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"Illusions Reimagined: Narrative Architecture, Feminist Design, and Societal Innovation in *The Palace of Illusions*"

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) tells the Mahabharata story from Draupadi's perspective, challenging traditional male-dominated narratives and introducing feminist ideas to rethink power dynamics and cultural conventions. The novel uses old stories and modern feelings to explain the mystical castle of Indraprastha, embodied by Draupadi, as a symbol of changing gender roles, personal strength, and social institutions. Draupadi's stories challenge the male-dominated structure of the Mahabharata, revealing society's weak and flexible rules.

The novel's unique narrative structure, blending Draupadi's memories with legendary events, links old India to the problems people in diasporas face. The fake aspect of the palace demonstrates that gender roles can be changed, making it an ideal place for a feminist to start anew. Draupadi's voice is clear, forceful, and bright, breaking down old power structures and promoting a society that values fairness and freedom of speech. The book's plot does not follow a straight path, making readers ponder how stories shape cultural identities. Draupadi's voice is close, strong, and thoughtful, calling for a society open to everyone and allowing people to make their own choices. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates the potency of narratives that employ illusions to transform narrative and societal frameworks.

Keywords: Draupadi, Feminism, Power Dynamics, Narrative Structure, Cultural Identity



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Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) tells the story of the ancient Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. It alters conventional narrative structures, critiques male-biased traditions, and provides novel perspectives on societal constructs. This dissertation investigates how Divakaruni utilised Draupadi's speech to construct a narrative that subverted the traditional norms of the epic.

It helps us perceive feminist ideas to understand power and cultural norms from a new perspective. Indraprastha's enchanted castle symbolises the transformation of gender roles, individual strength, and social institutions in the novel, which is articulated from a feminist and diasporic perspective.

Draupadi's stories modify the male-dominated framework of the Mahabharata. They show that women are background characters and people who make their own decisions. The palace is gorgeous, but it will not last. It symbolizes the dynamic and ever-evolving rules of society. This struggle is similar to Draupadi's fight to be a wife, a queen, and a person simultaneously. This book uses painstaking textual analysis and feminist literary criticism to demonstrate how Divakaruni's innovative storytelling techniques amplify marginalised voices and challenge patriarchal interpretations of ancient texts. Some words that come to mind are Draupadi, Mahabharata, postcolonial feminism, feminist narrative, storytelling framework, and societal change.

One of the longest poems in the world is the Mahabharata. This is a long narrative that comes from India. People have been interested in it for over 2,000 years because it connects dharma, politics, and people. However, a male viewpoint typically ignores what women have to say when many people and things are going on. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 2008 book *The Palace of Illusions* tells this old narrative in a whole new way, from Draupadi's point of view. It changes her from a minor character to the primary character who takes readers through familiar and quite different landscapes.

Divakaruni's work is more than just a retelling; it is a radical feminist intervention that questions the core structures of conventional stories and how they are delivered. Rashmi Varma asserts, "Modern feminist retellings of classical texts are not merely revisionist history; they serve as blueprints for envisioning alternative social possibilities" (Varma 23). Divakaruni prompts readers to reassess the Mahabharata and the broader ramifications of whose narratives are conveyed and whose voices echo in cultural memory by emphasising Draupadi's viewpoint.

This way of telling a story is significant for more than just being creative in writing; it also deals with significant problems of gender, power, and representation today. Draupadi's



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voice is essential right now since India still has many issues with women's rights, domestic violence, and getting women involved in politics. The book's analysis of polyandry, political marriage, and women's empowerment pertains to current dialogues around women's autonomy and the persistence of patriarchal structures in Indian society. This study examines the intersection of Divakaruni's storytelling strategies, feminist reinterpretation, and societal ramifications in creating a transformational work. The analysis demonstrates that *The Palace of Illusions* utilises complex narrative structures to cultivate a distinctive feminist framework, fostering societal innovation by challenging traditional gender conventions and advocating for women's rights in Indian and worldwide contexts. This study asserts, through rigorous analysis and feminist literary criticism, that Divakaruni's body of work represents a significant contribution to postcolonial female literature and the ongoing effort to decolonise classical texts.

The main pieces that make up a story's structure are called narrative architecture. These include the perspective, the time structure, the thematic unity, and the relationship between the narrator and the listener. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is very different from the usual all-knowing story in the Mahabharata since it features Draupadi as a first-person narrator who lets readers see much of her inner world. Linda Hutcheon refers to the transition from omniscience to subjectivity as "historiographic metafiction". This narrative approach examines the construction of historical narratives while presenting alternative perspectives on prominent events (Hutcheon 89).

The story starts with Draupadi's powerful statement of her power: "I am not weak, nor do I give in to everything. I am not the kind of person who would rather stay quiet and accept my fate" (Divakaruni 12). This sentence immediately makes her the primary character, which sets the tone for the rest of the book. This voice is quite direct, contrasting sharply with how the Mahabharata depicts Draupadi through the words and actions of men, particularly her husbands and Krishna.

Divakaruni's structural choices exemplify what H  l  ne Cixous refers to as "  criture f  minine", a distinctive feminine literary style that contrasts with conventional masculine narrative forms (Cixous 334). Cixous believes women's writing is more intuitive, cyclical, and physical than most men's stories. This approach fits the novel's fluidity of time, emotional depth, and focus on the inner self. Divakaruni can incorporate sections of Draupadi's narrative that are either absent from the original epic or not depicted in this manner.

Mahabharata has a straight timeframe, although Divakaruni does not stick to it. Instead, he tells Draupadi's story in a convoluted fashion that mixes memory, prophecy, and thought. This time disruption has three significant functions: it elevates subjective experience



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over historical chronology, demonstrates the connection between memory and trauma, and enables Draupadi to situate events within her interpretive framework. In her important essay, "Arachnologist", Nancy K. Miller makes a strong case that these narrative forms provide women writers an opportunity to "spin new webs of meaning" that go against the usual ways of telling stories that favour men (Miller 45). The story of Draupadi's birth from fire mirrors her feelings about fate and choice as an adult. This approach complicates the story and demonstrates how hard it is for her to deal with fate and choice. This technique lets readers observe what happens from the point of view of both the young woman who is going through things and the older narrator who is contemplating them. The novel's temporal structure exemplifies what Julia Kristeva designates as "women's time"—a cyclical, repetitive temporality that contrasts the linear, goal-oriented time typically linked to masculine narratives (Kristeva 191). The story of Draupadi does not move in a straight line; instead, it goes in circles, repeatedly returning to crucial events and relationships while progressively revealing new layers of meaning and understanding.

The Palace of Illusions is where the narrative takes place and a metaphor for the book's unique technique of conveying it. Maya, a demon architect, created the palace. It is dubbed a "place of wonders" because it "shifts and transforms" according to how the person looking at it sees it and what they require (Divakaruni 89). This description is comparable to how the book's story might alter, which makes it impossible to read outstanding works strictly.

It is impossible to learn about the palace since the walls that look solid are not, and the empty rooms hold secret rooms. Divakaruni similarly writes about the Mahabharata. People see the palace in different ways, and the "truth" of the epic alters according to who tells it. The palace shows how people make up tales, even ones intended to be holy or important, and how such stories may be transformed and read in new ways. The palace's relationship to Maya is important in Hindu philosophy because Maya stands for illusion and the creative force that makes things happen. Divakaruni's use of this idea demonstrates that her feminist retelling is not only a means to examine previous stories but also a method for creating new ones. The "illusions" she creates with Draupadi's discourse are not falsehoods; they are alternative truths that reveal aspects of reality obscured by patriarchal interpretation.

Feminist literary design requires more than merely integrating female characters or perspectives into established tales; it entails a comprehensive restructuring of story development, narration, and interpretation. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as a complex, flawed, and fully formed character in *The Palace of Illusions*, which is very different from how she is usually portrayed in other epic interpretations.



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In Indian literature, men are usually the ones who want to move ahead, know how to plan, and know how politics works. She said, "I wanted to be a queen who was remembered" (Divakaruni 56). She wanted to be more than a good wife and mother, as women were expected to be. This objective corresponds with bell hooks' assertion that feminist narratives should "centre women's experiences" and "disrupt patriarchal hegemony" by depicting women as whole individuals with unique interests, desires, and moral quandaries (hooks 24). The feminist design of the work is most evident in how it displays Draupadi's sexual and love urges. In conventional readings of the Mahabharata, Draupadi's sexual autonomy is either overlooked or regarded as a flaw, culminating in the narrative's tragic conclusion. Divakaruni, on the other hand, shows that Draupadi's hopes and dreams are real and normal.

Divakaruni's retelling of Draupadi's story features much feminist critique of one of the most troubling parts: her marriage to five brothers. Divakaruni examines this interaction's emotional and psychological consequences on all participants, contesting traditional interpretations that view it as divinely orchestrated or indicative of Draupadi's unique character. Draupadi's words, "I was a prize, passed from hand to hand, a jewel they all wanted to claim" (Divakaruni 102), severely criticise the notion that women were viewed as objects that men could trade.

This new way of looking at things aligns with what feminist anthropologists like Gayle Rubin have said. Rubin contends that women are most oppressed because they are viewed as commodities inside patriarchal families (Rubin 175). Divakaruni's Draupadi knows where she fits in this society, but she also struggles against how it makes individuals less human. She finds ways to stay independent even if her spouses always fight for power. She also strongly asserts her right to be seen as a person rather than property. The book also focuses on the negative impact of polyandry on Draupadi's mental health. It illustrates that the arrangement has some excellent qualities, but also makes people feel unhappy and alone in different ways. Her emotional landscape is complicated because she does not belong to anyone, and her husband views and respects her differently. Most people who read the epic do not see that.

Divakaruni's feminist ideology includes close relationships and Draupadi's role as a political activist and societal critic. Draupadi cares about justice, government, and civic duty throughout the book. She talks to Krishna a lot, and those talks indicate how much she knows about moral philosophy and how to do well in politics. She does not just do what Krishna says; she thinks about it, watches how he does things, and then decides how to cope with unfairness.

Uma Chakravarti describes this political involvement as crucial in feminist



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reinterpretations of Indian epics. It seeks to "dismantle myths perpetuating gender oppression" by portraying women as active agents in historical and political processes (Chakravarti 67). Divakaruni's Draupadi does not passively tolerate injustice; she actively attempts to effect change, amid the limits imposed by society's standards. This is how the book describes the famous moment of taking off garments. Divakaruni does not simply claim that Draupadi was sad; she also says that Draupadi thought about the situation strategically, looked at the power dynamics, and made long-term plans for revenge. This interpretation converts Draupadi from a symbol of women's sadness to a sign of women's strength and resilience.

The Palace of Illusions displays many different ways to be a woman and have power that go against what most people think about gender. This encourages people to consider new ideas. Draupadi's complex personality reveals that women can embody strength and vulnerability, be driven yet caring, and possess independence and dependence. This complex picture goes against both old-fashioned views about how women should be submissive and current concepts about whether women should be absolutely powerful or completely victimised.

The novel's significance to contemporary Indian society is notably evident in the ongoing discourse regarding women's safety, political participation, and economic independence. Draupadi's well-known problem during the dice game—whether Yudhishtira had the right to stake her after losing himself—has much in common with today's legal disputes over consent, agency, and women's rights in marriage. "I wanted to make my way, even if it meant failing," Divakaruni states (Divakaruni 214). This illustrates a notion of female self-determination pertinent to contemporary feminist movements. The book has real-world effects, such as making people think about women's positions in public places. Draupadi's role in political strategy and her impact on major decisions demonstrate that women can engage in politics in ways many may not believe they should or ought to. This photo is important because more and more women are becoming political leaders in India, and the fight for equal rights for men and women in government continues.

In India, the Palace of Illusions is very prominent. However, it also adds to the feminist conversation worldwide by highlighting that women's experiences are the same no matter where or when they happen. Draupadi's struggles with objectification, marginalisation, and the necessity of balancing many roles resonate with women worldwide, positioning the novel as a significant contribution to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls "feminism without borders" (Mohanty 234).



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The novel's exploration of intersectionality—the interaction of gender oppression with many social hierarchies—enriches contemporary feminist discourse. Draupadi's position as a powerful queen and a woman subject to patriarchal control illustrates the complex interplay of privilege and oppression in an individual's existence. Her elevated caste standing confers particular privileges; nonetheless, her gender imposes considerable limitations, highlighting the precariousness of simplistic binary conceptions of power and oppression. Gayatri Spivak, a literary critic, asserts that tales highlighting disadvantaged voices can "forge connections across cultural divides" and promote worldwide social transformation (Spivak 112). Divakaruni's writing makes it easy for people from various cultures to talk to each other by making Indian experiences accessible to people from other countries. The book is popular in many countries and shows how successfully feminist retellings can help people from different cultures understand each other.

The book affected more than just literature; it also affected schools and cultural institutions. Many students study *The Palace of Illusions* in college classes on female studies, postcolonial literature, and comparative mythology. It teaches pupils to write using old Indian legends and modern feminist methodologies. This educational effect is a cultural change since modern readers experience the Mahabharata through Draupadi's eyes instead of traditional patriarchal ideas.

The book has also greatly affected other kinds of art, like plays, visual art initiatives, and academic conferences focusing on feminist retellings of old stories. This bigger discourse about culture reveals how new ways of telling tales can help us think more profoundly about gender, tradition, and cultural change.

The Palace of Illusions is a book that explains how writing may be both art and politics simultaneously. It uses narrative architecture, feminist design, and new ways of doing things in society. Divakaruni's technical innovations, such as her use of first-person narrative, temporal disruption, and symbolic architecture, are artistic and deliberate choices that support the novel's themes of feminism and social justice.

This blend shows what Adrienne Rich calls the "politics of location". This means that artistic choices are always political choices that show different points of view and serve different purposes (Rich 212). Being a postcolonial woman writer affects every facet of Divakaruni's writing style. For instance, she emphasises Draupadi's subjectivity and chooses to bring attention to the palace's false nature. These artistic choices become political statements about who should be heard and what people should say about them.



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The book's popularity proves that basic stories can function well with complicated writing styles. Divakaruni's complex narrative style makes traditional Indian literature easier for modern readers to understand while still keeping the theoretical rigour needed for serious feminist study. This achievement signifies new prospects for activist literature that preserves artistic integrity while attaining political effectiveness. José Muñoz refers to the Palace of Illusions as "queer futurity", indicating that it is an initiative that uses art to envision novel social possibilities (Muñoz 185). Muñoz's theory generally focuses on queer identity; yet, his ideas about the transforming power of art on society are also important for feminist literature. Divakaruni's retelling does not just question old legends; it also creates new myths that indicate how people could connect and run society in other ways.

Divakaruni's depiction of Draupadi as a complex, inscrutable, and ultimately compassionate character instils hope for authentic societal progress through the combined influence of innovative creativity and political commitment. The book ends by saying that telling stories is a social activity and making new stories is an artistic activity that is important in the battle for justice and equality. The Palace of Illusions is a great book that can change how people think and act. Divakaruni reveals that Draupadi's voice can change how we think about the past and live in the present. The book finishes by arguing that telling stories is a social act and that making new stories is an artistic pursuit crucial to the battle for justice and equality. The Palace of Illusions is an excellent book that can influence how people think and act. Divakaruni shows that Draupadi's voice can affect how we think about the past and live now.

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