



FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION OF DRAUPADI'S CHARACTER: A VOICE FROM THE MARGINS

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ABSTRACT:

The Mahabharata is one of the two main ancient Indian epics, with the Ramayana being the other. At its heart, it's a story of rivalry between royal cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Their fight for the throne leads to the bloody battle of Kurukshetra, where many kings participate and perish. Draupadi, also called Krishna, Panchali, and Yajnaseni, is the main female protagonist in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. She is the daughter of King Drupada and the wife of the five Pandava brothers—Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a modern reimagining of the ancient epic Mahabharata, told from the perspective of Draupadi. It presents the story through the eyes of a woman navigating life in a deeply patriarchal society. The epic features many strong and complex women, such as Kunti, Gandhari, and Panchali, who significantly influence the story. However, they often remain as shadowy figures or marginalized. Their thoughts, emotions and feelings are only mentioned when they impact the lives of the male heroes around them, such as their fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons. Their portrayal in the epic is quite disappointing. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as more than just a wife and queen; she is portrayed as a deeply complex person with her own dreams, ambitions, and viewpoints. This depiction challenges the traditional image of a submissive woman often found in ancient texts. Instead, Divakaruni highlights Draupadi's inner conflicts, joys and doubts, struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks and achievements and her unwavering sense of justice. Her desire for power and equality reflects feminist ideals, pushing back against the societal norms that typically push women into the background. This fresh interpretation not only gives Draupadi a powerful voice but also critiques the patriarchal frameworks of the epic, making her a symbol of feminist strength. Ultimately, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a dynamic character who navigates the complexities of power, gender, and autonomy, providing a significant feminist perspective on a revered ancient epic. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as more than just a wife and queen; she is portrayed as a deeply complex person with her own dreams, ambitions, and viewpoints. (p. 215).

KEYWORDS:

EPIC, PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY, MARGINALIZED, FEMINIST, FRESH INTERPRETATION.

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INTRODUCTION

The Mahabharata is an ancient and timeless epic, centering around the complex and influential character of Draupadi, also known as Panchali. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a reimagined version of the epic, told from Draupadi's perspective. This retelling brings a fresh and feminist approach, placing Draupadi's voice, desires, and sense of justice at the forefront. Traditionally, Draupadi has often been portrayed as secondary, seen only in relation to how she impacts the male heroes' journeys. In contrast, Divakaruni's narrative empowers Draupadi, shedding light on her personal struggles, her autonomy in making difficult choices, and the depth of her emotions, as she navigates a world that often sought to control her fate. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as more than just a wife and queen; she is portrayed as a deeply complex person with her own dreams, ambitions, and viewpoints. (p. 215).

Draupadi's life is shaped by the indifference and

limitations placed upon her from birth. She never liked her name Draupadi. As her own father, King Drupad, gave little thought to her naming—she was simply called "Draupadi," meaning "daughter of Drupad." She was isolated, kept in a separate fortress away from her family, growing up in an environment shadowed by neglect and loneliness. The only true companionship she found was with her brother, Dhrishtadyumna, and her Dhai Ma, who cared for her deeply. Unlike her brother, however, Draupadi was denied access to lessons in what is a righteous war, how to fight manage horses and elephants despite her interest in them. Instead, she was taught skills deemed suitable for women—dancing, music and playing music reflecting the rigidly patriarchal society around her. As a child, she would often hide behind the curtain, listening to the lessons her brother received from his tutor. The tutor insists that her brother should no longer allow her to join

their lessons, suggesting that women are the cause of all the world's troubles. This deeply upsets her, as the tutor believes a woman's primary role is to support the men in her life—her father, brother, husband, or son—helping them achieve their heroic destinies. This denial of knowledge highlights how women were deliberately kept from gaining power or independence, reinforcing the expectation of their subservience.

In traditional portrayals, Draupadi is often depicted as a dutiful but one-dimensional character, with little emphasis on her inner desires and emotions. However, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a more nuanced and complex Draupadi, deeply expressive and full of longing, especially in her connection to Karna. Throughout the novel, her yearning for his attention is evident—from the moment she insults him in the court, later feeling regretful for how her words might have affected him, to her unspoken hope that he would intervene during her disrobing. She is profoundly moved when she hears of his feelings for her, even as revealed to Bhishma, and her emotional attachment to Karna lingers until the very end. Even after death, she imagines being able to hold his hand. This portrayal of Draupadi, marked by her unfulfilled desires and inner frustrations, gives her a rounded and deeply human experience, challenging and expanding the limited, patriarchal narratives that have historically confined her. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as more than just a wife and queen; she is portrayed as a deeply complex person with her own dreams, ambitions, and viewpoints. (p. 215).

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi defies traditional gender roles. She is not merely a wife or queen bound to a secondary position; instead, she is a powerful figure who significantly influences the political landscape of her time. In an era when men were considered superior, even Yudhishtir sought her counsel on political matters in private. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi as more than just a wife and queen; she is portrayed as a deeply complex person with her own dreams, ambitions, and viewpoints. (p. 215).

Draupadi finds herself in a deeply patriarchal world where her choices are seldom her own. Time and again, important decisions about her life are made by others, leaving her to grapple with the consequences. One of the most significant and distressing moments of her life was her public humiliation in the Kauravas court. Her husbands, the Pandavas, gamble away their kingdom, their wealth, and even her, allowing her fate to be decided by others. Yet, she did not accept her fate in silence. With her head held high, she remembered the teachings of Nyaya Shastra, "If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had jurisdiction over his wife." which state that if a man has lost himself, he no longer holds any authority over his wife. How, then, could Yudhishtira gamble her away? Despite the clear logic of her question, no one had a valid answer; instead, they twisted the truth and continued to disgrace her in the court. Although Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupad, born from fire and known for her strength and

grace, she begs for help from the elders and warriors present, but no one comes to her aid. In that very Sabha where she had once commanded immense respect, she is left dishonored. She demanded answers, challenged the legality of her situation, and held the elders accountable. By doing so, she shattered the traditional stereotype that women should remain silent under male authority.

That day made Draupadi realize that while her husbands loved her, their sense of honor and loyalty to one another came first. She understood that they would avenge her, but only when it would bring them heroic fame. This experience taught her that she could no longer rely on them completely in the future.

Draupadi endures numerous instances of humiliation, as her dignity is constantly undermined in a society ruled by patriarchal values. Her experiences reflect the struggles faced by women in such a world, highlighting the challenges of maintaining self-respect in the face of societal oppression. Her first ordeal occurs in the royal court when she is disrobed. When Jayadratha attempts to abduct her, Arjuna and Bheem were ready to punish him, but Yudhishtir intervenes, and did not let them kill him. Later, while the Pandavas are in exile in the kingdom of Matsya, Draupadi is harassed once more, this time by Keechak. Again, Yudhishtir remains silent to preserve their disguise and safety. Each time, Draupadi's dignity and well-being are sacrificed for the so-called honor and dharma of her husband's.

These events underscore the oppressive nature of the patriarchal society in which Draupadi lives. Despite the pain and betrayal she feels, especially knowing that her husband's prioritize their principles over her respect, she emerges resilient. Her suffering and humiliation serve as a harsh reminder of how a woman's worth was often secondary to societal norms and the honor of men. Yet, Draupadi's strength and ability to endure these hardships illustrate her indomitable spirit, even in the face of immense challenges.

After the war, the condition of women in the city became dire, as they were left vulnerable without male protection. They became easy targets, and anyone could harass or take advantage of them. Strangers would sometimes seize control of their family fortunes, yet the women were too terrified to approach the kings for justice. Draupadi, despite being in her own state of grief and emotional turmoil, stepped up with the dignity of a queen when she learned of these injustices. Along with Kunti and Gandhari, she approached Yudhishtir, leading to the establishment of a chamber in the women's quarters to address their grievances. However, the court alone wasn't enough; financial support was desperately needed, but resources had been depleted by the war.

It was then that Uttara came forward, followed by two maids carrying a chest full of her wedding jewelry. Uttara declared that she no longer had any use for these valuables and offered them to support the women who were suffering. Inspired by her gesture, Draupadi, Kunti, and

others sold their beloved jewelry and treasured artifacts to raise funds. This collective effort enabled the establishment of homes for the destitute and provided capital for women to start their own businesses. Soon, the women's market began to flourish, transforming into a hub of commerce in the city. This decision by Draupadi not only empowered women financially but also highlighted her wisdom, strategic thinking, and ability to lead others through a patriarchal society. This incident vividly illustrates the power of feminist solidarity in a world dominated by patriarchy.

CONCLUSION:

The title, *Feminist Reinterpretation of Draupadi's Character: A Voice from the Margins*, is aptly justified as it encapsulates the core argument of the paper: reexamining Draupadi through a feminist lens to bring her marginalized voice to the forefront. Traditionally portrayed as a secondary character in the patriarchal narrative of the Mahabharata, Draupadi's role often emphasizes her connections to male protagonists rather than her individuality. However, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a transformative interpretation, presenting Draupadi as a multi-dimensional figure who defies the constraints of societal norms.

The paper explores Draupadi's identity, emphasizing her agency, intellect, and emotional depth. This feminist reimagining reveals a woman who is not merely a pawn in the political games of her time but a strong-willed individual who questions, resists, and redefines her reality. From her early life, marked by neglect and imposed limitations, to the moments of humiliation in the Kaurava court, Draupadi's journey is one of resilience and courage. Divakaruni's portrayal highlights her inner conflicts, ambitions, and unwavering sense of justice, allowing readers to witness her as a dynamic and assertive character.

The title also emphasizes the idea of "a voice from the margins," as Draupadi's narrative in the traditional epic often sidelines her emotions and desires. By centralizing her perspective, the novel critiques the patriarchal frameworks that have historically silenced women. Her defiance during her disrobing and her role in empowering other women after the war signify a break from the submissive archetypes often associated with ancient heroines.

Ultimately, the title reflects the paper's effort to validate Draupadi as a feminist icon. By reclaiming her voice, the narrative not only critiques gender inequities of her time but also resonates with contemporary struggles for equality. Thus, the title underscores the transformation of Draupadi from a shadowy figure in a male-dominated story to a symbol of feminist strength and individuality. This reinterpretation firmly establishes her as a powerful voice emerging from the margins of history and literature.

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