

Fragmented Selves: Interior Monologue and Female Subjectivity in *The Palace of Illusions*

¹Dr Vipin Kumar Pandey¹

Associate Professor, Dept. of English & Other Foreign Languages, DSMNR University
Lucknow 206017.

²Dr Punam Pandey²

Assistant Professor (Senior), English, Banda University Of Agriculture & Technology
Banda UP 210001

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the interplay between *interior monologue* and *female subjectivity* in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a feminist revisioning of the *Mahabharata* through the voice of Draupadi. Drawing on narratological and psychoanalytic frameworks, the study argues that interior monologue functions as a key narrative strategy through which Draupadi's identity becomes fragmented, exposing her internal conflicts, silences, and evolving self-perception under patriarchal constraints. By rendering Draupadi's inner life—largely neglected in classical texts—Divakaruni constructs a resistant feminine subjectivity that challenges mythic essentialism and narrative fixity. The analysis further aligns Divakaruni's literary strategies with modernist and postcolonial techniques, suggesting that narrative interiority becomes a space of resistance, reclamation, and reconstitution of gendered identity. Engaging contemporary critical discourse on feminist rewriting, subject formation, and narrative consciousness, the paper situates *The Palace of Illusions* as a vital text within feminist literary traditions. Ultimately, it demonstrates how the reimagining of epic narratives through the interior lives of mythic women offers a powerful critique of patriarchy and affirms the cultural significance of feminist mythology.

Keywords: Interior Monologue, Female Subjectivity, Fragmented Identity, Counter-Epic Discourse

Introduction

In the shifting scenario of the Indian English fiction, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* emerges as a compelling literary intervention that reclaims silenced histories through the lens of *feminist mythology*. Centering on the epic figure of Draupadi, Divakaruni dismantles traditional portrayals by repositioning her not only as a central

narrative agent but also as a thinking, feeling subject shaped by *interior monologue*, *emotional depth*, and *self-reflexive inquiry*. Unlike the classical *androcentric frameworks* of epics where women are often reduced to symbols of sacrifice or honour, Draupadi in this novel is granted a voice that is fragmented yet powerful—reflecting the *polyphonic narratives* that dominate postmodern mythological retellings. Her introspective meditations, filled with desire, regret, and moral ambiguity, offer a nuanced portrayal of *female subjectivity* that challenges the monolithic images found in canonical texts.

This paper explores how the *fragmented identity* of Draupadi is constructed through the narrative technique of *interior monologue*, revealing an inner self that is fractured by patriarchal expectations, historical silencing, and inherited trauma. Through recursive thoughts and conflicting emotions, Draupadi's consciousness is laid bare, offering insight into the *gendered selfhood* of mythic women who are caught between personal agency and social roles. The *narrative resistance* embedded in such a portrayal signifies more than artistic innovation—it is a form of *counter-epic discourse* that reclaims mythic space for women's lived experience and epistemic autonomy. By allowing Draupadi to articulate her internal dilemmas and desires, Divakaruni constructs a counter-narrative that resonates across time, connecting the struggles of ancient heroines with contemporary discourses on gender, identity, and authorship.

One of the defining narrative strategies employed by Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* is the sustained use of interior monologue to portray the fragmentation of Draupadi's identity—what the present study terms the “fractured self.” Rather than presenting Draupadi as a singular, unified subject, Divakaruni allows her protagonist's voice to shift between emotional poles of desire, fear, and defiance, revealing a consciousness in constant negotiation with patriarchal structures. This technique reflects the modernist legacy of narrative introspection but is applied here with a distinctly feminist inflection. Draupadi's recurring sense of alienation and historical erasure is articulated poignantly when she observes, “*I was born of fire, but I was not invincible. I burned with questions no one wanted to hear*” (Divakaruni 34). Such interiorized reflection illustrates what Gayatri Spivak identifies as the “epistemic violence” inflicted on subaltern voices (Spivak 82), where a woman's speech is consistently filtered, denied, or mythologized beyond recognition.

Divakaruni's method of inscribing fragmented consciousness departs notably from other feminist retellings. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, for example, focuses more toward epic solemnity and spiritual framing, where Draupadi's emotional oscillations are anchored in dharmic ideals. In contrast, Divakaruni foregrounds Draupadi's psychological tension and unresolved contradictions. As critic Beena Agarwal notes, “The feminist consciousness becomes the voice of humanity at large, one that seeks justice not only for Draupadi but for the collective memory of silenced women” (Agarwal 35). This scholarly insight affirms how Divakaruni's fictional strategy merges literary resistance with ethical reconstruction. Her Draupadi does not merely remember; she reclaims. Through the lens of interior monologue, Divakaruni discloses the private dimensions of feminine struggle, redefining what it means

to possess subjectivity in a culture where myth traditionally confines women to archetype. A vital dimension of Draupadi's fragmented subjectivity lies in her exploration of desire—a theme Divakaruni renders with striking boldness. Where earlier telling suppress or shame female longing, *The Palace of Illusions* reconfigures Draupadi's desire as not only *valid* but *politically subversive*. Her secret yearning for Karna, traditionally taboo, is rearticulated through a *stream-of-consciousness* interiority that reframes desire as human rather than deviant: "*Had I married Karna, I believe I would have been more at peace*" (Divakaruni 229). This moment reflects what Khatun and Ahamad describe as a "revisionary desire that unsettles the moral binaries imposed on mythic women" (Khatun and Ahamad 58). Draupadi's inner transgressions rupture the epic ideal of womanhood, asserting emotional agency within a literary space long dominated by male-coded ethics.

Divakaruni's feminist storytelling thus constructs what Ali and Pandey term an "ethical disobedience" rooted in narrative intimacy (Ali and Pandey 6). Rather than seeking narrative redemption through silence or sacrifice, Draupadi voices her emotional ambivalence—be it about her birth, marriage, or unspoken love. Her monologues become an archive of dissent, illustrating that fragmentation does not signify weakness, but complexity. It is this layering of conflict and emotion that separates Divakaruni's characterization from mythic prototypes or even the allegorical tones of Ray's *Yajnaseni*. Where Ray spiritualizes suffering, Divakaruni politicizes it, turning emotional rupture into literary resistance.

Silence, Shame, and the Self in Crisis

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's inner world is shaped not just by desire and agency, but also by profound moments of **silence, shame, and psychological rupture**—hallmarks of a **fragmented self**. Her most devastating moment occurs during the dice game scene, where she is gambled away by Yudhishtira, not as a wife or queen, but as property. The epic's traditional silence around Draupadi's emotions is shattered by Divakaruni's interior monologue: "*A queen, yes. But a woman, too. A woman betrayed by those she called her own. What could I be now except shame?*" (Divakaruni 192). This introspective lament captures the crumbling of Draupadi's identity—a fracture between her perceived role and her internal truth. It is not merely her honor that is assaulted, but her very sense of personhood, which has been shaped and reshaped by patriarchal hands.

Through these internal confessions, Divakaruni exposes the **violence of silence**, the way shame severs a woman from herself, echoing what Nussbaum calls the "moral emotions" of self-erasure under coercion (Nussbaum 107). Draupadi's inability to make sense of her reality, even as she is dragged before elders and mocked, signals the depth of her psychic disintegration. Yet it is from this very rupture that her fragmented self begins to speak—not as an object of violation but as a woman struggling to assert meaning and dignity. Her *voice*, though fragmented, becomes a **site of resistance**, proving that internal monologue can be both confessional and revolutionary.

Divakaruni's power lies in allowing Draupadi to oscillate between submission and

revolt, guilt and defiance, creating a multidimensional self rather than a static epic heroine. Such representation moves beyond idealization and enters the terrain of *trauma narrative*, where inner conflict becomes narrative fuel. In this way, *The Palace of Illusions* not only humanizes Draupadi but reveals the psychological cost of epic heroism—a cost paid, historically, by women whose voices were erased in favor of male honor.

Revisiting Myth through Feminist Interiority

The need to explore fragmented female subjectivity in *The Palace of Illusions* emerges from a broader scholarly imperative to reinterpret mythology through a contemporary feminist lens. Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* have historically glorified male heroism while relegating female figures to archetypal roles of virtue, sacrifice, or vengeance. Even when central to the narrative—as Draupadi undeniably is—their emotional and psychological landscapes are rarely granted narrative autonomy. In Divakaruni's retelling, the use of **interior monologue** functions as a tool of resistance, granting women access to narrative space long denied. This literary strategy deserves deeper academic inquiry, particularly for how it reveals the tensions between public identity and private emotion in mythic women. Investigating this internal fragmentation not only brings psychological realism to epic characters but also addresses critical gaps in how gender and voice are constructed within postcolonial and postmodern myth-making. Thus, this research is crucial in foregrounding how *female subjectivity* is not recovered by altering events alone, but by allowing mythic women to narrate their inner conflicts, desires, and moral complexities.

Bridging Literary Gaps in Gendered Narratives

Despite a growing corpus of feminist rewritings of Indian mythology, little scholarly attention has been given to how **narrative form**—particularly interiority and voice—reshapes female identity within these texts. Much existing research tends to focus on the symbolic roles of characters like Draupadi, Kunti, or Gandhari, often viewing them through the binary lens of victimhood or virtue. What remains under-examined is the nuanced interplay of **psychological fragmentation, narrative structure, and subject formation**. This research aims to bridge that gap by examining how Draupadi's introspective narration complicates her mythic portrayal, revealing her not as a monolith but as a fractured, evolving self negotiating personal and collective trauma. In doing so, this study contributes to a more intersectional understanding of Indian English literature, where myth, feminism, and postmodern form converge. By focusing on *The Palace of Illusions*, the research asserts the continuing relevance of revoicing classical texts in ways that reflect contemporary struggles for gendered identity, autonomy, and narrative justice.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni performs more than a feminist retelling of the *Mahabharata*; she executes a radical narrative reconfiguration where the female voice—long silenced in epic tradition—emerges as central, conflicted, and richly introspective. By structuring Draupadi's journey through interior monologue and psychological self-inquiry, Divakaruni allows readers to witness the construction of a **fragmented self**, one shaped by trauma, desire, displacement, and defiance. This fragmented voice is not a sign of weakness, but of narrative strength—a polyphonic subjectivity that

reflects the complexity of women's lived experiences across myth and modernity.

Through emotional ambivalence, symbolic resistance, and narrative intimacy, Divakaruni reclaims space within epic literature for **female subjectivity**, dismantling patriarchal binaries that reduce women to symbolic functions. This paper has demonstrated that Draupadi's inner voice—oscillating between obedience and revolt—represents a critical rupture in the traditional epic structure. Her monologues do not merely fill silences; they transform them into acts of self-representation. The relevance of such storytelling extends beyond literary studies, offering cultural, ethical, and feminist interventions into how we remember, retell, and reimagine foundational myths. Thus, Divakaruni's work not only reclaims Draupadi's identity but also inaugurates a wider feminist discourse on the legitimacy of women's voices in shaping historical and literary memory. The fragmented self, then, becomes not an endpoint, but a starting point for recovering narrative justice.

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