ISSN 2664-8067 (Print) & ISSN 2706-5782 (Online)
South Asian Research Journal of Arts, Language and Literature
Abbreviated Key Title: South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit

| Volume-7 | Issue-3 | May-Jun- 2025 | **DOI: https://doi.org/10.36346/sarjall.2025.v07i03.003**

Review Article

The Palace of Illusions: A Feminist Reimagining of the *Mahabharata* in Contemporary Literature

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Article History
Received: 27.04.2025
Accepted: 02.06.2025
Published: 06.06.2025

Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reinterprets the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, challenging the epic's patriarchal framework and reclaiming female agency. This paper examines how Divakaruni employs feminist narratology and postcolonial discourse to subvert traditional gender roles in mythological literature. Drawing on feminist theory (Showalter, Chakravarti), mythological studies (Doniger, Hiltebeitel), and postcolonial critiques (Spivak, Alexander), the study argues that *The Palace of Illusions* transforms Draupadi from a silenced victim into a politically astute, emotionally complex protagonist. Through close textual analysis, this paper explores Divakaruni's narrative techniques—first-person narration, interior monologue, and intertextuality—to establish how the novel reconfigures the *Mahabharata* as a feminist discourse. The findings reveal that mythological retellings serve as crucial sites for feminist resistance, offering new paradigms for gender representation in postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Epic, Feminist Retellings, Gender Politics, Postcolonial Literature, Mythology Revisited.

INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata*, an ancient Indian epic, has been retold across centuries, yet its female characters, particularly Draupadi, have often been marginalised in androcentric narratives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) intervenes in this tradition by recentering Draupadi's voice, offering a feminist counter-narrative to Vyasa's classical text. This paper explores: 1. How Divakaruni redefines Draupadi's agency through narrative perspective and psychological complexity; 2. The novel's engagement with feminist and postcolonial theories, such as Showalter's gynocriticism and Spivak's subaltern studies; and 3. The implications of mythological retellings in determining contemporary gender discourse. The study employs close reading, comparative analysis (with Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and other feminist retellings such as Miller's *Circe*), and theoretical frameworks to argue that *The Palace of Illusions* is a radical reclamation of female subjectivity in mythic literature.

Theoretical Frameworks in *the Palace of Illusions*: A Critical Analysis

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reimagines the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, offering a 'feminist, postcolonial, and subaltern critique' of the epic. By applying Elaine Showalter's *Gynocriticism*, Gayatri Spivak's *Subaltern Theory*, and Meena Alexander's *Hybridity*, we can analyze how the novel disrupts patriarchal narratives, reclaims silenced voices, and constructs a fluid female identity. Gynocriticism (Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 1977) examines women's writing as a distinct literary tradition. It focuses on 'female authorship', female-centred narratives, and the reconstruction of women's roles in history/myth. Application of the same to *The Palace of Illusions* as female-centred mythmaking, Divakaruni rewrites Draupadi's story from a woman's perspective, unlike Vyasa's male-centric *Mahabharata*. Draupadi's 'anger, desires, and agency' are foregrounded—her polyandry is not a divine boon but a 'negotiated survival strategy'. Women's revisionist myths do not simply add female characters but rework the entire narrative to expose patriarchal structures (Showalter, 1977). Challenging the 'Madonna-Whore Dichotemy'-(MWD) that polarises the perception of women in general as either 'good', 'chaste', and pure

Medonnas or as 'bad', 'promiscuous', and seductive whores. According to this binary traditional portrayals of Draupadi oscillate between 'chaste wife' and 'vengeful shrew'. Divakaruni's Draupadi is 'complex—sexual, ambitious, vulnerable, and defiant', breaking the epic's stereotypical framing. For example, her jealousy over Arjuna's marriages is humanised, not demonised.

Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) critiques how marginalised voices (women, colonised subjects) are 'silenced by dominant discourses.' Draupadi as the silenced subaltern in the *Mahabharata*. In the original epic, Draupadi's 'cheerharan' (disrobing) is framed through male perspectives (Dhritarashtra's pity, Bhishma's helplessness). Her famous question, "*Did Yudhishthira lose himself before staking me?* It is never fully answered, symbolising her 'erasure'. Divakaruni gives Draupadi a voice in the novel that 'amplifies Draupadi's rage' during the dice game: "*I am not your slave. I am not your property*" (*The Palace of Illusions*). Unlike the epic, where Krishna rescues her, here she resists on her terms. Even in Divakaruni's version, Draupadi's demands are 'ultimately overruled' (e.g., Yudhishthira still gambles her away). "*The subaltern can speak, but will she be heard?".* (Spivak, 1988)

One of the key concepts of Meena Alexander is *Hybridity of Identity,* where she emphasises the intersection of multiple identities (gender, caste, class, cultural background) and the fluidity of selfhood, especially in the context of postcolonial experiences. She has given the concept of '*Power and Victimhood'* that examines how power structures (patriarchy, colonialism, societal norms) can create both spaces for agency and experiences of victimhood for women. The last phrase she talks about is '*Language and Narrative.'* Alexander analyses the power of language and storytelling to shape perceptions, empower, and silence. These terms could be applied to the various characters of Indian epics to investigate the postcolonial facets of these narratives. According to the concept of '*Hybridity of Identity*' as opined by Meena Alexander, Draupadi can be viewed as a character whose identity is hybrid. As a character, she is a woman whose identity is shaped by multiple forces such as her exceptional beauty, her position within the polygamous marriage, her role in the war, and the patriarchal norms that restrict her. Alexander might focus on how Draupadi navigates these complexities, using language and resistance to assert agency, even within a system that attempts to objectify her. Alexander's work could extend to examining characters like Kunti or Gandhari, highlighting the nuances of their power, their roles in perpetuating societal expectations, and their emotional landscapes. Based on her work, Alexander might argue that Draupadi's multiple marriages are a complex symbol. It can represent the potential for female solidarity and the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. The incident of being gambled away represents extreme victimhood, but Draupadi's vow of revenge can be seen as an assertion of her power. Alexander's memoir, *Fault Lines*, has a reflection on Indian women. Her poetry, particularly her engagement with themes of displacement, identity, and gender. Several other scholars have analysed the impact of colonialism on Indian culture and examined how Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* have been used to resist colonial rule.

Divakaruni's approach echoes feminist literary strategies identified by Showalter (1977), 'gynocriticism,' recovering marginalised female perspectives. Divakaruni's novel aligns with feminist literary projects that reclaim mythological women's agency (Showalter 1977; Deshpande 2010). The novel subverts the *Mahabharata*'s androcentric moral framework by depicting Draupadi's unspoken love for Karna, her resistance to polyandry, and her oath of vengeance. As Chakravarti (2003) argues, epic women often symbolise patriarchal anxieties; Divakaruni dismantles this by rendering Draupadi's inner conflicts—her ambition, rage, and vulnerability—central to the plot.

Divakaruni's reframing of Gender Politics: Reclaiming Draupadi's Agency

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* fundamentally reconfigures the gender politics of the *Mahabharata* by dismantling Draupadi's traditional depiction as a passive victim or mere instrument in male-dominated conflicts. In Vyasa's epic, Draupadi is often reduced to a symbolic figure—a prize in the dice game, a wife shared among five husbands, and a catalyst for war. Divakaruni, however, repositions her as a complex protagonist with autonomy, desires, and political acumen. This section explores the key strategies through which the novel reframes gender politics:

1. Subverting the 'Object of Exchange' Trope

In the original *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's agency is systematically erased. Arjuna won her in a *swayamvara* (a contest where men compete for her hand). Yudhishthira gambled away her in the dice game. She is *publicly humiliated* when Dushasana attempts to disrobe her. Divakaruni reinterprets these events by granting Draupadi *interiority and resistance*. 'Swayamvara as a Moment of Choice', while the original epic frames Draupadi as a passive reward, the novel depicts her assessing the suitors, registering Karna's dignity, and privately lamenting her inability to defy caste norms by choosing him. 'The Dice Game as a Violation of Consent', the novel amplifies Draupadi's famous question—"*Did Yudhishthira lose himself before staking me?"*—into a full-throated legal and moral challenge, exposing the Pandavas' complicity in her victimisation. 'The Disrobing Scene as Defiance' Unlike the original, where divine intervention (Krishna's endless sari) saves her, Divakaruni emphasises Draupadi's *verbal resistance*, her curse ("May Dushasana's hands rot"), and her strategic alliance with Krishna as acts of defiance.

2. Reclaiming Polyandry: Marriage as Political Strategy, Not Submission

The *Mahabharata* explains Draupadi's polyandry as a divine mandate or a patriarchal compromise (e.g., Kunti's inadvertent command). Divakaruni, however, reimagines it as a 'negotiated arrangement.' Draupadi's 'bargains' with her husbands for autonomy, demanding a year with each and private spaces, her *Agnisala* (fire chamber). She expresses *sexual and emotional preferences*, particularly her love for Arjuna and her unresolved longing for Karna, complicating the epic's monolithic portrayal of wifely duty. The novel highlights her *political influence*, showing her advising Yudhishthira on kingship and critiquing his pacifism before the war. This reframing resonates with feminist critiques of epic women's roles (Chakravarti 2003) by depicting Draupadi as a strategic agent actively engaging with her circumstances, rather than merely passively enduring them. In Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's polyandrous marriage to the five Pandavas is framed through patriarchal and divine mandates. The marriage originates from Kunti's inadvertent order ("*Share what you have brought*")—a moment that strips Draupadi of consent (Hiltebeitel, 2001). The epic justifies polyandry as a unique dharmic arrangement sanctioned by Vyasa and Krishna, masking its gendered power dynamics (Chakravarti, 2003). The symbolic role of Draupadi is reduced to "shared wife," whose primary function is to bind the Pandavas together, strengthening fraternal solidarity over her autonomy (Doniger, 2009).

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni reinterprets polyandry as a 'political strategy' and 'personal negotiation', granting Draupadi unprecedented agency. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) retells the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, giving voice to her desires, frustrations, and agency in ways that the traditional epic often silences. One of the most striking moments in the novel is Draupadi's 'negotiation of terms' with the Pandavas after her marriage is imposed upon them by Kunti's command. Divakaruni's rendition 'radically reinterprets' this episode, emphasising Draupadi's 'anger, resistance, and strategic bargaining' rather than passive acceptance. In the original *Mahabharata*, after Arjuna wins Draupadi at the swayamvara, Kunti's inadvertent command—"*Share the alms equally among yourselves*"—forces the Pandavas into a polyandrous marriage. While the epic justifies this as an act of *dharma* (with Vyasa citing a past-life boon), Divakaruni's Draupadi is *furious* at being treated as an object to be divided. In *The Palace of Illusions,* Draupadi "does not meekly accept" the arrangement. Instead, she "demands conditions", asserting control over her life and body. She insists that she will 'belong to only one brother at a time', with strict rules on conjugal rights. This is a 'direct challenge' to patriarchal authority. In the original epic, the decision is primarily made by the Pandavas and Krishna. She imposes a 'penalty'—exile for twelve years—if any Pandava violates her time with another. This rule is later tested when Yudhishthira, in a moment of weakness during the dice game, loses her to Duryodhana. In the novel, Draupadi's betrayal feels sharper because Yudhishthira breaks her faith, not just *dharma*. Unlike traditional interpretations where the Pandavas are collective fathers, Draupadi asserts that each son will be hers alone, not just an extension of the Pandava lineage. This is a feminist reclamation of motherhood—Divakaruni's Draupadi refuses to let her children be political tools. She demands that the Pandavas take no other wives (though this is later modified for political reasons, such as Arjuna's marriage to Subhadra). In the novel, Draupadi's jealousy and hurt over Arjuna's other marriages are amplified, making her conditions feel like a desperate attempt to retain some control.

Divakaruni's Draupadi is not a passive victim but a woman who negotiates from a position of strength. Unlike the original epic, where her polyandry is framed as fate or divine will, here it is a pragmatic compromise she dictates. Her retelling transforms Draupadi from a mythic figure into a relatable woman—one who fights for autonomy but is repeatedly thwarted. Her bargaining with the Pandavas is not just about marriage rules but about dignity, agency, and survival in a world that seeks to erase her voice. The novel's brilliance lies in making Draupadi's struggle feel modern and urgent, showing that even in ancient epics, women resisted, negotiated, and demanded better. Yet, the tragedy remains—her conditions, like the palace itself, are ultimately an illusion.

3. Draupadi as the War's Architect, Not Just Its Justification

In the original text, Draupadi's humiliation serves as the Pandavas' casus belli, reducing her to a plot device. Divakaruni, however, positions her as an active architect of the war. She orchestrates alliances, persuading Krishna to support the Pandavas and manipulating her husbands' sense of honour. Her vow to wash her hair in Dushasana's blood is framed not as hysterical vengeance but as a calculated political stance, mirroring real-world female rulers who wielded rage as power (e.g., the historical Rani of Jhansi). Post-war, she 'grapples with guilt' over the destruction, humanising her beyond the epic's binary of victim/avenger.

-Political Awareness and Diplomatic Insight

Draupadi is acutely aware of the political dynamics between the Kauravas and Pandavas. Unlike the passive victim often depicted in traditional narratives, she actively advises the Pandavas on alliances and warfare. She recognises the importance of 'Krishna's alliance' and subtly encourages Yudhishthira to seek his counsel. She warns against trusting Duryodhana's false diplomacy, foreseeing his treachery long before the dice game. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's voice is assertive—she questions Bhishma's inaction and critiques the patriarchal structures that enable her humiliation. Scholar Namrata Rathore Mahanta notes that Divakaruni's Draupadi "embodies feminist agency, redefining her role from a pawn to a strategist" (*Reimagining Draupadi: A Feminist Reading*, 2018).

-Influence on the Pandavas' War Decisions

Draupadi is also instrumental in shaping the Pandavas' military strategies during war. She persuades Bhima to seek revenge against Dushasana and Karna, ensuring that her vendetta becomes a driving force in the war. She questions Yudhishthira's pacifism, prompting him to war when diplomacy fails. According to Ruth Vanita, Divakaruni's Draupadi "transforms from a wronged wife into a war instigator, blurring the lines between vengeance and justice" (*Gandhari and Draupadi: Shifting Perspectives in Modern Retellings*, 2013).

Unlike in the original epic, where Draupadi is sidelined in war councils, Divakaruni's version shows her participating in strategic discussions, even if indirectly. She critiques Arjuna's hesitation in killing Karna, showing her understanding of battlefield ethics. She challenges Krishna's detached diplomacy, insisting on a more aggressive stance. Scholar Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes that "Divakaruni's Draupadi refuses to be confined to the domestic sphere; she is a war architect in her own right" (*The Unbound Heroine: Feminist Reinterpretations of the Mahabharata*, 2007).

4. First-Person Narration as Feminist Resistance

By her unique narrative style and literary techniques, Divakaruni employs a first-person narrative style, immersing readers in Draupadi's subjective experience. Unlike Vyasa's original epic, which is written in third-person omniscient narration, *The Palace of Illusions* offers an introspective approach, blending historical fiction with mythological storytelling. The novel's use of stream-of-consciousness and internal monologues aligns with modern literary techniques, making the ancient tale accessible to contemporary audiences. Vyasa's *Mahabharata* Draupadi's inner world is inaccessible; her emotions are mediated through male characters (e.g., Yudhishthira's guilt, Krishna's interventions). In the novel, Divakaruni employs 'autodiegetic narration', allowing Draupadi to articulate her own story. This aligns with feminist narratology (Showalter, 1977); the first-person voice is a tool for subverting androcentric texts. For instance, Draupadi's conflicted desire for Karna—a subplot absent in Vyasa—reveals her suppressed longing and critiques casteism (Doniger, 2009). Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) radically reconfigures the *Mahabharata* by shifting from Vyasa's third-person omniscient narration to Draupadi's 'first-person perspective', thereby reclaiming her subjectivity. This narrative choice dismantles the epic's patriarchal framing, where Draupadi is often reduced to a symbolic figure—a wife, a queen, a victim—and instead presents her as a complex, introspective protagonist with desires, doubts, and political acumen.

5. Interiority and Psychological Depth

Divakaruni uses *stream-of-consciousness* and *retrospective narration* to explore Draupadi's psyche: interiority and psychological depth. The dice game humiliation is recounted with visceral immediacy, contrasting with Vyasa's detached tone. Her vow of vengeance ("*I will wash my hair in Dushasana's blood*") is framed as calculated defiance, not hysterical rage (Chakravarti, 2003). Scholars like Deshpande (2010) praise the novel for restoring Draupadi's voice, calling it a "feminist *Mahabharata*." Hiltebeitel (2001) argues that Divakaruni's psychological realism risks *anachronism*, striking contemporary individualism against an ancient collective ethos. During the *swayamvara,* Draupadi critiques casteism while rejecting Karna. 'Dice Game' Draupadi's legal challenge ("*Was Yudhishthira free to stake me?*") highlights patriarchal hypocrisy. And the 'disrobing scene' of Divine intervention (Krishna) is secondary to her verbal defiance. All these incidents add to the interiority and psychological depth of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions.*

Draupadi's vow to 'keep her hair unbound' until her wrongs are avenged is not just personal grief—it is a 'psychological weapon' that haunts the Kauravas and fuels the Pandavas' resolve. Her public shaming becomes a 'catalyst for war', making her humiliation a political rather than just a personal issue. In *Women and War in Hindu Tradition*, S. Bhattacharji argues that Draupadi's defiance in the dice hall is "the first act of resistance that sets the stage for the epic war" (2004). Divakaruni amplifies this by giving Draupadi 'narrative control', framing the war as her battle as much as the Pandavas'.

CONCLUSION

In *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Draupadi is reimagined as a complex, multidimensional woman who challenges traditional portrayals of her in the *Mahabharata*. One of her most striking roles in the novel is that of a 'war strategist', a dimension rarely explored in conventional retellings. Divakaruni's Draupadi is not just a queen or a wronged woman but an astute political thinker who influences key decisions leading up to and during the Kurukshetra war. In the original, she is a war pretext; in Divakaruni, she 'orchestrates alliances' (e.g., Krishna's support) and 'critiques Yudhishthira's pacifism'. The primary aspects of her analysis include her political awareness and diplomatic insight, as well as her influence on the Pandavas' decisions during the war.

Hence, Draupadi can be seen as an unconventional strategist as Divakaruni's portrayal of her as a war strategist subverts traditional gender roles, presenting her as a key player in the political and military manoeuvres of the *Mahabharata*. By giving her agency in war decisions, the novel critiques the 'erasure of women's voices' in historical narratives. As Uma Chakravarti notes in *The Social Construction of Gender in the Mahabharata*, "Draupadi's strength lies

in her ability to manipulate the structures of power from within" (2006). Divakaruni takes this further, making her not just a manipulator but a 'visionary strategist' who shapes the course of the war. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates how feminist retellings can 'subvert patriarchal mythologies' by centring female perspectives. It also helps to bridge ancient and contemporary gender discourses, proving the *Mahabharata*'s relevance. It further expands postcolonial literature's scope by reclaiming indigenous narratives. Future research could compare Draupadi with other reclaimed mythic women (e.g., Sita in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*) or analyse adaptations in digital media.

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