

# **Verbiage Without Volition: The Ambivalence of Female Agency in Pratibha Rai's *Yajnaseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions***

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## **Abstract**

Draupadi's lasting significance in the Mahabharata extends beyond the humiliation that becomes inseparable from the epic's tragedy to include tension between her exceptional eloquence and her restricted control over the forces governing her life. Modern retellings of the epic have transformed her from a subject whose story is told into the narrator of her own experiences. This paper investigates the implications of this transformation through a comparative reading of Pratibha Rai's *Yajnaseni* (1984) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). It contends that narrative self-consciousness does not guarantee an equivalent expansion of volitional agency. Building on Saba Mahmood's reconceptualization of agency under conditions of constraint, the paper draws an analytical distinction between narrative, discursive and volitional agency in order to investigate the relationship between self-expression, interpretation and consequential action. Using comparative close reading, this study illustrates that while both novels substantially enhance Draupadi's narrative and discursive agency – enabling her to interpret her experiences, interrogate imposed meanings and express desire – her capacity for self-determination still remains constrained by familial, marital and political structures. *Yajnaseni* foregrounds Draupadi's negotiation of her involuntary polyandrous marriage and her construction of a workable sense of self within restrictive circumstances while *The Palace of Illusions* highlights the retrospective narrator's capacity to reassess her past choices, recognise unrealised alternatives and differentiate desires from lived reality. Both texts represent retrospective narration enables a form of self-expression although it falls short of granting the power to re-write the events narrated. The paper does not equate voice with volition or accommodation with uncomplicated consent and argues that the feminist significance of these retellings lies in their nuanced understanding of agency. Draupadi's voice broadens the limits of self-expression and interpretation even when her volitional agency remains constrained thus exposing in a persistent gap between selfhood and self-determination thus challenging the conventional understanding of female agency.

**Keywords:** Draupadi, female agency, narrative agency, discursive agency, volitional agency, feminist rewriting, *Yajnaseni*, *The Palace of Illusions*, agency under restraint, retrospective narration.

## 1. Introduction

The enduring literary legacy of Draupadi distinguishes her from most of the women characters in the *Mahabharata*. The fiery princess of Panchal combines the distinct personalities of a daughter, wife, queen, mother, a political tool and an aggrieved woman whose humiliation becomes inseparable from the tragedy of the epic. However, her position within the epic narrative displays a paradoxical tension. While she is arguably one of the most articulate women in the epic, she has little control over the circumstances that determine the trajectory of her life. All the pivotal decisions of her life are made by others, mostly the male members of her family. At her self-choice or *svayamvara* ceremony, she is reduced to the prize for the best archer by her politically ambitious father eager to seek an alliance with the Pandavas. Her marriage is dictated by Kunti's 'inadvertent' utterance and the unquestioning compliance of the Pandavas. In the game of dice, she is staked and lost like a pawn and subsequently humiliated in the Kuru assembly despite her persistent efforts to question the legitimacy of the ill-treatment meted out to her (Debroy 284-86). Her ability to speak therefore does not automatically translate into the agency to determine the conditions of her being.

This conflict makes Draupadi amenable to feminist reinterpretations. By shifting the focus of the narrative from the male perspectives to Draupadi's consciousness, contemporary authors display a desire to retrieve the woman behind the epic figure. But merely allowing her to speak does little to yield a profound reconfiguration of her character. She is allowed to speak in the Epic. Modern retellings have accomplished something more – she has been made the narrating subject of her story. This distinction is decisive. While a character's speech is situated within a narrative over which they may have little control, the authority of the narrator is greater and reflected in their ability to select, interpret and provide meaning to the events being recounted (Smith & Watson 1-2).

This transformation is significantly visible in Pratibha Rai's *Yajnaseni*, originally published in Odiya in 1984 and translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharya in 1995 and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* published in 2008. Both novels reposition the epic narrative within Draupadi's consciousness and provide her a consistent narrative voice. Though both novels unfold retrospectively, *Yajnaseni* is structured as an epistolary narrative addressed to Krishna. *The Palace of Illusions* on the other hand assumes the form of an autobiographical narrative where the major events of Draupadi's life are re-examined and reassessed by her. It is noteworthy that modern Draupadi is no longer a subject whose story is told, she assumes the role of the narrator herself.

This formal reconfiguration is arguably imbued with feminist overtones. The ability to narrate one's own experience enables one to challenge and potentially subvert the authority and the legitimacy of the narratives imposed from the outside. Draupadi who has conventionally been portrayed and perceived through relationships – to her father, husbands, sons, allies and enemies is allowed to interpret those relationships from her perspective. This strategy makes accessible the experiences and perspectives that a third person narrative may completely miss or overlook – feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, desire, disappointment, resentment and regret, as well as the psychological implications of the decisions made by others for her and in her name. This paper focusses on the elaboration of Draupadi's inner world in the modern retellings, specifically *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions*.

The title of this paper, “verbiage without volition” captures the ambivalence at its centre. The phrase is intentionally provocative. “Verbiage” does not imply that Draupadi’s words are meaningless or empty talk. It denotes the profusion of speech, reflection and self-expression, a feature of the modern retellings. The significance of “volition” exceeds the idea of simply having a preference. It means the ability to exercise one’s will through transformative choice. The phrase therefore indicates the asymmetrical relationship between an amplification of verbal and interpretive power on the one hand and the consequent power of self-determination on the other.

This paper does not claim that Draupadi is devoid of agency in the contemporary retellings since such an assumption will only reinforce the dichotomy that the modern retellings are trying to problematize. It would also be reductive to reimagine her as an unambivalent feminist protagonist whose attainment of voice may be equated with emancipation. Rather the paper investigates the paradox between investing her with words without relaxing the structural constraints that shape her as a character – the ambiguity of her agency. By distinguishing between speech, narrative authority and agency, this paper examines how the consciousness of Draupadi is shaped through marriage and the accompanying experiences of restraint and control. It also scrutinises the role of desire in complicating agency and reassesses the significance of feminist rewriting that resists an unproblematic transition from voice to volition.

## Review of Literature

The demarcation between voice and agency is crucial to this paper’s theoretical positioning. Contemporary feminist criticism has resisted the oversimplification of agency as resistance to authority and domination or the unrestrained capacity for personal choices since such approaches yield to a polarised view of the woman either as self-directed and defiant or as subjugated and silenced. Rai and Divakaruni problematize this binary. Her portrayal neither reflects an utter lack of agency nor is she entirely agentic and defiant. While the several structures governing and determining her life lie beyond her control, she is given a space to speak, reflect, desire, question, interpret and navigate.

Saba Mahmood in *Politics of Piety* reconceptualises agency by interrogating the assumption that agency must inevitably assume the form of resistance to prevailing norms (Mahmood 15). She underscores the kinds of agency that operate within, rather than in opposition to the normative social structures. This lens enables recognition of action under restrictive circumstances without conflating accommodation with absolute consent or resistance with unqualified autonomy. This distinction is particularly pertinent to the present discussion on Draupadi whose choices are delimited by structures of gender, kinship, marriage and political obligation (Mahmood 29). Her negotiation of externally determined circumstances cannot be translated as an expression of unrestricted choice. Alternatively, her constrained circumstances cannot be regarded as evidence of her utter passivity. Mahmood’s theorisation, therefore offers a more nuanced understanding of Draupadi’s agency. The question at hand, thus, is not whether she resists patriarchy but is to do with the forms of autonomous action and self-authorship available to her within it. This review locates the present analysis at the intersection of two bodies of scholarship.

The first is feminist scholarship on agency within restraint, especially Saba Mahmood’s critique of the resistance paradigm which provides the paper’s principal analytical vocabulary. The second is narrative and life-writing theory. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s work on autobiographical narrative authority

shows that a narrator wields power through the selection, interpretation and meaning-making of the past events, a power distinct from the ability to determine the course of those events (Smith & Watson 1-2, 21-22, 63-65). This differentiation between narrative control and control over the events narrated underpins the paper's central claim that retrospective authority may not necessarily translate into volitional agency. Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation further frames *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* as acts of representation of an inherited narrative, involving both repetition and re-creation (Hutcheon 7-9), which lets the two novels to be read not merely as retellings of the Mahabharata but as deliberate, feminist engagements with it.

Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that feminist readings of epic heroines tend to assume an uncomplicated relationship between narrative voice and emancipation without adequately considering the diverse contexts in which agency is constituted and exercised. The present paper seeks to bridge this gap – between a theory of narration that foregrounds narrator's interpretive authority, and a theory of agency that acknowledges restrained autonomy – by developing an analytical framework suitable for the study of Draupadi's contemporary retellings.

## Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative, theory-driven comparative textual analysis for its examination of the primary texts – Pratibha Rai's *Yajnaseni* (1984) translated by Pradip Bhattacharya in 1995, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* published in 2008. Bibek Debroy's translation of the *Mahabharata* serves as their shared intertext. The two novels were chosen because both relocate the epic within Draupadi's consciousness and grant her sustained first-person narrative authority, although they employ different narrative strategies – *Yajnaseni* is presented as an epistolary confession addressed to Krishna while *The Palace of Illusions* is structured as a retrospective autobiographical account. This combination of a shared relocation of narrative authority and divergent generic authority makes the two texts a valuable comparative framework to analyse the ways narrative form informs the portrayal of agency.

The paper's analytical method is premised on an operational distinction between the three forms of agency, derived from Mahmood's critique of the resistance paradigm and Smith and Watson's theory of narrative authority. Narrative agency pertains to ability to narrate and interpret one's experiences. Discursive agency corresponds to the capacity to challenge, dispute and critique meanings imposed by others. Volitional agency implies the ability to enact one's will through decisive choices. These three categories should be viewed as overlapping analytical lenses rather than distinct stages in a fixed sequence – a single episode may reflect varying degrees of each.

Close reading is used to examine the ways in which each form of agency is manifested, expanded or constrained across recurring thematic concerns in both the novels – Draupadi's *svayamvara*, her polyandrous marriage, her humiliation in the dicing hall and her relationships with Krishna and Karna – episodes that carry the greatest structural weight both in the epic and its retellings.

The analysis first examines how narrative authority is reconstructed through each novel's chosen form – epistolary confession and autobiographical retrospection and then proceeds to assess whether this

reconfiguration causes a comparable expansion of discursive and volitional agency. A comparative reading of the novel highlights the convergences and divergences in how they negotiate between voice and choice. Secondary theoretical material (Mahmood, Smith & Watson and Hutcheon) serves as an interpretive framework rather than a distinct focus of analysis.

## **Arguments and Discussion**

### **Voice and Choice: Reframing the Problem**

The feminist implications of the narrative voice beg more for a more nuanced engagement than the mere recovery of silenced female subject. Even as this transformation of Draupadi from the object of narration to the narrating subject marks a departure from the narrative strategy of Vyasa's authoritative text, is speaking always equal to choosing? This question offers a crucial distinction between the two kinds of power. A woman may be provided the vocabulary to narrate her experiences without having the power to alter or prevent them. She may identify the injustice of a situation without the power of reversal or even intervention. She may scrutinise the governing principles of her life while still being bound to the social structures that condition and enforce them. In hindsight she may yearn for an alternative course of life but that can never substitute agency.

This dichotomy between voice and choice is quite evident in the Epic, the most telling instance being the humiliation of Draupadi following the first game of dice. Despite being dragged into the assembly hall, she refuses to suffer in silence. She questions the legitimacy of having been staked by her eldest husband after he had lost himself (Debroy 285). Ironically, her intellectual and discursive power fails to yield her the desired outcome. She can neither control the assembly nor alter its verdict. While her speech exposes the inconsistencies of the rules that subjugate her, she must comply nonetheless. Her moving speech lacks the power of self-determination.

Modern retellings emphasise this distinction by including these moments in her expanded subjectivity. Draupadi's speech is not restricted to these moments of crises, she recounts her entire life, revisiting the decisions of others, her responses to those decisions and even conceives alternative trajectories. This apparent augmentation of her agency is reflected in her ability to shape how an event may be remembered and comprehended even though she could never control it in the first place. But this gives way to another question pertaining to the kind of agency one could imagine arising out of this incongruence between an enlarged narrative authority and restricted material freedom. This paper argues that an answer to this question may be sought in reimagining agency as a nuanced concept rather than viewing it as an absolute condition.

Both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* magnify Draupadi's narrative and discursive agency by letting her interpret her own history and offering the readers an insight into her perceptions and judgements. Her volitional agency, however, remains largely unaffected. Her entire life, including her marriage to the Pandavas, her position within her conjugal family, her political importance and many of the implications of her 'choices' remain implanted within structures that far exceed her control. The portrayal of her *svayamvara* and the ensuing transformation of her marriage makes this problem conspicuous. Traditionally, *svayamvara* seems to offer a woman the power of selecting her husband. But Draupadi is merely given the illusion of choice since the conditions for the same are predetermined by

others. Individual preference gives way to political consequences, a problem exacerbated by her subsequent polyandrous marriage to the Pandavas.

### ***Yajnaseni*: Negotiated Agency within Imposed Structures**

Pratibha Rai's *Yajnaseni* offers an especially fertile site for the investigation of the distinction between narrative and volitional agency. Draupadi's consciousness is made the focus of the narrative. The text recounts her life in hindsight in the form of a comprehensive letter addressed to Krishna thus allowing her to reassess and re-explore the experiences that conditioned her identity. It also enables her to reevaluate the choices of people surrounding her. This narrative strategy serves more than merely increasing the volume of her speech – it allows her to interpret her experiences, reveal contradictions that remain virtually camouflaged in a third-person narrative, unravel and scrutinise the underlying impulses of those who wield power over her and verbalise the psychological impact of the decisions where her participation was severely restricted.

But the text does not render equivalent textual authority with unfettered freedom. Rai juxtaposes Draupadi's intensified consciousness with her tragic realisation of the limits of her ability in dictating the trajectory of her own life. Her marriage is a case in point. The dramatic transition from self-choice ceremony to a polyandrous marriage completely reconfigures an apparent instance of female choice to a framework aggressively shaped by familial authority and political necessity. Draupadi's consciousness makes it evident that her comprehension, scrutiny and response to these decisive events in her life which were essentially shaped by the circumstances beyond her control cannot be construed as expressions of her autonomy.

An assessment of Draupadi's agency must necessarily examine the event of her *svayamvara* given that this conventional practice of choosing one's husband offers an illusion of autonomy. However, the choice offered by this institution is drastically limited since her choice must necessarily conform to the conditions pre-determined by King Drupada keeping in view his own political aspirations. The selection of a husband therefore is no longer a personal choice but gives way to the consolidation of political interests of her father.

In hindsight, Draupadi becomes fully cognizant of such tensions. Her narrative resists the temptation to interpret her *svayamvara* as a romantic episode resulting in Arjuna's victory; instead, it is embedded within the larger trajectory which allows Draupadi's identity to be appropriated by conflicting claims. Her preference, if it exists at all, is delimited by circumstances she never authored. This argument becomes pertinent especially in the aftermath of Arjuna's victory in the *svayamvara*, an event which marks a decisive turn in Draupadi's conjugal future.

Her polyandrous marriage to the Pandavas conflicts with her conception of marriage. It is an arrangement thrust upon her and her only option is to comply. She accommodates what she cannot change. Thus, it is not be equated with an exercise of uncomplicated consent. It is an instance of accepting a circumstance rather than choosing it. While she may negotiate her position within this peculiar marriage, she does not have access to the decisive moment when this decision was imposed upon her. Her agency may be located in her ability to comport herself within this marriage rather than dictate the institution

itself. This analysis is consistent with Mahmood's conception of agency under restraint (Mahmood 29). Draupadi's accommodation within the marriage implies neither her unresisting compliance nor willed acceptance. Instead, it may be viewed as a form of action necessitated and enabled by the circumstances she is placed within. Agency here, may be situated within an arrangement whose driving principles were entirely beyond her control.

The portrayal of polyandry in *Yajnaseni* highlights the contrast between voice and volition. Rai's text moves beyond merely depicting polyandry as a cultural anomaly, it emphasises its implications for Draupadi's sense of identity. Her awareness of this arrangement is closely bound with society's perception of her. She is acutely aware of the social censure she would inevitably incur on account of her marriage and wonders whether and how she will be able to carve out a respectable identity for herself. It is difficult to dismiss her anxiety since her polyandrous marriage renders her sexuality a subject of social scrutiny. Though her marriage is dictated and sanctioned by powerful men, she is not immune to social censure. Chastity and feminine propriety, the essential aspects of a woman's identity are sacrificed at the altar of familial and political ambitions rendering her completely vulnerable. While she is legally married to five men, she must constantly to vindicate her 'purity'. She attempts to mitigate her predicament by drawing upon figures like Tara, Mandodari and Sita who were revered as exemplary women despite their unorthodox sexual and marriage histories.

This approach demonstrates the ambivalence of her agency. On the one hand, she rejects an unquestioning acceptance of meaning thrust upon her and uses discursive resources at her disposal to legitimise her identity. But on the other hand, this desperate defence of her identity testifies a subservience to the patriarchal standards she tries to bargain with. Her conformity to the normative ideal of wifely fidelity and chastity becomes her means to legitimising her identity. Ironically, in an attempt to escape patriarchal judgement, she inevitably succumbs to patriarchal norms. Her agency is therefore, neither absolutely counter-hegemonic nor entirely submissive (Mahmood 15, 157). While she may challenge the social taboo surrounding polyandry, the normative discourse of idealised womanhood is inescapable. Her kind of agency evades the straightforward resistance/autonomy model.

The retrospective mode of narration adopted by Rai complicates the problem even further. By transforming Draupadi into a narrator, the author has imbued her with a degree of autonomy denied her as her younger self inhabiting the events she recounts later (Smith & Watson 21-22). Hindsight enables her to examine and evaluate the intent of the people surrounding her, identify the outcome of decisions and make coherent the experiences that overwhelmed her when they occurred (Smith & Watson 1-2). Narration, thus becomes a means to retrospective self-assertion. At the same time, it must be distinguished from retrospective authority and control. Draupadi may be able to unravel the significance of marriage in hindsight, but she cannot avoid the institution itself. She may scrutinise the conditions that shaped her polyandrous marriage but cannot revise the circumstances that caused it. An articulation of disdain, discontent and desire does not reconfigure social relations. This is a significant distinction to make since an autobiographical narrative may easily blindside oneself to the academic pitfall of equating narrative control with complete autonomy. By letting Draupadi narrate her own story, Rai allows her control over the representation without extending it to the events themselves (Smith & Watson 63). As a result, we witness a considerable magnification of Draupadi's narrative and discursive agency even as her volitional

agency remains unaltered. She is allowed to speak about the factors that determined the trajectory of her life, she may even resist their meanings but she cannot fully govern how they function.

An examination of Draupadi's agency will remain incomplete without analysing her relationships with Krishna and Karna given their role in problematising the relationship between desire and agency. Draupadi's subjectivity is deeply conditioned by her affinity to both these figures. The text highlights the profound emotional and imaginative depth of her bond with Krishna thus resisting any reduction of Draupadi to a passive instrument tossed from one political arrangement to another. Her interior world harbours feelings of affection, desire and yearning and is shielded from the public role imposed upon her.

At the same time, the expression of desire should not be mistaken for volition. While she feels desire, she cannot reconfigure her life around it since social constraints always restricts her emotional autonomy. This differentiation feeds into the larger claim this paper is trying to make – recognising one's desires is not translated into the capacity to shape their outcomes. While Rai's Draupadi is exceedingly self-conscious, she is not self-authorising. Her narrative voice facilitates an extraction of meaning from the experiences that evaded her control. While her negotiation of polyandry illustrates that agency can circumvent constraint, her sustained attempts to vindicate that accommodation emphasizes the enduring hold of patriarchal norms.

The significance of *Yajnaseni* therefore may be located in Draupadi's precarious positioning between complete liberation and absolute subordination. Even as her words lend her hermeneutic agency, it is distinct from actionable will. This disparity between the power to narrate and the capacity to control render *Yajnaseni* a particularly striking example of the complexities of female agency.

### ***The Palace of Illusions: Retrospective Agency and Unrealised Possibility***

While *Yajnaseni* emphasises Draupadi's navigation of circumstances mostly imposed upon her, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* focuses on the evolution of Draupadi's selfhood and her gradual understanding of choice. From her early years, Divakaruni's Draupadi refuses to surrender her identity to the roles prescribed to her by gender, family and political imperatives. Yet the novel constantly pits her evolving self-consciousness against circumstances where her ability to chart her own course appears significantly more restricted than her ability to envisage it. The ensuing tension especially apparent in her *svayamvara* and her later reflections on Karna.

Divakaruni demonstrates Draupadi's quest for autonomous identity even before she is initiated into the structures of marriage and political authority. As a child she feels constrained by her father's restrictive palace and acknowledges that her identity is predetermined by purposes that precede and sometimes elude her. Drupad's obsession with retribution and his preferential treatment of her sibling drive her to the painful realisation that she has been attributed a function, a purpose instead of an opportunity of self-determination. The claustrophobia experienced by her in her father's palace anticipates a connection between confinement and social expectation. Her interactions with Shikhandi lays bare the relationship between gender and the ability to wield power and his determination to challenge the limits imposed upon him opens up for Draupadi a new horizon of possibilities. These episodes are crucial in shaping Draupadi's self-consciousness and her interrogation of conventional gender roles implying that her transition into

adulthood is shaped by a consciousness and an acknowledgement of the difference between the identity demanded of her and the one she wishes to define. Her agency, in this sense, originates in the realms of imagination and interpretation allowing her to envision a self, unfettered by socially imposed constraints.

But the novel also highlights the gap between an ability to envision an alternative self and the power to materialise it. Her *svayamvara* is a case in point. She mistakes it for an opportunity for self-definition, a desire she had entertained since her formative years. She is ostensibly accorded the agency to choose her husband and her fascination for Arjuna gives this event a semblance of a personal decision. However, the episode concludes by highlighting the gap between having a preference and regulating the circumstances which render it consequential.

Arjuna's victory does not precipitate the future she had expected. Kunti's declaration that the brothers had equal claim on the 'prize' won by Arjuna alters the terms of Draupadi's expected choice. She later recounts her desire to protest against polyandrous marriage, reasoning that she had already acquired the status of Arjuna's wife, consequent to his victory in her *svayamvara*. But she stays silent. The significance of her silence may be sought in its indeterminacy. It would be unproductive to read it as her lack of agency. Her resistance however is internal. She is neither unsure of what she desires, nor lacks a cognisance of the injustice meted out to her. But she clearly does not possess the power to transform that internal resistance into a meaningful intervention. Her silence therefore alludes to this space between self-knowledge and decisive choice.

This episode also illustrates how gendered power structures replicate through the actions of men as well as women. Draupadi becomes acutely aware of the hold Kunti has over her sons, a position she envies and resolves to acquire in the near future. While both women are delimited by patriarchal structures, Kunti's seniority within the family enables her to exercise authority over familial decisions. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage is thus the outcome of the complex hierarchy of familial authority where she occupies the weakest position. The initial moment of female choice is quickly appropriated within the larger structures of obligation, an area currently dominated by her mother-in-law. Draupadi whose choice had already been circumscribed within the limits of her father's familial and political dominance, is now made to surrender even that limited agency to her newly acquired family.

The text's most defining treatment of agency may be situated in Draupadi's reflective reconsideration of Karna. Her feelings towards him problematise the conventional description of her *svayamvara* in the epic thus suggesting a possibility of an alternative choice and hence a different life. A mature Draupadi can consider this possibility only in hindsight. Retrospection therefore becomes an occasion for reimagining past possibilities. She can speculate alternative trajectories which could have materialised had she acted and understood differently in the past without this implying that an alternative course of life would necessarily have yielded better outcomes. It does, however, alert her to the fact that the life she lived was just one of the many possibilities available to her.

Her retrospective narrative is bound, however, by the central constraint – her ability of reimagine her past does not alter it. The moment of decision is embedded in the past and hence inaccessible to her. Her retrospective freedom cannot accommodate the liberty to act. Her authority this is primarily interpretive and distinct from consequential action. Her retrospective thoughts on Karna falls within this category.

While he is more than a missed romantic possibility and may have become the figure through which she may have accessed a self that could have been radically different from the one she finally becomes. Her reflections on him emphasize the contrast between desire and volition – an emotional possibility may not necessarily become socially actionable. The agency available to Draupadi at the end of the novel exists only in the reflective realm. She can identify and acknowledge her desires; revise her judgements and even identify possibilities she overlooked in her younger years. But this consciousness is informed by hindsight and undercuts her earlier autonomy. An acknowledgement of alternative possibility does not guarantee its practical availability.

### **Comparative Synthesis: Negotiated Agency versus Retrospective Agency**

Divakaruni's Draupadi is not essentially more autonomous than Rai's Draupadi. The two texts differ primarily in how they situate this tension between agency and constraint. *Yajnaseni* emphasises Draupadi's mediation of the mandated social and marital arrangement and her construction of a workable sense of self within these constraints. *The Palace of Illusions*, on the other hand, focusses on the gap between Draupadi's imagined self and the one she eventually inhabits.

This distinction underscores the significance of first-person narration in each text. A mature Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* wields substantial power over the reconstruction of her past. She can discriminate between her desires and her lived experiences, between her choices and the external impositions and speculate on unactualized possibilities. Her retrospective narration therefore reinforces her sense of self. But this consciousness does not give way to unrestricted freedom. She could not control the events she narrates retrospectively. This narrative control over the past is acquired by a surrender of her practical control over the present.

Divakaruni's text derives female agency from self-recognition rather than straightforward control. Draupadi becomes exceedingly aware of the forces that have conditioned her trajectory, the desires that have nuanced her choices and the unrealised possibilities. Her power lies in her refusal to allow others to have exclusive control over the interpretation of her experiences even as the text distinguishes between identifying one's own will and possessing the power to actualise it.

Both novels, discussed in this paper problematise the assumption that giving Draupadi a voice guarantees her autonomy. The narrative authority is relocated within her consciousness but this authority is deliberately moulded to emphasize the lacuna between her understanding, articulation and desire on the one hand and her ability for self-determination on the other.

### **Research Gap and Limitations**

#### **Research Gap**

Existing feminist scholarship on the modern retellings of Draupadi has often interpreted the shift from third-person epic narration to retrospective first-person narration as inherently empowering. The acquisition of narrative voice has been confused with the recovery of female subjectivity and thus often equated with emancipation. But this body of work has not delved into the internal differentiation of agency itself – the possibility that a text may significantly enhance a character's ability to narrate and interpret

her experiences (narrative and discursive agency) without adequately extending the corresponding capacity to determine the outcome of those experiences (volitional agency). Likewise, Mahmood's critique of the resistance paradigm, despite its significant influence in feminist anthropology and religious studies has been relatively underapplied to literary analyses of Indian epic retellings. Furthermore, it has hitherto, not been combined with narrative theory's account of autobiographical authority, theorised by Smith and Watson, to formulate a threefold framework that underpins this paper. This paper's contribution is in the act of bridging these bodies of theory to provide a more nuanced vocabulary for describing the forms of agency produced by first-person retellings, instead of simply equating narrative voice with agency.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations which also indicate areas that may be taken up for future research. First, the analysis is restricted to two novels available in English – Pradip Bhattacharya's English translation of *Yajnaseni* has been preferred over Pratibha Rai's Odiya original – a discussion on the problems and politics of translation are beyond the scope of this paper. Second, the comparative framework, while useful, overlooks the massive literary and non-literary retellings of Draupadi – other Indian language novels, television adaptations, graphic narratives and stage productions – that could extend or problematise the tripartite theoretical framework developed for this paper. Third, the paper employs a text-based, interpretive model rather than an empirical one and hence cannot consider reader-response data or reception history to assess readers' perception of the relationship between narrative voice and agency. Lastly, while the analytical categories of narrative, discursive and volitional agency are analytically valuable, their boundaries often overlap within the texts, and hence applying them to texts, inevitably requires a measure of interpretive judgement.

### Findings

The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper identifies the following key findings. First, both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* significantly magnify Draupadi's narrative and discursive agency: both Draupadis have been granted sustained first-person authority to select, interpret and evaluate the events of their lives and both of them challenge the meanings historically imposed on them by others. Second, this expansion of narrative and discursive agency does not guarantee a corresponding expansion of volitional agency in either of these texts: the critical events in Draupadi's life – her *svayamvara*, her polyandrous marriage and, her humiliation in the dicing hall – are determined by others both the novels as well as the epic. Third, this shared conclusion is developed through different structural approaches employed by the two novels. *Yajnaseni* develops negotiated agency – it locates Draupadi's agency in her ability to construct a workable sense of self and identity within an imposed polyandrous marriage, that she cannot alter, by invoking cultural precedents and self-vindication to navigate, rather than challenge, her circumstances. *The Palace of Illusions* develops retrospective agency: it situates Draupadi's agency in her capacity as a mature narrating self, to identify unrealised possibilities, distinguish desire from lived experiences, and reinterpret past choices, without having the power to revise the events themselves. Fourth, both texts draw an analytical distinction between desire and volition: the ability to desire or articulate what one wants is not accompanied the power to pursue or realise it, illustrated by Draupadi's relationship with Krishna in *Yajnaseni* or her relationship with Karna in *The Palace of Illusions*. Fifth, in both texts, retrospective narration operates ambivalently: while it enables a genuine form of self-

expression and hermeneutic control over the past events but on the other hand, it also emphasises their irrevocability, since the moment of decision stays beyond her return. Finally, a comparative analysis of these novels shows that female agency, as constructed in these retellings, is internally heterogenous, rather than a single, coherent ability – a finding that reinforces Mahmood’s argument that agency can operate beyond overt resistance thus resisting an uncomplicated reading of these retellings as inherently emancipatory.

## Conclusion

Read together, both *Yajnaseni* and *The Palace of Illusions* resist an uncomplicated reading of Draupadi as either a disempowered subject or an agentic female protagonist. Their significance lies precisely in their complication of this binary. Both texts endow Draupadi a psychological depth that enable her to interpret experiences that have conventionally been mediated through others’ perspectives even as this magnified consciousness is limited by the structures that dictate her choices.

While the two texts approach this conflict differently – *Yajnaseni* through the negotiated construction of selfhood within an enforced marriage, *The Palace of Illusions* through the retrospective recognition of unrealised possibility – their shared feminist relevance lies in their unmasking of the disjunction between selfhood and self-determination.

Draupadi is allowed autonomy over the interpretation of her experiences without exercising equivalent authority over the circumstances that produce them. The ambiguity signalled by the title of this paper is pivotal to both these novels’ reconceptualization of female agency – her voice expands the realms of self-expression even where her volition is restricted by the social order she inhabits.

The foundational claim of this paper is not that these modern retellings have failed to empower Draupadi but that they reveal empowerment itself to be internally heterogenous. While Draupadi’s transition from a woman who is spoken about to the woman who assumes the power to speak back is significant in itself, speaking back is not the same as choosing. The ambivalence of female agency is to be situated precisely in this gap between voice and volition.

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