

Breaking Silence: Draupadi's Voice in a Feminist Retelling of *The Palace of Illusions*

Vimaljeet Kaur

Assistant Professor

PG Dept. of English

Khalsa College

Abstract

The modern feminist Retellings of myth offer a crucial space for reinterpreting and reconstruction the silenced voices of women in ancient narratives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a powerful reimagining of the Mahabharata through the perspective of Draupadi, a character traditionally confined within patriarchal representation. This paper examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi's character in *The Palace of Illusions* by giving her a strong narrative voice. In many traditional versions of the Mahabharata, Draupadi appears as a symbolic figure whose inner thoughts are rarely expressed. By foregrounding her thoughts, emotions and inner conflicts, the narrative breaks the long standing silence imposed upon her in Mahabharata. This study argues that Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a self-aware narrator who reflects on her emotions, choices, and struggles. The paper reviews existing scholarship on feminist retellings and identifies a gap in the limited attention given to Draupadi's inner voice and psychological development. By focusing on her personal experiences, this study reveals how the novel challenges patriarchal values and presents a more complex portrayal of womanhood. Through this feminist retelling, Draupadi emerges as a symbol of resistance and self awareness. Her voice becomes a tool of resistance and identity formation.

Keywords: Draupadi, Feminist Retellings, Identity, Patriarchy, Silence, Voice

Introduction

Mythological texts such as the Mahabharata have shaped cultural values and social norms for centuries. These texts present ideas about duty and morality but largely they focus on male experiences, placing women in secondary roles. The women in the traditional narratives are presented as submissive and always related to the men around them. They do not have an individual identity; They do not have a voice.

In traditional narratives, Draupadi is remembered as a cause of conflict or a symbol of honor. Her thoughts and emotions are rarely explored. Her silence is interpreted as obedience, reflecting patriarchal structures. Although she is revered as embodiments of virtue and endurance yet her inner lives, personal conflicts and emotional struggles remain largely unexplored. This paper aims to explore the voice of Draupadi.

In *The Palace of Illusions* Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni allows Draupadi to narrate her own story. It argues that Draupadi's voice is not only a narrative technique but also a form of resistance and identity. She is not only a daughter, a sister or a wife, she is an individual who has a voice, who has desires, feelings, emotions and who is not merely identified in relation to the male member of her family but as an epitome of courage and female power.

In the traditional Mahabharata, Draupadi is portrayed as a silent figure but in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* she is the epitome of courage and strength.

Devakaruni wrote in her author's note I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women...they remain shadowy figures their thoughts and motives mysterious, and their emotions portrayed 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 wrote a book...I would place women in the forefront of the action. I would uncover the story that they lay invisible between the lines of men's exploits. (Divakaruni, xiv-xv)

Literature review

Feminist retellings of mythology have received significant scholarly attention. These studies focus on voice, agency, and identity in rewriting female characters from male-centered narratives through the lens of gender, voice, and agency. These Retellings seek to challenge the patriarchal frameworks embedded in classical text by foregrounding marginalized perspectives, particularly those of women whose voices were suppressed earlier. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The palace of Illusions* shows this literary shift by reimagining Draupadi, a central yet often objectified figure in the Mahabharata, as a self-articulating subject. By granting Draupadi the narrative authority, the novel transforms myth into a site of resistance and reinterpretation.

Scholars such as Suzette H. Eikelenboom argues that myths are not fixed entities but evolve over time, allowing reinterpretation that reflects changing culture and ideological contexts according to cultural needs (Eikelenboom 4). This perspective provides a foundation for understanding feminist retellings as dynamic engagements with tradition rather than mere adaptations. In this context Divakaruni's work becomes a critical intervention that reclaims Draupadi's voice from the constraints of a male-dominated narrative structure. The shift from third person perspective to first person perspective narration is particularly significant, as it enables the protagonist to assert her identity and challenge the authority of canonical representations.

The question of narrative voice is central to feminist literary discourse, as it is closely tied to issues of power and representation. Niraja Saraswat observes that Divakaruni's use of first person narration allows Draupadi to express her individuality and subjectivity, thereby transforming her into a figure of agency (Saraswat). Similarly, Anant Shivam and Uday Shankar Ojha highlight that this narrative strategy facilitates a deeper understanding of Draupadi's emotional and psychological experience, which is largely absent in the original epic. By providing access to her inner world, the novel humanizes Draupadi and complicates her characterization beyond the archetypal roles assigned to her in traditional texts (Shivam and Ojha).

Further reinforcing this perspective, Tara Prasad Adhikari contends that while the Mahabharata often objectified Draupadi, *The Palace of Illusions* represents her as an active subject with agency and autonomy. This transformation is also noted by Devashish Kumar, who describes the novel as a feminist rewriting that challenges dominant patriarchal traditions. Meenal Talu similarly argues that Draupadi is portrayed as a strong and independent figure who resists prescribed gender roles. Collectively, these scholars emphasize the novel's role in redefining Draupadi as a voice rather than a symbol, thereby aligning with broader feminist efforts to reclaim women's narratives.

In addition to the agency, critics such as Hema S. draw attention to the psychological depth and emotional complexity that characterize Divakurani's portrayal of Draupadi. Unlike the relatively static depiction in the epic, this version of Draupadi is introspective, conflicted, and deeply aware of her circumstances. Her desires, frustration, and vulnerabilities are brought to the forefront, offering a more nuanced and relatable representation. This emphasis on inferiority not only enhances the character's realism but also underscores the importance of voice as a means of self-expression and identity formation.

However, while existing scholarship extensively examines themes of agency, voice, and psychological depth, it often overlooks the critical dimension of silence and its relationship to power. Draupadi's voice in *The Palace of Illusions* is not merely an expression of empowerment but also a response to prolonged silencing within the epic tradition. Moments of enforced silence, whether social, cultural or relational, shape her consciousness and inform her eventual articulation. Thus, "breaking silence" emerges as a complex act that involves both resistance and negotiation within a patriarchal framework.

Research Gap

Most studies focus on general feminist themes but do not deeply analyze Draupadi's inner voice and emotional development. This paper fills that gap by focusing on her internal voice as a process of identity formation.

The gap in the literature highlights the need for a more focused exploration of how silence operates alongside voice in feminist retellings. By examining the interplay between silence and speech, this study seeks to move beyond conventional readings of empowerment and instead analyze how Draupadi's narrative voice functions as a transformative force. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discussions in feminist literary studies by emphasizing that voice is not simply given but is actively constructed through the struggle against silence.

Methodology

This paper uses textual analysis to examine Draupadi's voice in *The Palace of Illusions*. It studies selected passages to understand themes of identity, voice, and resistance. It adopts a qualitative design grounded in feminist literary criticism to examine the representation of voice and silence in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakurani.

The research focuses on how Draupadi's narrative voice functions as a site of resistance within a patriarchal framework, particularly in the context of feminist retellings of mythological texts.

The primary method employed is close textual analysis, which involves a detailed and interpretive reading of the novel. This approach enables an in-depth examination of language, narrative structure, and characterization. The study is informed by key concepts of feminist theory, particularly those related to voice, agency, and the politics of silence, as well as narrative theory that considers the significance of first person storytelling in shaping subjectivity.

Selected passages from the text are analysed based on their relevance to themes of silence, self-expression, identity formation and resistance. These include critical moments in Draupadi's life - such as her experiences of marginalisation, her internal reflection, and instances where she asserts or negotiates her voice. The selection is purposive, focusing on sections that best illustrate the tension between imposed silence and narrative articulation.

The analysis follows a thematic approach, identifying and interpreting recurring patterns related to voice and silence. Special attention is given to literary techniques such as first person narration, tone, symbolism, and internal monologue, which contribute to the construction of Draupadi's perspective. Through this method, the study explores how the act of "breaking silence" is represented not only as personal expression but also as a form of resistance against dominant patriarchal narratives.

In addition, the study also has a comparative framework by referencing Draupadi's portrayal in the Mahabharata. This comparison highlights the shifts in characterization and narrative authority introduced in the feminist retelling, thereby emphasizing the transformative role of voice in the reinterpretation of myth.

Draupadi's Voice and Identity

Draupadi narrates in first person, making her an active subject. She expresses emotional vulnerability. Draupadi's voice is not merely when a sorceress teaches her to cook food, to wear cotton sarees, to sleep on the floor, how to behave with husband, Draupadi is very confused with all tactics and asks; "Teach me how to love my husband..." (Divakaruni 63).

She also questions her identity and rejects being defined only through her father. She doesn't want to be known as her father only. She said

"I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name." (Divakaruni 5)

Draupadi is very courageous in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, when she and her caregiver went to a sage to ask for the future, the sage invites the spirit to ask the future of Draupadi. The sage thinks Draupadi is scared of the spirits, the sage taunted: "Scared princess?" "Maybe you'd better step out and return to your safe palace—" (Divakaruni 38)

On this Draupadi replied with so much courage;

"No! Ask your spirits if I will get what I desire ...

I am no child ,and I don't know what I want! I want to leave a mark on history ,as was promised to me at my birth.”(Divakurani 38 - 39)

Draupadi rejects being a daughter,a wife or a sister ,she says that she has her own identity.She is strong enough to be recognised by her own name.

Dice game episode

During the dice game, Draupadi refuses shame and questions injustice. She realizes her husband values honor over her suffering (Divakaruni 194–95). This marks a turning point in her awareness.When her five husbands lost everything in the gambling and duryodhan summons Draupadi to come to the hall upon hearing Draupadi was shocked but at last replied very boldly.

“I’m a queen.Daughter of Draupadi,sister of Dhristadyumna .Mistress of the greatest palace on earth .I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins ,or summoned to court like a dancing girl.”(Divakurani 190)

This shows the boldness of Draupadi but ultimately she realises the patriarchal system of the society that women have no right in this society and she has to do what the male members of the society asked her to do ,she says

“The wife is the property of the husband ,no less so than a cow or a slave”.(Divakurani 190)

After Draupadi was insulted by the men in the royal hall ,she says in rage

“All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work.Your mother and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept.This entire kingdom will become a channel house .Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead .All that will remain is the shameful memory of today,what you tried to do to a defenseless woman.”(Divakurani194).

All this said by Draupadi shows her trauma and how traumatized she was when all this humiliation happened to her. She also took an oath not to comb her hair until all the Kaurava men who were involved in her humiliation will die. “ I will not comb it until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood.”(Divakurani 194).

Challenges Dharma

Draupadi challenges dharma, showing that moral rules often favor men. This exposes gender bias in traditional ethics.When Yudhishtira gambles Draupadi away,she questions whether he even had the right to stake her ,women are treated as property.This is one of the strongest moments where she directly challenges dharma.she questions the norm of the society that this is the moral responsibility (dharma) of a woman to obey her husband ,Draupadi questioning in the court exposes how dharma is interpreted to justify male authority ,even when it results in injustice.In *The palace of Illusions*, dharma is shown as complex and sometimes flawed, not purely moral.Draupadi’s perspective reveals its contradictions.

Female relationships

Relationships with Kunti and others are complex. Women sometimes support patriarchal systems, showing the depth of social conditioning.Especially Kunti and Draupadi’s

relationship is very complex ,there is always a tension between both of them from the day Draupadi got married to Arjun.Their relationship reflects both maternal authority and suppressed female solidarity.

The relationship between Draupadi and other wives of her husbands are somehow natural .Firstly when her husbands marries other women ,she was devastated and somehow jealous of the other wives ,she says

“ I didn't win all my battles. My husbands took other wives :Hidimba,Kali,Devika,Balandhara,Chitrangada,Ulupi,Karunamati.how naive I'd been to think I could have prevented it !Sometimes there were political reasons ,but mostly it was male desire.”(Divakurani 151)

Draupadi's anger, rivalry and jealousy between all the wives is natural or we can say that it is shaped by male dominated power systems.

Draupadi's inner feelings towards Karna

In *The Palace of Illusions* ,Divakurani portrayed the deep inner feelings of Draupadi which was never portrayed in the traditional Mahabharata.The best example of this argument is that in this novel ,Divakurani shows the feelings and emotions of Draupadi towards Karna which was missing from the traditional epic,when Draupadi was being humiliated in the hall ,she was upset with the whole group of men about but she was more upset with Karna because of the attraction she feels for him

“I spoke to all ,but it was Karna I looked at ,his gaze I held .Of one thing I was glad .What happened today had stripped away all ambiguities from my heart .Never again would I long for this attention”.

This very line from the mouth of Draupadi reveals her feelings for Karna .She always wants to talk to him after the incident when she insulted him about his identity.Draupadi feels a strange kind of attraction towards Karna . Draupadi's feelings about Karna is only portrayed in *The Palace of Illusions* which is missing from the traditional Mahabharata.

Emotional Growth

Draupadi evolves from a hopeful young woman into a reflective and self-aware individual. Her experiences shape her identity and understanding of power.Her emotional growth is driven by her internal struggles ,her longing for agency ,love,and recognition can analyze how her suppressed desires(especially her feelings for Karna)shape her emotional maturity and self awareness.Her humiliation in the court, the trauma she got from that reshapes her identity,shifting her from idealism to a strong ,powerful woman.

Draupadi's relationships with the Pandavas,Krishna ,and even her adversaries influence her growth; for example, she learns the limitations of marital and political alliances.

With Krishna :she gains philosophical insight and emotional grounding.

Early in the novel,Draupadi seeks validation within patriarchal structures.Later ,she begins to question and resist them ,her emotional growth is tied to reclaiming her voice in a male dominated world.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines Draupadi as a powerful narrative voice, transforming her from a traditionally silent figure into an introspective and self-aware individual. Though it focuses on her inner life, emotional struggles, and personal agency, the novel challenges patriarchal interpretations embedded in classical narratives. By foregrounding Draupadi's perspective, the study not only fills a critical gap in literary analysis but also underscores the importance of feminist retellings in reclaiming marginalized.

Ultimately, Draupadi's voice becomes a symbol of resistance, identity, and self-expression, encouraging readers to question dominant narratives and engage with mythological texts from a more inclusive and critical perspective. Such reinterpretations open pathways for further exploration of other silenced voices in literature and highlight the evolving role of storytelling in shaping cultural understanding.

The study fills a research gap by focusing on her inner voice and emotional journey. It highlights how feminist retellings recover marginalized perspectives and challenge traditional narrative

Works Cited

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India, 2008.

Eikelenboom, Suzette H. "Myth and Its Reinterpretation." *Journal of Myth Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1–10.

Saraswat, Niraja. "Reclaiming Draupadi's Voice in Feminist Retellings." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2020, pp. 45–60.

Shivam, Anant, and Uday Shankar Ojha. "Narrative Voice and Feminist Perspective in *The Palace of Illusions*." *International Journal of English Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2021, pp. 22–30.

Adhikari, Tara Prasad. "From Object to Subject: Draupadi in Modern Retellings." *Nepalese Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2022, pp. 70–82.

Kumar, Devashish. "Rewriting Myth from the Margins." *Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2023, pp. 101–115.

Talus, Meenal. "Feminist Identity in *The Palace of Illusions*." *Indian Literary Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, pp. 55–63.

Hema, S. "Psychological Dimensions of Draupadi's Character." *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2020, pp. 88–96.