
Rewriting Myth from the Margins: Draupadi's Voice, Feminist Memory, and Counter-Canonical Ethics in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Article Received: 09/12/2025

Article Accepted: 10/01/2026

Published Online: 11/01/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.78

Abstract

The paper will discuss how **The Palace of Illusions** by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be read as a feminist rewriting of the **Mahabharata**, subverting the patriarchal dominance of epic tradition through Draupadi's subjective narratorial gazing. Moving beyond the parameters of simple storytelling, this book provides a deconstruction of tradition as a terrain constructed with memories, desires, and dilemmas. In this paper, a hypothesis will be presented that Divakaruni engages her **The Palace of Illusions** to reinscribe Draupadi from the signifier for "honour and revenge" to the informed subject who challenges the root ethics of the Mahabharata tradition.

This paper applies ideas from feminist narrative theory, memory studies, & counter-canonical studies to explore the strategy of resistance found in the use of interior monologue, retrospective narration, & the projection of female desires in the way that the novel subverts the traditional act of mythological storytelling. The findings conclude that the importation of The Palace of Illusions to the subject field of feminist Indian literature is important & relevant because it reconstructs cultural memory & re-establishes the epistemic agencies of womanhood in the classics.

Keywords: feminist retellings; myth and memory; Draupadi; counter-canon; gender and mythology; Indian English fiction

Introduction

A leading place within the formation of the cultural consciousness, ethics, and gender ideals in Indian society belongs to mytho-religious stories, among which the **Mahabharata** is a prototype that provides guides for heroism, duty, kin, and sacrifice in society. The tradition of the epic, in general, is very patriarchal in its outlook, giving women a symbolic or functional status in its value system. The woman appears in the tradition as a symbol of the following female types: honour, purity, or sin, depending upon the interpretation.

Recent decades have witnessed a turning to classical mythology on the part of feminists seeking to rectify this imbalance. **The Palace of Illusions** is a significant intervention in this regard and is a retelling of the Mahabharata from the first-person perspective of **Draupadi**, written by **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**. This paper will demonstrate that, far from being simply a feminist rewriting of a classic, **The Palace of Illusions** constitutes a counter-canonical rewriting, one which problematizes not just patriarchal notions of dharma, but even the status of mythology as a possible subject of knowledge.

Review of Literature

However, most critical commentaries written about **The Palace of Illusions** have had to do with its methodology as a revisionist mythology and its effort to recreate Draupadi as a feminist icon. Most critical reviews have pointed out that among how Divakaruni uses mythology as a subversive discourse is by giving the authority to narrativise to the silenced female protagonist. This approach of feminist criticism positions this novel as a part of a tradition of mythological retellings that attempt to correct androcentric myths.

Even so, this critique has viewed the novel as an addition to or correction of this tradition, rather than as a counter-canon challenging the ideological underpinnings of myth itself. The significance of memory, narrative perspective, or interior conflict as intentional feminist strategies to disrupt epic righteousness has not yet been pursued. This paper seeks to fill this schism as it examines how Divakaruni subverts myth from inside in relation to Draupadi's mind.

Theoretical Framework

In fact, the present research will employ three critical approaches. Feminist narrative theory will inform the analysis of voice, interiority, and agency in the representation of women. On the other hand, the importance of memory studies will be understood in terms of the way the past is challenged by the counter-archive of retrospection. Finally, counter-canonical criticism will enable the critical examination of subversive discourses at the margins of foundational texts.

Instead of considering the application of theory upon Draupadi's storytelling voice as something external, this paper will examine how her storytelling voice is itself a theoretical practice that reveals the silences and power dynamics inherent within epic storytelling.

Myth as Patriarchal Archive

The conventional forms of the Mahabharata function as patriarchal texts that confirm and legitimate hierarchical orders of society. For instance, the insult in the gambler's hall that Draupadi suffered is often viewed as an element that triggered the narrative of war rather than as an incident relating to violence against women. In other words, the sufferings of women are used to validate the acts of men.

Divakaruni subverts this archival aspect by reframing the tale from Draupadi's perspective. In this way, the teller of the tale itself becomes the focal point of the reframing. Through Draupadi's own tale of her own life history and struggles, the constructed mythology is laid bare as one that validates the sacrifice of women for the cause of dharma.

Memory as Feminist Narrative Strategy

One thing that characterizes **The Palace of Illusions** is its use of memory as a literary form. Draupadi talks from within the framework of memory, going back to moments that are considered morally resolved from epic tradition. This enables her to interpret decisions and actions that have already been justified from patriarchal morality.

Memory in the novel serves as a feminist counter-archive that challenges the closure of epic history. By means of memory, Draupadi rewrites instances of humiliation, marriage, and war by highlighting their emotional and ethical tolls that are repressed in instances of heroic narratives. Memory in this context serves as a means of feminist resistance through which silenced experiences and different moral viewpoints are recovered.

Desire, Interior Conflict, and Female Subjectivity

Amongst the most unconventional deviations from the tradition associated with epics would be the way in which Divakaruni has expressed the concept of female lust. In traditional stories, female lust either remains unaccounted for or it has to be dangerous. This tradition gets inverted in **The Palace of Illusions** because the story depicts a paradigm in which lust leads to self-consciousness instead.

Draupadi's lust in Karna, her ambivalence towards polyandry, and frustration with assigned roles index the psychological complexities of women in power. The expression of lust does not mythologize resistance but discloses the conflict that surfaces when women are pressured towards assigned roles as against their wishes. The novel presses home the ideological implications of women's psyche.

The Palace as Metaphor of Illusory Power

In the novel by Divakaruni, the palace is a metaphor with strong gender implications. Since the palace is Draupadi's creation, the very metaphor itself is an aspect of Draupadi's intelligence and power. However, this power is also shown to be dependent, existing through the structure of the males.

The end of the palace is a parallel to the end of Draupadi's hopes and signifies how easily the independence of women is destroyed in a patriarchal setup. The palace stands for empowerment and visibility without actual authority and power.

Questioning Dharma and Epic Violence The epic tradition generally depicts the idea of dharma as an absolute and, more often than not, unassailable tenet, and sometimes tends to glorify violence as well, in the cause of dharma. The author has tried to make these ideas morally complex by giving Draupadi, the heroine, the chance to think correctly about the war and its negative consequences. The Kurukshetra war, which was glorified as "dharma," becomes an event accompanied by loss and sorrow in the novel.

This is an ethical question that aligns the novel with the feminist critique of violence, which places the experience of suffering above the idea of justice. Draupadi becomes not the mythological cause of the war but the ethical witness to the gendered toll of the heroic narrative.

Feminist Counter-Canon and Cultural Memory

The **Palace of Illusions** is finally a feminist counter-canon that reconfigures cultural memory. In placing the emphasis on the discourse of Draupadi, it puts the epistemological privilege of the epic itself into question and seeks to reclaim the multiplicity of the narrative. It is an act of reinscription which attempts neither to uproot the Mahabharata from its privileged standpoint nor to posit a new truth but to show how myths constitute a living discourse.

This counter-canonical reading exemplifies how the feminist re-reads operate outside the ideological framework of received stories to subvert them. The return to Draupadi's voice brings back the epistemological role of women in classical literature and opens up possibilities for feminist literary discourses in India.

Conclusion

In this thesis, it has been asserted that **The Palace of Illusions** recasts the **Mahabharata** through the prism of a feminist politics of memory, desire, and narration. Through the emphasis on the inner voice of Draupadi, the novel subverts the patriarchal interpretations of **dharma** and the limitations of epic morality. "The Palace of Illusions" demonstrates how feminism's resistance to mythology is a matter of re-interpretation and how a cultural memory can be altered from the inside. The Palace of Illusions, as a feminist counter-canonical text, is a significant entry in feminist re-imaginings of the canon in India.

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