. *Signs*,1(4):875-893.
4. Variyar Akhila and Abhisarika Prajapati (2018). Myth and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. *Journal of English Language and Literature*. 5(1):304-307.