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Resurrecting Draupadi: Feminist Echoes in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Dr. Nisha Thomji Varghese

This paper explores contemporary Indian literature's reexamination and reinterpretation of ancient myths, folklore, and history, focusing on dismantling patriarchal structures and misconceptions. Through a feminist lens, it scrutinizes Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. The novel illuminates Draupadi's innermost thoughts and emotions, challenging traditional portrayals and highlighting her resilience and agency. It delves into themes of identity, gender dynamics, and societal oppression, revealing how feminist retellings enrich literature and contribute to social justice. By reclaiming marginalized voices and offering a new narrative, the retelling fosters a critical reevaluation of cultural values, advocating for inclusivity and gender equality. Divakaruni's work exemplifies this transformative approach, portraying Draupadi as a complex, multifaceted character whose story resonates with contemporary issues, ultimately reshaping cultural narratives and their perceived value.

Keywords: Marginalization, Feminist Retelling, Identity and Agency, Patriarchal Structures, Empowerment

Introduction

In contemporary Indian literature, ancient myths, folklore, and history are meticulously re-examined, revised, and reimaged. This literary movement responds to the theoretical imperatives of dismantling patriarchal dominion, antiquated traditions, misconceptions,

and ideological hegemony. The Hindu epics, particularly, offer a fertile ground for modern writers to retell and reinterpret myths, thereby illuminating the manifold perspectives and resurrecting characters marginalized by mainstream narratives. Feminist retellings, in particular, scrutinize the roles and representations of female figures, delving into their lives, gender dynamics, societal status, and intersecting marginalities, significantly enriching literature and history. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* epitomizes this trend, offering a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata through the eyes of Draupadi. The novel intricately explores Draupadi's innermost thoughts and emotions, allowing readers to grasp her pivotal role. Divakaruni portrays her with an earthy authenticity that dismantles her mythical image from traditional narratives and scrutinizes Draupadi from a feminist vantage point. It reveals how discrimination pervades various stages of women's lives, irrespective of their age, class, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, rendering them victims of societal violence. Draupadi is subjugated by male chauvinists, her voice stifled. Through a feminist lens, her individuality and emotions emerge, spotlighting overlooked themes in the Mahabharata and contributing to the feminist discourse challenging traditional representations of women in art and literature.

The Power and Purpose of Literary Retellings

Retellings, an intriguing and dynamic category of literary work, take pre-existing stories and breathe new life into them through imaginative reinterpretations. These creative endeavors can range from straightforward adaptations of beloved classics to bold, innovative reimaginings that explore untapped perspectives or themes. The scope and nature of retellings are vast, transcending various media such as books, short stories, plays, films, and even video games. At the heart of retellings lies the enchantment of re-exploring tales deeply rooted in cultural consciousness. Fairy tales, myths, and legends frequently serve as fertile ground for these creative forays, their timeless narratives inviting endless reinterpretation. Yet, retellings are not confined to these traditional domains alone. The rich tapestry of Shakespearean plays, the nuanced plots of well-known novels, and

even historical events or folk narratives can all be woven anew with fresh threads of imagination.

The allure of retellings lies in their ability to infuse ancient tales with contemporary relevance and nuance. By reimagining these stories, authors can offer readers a fresh lens through which to view well-known narratives, often shedding light on overlooked aspects or introducing novel elements and characters. This process of reinterpretation not only rejuvenates the original story but also engages with modern sensibilities, reflecting current societal concerns and values. Classical fairy tales, once simple moral fables cloaked in enchanted realms, have metamorphosed through retellings into profound narratives that grapple with intricate themes of identity, power, and social justice. In the adept hands of a master storyteller, a tale as well-trodden as Cinderella blossoms into a rich tapestry of resilience and self-determination, subverting the passive archetypes of yore. As cultural critic Roland Barthes suggests, “narrative is determined not by a desire to narrate but by a desire to exchange (Barthes, 1977, p. 79)”, reflecting the dynamic evolution of these stories. These reimagined tales illuminate the human condition, transforming the familiar into the sublime.

Similarly, myths and legends undergo metamorphosis in contemporary retellings. Ancient heroes and deities, once shrouded in grandeur and mystique, are reimagined with human vulnerabilities and relatable dilemmas. This humanization brings an intimacy to the epic scale of these tales, allowing readers to connect with the characters on a deeper emotional level. Shakespearean retellings, too, present a fertile ground for creative alchemy. The Bard’s labyrinthine plots and kaleidoscopic characters invite reinterpretations that can unveil hidden themes or recast familiar figures in a novel light. Imagine *Hamlet* through Ophelia’s eyes: her metamorphosis from a tragic wisp into a formidable heroine, commanding her own destiny. As translation theorist Walter Benjamin posits, “Translation is a mode” that reveals the profound essence of the original (Benjamin, 1996, p. 16). These reimaginings breathe new life into timeless tales, transforming them into shimmering mosaics of meaning and resonance.

In the realm of novels too, retellings can provide a platform for voices and viewpoints marginalized in the original works. By shifting the focus to these overlooked characters, authors can challenge and expand upon the established canon, fostering a more inclusive literary landscape. This approach not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to engage with the text in a more critical and reflective manner. Retellings function as a shimmering bridge between antiquity and modernity, merging the ageless allure of classic tales with the vivacity of contemporary narratives. This creative alchemy allows authors to weave present-day issues into the fabric of age-old stories, crafting works that resonate profoundly across eras. Themes such as gender equality, environmental sustainability, and cultural identity are seamlessly integrated, rendering these retellings both timeless and timely.

Furthermore, retellings invigorate beloved narratives by introducing novel plot twists, alternative endings, or entirely new characters. This boundless creative freedom enables authors to play with reader expectations, crafting tales that are simultaneously familiar and astonishing. As Richard Hoggart observes, “The uses of literacy... will always bear the mark of the society which employs them,” emphasizing how contemporary contexts reshape these narratives (Hoggart, 1957, p. 17). Similarly, Edward Said notes, “Texts are worldly; to some degree they are events,” highlighting how retellings can reflect and influence societal currents (Said, 1983, p. 4). In this dance of reinterpretation, retellings invite readers on a journey of rediscovery, where the known and unknown intermingle in enchanting and thought-provoking ways. By revisiting and reimagining cherished tales, authors create a mosaic of stories that continually captivate and enlighten new generations, transforming the familiar into the sublime.

Feminist Retellings in Indian Literature

Feminist retellings in Indian literature aim to dismantle and subvert the patriarchal narratives and gender norms entrenched in traditional stories and myths. By foregrounding the perspectives of female characters and reimagining their experiences, these retellings offer a new and often more nuanced understanding of these ancient

tales. Such narratives amplify the voices of women and other marginalized communities, whose stories have historically been overlooked or suppressed. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak aptly observes, feminist critique “is a persistent critique of what we cannot not want” (Spivak, 1988, p. 271)—that is, a critique of ingrained patriarchal structures we must continuously challenge. These feminist retellings are crucial because they provide an alternative to the dominant cultural narratives that often reinforce gender inequalities and other forms of oppression. By challenging these narratives and offering new perspectives, these retellings can promote gender equality, empowerment, and social justice. They also allow contemporary readers to connect with traditional stories and myths in a more meaningful and relevant way by exploring themes and issues pertinent to their own lives and experiences. Ultimately, feminist Indian retellings inspire readers to critically examine the stories and myths that shape cultural values and identities, envisioning more inclusive and just futures.

In the traditional narrative of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, is depicted as an enigmatic woman of substance. Princess Draupadi is compelled to enter into a polyandrous marriage, sharing her life with five husbands. She is often portrayed as a firm woman with an unbending will, faithful to her husbands, and performing her duties according to ‘dharma’ or righteousness. However, modern critics view her as an early feminist figure, an interpretation that opens up numerous avenues for reimagining her character.

Contemporary literary works delve into Draupadi’s saga, reimagining her within a more tangible and relatable milieu. These retellings peel back the layers of her character, revealing the rich tapestry of feminine emotions and profound depths often eclipsed in Vyasa’s original epic. One notable feminist reinterpretation is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions*.

The novel reweaves the grand Hindu epic Mahabharata, presenting its intricate plot through Draupadi’s eyes. While the storyline remains loyal to the original epic, its unique allure stems from the narration by a female protagonist. Divakaruni’s choice to center a

woman's perspective offers readers a novel lens through which to view the legendary tale. Written in the first person, the novel allows Draupadi to articulate her personal journey, affording ample space for her voice and those of other female characters. As Judith Butler posits, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a doing rather than a being" (Butler, 1990, p. 25), underscoring Draupadi's dynamic portrayal. In this retelling, Draupadi's narrative breathes life into the silent spaces of the epic, echoing Bell Hooks' assertion that "Feminism is for everybody" (Hooks, 2000, p. 9). Through Divakaruni's masterful prose, Draupadi transcends her mythic origins, emerging as a symbol of resilience and agency, inviting readers to explore the confluence of tradition and modernity, the familiar and the revolutionary.

Draupadi's Voice in a Contemporary Narrative

Elaine Showalter's theory of "gynocriticism" emphasizes a distinctly female framework for analyzing women's literature, advocating for the creation of new models rooted in female experiences rather than adapting male-centric theories. *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies this approach, constructing a narrative deeply embedded in the female experience, diverging sharply from the male-dominated perspectives traditionally seen in epic literature. Divakaruni's retelling of the Mahabharata through Draupadi's eyes reimagines the epic with a luminous, feminine lens. The novel unravels the silken threads of Draupadi's life, weaving a rich tapestry of her emotions, struggles, and triumphs. Her voice, once a muted echo in the corridors of myth, now resonates powerfully, offering readers a profound connection to her innermost thoughts. Showalter's assertion that feminist criticism should develop "new models based on the study of female experience" (Showalter, 1979, p. 28) is vividly brought to life in Divakaruni's narrative.

This reimagined Draupadi is not just a character but a symbol of resilience and agency, her story a vibrant mosaic that captures the essence of womanhood in its multifaceted glory. Divakaruni's work, through its intricate prose and deep empathy, transforms the epic into a testament to the enduring power of the female voice, inviting readers

into a world where tradition and innovation beautifully converge. The retelling in *The Palace of Illusions* imbues Draupadi with a robust perspective, emphasizing her emotions, desires, and inner life. This approach challenges the conventional portrayal of Draupadi, moving beyond the one-dimensional depiction of her as merely dutiful and righteous. Instead, she is depicted as a complex, multifaceted character with her own agency and voice.

By reimagining Draupadi, Divakaruni invites readers into a vibrant tapestry of the female experience, rich with resilience and agency. Her narrative shines a luminous light on the constraints and challenges women face in patriarchal societies, transforming Draupadi's struggles and triumphs into a resonant symphony for contemporary women seeking representation. Through intricate prose and profound empathy, Divakaruni crafts a vivid mosaic where tradition and innovation converge, echoing Bell Hooks' vision of a society where all are self-determining (Hooks, 2000, p. 24).

This retelling emboldens the female voice, casting Draupadi not merely as a character but as an enduring symbol of womanhood. The novel's feminist lens vividly explores themes of autonomy, identity, and resistance. Draupadi's voice emerges as a potent critique of the gender norms and societal expectations shackling her. Her inner musings and emotions, meticulously examined throughout, offer a profound comprehension of her role, transcending traditional narratives. This introspective approach echoes H el ene Cixous's exhortation for women to "write themselves" into literature, reclaiming their rightful place in cultural discourse (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). Divakaruni's portrayal transforms Draupadi into a symbol of resilience and empowerment, her story a luminous testament to feminine strength and agency. Moreover, Divakaruni's retelling is part of a broader renaissance in contemporary Indian literature. Authors like Saniya Inamdar and P.K. Balakrishnan also reimagine Draupadi's tale, each illuminating unique facets of her character. These vibrant reinterpretations collectively weave a richer, more nuanced tapestry of Draupadi, showcasing her as a paragon of strength, resilience, and complexity. Through their imaginative prose, these authors breathe new life into Draupadi, transforming her from a mythic figure into a

timeless symbol of feminine power and grace, a beacon of empowerment in the ever-evolving landscape of Indian storytelling. The impact of these feminist retellings transcends literature, reshaping cultural narratives and their perceived value. By offering alternative perspectives, they dismantle the hegemony of patriarchal interpretations, creating space for more inclusive and equitable representations. As Judith Butler asserts, "...the task is not whether to repeat or break with the past, but rather to repeat and, through a radical reworking, to transform it" ((Butler, 1993, p. 28). These feminist reinterpretations embody this transformative ethos, reweaving traditional tales to resonate with contemporary values and champion social change.

Draupadi's Quest for Identity and Agency

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi as a woman in constant search of a true identity is a powerful commentary on patriarchal structures. Draupadi, named after her father Drupada, feels a deep dissatisfaction with her given name, yearning for one that embodies her prophesied fate. The name 'Draupadi' signifies nothing more than "the daughter of Drupada," while her brother, Dhristadyumna, is named "Destroyer of Enemies," reflecting his heroic destiny.

Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? 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)

This quest for a meaningful identity highlights the gender biases embedded in the very act of naming. The patriarchal society around Draupadi, especially her father, does not recognize her equal potential. Both she and her brother were born of divine intervention to fulfill significant prophecies, yet Draupadi is treated as secondary, a 'spare.' Drupada's initial reluctance to even acknowledge Draupadi's birth underscores the societal preference for male offspring.

And whether my lack of friends and visitors was due not to my father's strictness but to people's wariness of someone who wasn't

born like a normal girl and who, if the prophecy was correct, wouldn't live a normal woman's life. (Divakaruni 32)

Draupadi's isolation from her family and society vividly portrays the profound fear and estrangement faced by women who defy societal norms. Raised within the cloistered confines of the palace, devoid of the camaraderie enjoyed by her brother, she epitomizes society's unease with assertive women. Her sole solace is Dhai Ma, a maternal figure and confidante, emblematic of the limited female solidarity available to her. Draupadi's yearning for an education equal to her brother's signifies her rebellion against patriarchal constraints. Despite opposition, including from her father, Krishna's intervention secures her access to the same learning. This act of defiance marks her early feminist consciousness, challenging the pervasive notion of female inferiority and advocating for equal opportunities.

Throughout the novel, Draupadi's narrative unfolds like a tapestry woven with threads of resilience and defiance, her journey echoing across time as a testament to feminine strength. Through Divakaruni's lyrical prose, Draupadi emerges not merely as a mythic figure but as a beacon of empowerment, illuminating the struggles and triumphs of women in a world shaped by tradition and transformation. Draupadi's life unfolds amidst the tumultuous currents of obligation versus personal agency. Her union with the five Pandavas epitomizes this poignant conflict—a marriage not of her choosing, but decreed by male custodians and societal norms. The intricate web of this polyandrous bond is woven around her without consent, a stark manifestation of patriarchal dominance over her destiny and autonomy. Draupadi navigates these turbulent waters, her spirit a tempest of resilience amidst the storm of imposed roles and expectations, forging a path through the relentless pressures of tradition and duty.

My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. (Divakaruni 120)

Draupadi's predicament starkly contrasts with the freedom enjoyed by her husbands, who take additional wives without

consequence. This polygamous arrangement highlights the gender inequalities that permeate her world. Despite her yearning for genuine love, especially from Arjun, she is continually reminded of her role as a wife bound by duty rather than affection. Arjun's coldness and the subsequent affection from Bhima further complicate her emotional landscape, leaving her unfulfilled and longing for a deeper connection.

The disrobing incident marks a pivotal moment in Draupadi's life, transforming her from a dutiful wife to a vengeful woman. The humiliation she endures at the hands of the Kauravas, while her husbands remain passive, crystallizes her realization of their failure to protect and honor her. Her subsequent vow of vengeance fuels the Pandavas' quest for justice, yet it also underscores the limits of their love and loyalty. Her relationship with them becomes one of mutual dependence rather than genuine emotional connection.

Draupadi's journey as a mother is a labyrinth of intricacy and conflict. Despite birthing five sons, her motherly embrace remains elusive, overshadowed by the demands of queenly duties and marital bonds. Dhai Ma and later Subhadra assume the nurturing mantle, creating a chasm between Draupadi and her children, one she struggles to breach even in fleeting reunions. The tragedy deepens with the violent demise of her sons, severing any hope of reconciliation or profound connection. Her inability to embody the societal ideal of motherhood stems from her captivity within patriarchal structures, ensnaring her in obligations that eclipse personal fulfillment and maternal tenderness.

In Divakaruni's rendition, Draupadi's unrequited love for Karna stands as a poignant counterpoint to her dutiful facade. Concealed from all, even herself at times, this forbidden affection defies the societal constraints that bind her. Her longing for Karna, despite his humble origins, symbolizes a rebellion against the rigid caste and social norms entrenched in her world. "How I longed to speak to her of that other, forbidden name: Karna." (Divakaruni, p. 74). Draupadi's rejection of Karna at her swayamvar, compelled by familial honor and societal pressure, casts a lingering shadow over her life. Karna's reciprocated sentiments, embittered by the public humiliation

of her swayamvar, imbue their relationship with tragic complexity. His controversial suggestion during the dice game, proposing her disrobing, echoes the unresolved tension between them. “Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too.” (Divakaruni, p. 192) In Divakaruni’s narrative, Draupadi’s unfulfilled yearning for Karna becomes a poignant allegory of love thwarted by societal dictates, woven into the fabric of her destiny with threads of longing and regret.

Despite the bitterness and hatred, Draupadi’s feelings for Karna never fully dissipate. Her longing for him persists even through the tumultuous events of the Kurukshetra war, culminating in her meditative state after his death, where she finds a semblance of peace. This unconsummated love serves as a poignant critique of the constraints placed upon her by her marriages and societal expectations. Divakaruni’s retelling of Draupadi’s story is a feminist critique of the patriarchal norms that govern her life. By giving voice to Draupadi’s thoughts and emotions, the novel challenges the traditional narratives that have long silenced women’s experiences. Divakaruni’s Draupadi is a complex, multi-dimensional character whose struggles resonate with contemporary issues of gender discrimination and identity.

Theorizing Draupadi’s Identity and Resistance

Elaine Showalter’s concept in “A Literature of Their Own” (Showalter, 1977) profoundly resonates with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s portrayal of Draupadi. Showalter argues that women’s literature often reflects the tension between personal identity and societal expectations. Draupadi’s story, as reimagined by Divakaruni, exemplifies this conflict, depicting her as a woman perpetually torn between her prescribed roles and her inner desires. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of the “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988) is applicable to Draupadi’s character. Spivak postulates that subaltern women are often rendered voiceless within dominant discourses. Divakaruni’s narrative strives to reclaim Draupadi’s voice, enabling her to articulate her previously marginalized experiences and perspectives. Draupadi’s inner turmoil and suppressed desires find expression in Divakaruni’s rich, evocative prose, painting her not just

as a mythic figure, but as a fully realized woman. Judith Butler's notion of "gender performativity" (Butler, 1990) also provides a valuable lens for examining Draupadi. Butler argues that gender is a performance, constituted through repeated acts that conform to societal norms. Draupadi's life, dictated by the expectations of her father, husbands, and society, is a testament to this performativity. Her moments of rebellion and unspoken love for Karna represent attempts to break free from these performances and assert her true self. As Gloria Steinem notes, "The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn" (Steinem, 1983, p. 205). Draupadi's journey embodies this unlearning, as she seeks to transcend the confines of her prescribed roles. Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's assertion that "We should all be feminists" (Adichie, 2014, p. 48) underscores the universal relevance of Draupadi's struggle for autonomy and voice. Divakaruni's narrative thus transforms Draupadi from a mythic archetype into a symbol of feminist resilience and empowerment.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a richly textured feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, centering on Draupadi's experiences and perspectives. Through this masterful retelling, Draupadi emerges as a potent symbol of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Her struggles with identity, experiences of discrimination, complex relationships, and unfulfilled love are portrayed with a depth and nuance that challenge traditional narratives. While *The Palace of Illusions* adheres to the plot of the original epic, its characterization of Draupadi stands out as a beacon of feminist reinterpretation. Divakaruni's meticulous research and vivid imagination bring forth a multi-dimensional character, replete with flaws, hatred, and desires, portrayed in a raw and real manner. As Virginia Woolf asserts, "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman" ((Woolf, 1929, p. 48). Divakaruni's reimagining of Draupadi transforms this once-anonymous figure into a richly complex protagonist, embodying the feminist struggle for voice and agency.

Draupadi's story, despite its predestined patriarchal conclusion, is reimagined in a way that explores previously undiscussed themes, liberating her character from the constraints of traditional interpretations. This novel invites readers to reconsider the stories that shape cultural values and identities, encouraging a critical examination of persistent gender norms. By giving Draupadi a voice and space to articulate her story, Divakaruni reclaims a significant character from the Mahabharata and contributes to the broader project of feminist literary critique and recovery.

“Literature is analysis after the event (Lessing, 1962, p. 16).” Divakaruni's novel exemplifies this, as it dissects and reassembles Draupadi's narrative, offering new insights and perspectives. Angela Carter's notion that “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster” (Carter, 1979, p. 87) resonates with Draupadi's journey. Her rebellion against societal norms and her quest for autonomy mark her as a revolutionary figure within the constraints of her world. Feminist retellings like *The Palace of Illusions* carve a path for silenced women in traditional literature to reclaim their voices. These narratives extricate characters who have been marginalized and vilified by patriarchal societies. Envisioning characters like Draupadi, who were overshadowed by male dominance, fosters a deeper understanding of the flaws in the treatment of women. By revisiting and critiquing masculine plots, such retellings uplift the female gender from suppression, empowering women through the reclamation of their stories. Thus, feminist retellings not only liberate the characters but also empower women, encouraging a reevaluation of cultural values and norms through a lens of equity and justice.

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