
**BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELD: DRAUPADI'S VOICE IN
DIVAKARUNI'S
THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS**

Vanshika Verma

Department of English, Galgotias University

Article Received: 14/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 16/06/2025**Published Online:** 18/06/2025**DOI:** 10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.390

Abstract: The Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have been passed down through generations, primarily through oral tradition. Over time, these stories have been interpreted and adapted according to the prevailing ideologies of different eras. They continue to serve as a reflection of historical beliefs, moral values, and cultural traditions that shape Indian society. Among the many adaptations and retellings of the Mahabharata, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* stands out for its unique perspective. Unlike traditional narratives that center around male protagonists, Divakaruni's novel reimagines the epic through the eyes of Draupadi, one of its most compelling characters. By adopting a first-person narrative, the novel allows readers to experience Draupadi's thoughts, emotions, and struggles in a deeply personal way.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi is infused with themes of feminism, history, and culture. The novel challenges conventional depictions of her role in the Mahabharata, presenting her as a strong, independent, and introspective woman navigating a male-dominated world. It delves into her ambitions, desires, and inner conflicts, shedding light on aspects of her personality that are often overlooked in traditional versions of the epic. Through *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni offers a modern interpretation of an ancient story, making it accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences. Her storytelling not only reimagines Draupadi's life but also highlights the interplay between personal agency and societal expectations. The novel stands as a powerful retelling that bridges history, culture, and feminist discourse, reinforcing the timeless relevance of the Mahabharata in shaping perceptions of identity and tradition.

Keywords: Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* Feminism, culture, history, system.

Introduction: The Mahabharata exists in numerous versions, each emphasizing distinct themes and perspectives. The storytelling approach and narrative voice in these retellings significantly shape their artistic impact. Following India's independence, greater attention was given to the epic's lesser-known episodes, leading to a broader appreciation of its

complexity. Several modern authors have reinterpreted the Mahabharata, offering fresh insights into its timeless tale. Devadutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* provides an accessible, visually rich version of the epic. Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* presents the story from the Kauravas' perspective, challenging conventional narratives. Sharath Komarraju's *The Rise of Hastinapura* explores the history and political intrigue surrounding the epic's events, while Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* focuses on Uruvi, a lesser-known yet compelling character.

Among these retellings, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* stands out for its unique focus on Draupadi. Told in the first person, the novel presents her journey from birth to her tragic end, allowing readers to experience her thoughts, desires, and frustrations intimately. Divakaruni, known for her strong female protagonists, crafts Draupadi as a deeply feminist figure, challenging traditional portrayals of her role in the Mahabharata (*The Palace of Illusions, Author's Note xv*).

By offering these diverse retellings, modern authors ensure that the Mahabharata remains relevant, continually engaging new audiences with its rich themes and dynamic interpretations.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a significant departure from Vyasa's Mahabharata, particularly in its portrayal of Draupadi's emotions and autonomy. One of the most striking contrasts is the novel's exploration of Draupadi's unspoken love for Karna, an element absent in traditional renditions. Rather than embodying the stereotypical image of a woman suffering in silence, Draupadi in Divakaruni's retelling actively challenges the injustices she faces. As one scholar notes, "Divakaruni transforms Panchaali from being an Object to a Subject. This at once connects the readers to not only a mythological but also a contemporary understanding of feminine identity".

Despite the novel's incorporation of divine characters and celestial influences, Draupadi remains skeptical of the myths and rituals surrounding her existence. She is depicted as stronger, more rebellious, and deeply introspective, offering a more realistic take on her personality. Unlike the prophecy foreseen by Vyasa, Draupadi refuses to passively accept her fate of being married to five men. The bitterness she harbors towards her father, King Drupad, is evident from the moment of her birth, when he initially sought only a son, disregarding her significance. She reflects on this rejection, stating, "He was generous, perhaps even indulgent, in his own brutal and obsessive fashion. But I could never forgive him for that first rejection. Maybe that was why, as I grew from girl to maiden, I never trusted him fully." (*The Palace of Illusions* 6).

In "The Palace of Illusions", Divakaruni retells Draupadi's story, where she emerges as a fully fleshed-out, sensitive and self-aware woman. Her interpretations challenge attitudes towards women, transforming the epic into a tale that speaks more directly to modern audiences.

Draupadi, despite being born into a deeply patriarchal society, never allowed herself to be weak or subservient. Her father's initial rejection his belief that a daughter could not serve his political ambitions deeply impacted her, shaping her into a determined and resilient individual. As she grows, she becomes fascinated by Dhai Ma's recounting of her birth, learning that the gods foretold her destiny before she even existed. This prophecy that she would alter the course of history becomes a guiding force in her life, reinforcing her sense of purpose and identity.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni elevates Draupadi's struggles beyond personal hardship, positioning them as emblematic of the adversities faced by women worldwide. While traditional interpretations often blame Draupadi for igniting the devastating Kurukshetra war, Divakaruni reframes her journey, emphasizing her inner conflicts and resistance against societal constraints. Though her fate dictated that she marry the five Pandavas against her wishes Divakaruni highlights her suppressed feelings for Karna, revealing a softer, more emotional side to her character. Krishna, however, continually influences her thoughts, leading her to focus on Arjun as the one who could fulfill her childhood dream of transforming history.

Despite Krishna's influence, Draupadi experiences an intense moment of connection when she first sees Karna. She describes him as "the figure [who] caught my eyes on Duryodhan's right, older than the prince and austere-faced. The man sat upright, his lean body wary, as though he knew the world to be dangerous. Though he was all alone in court. His only decorations were a pair of gold earrings and a strangely patterned gold armor, not like anything I'd ever seen. His eyes were lenses through which passed an ancient sorrow. They pulled me into them. My impatience evaporated. I didn't want to see Arjun's picture anymore. Rather, I wondered that would those eyes look like if the man smiled. And foolishly I wished I could make him smile. (*TPI* 69). This passage reflects Draupadi's longing for emotional depth and connection, adding complexity to her character and reinforcing her defiance of predetermined destiny. By portraying Draupadi as a multifaceted and self-aware woman, Divakaruni challenges conventional narratives, offering a contemporary feminist perspective that resonates with modern readers.

In traditional Indian society, women were rarely allowed to choose their life partners. Cultural norms placed immense value on female virginity, framing it as a sacred asset, while men were largely exempt from similar expectations. This imbalance contributed to frequent instances of infidelity among husbands. Draupadi, despite being born into royalty, was warned by Dhai Ma that her future husband likely a prince might be required to marry multiple women for political alliances. However, as a symbol of feminist defiance, Draupadi longed for unwavering love and devotion from her husband, something she believed she could see in Karna's eyes.

Ancient tradition upheld the idea that a woman whose body belonged solely to one man was the ideal of virtue. Yet Draupadi was compelled to marry five men, adhering to the revered concept of “dharma” dictated by Vyasa. To justify this unusual fate, Vyasa granted her a mystical boon ensuring that she would remain a virgin each time she transitioned from one husband to the next. However, as Draupadi herself recognizes, the boon primarily benefits her husbands rather than herself. She reflects on this with scepticism, stating, “Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands’ benefit than mine” (*TPI 120*)”

Throughout her life, Draupadi harbors deep feelings for Karna, believing that he would have been a more devoted partner than her five husbands. Each time she feels let down by them, she finds herself contemplating Karna, convinced that he would have never disappointed her. Divakaruni’s retelling repositions Draupadi as a complex figure who challenges patriarchal expectations while struggling with personal desires and societal constraints.

In the original “Mahabharata”, Draupadi is revered as the goddess of virginity, yet her purity is cruelly tested in the court of counselors through public humiliation. Her divine status serves to reinforce societal edicts governing women's chastity. At her birth, prophecy foretells that she will change history, yet it remains unclear how until she is dishonoured before esteemed figures such as Bhishma, Drona, and Karna. This moment raises a fundamental feminist question: must a woman’s suffering be the catalyst for historical change?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the hierarchical division between the public and private spheres, noting that sexism sustains the belief that the public domain is superior, rational, and inherently masculine. She argues that feminists must challenge this hierarchy by emphasizing the significance of emotions and sexuality, which patriarchal structures repress to maintain control. She observes, “The most ‘material’ sedimentation of this repressive politics is the institutionalized sex discrimination that seems the hardest stone to push” (*Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 89*).

The treatment of women in the “Mahabharata” reflects the persistent discrimination they face in public life. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni amplifies Draupadi’s passion, a trait often diminished in earlier interpretations. Vyasa’s prophecy fuels her lifelong ambition to rule over a magnificent palace, a dream born from her father Drupad’s initial rejection of her because she was female. She envisions, “Often, I imagined my palace, the one I would build someday. What would it be made of? What form would it take? Krishna’s palace in Dwaraka was pink sandstone, the arches like the ocean waves that bordered it. It sounded lovely, but I knew mine would have to be different. It would have to be uniquely mine” (*TPI 113*).

Draupadi spends her life asserting her power, whether as the wife of five great warriors or the daughter of a mighty king. This reflects the struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies, where gender inequality shapes their personal and societal aspirations. Despite her growing strength, she does not choose Karna as her husband during the “Swayamvar”, sacrificing personal desire to protect her brother, Dhri. When Karna threatens Dhri, Draupadi fears that choosing him could lead to the deaths of her father, brother, and future children. Though she harbors love for Karna, she abandons him for Dhri, her only true ally. This decision underscores her deeply ingrained sense of duty. To prevent Karna from competing for her hand, Draupadi asks him a painful question she regrets until her final breath: “Before you try to win my hand, King of Anga, tell me your father’s name. For clearly, a bride-to-be, who must divorce her family and marry into her husband’s line, has the right to know this” (*The Palace of Illusions*, 2008). This moment reveals not only Draupadi’s conflicted emotions but also the rigid gender expectations imposed upon her. Through *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni reinterprets Draupadi’s character, offering a feminist critique that highlights the complexities of female agency within the framework of ancient traditions.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a deeply emotional and conflicted figure, caught between societal expectations and personal desires. Despite her initial fascination with Karna, fate prevents them from forming a relationship, as she is bound by her marriage to the five Pandavas and the dominating presence of her mother-in-law, Kunti. Throughout her life, Draupadi’s encounters with Karna remain fraught with tension and dissatisfaction, particularly following the infamous dice game at Hastinapur. Karna, rather than defending her, remains silent during her humiliation, further straining their unspoken connection. His cruel remark “Why should Draupadi be treated differently? Take her garments as well” intensifies her disillusionment. (*Feminism in Contemporary Literature*. Atlantic Publishers, 2010).

This betrayal teaches Draupadi a painful lesson, as she internally condemns Karna, stating, “Karna, I said to myself, you’ve taught me a lesson; and you’ve taught it well”. However, her resentment is fleeting. Draupadi later finds solace in the revelation that Karna had harbored feelings for her all along. His confession to Bhishma “When Kunti told me that if I joined her sons, I’d be king instead of Yudhistir, I wasn’t tempted. But when she used her final weapon, when she said that as her son, I, too, would become Paanchali’s husband, I was ready to give up my reputation, my honor, everything! I had to use all my willpower to remain silent” brings a bittersweet fulfillment to Draupadi’s lifelong longing. This realization is evident in her own words: “Wasn’t this what I’d secretly wanted all my life, to know that he was attracted to me, even against his will?”

Draupadi’s emotional journey is marked by extreme highs and lows, reflective of the broader struggles women face within patriarchal systems. Though she is celebrated for her resilience, her story also explores her hidden desires and vulnerabilities. Divakaruni’s portrayal of Draupadi challenges conventional narratives, emphasizing the importance of

female autonomy and emotional depth. She critiques the expectation that women must sacrifice their desires for societal norms, portraying Draupadi as a figure who embraces both passion and responsibility. Ultimately, Draupadi accepts the consequences of her unfulfilled love for Karna, falling first on the way to paradise. As scholar Agarwal observes, “Divakaruni within the plot of *The Palace of Illusions* exhibits her specific concern for those female characters who were subjected to torture and neglect in Mahabharata. The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large”.

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