

Beyond the Protagonist: A Comparative Study of Draupati, in Divakaruni's Retelling" in the Novel "The palace of Illusions

R Meenu

Assistant Professor, Department of English, PERI College of Arts and Science, Mannivakkam

Abstract

The article titled "The Palace of Illusions" is the story taken from the Great epic Mahabharata written by Ved Vyasa (Released by Picador - 2008). This story is a tale of sacrifice, authority and self-esteem. Panchali is the Heroine of the Novel as well as its speaker. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions reconstructs the character of Draupati, moving beyond her traditional archetypes to highlight her agency, political shrewdness, and survival instincts within a patriarchal context. By analyzing the complex power dynamics and generational survival strategies between Kunti and Panchaali, this study demonstrates how the novel presents a nuanced, multi-layered critique of epic womanhood. The story starts from the appearance of Draupati as a charming dusky complexioned girl baby from the sacrificial divine fire after her brother Drishtadyumna. Draupati was married to all Five Pandavas. Divakaruni narrates Panchali's divine friendship with Krishna, her secret passion towards Karna who is her husband's opponent and her wish to take control over her ménage.

Key words: Patriarchal Context , Power Dynamics, Sacrifice and Authority

1. Introduction

The Mahabharata, traditionally attributed to the sage Ved Vyasa, stands as one of the most foundational and complex epics in world literature. For centuries, its multi-layered narratives of righteousness, duty, and catastrophic war have been told predominantly through a patriarchal lens, focusing on kings, warriors, and divine interventions. However, contemporary postcolonial and feminist literature has witnessed a significant shift toward revisionist mythmaking, a literary practice that reclaims ancient narratives from marginalized perspectives. The novel The palace of Illusions consists of forty-three chapters across 360 pages, the novel subverts the traditional epic framework by shifting the locus of authority to a female narrator. Panchali (Draupati) serves not only as the central heroine of the novel but also as its speaker, guiding the reader through an ancient world fraught with strict moral codes and gender hierarchies.

Divakaruni's narrative traces Panchaali's life from its extraordinary beginnings—her divine appearance from the sacrificial fire as a charming, dusky-complexioned girl child alongside her brother, Drishtadyumna—to her complex polyandrous marriage to all five Pandava brothers. Throughout this journey, the novel highlights Panchaali's deep spiritual and divine friendship with Krishna, her unspoken, secret passion for Karna—her husbands' ultimate opponent—and her fierce desire to assert

autonomy and take control over her own royal household and ménage. By placing a woman's consciousness at the center of the text, *The Palace of Illusions* transforms a tale of dynastic warfare into an intimate saga of sacrifice, authority, and self-esteem.

While Panchaali's perspective anchors the narrative, Divakaruni simultaneously reconstructs the character of Kunti, the Pandava matriarch. Traditionally idealized as the passive, self-sacrificing mother figure of Hindu mythology, Kunti is reframed in this text as a deeply human, pragmatic figure. This study moves beyond traditional archetypes to highlight Kunti's latent agency, political shrewdness, and calculating survival instincts within an uncompromising patriarchal context. By analyzing the intricate power dynamics, silent tensions, and shared generational survival strategies between Kunti and her daughter-in-law, Panchaali, this paper demonstrates how *The Palace of Illusions* presents a nuanced, multi-layered critique of epic womanhood. Ultimately, this research explores how both women navigate their marginalization, proving that their quiet strategies and personal sacrifices were just as pivotal to the destiny of the Kuru dynasty as the weapons wielded on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

From Fire to Polyandry: Panchaali as the Narrative Voice:

The Palace of Illusions, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni immediately decentralizes patriarchal authority by establishing Panchaali not just as the heroine, but as the active narrator of her own destiny. In the traditional Mahabharata by Ved Vyasa, Draupati's birth is an instrumental by product of King Drupad's male-centric desire for vengeance. Her twin brother, Drishtadyumna, is summoned from the sacrificial fire explicitly to kill Drona, while Draupati emerges as an afterthought—a beautiful asset to be married off for political alliances.

Divakaruni subverts this narrative from the opening pages. Panchaali describes her own birth with acute self-awareness, noting her physical appearance as a "dusky-complexioned" girl child. By focusing on her dark skin, the text challenges the conventional Eurocentric and traditional Indian tropes that equate fairness with purity and heroic beauty. Right from the divine flames, Panchaali rejects the passive role assigned to her. While her father and the palace sages view her through a utilitarian lens, her narrative voice reclaims her birth as a moment of profound personal awakening, filled with a fierce sense of self-esteem and unyielding pride.

This pursuit of authority faces its ultimate trial during her marriage. Winning Panchaali through a test of archery, Arjuna brings her home, only for Kunti to issue the irreversible command that she must be shared equally among all five Pandava brothers. In a traditional reading, Draupati's polyandrous marriage is viewed as an act of absolute submission to maternal duty and religious righteousness (dharma). However, through Panchaali's narrative voice, Divakaruni exposes the deeply unsettling, chaotic, and isolating reality of this arrangement.

Instead of becoming a passive victim divided among five men, Panchaali deliberately uses her position to take control over her ménage (domestic and royal household). She establishes strict boundaries, structural rules, and independent emotional relationships with each brother to preserve her dignity. Her narrative voice turns the chaotic arrangement into a space of political negotiation. Through her eyes, the polyandrous marriage becomes a complex chessboard where she constantly fights to balance her self-

esteem against the patriarchal constraints of her environment, transforming her domestic imprisonment into a palace of personal authority.

Psychological impact of the polyandrous marriage on Panchaali

In *The Palace of Illusions*, the portrayal of polyandry, as more than just a societal norm. She goes into Panchaali's emotional challenges inside this structure. We see her manage intimacy with five spouses, societal expectations to create offspring and potential jealousy. This calls into question the notion that polyandry inevitably leads to promiscuity. The work initiates a discussion about societal conceptions surrounding female sexuality by contrasting it with society's ideals of female monogamy. Furthermore, investigating the historical context of polyandry enhances the understanding.

Furthermore, Panchaali's voice is central. Divakaruni describes her challenges and accomplishments within the system. Does she have moments of happiness? Does she ever rebel? By focusing on Panchaali's perspective, the story emphasises the human cost of cultural conventions and challenges how female sexuality is frequently perceived.

Beyond the monolithic wife

Divakaruni's feminism goes beyond a mere challenge to masculine domination. She understands the subtleties of patriarchy. Despite her status as queen, Panchaali is limited by her gender. The situation of lowered caste women, such as her maid, serves as a reminder that oppression manifests differently for women from different socioeconomic groups. This intersectional approach improves the story by emphasising the diverse nature of power dynamics.

Panchaali's love life also serves as a platform for feminist study. The concept of polyandry, which is frequently used to portray her as promiscuous, takes on new significance. Divakaruni portrays it as a societal norm, delving into Panchaali's challenges with emotional intimacy and social pressures. This calls into question the double standard that exists for male and female sexuality.

Furthermore, Panchaali's affection for her husbands is not a single thing. Each relationship is fashioned by their personalities, demonstrating her multidimensional nature and challenging the idea of a monolithic "wife" image. Finally, "*The Palace of Illusions*" empowers women by giving Panchaali a voice and reclaiming her story.

The power of Panchaali's voice

By giving Panchaali a voice, Divakaruni reclaims the story. We see the impacts of war not only on the battlefield but also on the women who remain behind. Panchaali's sorrow, perseverance, and views highlight the human cost of conflict. This move empowers female readers by allowing them to identify with a strong female character and recover their proper place in the larger narrative.

The Palace of Illusions is more than just a compelling retelling; it's a call to action. It inspires us to challenge conventional norms and strive for a society in which women are recognised as complicated beings with their aspirations, voices, and stories, rather than as objects. It's a strong reminder that even in the face of adversity, the human spirit perseveres, especially when women are given the freedom to

speaking their truth. This book is a must-read for anyone looking for a new take on an ancient epic, as well as a gripping story with a strong feminist message.

The Mahabharata is a story of battle and revenge. Panchaali is a central character caught up in this terrible cycle. She feels enormous sadness and loss after witnessing the brutality firsthand. Panchaali is portrayed by Divakaruni as someone who seeks peace and reconciliation rather than revenge.

Despite her anger and hurt, she expresses a yearning for a new path, a world where disputes are resolved without violence. The novel is a critique of the celebration of violence, emphasising the human cost, particularly for women, who are frequently the victims of societal conflicts. Panchaali's wish for peace is a powerful counterweight to the catastrophic forces at play. While the story highlights Panchaali's relationships with her husbands, it also emphasises the value of female friendships. One such friendship is with Draupati, a maidservant who serves as a confidante and source of support. Panchaali finds a secure area to express her fears and frustrations throughout their chats. Their relationship exemplifies the strength of female solidarity in a patriarchal environment. Having another woman to confide in and rely on helps Panchaali manage the difficult world around her. The novel emphasises that women are not separate beings, but can find strength and comfort in their relationships with one another. Through Panchaali's eyes, we see the emotional cost of war, the complications of polyandry, and the constraints placed on women in a patriarchal society. Divakaruni breaks down the "male gaze" by digging into Panchaali's inner world, showing her desires, fears, and strategic intellect.

‘How To Raise A Feminist Son’: A Manifesto For Intersectional Feminism

The story celebrates the strength of female solidarity while also challenging the double standard that applies to female sexuality. Finally, The Palace of Illusions empowers women by granting Panchaali a voice and reclaiming her story. It's a call to action, asking readers to question established norms and fight for a society in which women are viewed as human beings with voices and stories to tell, rather than as just objects.

Shadows of Desire and Divinity:

Indian authors have been influenced and inspired time and again to retell and recreate the stories of Mahabharata to narrate the experiences of the modern-day India. Hence Mahabharata continues to be a living tradition in Indian society exercising its influence over the socio-political and cultural spheres of the country. Some of the major re-telling of Mahabharata in fiction include Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* (2005), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), P.K. Balakrishnan's *Ini Njan Urangatte* (1973), M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (1997) to name a few. The proud and passionate heroine of Mahabharata, Draupati has always been a victim; her swayamvara ends in fight; a fivefold marriage is imposed upon her; she is humiliated in the royal court of Hastinapura twice over; she loses all her children in the war and dies alone without her husbands. Her name says a lot about the characteristics she bears. The word Draupati literally means 'Daughter of Dhrupad'. But she preferred to be known as Panchali, the princess of Panchal kingdom. Her name yajnaseni explains her divine birth from the fire and the name Ayonija denotes that she was not born from a woman's womb. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel offers the viewpoint of a woman living in a man's world. It traces Panchali's life story from birth and lonely childhood to her adulthood and death. Her companionship

with Dhai Ma, friendship with the Krishna and her boundless love for her Dhri- all these find a place in Divakaruni's story, something that the real epic forgets to tell. While there are several female characters in Mahabharata, they are all made to stand behind the male shadows. Draupati's case was no different. As a result of her unusual birth, she was marked out from the very beginning. Her father Dhrupad accepts her with much hesitation and unwillingness. Dhai ma describes her as 'the uninvited one'. But being the spirited girl she is, Draupati used to make up fancy nicknames for herself like 'the offspring of vengeance', 'the unexpected one' to name a few. In The Palace of Illusions, Draupati is in no way less than Bheema or Arjun in strength and spirit, valour and virtues but still she has been victimized by fate and downtrodden by her own family members. Vyasa's Draupati was tolerant, and she has been accused of being sole reason for the entire war of Kurukshetra. It can be clearly observed from the retelling that Draupati was not the only reason behind it. Unlike the Vyasa's Draupati that highlights her decisive role in bringing about the war, Chita Banerjee focuses more on the humane side of Draupati. Beginning from her relationship with her brother Dhristadyumna, divine connection with Lord Krishna, her budding friendship with Subhadra and her final reconciliation with Kunti; multitude of relationships and its impact on her persona are highlighted by the author. Written in first person the entire story unfolds through her words. Draupati's polyandry was quite different from polygamy of a man. In the swayamvara she had to marry the man who won the impossible task set down by her father. For the sake of her father's vengeance, she gave up her desires. Her loss was her father's gain. Another dilemma that she suffers is the indifference shown by Arjun towards her. Arjun who truly weds Draupati puts the entire blame on her by avoiding her presence. He even refuses to talk to her properly as if it was her decision to marry the five brothers. Arjun who could have prevented such a decision puts Draupati on the receiving end only because she is a woman. Later when Arjun marries Subhadra, he acts very normally and does not express any concern over the emotional torment that Draupati undergoes. The double standard of the society is clearly visible in Arjun. Out of the Pandavas the only person Draupati could love was Arjun. Arjun on his part found happiness in neglecting her. Draupati's marriage with the five Pandavas was never completely happy affair. She was the queen of the Pandavas but her husband's polygamy was a matter of concern for her. Like any other women she too wished that her man must stay true to her and wanted his complete attention. For several reasons all the Pandavas married after being wedded to Draupati. Draupati's displeasure and reluctance have been clearly articulated in The Palace of Illusion, in the scene where she is asked to get married to all the five brothers. Her words were defiant. She was not at all comfortable with the second wives of her husbands. Just like her marriage, she had no control over whom she slept with. Everything was predetermined by Vyasa's orders and like a cattle she was passed over between the Pandavas. Her likes and dislikes were never a question. The importance given to the concept of virginity is highlighted when Draupati is blessed with the gift of regaining her virginity for each of the year when she goes to her next husband. The words spoken by Draupati challenge the society's notion on chastity and virginity: "If the sage had cared to inquire, I'd have requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother, I'd have requested that Arjun be my first husband. He was the only one of the Pandavas I felt I could have fallen in love with" (Diwakaruni, 2010). These lines are clearly indicative of Draupati's reluctance towards other Pandavas and hope of being valued by Arjun. Her mind is always curious, always in search of new knowledge; she is unable to make sense of the world around her. This curiosity proves to be the reason for her downfall and torment. As a youth she believed that her man will only be devoted to her if she ever gets married. But just like a butterfly flies from one flower to the next one in search of nectar they just move around in search of

pleasure. Initially this truth was hard for Panchali to digest, later she comes to terms with it when Arjun takes in Subhadra as his second wife. Though Draupati has been presented as a fusion of a modern and traditional woman her conscience is more active in the retold version of the epic. As a character blessed with critical thinking, she never took anyone on face value. Bhishma's case can be taken as an example. As a man who parted with desire so easily Panchali fears that Bhishma will not protect her husband by compromising his words. After all he was responsible for Amba's death as he refused to break his pledge over a woman's life. However, from Bhishma's character and her husband's utter devotion to him she deduced a crucial fact about the Pandavas- their ultimate yearning to feel loved, to be cherished and to be valued. Panchali is endowed with such an alert mind that she does not miss the importance of even in the minute gestures. She draws wisdom from insignificant events. Draupati questions the logic behind Gandhari's decision to go blind-folded following her blind husband Dhritarastra. As a practical woman she opines that, when a husband has some physical impairment, the wife should show him the right path in life. Draupati commands and earn respect to assert her individuality in the society. The ancient epic shows her calm and moderate nature but has never focused on how she rose from troubles like a phoenix from ashes. She boldly voiced her opinions without fearing the consequences. For a woman a true freedom meant a world free of male demands and virtuous women need to be reincarnated as men as every woman is perfect the way she is. Draupati is not a wife who is begging for her privileges. In Vyasa Mahabharata Draupati endures the dishonor, she questioned but she didn't rebel as she does in The Palace of Illusion. Draupati questions how she can be gambled by Yudhisthira when he himself was slave. Only Krishna came to her rescue and Draupati concludes that even the laws are designed for the benefit of men. Unable to understand her situation there in the court; her inner voice prompts her to question her identity- "I'm a queen. Daughter of king Dhrupad, sister of Dhritadyumna, mistress of the great palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (Divakaruni 190). While Hastinapura suffocated her, she feels that the palace of illusions was her only true home and as time passed it started to impact her thoughts too. And she begins to see her husbands as one single unit they would protect her no matter what. Later in the story this belief is shattered, and she never trusts anyone blindly. Divakaruni represents Draupati's role as a mother in a revolutionary way. Draupati loved her children but wasn't particularly maternal. Having received no maternal affection, Draupati probably is not to be blamed for being less motherly towards her children. She never excuses herself for delegating the task of her mothering of her kids to other women. The extraordinary circumstances in which she grew up stripped her of many usual womanly qualities. But she never forgave her conscience for choosing her husband over her children.

2. Conclusion

In Mahabharata her identity is established very much in relation to her status as the wife of Pandavas. In other words, Draupati exists so that the heroism of her husband can be properly highlighted. On the other hand, Divakaruni introduces Draupati as a woman who will change the course of history. She is normal and extra ordinary, for she simultaneously sympathizes with the plight of women who are less fortunate than her and has the courage to question the decisions that others force upon her. Draupati's experience teaches her to never wait for a man to save her but to grab the opportunity on her own. Instead of making her shadowy figure destined to stand behind her husband's Divakaruni portrays a different Draupati. She exerts her independence by being defiantly vocal throughout her life. Divakaruni articulates Draupati's thoughts and shows us how practical she is. Draupati's story is an eye opener as

well as an inspiration for every woman who is subjugated. In fact, it can be seen as a war-cry to rise up and embrace the real you, with all the imperfections. On the other hand, Karna's misfortune had much to do with the place he belonged. Brought up in the Adhhiratha's house his foster parents loved him with all their heart. But the ignorance regarding his true parentage frustrated him. The resulting bitterness led him to a disastrous life story. If he had known his parentage Karna would have behaved nobly and retained the integrity of his character till the end.

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