
**FEMINIST REVISIONIST MYTHMAKING IN CHITRA BANERJEE
DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS***

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Article Received: 26/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 28/06/2025**Published Online:** 30/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.669

Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* is an example of feminist revisionist mythmaking. She reimagines the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view, so undermining the androcentric narrative of the original epic. Due to the fact that this book gives Draupadi agency, emotional depth, and a voice that confronts patriarchal conventions, she is transformed from a marginalized character into a fully-fledged protagonist. Draupadi is humanized beyond the stereotypical roles that are allocated to women in ancient mythology by Divakaruni, who explores Draupadi's wants, frustrations, and existential issues through the use of first-person narrations. In order to shed light on the oppression that is embedded in the system, the book takes a critical approach to significant occurrences, such as the dice game and her disrobing, and reframes them through the prism of gender. However, the work also emphasizes Draupadi's relationships with other women, which further complicates her identity beyond the encounters she has with male characters. It is symbolic that the palace that bears her name reflects her aspirations and her autonomy, and the demolition of the palace is a reflection of the precarious nature of female agency in a world that is patriarchal. Not only does *The Palace of Illusions* recover Draupadi's story, but it also attacks the suppression of women's voices in cultural storytelling. This is accomplished by questioning the traditions of mythology and putting the focus on the subjectivity of women. Considering that the novel is an important contribution to feminist literary discourse, its contemporary resonance can be attributed to the parallels it draws to present fights for gender equality. The work demonstrates how using mythmaking as a vehicle for cultural critique, historical reclamation, and the empowerment of oppressed perspectives may be accomplished through the revisionist approach that it takes.

Keywords: Feminist revisionism, mythmaking, agency, patriarchy, *Mahabharata*, gendered narrative, Draupadi.

Introduction: Revision Mythmaking is a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery and is

a means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture or, in other words, to subvert and transform the life and literature women poets inherit. Draupadi is an example of a woman whose voice is not heard much in the original *Mahabharata*, despite the fact that she is a major character. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni changes that. It tells the story of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*. This suggests that we are able to see the epic from a completely different perspective. This retelling is what we call feminist revisionist mythmaking. Rewriting ancient stories to reflect women's perspectives is necessary to give them a voice that was previously left unheard. The way that Divakaruni brings Draupadi back to life in this book will be discussed in this chapter. We will look at how the story is changed by telling it, how she portrays herself as a real person with feelings, and how the book helps us understand her better.

What Is Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking?

Authors have used multiple methods of revising myths, including retelling them entirely from the point of view of the main female protagonist, recreating the story in a way that attempts to showcase the treatment of women as inactive objects, and telling the story with satirically mocks the original text's faulty portrayal of women through a feminist narrator (Leslie, *Myth and Mythmaking* 45).

Now let us break down the term:

- Feminists emphasize women's rights, opinions, and experiences.
- A revisionist is someone who reexamines and may even change something.
- Telling stories about the past, usually with gods, heroes, and important events, is known as mythmaking.

A multidisciplinary method covering feminist theory, revisionist history, and mythological analysis can help make the term clearer. Feminist scholarship uses intersectional frameworks to look at how patriarchal systems have ignored or lied about the actual and symbolic contributions women have made in the past. Feminist speech not only questions dominant stories, but it also changes the basis of knowledge to include a wide range of gendered experiences by focusing on female subjectivity. As a method, revisionism is more than just a different way of looking at things. It includes carefully taking apart popular stories to show their ideological biases, which could be based on gender, culture, or politics. Archival recovery, building counter-narratives, and shaking up teleological historical accounts that favor some groups while ignoring others are all common parts of this process.

In this case, making myths is a living part of culture that lets groups show what they think about life, morality, and the universe. Myths are places where people fight over ideas, and they are never fixed or one-piece. Instead, history and power relationships are always changing them. So, feminist revisionist mythmaking is both breaking down and rebuilding myths. It finds myths that can free people, questions the binary roles of men and women in

heroic traditions, and rebuilds stifled female characters. This project not only flips the androcentric canon upside down, but it also creates new mythical imaginations that support women's agency, group memory, and oppressed knowledges. By stepping in critically and including everyone, this way of thinking changes myth live discourse that is always changing. The process of retelling stories to emphasize women's viewpoints, especially when those perspectives were ignored in the original, is hence known as feminist revisionist mythmaking. Their voices, emotions, and role in the story are all highlighted. That is exactly what Divakaruni accomplishes in *The Palace of Illusions*. She gives Draupadi the opportunity to talk and share her emotions and wishes with us. This changes the way we read the *Mahabharata*.

Draupadi as the Storyteller: *The Palace of Illusions* is the first time we ever hear Draupadi narrating her own tale. This is no longer a far-off mythological character; rather, it is like sitting down with a buddy while she divulges her darkest secrets. She talks to us about her difficult upbringing, her conflicted thoughts about marriage, and all of the private times when she felt like she was alone even while everyone else was around her. She becomes so human, which is what gives this its power. We see her as making sense of having five men for a husband and covertly having feelings for someone she shouldn't want and also fake bravery while dying on the inside. She is wrestling with rage that she should not have. All of a sudden, this ancient queen appears like someone we might know—that coworker who always seems fine when you know she is not, or that relative who tears in the toilet during family gatherings despite having everything. Divakaruni's method is brilliant because it makes Draupadi's 3000-year-old troubles seem as current as the articles on social media about poisonous relationships and finding your voice today. We comprehend Draupadi's description of her chest constricting during the humiliation of the dice game not merely logically, but also with a knot in our own bellies. The ability of first-person narrative to span decades in a single pulse is its strength.

Instead of studying mythology, we are seeing how her life mirrors our own.

Draupadi's Emotions and Desires: In many folktales, women are often portrayed as perfect and submissive. It is forbidden for them to feel strong emotions or showcase their desires. However, this book presents Draupadi as a voiced female. She feels angry, hopeful, and envious. She admits she was not interested in marrying five different men. (Divakaruni 87) Even though Karna is known for being antagonistic, she finds him attractive. Her sincerity is enhanced by her sincere feelings. She wants love, respect, and attention, just like everyone else.

Questioning Traditions: Draupadi frequently contemplates the events that transpired regarding her. She contemplates the reasons of women's prejudice and the necessity of adhering to specific conventions. She is not passively acquiescing to her surroundings, as evidenced by these inquiries. She meticulously evaluates all aspects and endeavours to comprehend the reasons behind the current state of affairs. Draupadi's existential and

philosophical views on her victimization in the *Mahabharata* indicate a profound critique of the patriarchal and epistemic frameworks that rule her world. Her analysis of the events surrounding the dice game—particularly her public humiliation and the silence of the Pandavas—exposes the paradoxes inherent in the dharma discourse that nominally promotes justice but selectively enforces it along gendered lines (Hiltebeitel 45; Dhand 231). She explicitly wonders why her personality was reduced to a gamble, why her husbands failed to intercede, and why her suffering was regarded an acceptable sacrifice for the preservation of masculine dignity (Bose 112). These queries are not passive lamentations but form an intentional challenge to the androcentric logic of the epic, portraying her as a critical thinker who exposes the moral difficulties of the socio-religious system (Sutton 89). Scholars have understood Draupadi's resistance—particularly her famous query, Did my husband lose me first, or himself?—as a moment of radical agency that destabilizes the legal and ethical systems of her day (Mohan 162). Her refusal during the disrobing event, wherein she summons dharma itself as her defender, further highlights her subversion of victimization; she does not only oppose but induces a supernatural intervention that reveals the weakness of patriarchal power (Hudson 178). This act, coupled with her later rhetorical challenges, reveals that Draupadi functions not only within the confines of her narrative position but also as a discursive force that interrogates institutional injustice (Chakravarti 581). Moreover, her observations expand beyond personal grievance to cover a broader critique of the gendered nature of mythological storytelling. The *Mahabharata* itself, through Draupadi's voice, offers for a meta- commentary on how women's pain is narrativized—whether as tragic inevitability or moral lesson—while their agency is often restricted by the very myths that purport to represent them (Doniger 205). Draupadi's continual inquiry functions as an internal critique of the epic's patriarchal conventions, exposing the discord between established gender roles and the actual experiences of women in mythological narratives (Bhattacharya 38). Her character exceeds that of a passive heroine; she emerges as a philosophical and political entity whose resistance compels a re-evaluation of the intersections among gender, power, and story.

Important Events Seen Differently: Because this novel is written from Draupadi's perspective, this book offers a unique take on some of the most important events in the epic *Mahabharata*. In the original epic the focus is more on the dice game in which the Pandavas lose everything. Divakaruni's adaptation focuses mostly on Draupadi's suffering. Her helplessness and anger are all felt by the readers. She shows courage and strength by questioning the court's participants. (Divakaruni 132) Draupadi is not satisfied with her marriage to the Pandavas. She feels offended and confused most of the time because she wants to be loved for her true self other than just being a shared wife. There is no mention of Karna and Draupadi's love angle in the *Mahabharata*. However, in *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi confesses her love for Karna and her guilt for injuring him in this book. (Divakaruni 56) Her character reveals her emotional side to become more relatable.

Relationships With Other Women: Additionally, this book explores Draupadi's interactions with other women in the epic.

Dhai Ma, her nurse, is like a mother to her who is attached to her. She has a complex relationship with her mother-in-law, Kunti. There is a lot of respect. These relationships show how Draupadi's life is influenced not only by the male characters but also by the women in her vicinity.

The Palace as a Symbol: In addition to being a magnificent residence, Draupadi's palace was the tangible representation of her aspirations and her hard-won freedom. For a woman who had been viewed as little more than property, this remarkable building symbolized her dream of a different type of life—one in which she would at last feel safe and in charge of her own fate. The dreams she had cultivated over years of adversity were reflected in every exquisitely planned hallway and glistening hall. We see more than just a building destroyed as the palace burns down; we see the catastrophic breakdown of everything the palace represented to Draupadi. The scene encapsulates the universal human experience of witnessing what you put your entire being into—whether it be a job you developed, a relationship you fostered, or a future you meticulously planned—be reduced to ashes. The way the heat feels on Draupadi's skin, how the smoke stings her eyes, and the blank astonishment as years of labour vanish in an instant are all ways that Divakaruni conveys the weight of this loss. This timeless moment serves as a powerful reminder of how brittle our dreams can be and how strong we can be if we have the courage to rebuild them. In addition to being a story aspect, the palace's demolition serves as a metaphor for all the instances in life when our safe havens fall apart and we are left standing in the rubble, choosing to leave or start over.

A Story for Modern Times: Although centuries old, Draupadi's narrative echoes the unarticulated challenges faced by contemporary women, rendering *The Palace of Illusions* profoundly impactful. In addition to being a legendary queen, she is every woman who has been overlooked in a conference, every daughter expected to acquiesce silently, and every wife who has suppressed her frustration to preserve peace. We identify with Draupadi as she challenges the injustice of being seen as property, asserts her need for respect, and quietly yearns for affection while fulfilling her duties. The novel's significant impact arises from its ability to narrate an ancient tale while simultaneously illuminating the ongoing, unvoiced challenges encountered by women daily. Contemporary discussions on equality are driven by the same frustration that Draupadi endures when her voice is overlooked. The isolation women endure, despite engaging in connected, social media-oriented lives, is evident in their loneliness within a crowded palace. Individuals who have been encouraged to exercise patience or adapt may utilize her ultimate rejection to let the expectations of others to shape their identities. By dismantling the mythological barrier, Divakaruni's narrative adeptly portrays Draupadi as a flawed, wrathful, and profoundly human character. Rather than only feeling sympathy for her, readers see their own struggles reflected in her experiences. This is the rationale for why this narrative appears more authentic than historical fact. Truth invariably resonates with the present, irrespective of its age.

Final Thoughts: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a groundbreaking feminist retelling of Draupadi's story. It turns her from a minor character in the *Mahabharata* to a fully developed main character with free will and psychological depth. By using the technique of mythmaking, the book retells the epic from Draupadi's point of view, giving her the chance to talk about her wants, frustrations, and personal experiences, which is something that female characters in male-dominated mythologies usually can't do. Not only does this way of writing give Draupadi a human side, but it also looks at the androcentric roots of classical storytelling, which hide or filter women's opinions through male points of view. In this version of the story, Draupadi is not seen as a helpless victim of events, but as a free person figuring out how to deal with power, love, and revenge in a world that is meant to limit her freedom. The novel is important because it talks about how women's views are often silenced in mythological stories, not just Draupadi's story. In old epics, female characters often show up as one-dimensional stereotypes, like the obedient wife, the slighted queen, or the sacrificed girl, instead of fully developed people with inner lives. The novel shows how traditional myths erase and change facts by focusing on Draupadi's personal experience. This makes readers think about how gender affects cultural memory and how history is told. This method fits with modern feminist literary strategies that try to take apart patriarchal stories and put them back together with the point of view of women at the centre. The book is especially powerful because it shows how different ways of telling stories can bring back marginalized voices that have been erased or lost in classic works. Finally, the novel shows how modern reimagining of literature can be used to fix history and claim back cultural heritage. The book challenges the gender roles that have traditionally defined Draupadi by showing her as a woman with natural dignity and honour, not just a victim of fate. Not only does this way of telling the story help us understand Draupadi's better, it also sets a very important example for how to rethink the stories of other minor characters in myth and history. The work shows how important diverse stories are for challenging prevailing cultural norms and broadening our common imagination. This book takes a new method to making up myths, which makes readers think about not only Draupadi's story but also the many other untold stories of women in literature and history.

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