



**Draupadi's Story Retold with a Feminist Perspective by Chitra  
Banerjee Divakaruni**

**Mrs.Liberty,**

2 nd MA., Dept. of. English,  
Adaikalamatha College, Vallam,  
Thanjavur-613403,  
7708215441

**APACitation:**

Liberty (2025). Draupadi's Story Retold with a Feminist Perspective by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni,  
*Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English*, 03(01), 231-235; 2025

**Submission Date:** 16.03.2025

**Acceptance Date:** 24.03.2025

**Abstract**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata by reinterpreting the epic through the perspective of Draupadi (Panchali). The novel highlights themes of women's agency, autonomy, and resistance against patriarchal norms. Draupadi, unlike traditional portrayals, is not a silent sufferer but a woman who questions societal expectations, asserts her intelligence, and actively influences historical events. Her struggles with forced marriage, denied love, and political manipulation reflect the limitations placed on women in a male-dominated world. The disrobing scene, a pivotal moment in the novel, serves as a stark symbol of women's oppression and resilience, showcasing her transformation from a victim to a powerful figure demanding justice. Despite being treated as a pawn in political games, Draupadi emerges as a woman who shapes her destiny through wit and courage. By giving Draupadi a voice, the novel challenges traditional gender roles and presents her as a feminist icon, relatable to modern readers. It redefines strength beyond physical power, emphasizing intelligence and emotional resilience. Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* is a compelling exploration of female empowerment, love, and destiny, making Draupadi a timeless symbol of feminist resistance.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women's Agency, Draupadi, Patriarchy, Autonomy...

## Introduction

Feminism in Indian writing in English has played a crucial role in challenging patriarchy, redefining gender roles, and giving voice to women's struggles and aspirations. Indian women writers have used literature as a powerful tool to question societal norms, highlight gender inequalities, and portray the resilience of women in both historical and contemporary settings. Early feminist writing in India can be traced back to authors like Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, who subtly addressed issues of gender and identity through poetry. However, it was in the post-independence era that feminism became a more pronounced theme in Indian literature, with writers like Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, and Anita Desai focusing on the inner conflicts of women trapped in traditional roles. Modern Indian women writers, including Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, have further explored themes of women's agency, love, marriage, sexual autonomy, and resistance against oppression. Through their works, they portray female protagonists who challenge societal expectations, seek independence, and redefine their identities. Indian feminist literature continues to evolve, incorporating intersectional perspectives on caste, class, and sexuality. These writings serve as both a mirror and a critique of society, advocating for gender justice and equality in an ever-changing world.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a remarkable feminist retelling of the Mahabharata, narrated from the perspective of Draupadi (Panchali). This novel reimagines Draupadi's life beyond the traditional epic, portraying her as a woman with a strong will, intelligence, and a deep sense of self-awareness. Through Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni explores themes of feminism, women's agency, and resistance against patriarchal oppression. Draupadi is no longer a silent figure in the shadows of great warriors but an individual who challenges gender norms and asserts her autonomy.

## Challenging Patriarchy and Gender Norms

In the original Mahabharata, Draupadi is often seen as a wife and queen whose fate is dictated by men—her father, husbands, and even Krishna. However, *The Palace of Illusions* gives Draupadi agency over her own story. From a young age, she questions societal expectations and refuses to be constrained by traditional gender roles. She seeks knowledge and political awareness, something rarely attributed to women in her time.

“A princess must marry where her father tells her. Love doesn't figure in it.”

She is not content with being a passive wife to the five Pandavas; rather, she wants to

influence their decisions and play a crucial role in the fate of the kingdom. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage was a controversial aspect of her life and is portrayed as something she never desired but was forced into due to societal pressures. Despite this, she asserts her position and refuses to be overshadowed by her husbands. She challenges the notion that a woman's role is to be obedient and submissive, proving that she is just as important in shaping history as the men around her.

### **The Theme of Love and Unfulfilled Desires**

Another important aspect of feminism in the novel is Draupadi's right to love and desire, which is often denied to women in patriarchal settings. The novel presents an alternative narrative where she secretly harbors feelings for Karna, the enemy of her husbands. However, caste and destiny prevent her from ever pursuing this love. This highlights a crucial feminist concern and women's lack of autonomy in choosing their own partners. Despite being married to five men, Draupadi struggles with the reality of being an emotional and romantic outsider in her relationships. Arjuna, the husband she truly favors, marries another woman (Subhadra), sidelining Draupadi's position in his life.

“Why did my heart tremble whenever I heard Karna's name?”

This further emphasizes the theme of women being treated as secondary figures in marriage, a concept that *The Palace of Illusions* critiques throughout. One of the most harrowing moments in Draupadi's life is the infamous disrobing scene, where she is humiliated in the Kaurava court after Yudhishtira gambles her away. In traditional retellings, this event portrays her as a helpless victim dependent on Krishna's divine intervention. However, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's reaction is filled with anger, resistance, and a demand for justice. She does not suffer in silence but instead curses the Kauravas and swears vengeance. This moment serves as a powerful symbol of women's oppression and their fight for dignity. Draupadi refuses to accept her humiliation passively; her rage becomes a catalyst for war, proving that a woman's voice and emotions have the power to shape history. This challenges the stereotype that women should endure suffering with patience and silence. Instead, Draupadi reclaims her agency by refusing to be a passive victim.

### **Women's Strength Beyond Physical Power**

While the men in the epic are known for their physical prowess, Draupadi's strength lies in her intellect, resilience, and emotional depth. She influences political decisions, provides counsel to the Pandavas, and uses her intelligence to navigate the complexities of royal life. Unlike conventional portrayals of female characters in epics, Draupadi is not defined by motherhood

or domesticity but by her wisdom and strategic thinking. Her sharp wit and courage make her a formidable force, reinforcing the feminist idea that strength is not limited to physical power. Through Draupadi's character, the novel asserts that women possess strength in various forms, including intelligence, emotional endurance, and the ability to inspire change. One of the most significant contributions of *The Palace of Illusions* to feminist literature is its reinterpretation of mythology from a female perspective. Historically, epics like the Mahabharata have been male-dominated narratives where women play supporting roles. Divakaruni subverts this tradition by centering the story around Draupadi, making her the narrator of her own life. This retelling aligns with the feminist literary movement, where women reclaim historical and mythological figures, giving them voices that were previously unheard. The novel serves as a reminder that women's stories deserve to be told from their own perspectives, rather than being filtered through a male lens. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni redefines Draupadi as a feminist icon, transforming her from a historical figure into a symbol of women's resistance, agency, and empowerment. The novel critiques the constraints placed on women in patriarchal societies while celebrating their ability to challenge, resist, and shape their own destinies.

"I had no weapons, no army, only my words and my fire."

Through Draupadi's journey and her struggles, desires, injustices, and ultimate assertion of self and the novel offers a powerful commentary on gender roles, autonomy, and female strength. In doing so, *The Palace of Illusions* stands as an important feminist reimagining of mythology, providing a voice to women who have long been relegated to the margins of history.

## Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a powerful feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, centering Draupadi as a woman of agency, intelligence, and resilience. Through her voice, the novel challenges patriarchal structures, redefines gender roles, and explores themes of love, power, and justice from a distinctly female perspective.

Draupadi is not merely a wife, daughter, or queen, she is a woman who questions societal norms, demands justice, and refuses to be a silent spectator in her own life. Her struggles against forced marriage, political manipulation, and emotional suppression highlight the gendered oppression faced by women throughout history.

Yet, her strength lies not in physical power but in her sharp intellect, unyielding courage, and ability to influence the course of history.

By retelling Draupadi's story through her own voice, *The Palace of Illusions* becomes a feminist act in itself.

It asserts that women's narratives deserve to be heard, not as supporting stories to men's achievements, but as powerful epics in their own right. Ultimately, the novel serves as a timeless reflection on women's struggles for identity, autonomy, and self-determination, making Draupadi a symbol of feminist resistance and empowerment.

### **Works Cited**

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Doubleday, 2008.

Chakravarty, Urmila. *Women in Indian Epics: Feminist Perspectives on Draupadi and Sita*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Devy, G. N. *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation*. Orient BlackSwan, 2002.

Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.

Rajeshwari, B. *Rewriting Mythology: A Feminist Reading of The Palace of Illusions*. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2010, pp. 45-62.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 1993.

Balaganapathy, M. *Investigating L2 Proficiency among Government College Students in the Districts of Thanjavur*. *Journal of English Language and Literature*. 2024.