

UNVEILING PANCHAALI: A FEMINIST RETELLING OF THE MAHABHARATA

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Abstract

By foregrounding Panchaali's voice, Divakaruni invites readers to reconsider the roles and agency of women not only in ancient mythology but also in contemporary society. Through an analysis of bliss and sadness, struggles and triumphs, heartbreaks and achievements, strengths and faults, the paper aims to uncover the depth and complexity of Panchaali or Draupadi's character, "It is her life, her voice, her questions and her vision that I invite you into *The Palace of Illusions*" (Divakaruni 15). Divakaruni's work unveils the narrative threads that have remained invisible within the male-dominated retellings of historical and mythological tales. By centring the experiences of women, she sheds light on overlooked aspects of these stories, offering fresh perspectives and insights that resonate with contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Feminist Reinterpretation, Mythology, Mahabharata, Draupadi.

INTRODUCTION

Women are not just integral but essential components of human civilization. Their active participation is not merely beneficial but crucial for the advancement of any society or nation. Throughout history and across cultures, women have consistently faced inequality compared to men. This inequality manifests in various forms, including enduring mental, physical, and emotional suppression and torture. Such mistreatment has been ingrained over generations, perpetuating a cycle of oppression against women. Despite facing these challenges, women have shown resilience and courage, refusing to accept their inferior position in society. Instead, they have taken up the mantle to challenge and resist the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that perpetuate their marginalization.

The gradual shifts in cultural, social, and economic patterns have broadened and transformed women's reality. Women are inherently free, yet they are often confined. They are often viewed as inferior based on gender, although this is not universally true. There are women who do not adhere to traditional norms. They resist conforming to societal expectations, rituals, and taboos. By diving into their inner worlds, Divakaruni exposes the nuances of their experiences, questioning old narratives that have marginalized female perspectives. Regarding the treatment of women in literature, in her book *The Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir stated that women in mythology are "the elementary silence of truth" (Beauvoir 143). She pointed out that female characters in literature are rarely allowed to speak because they may reveal society's terrible truths. So, these epics have faults that need to be addressed. These epics frequently portray

women in traditional ways, erasing other parts of feminine identity such as free will and individual desire.

Divakaruni became increasingly discontented with the depiction of women in the epic, despite their significant roles in shaping major events. Characters like Kunti, a devoted mother who ensured her son's ascent to kingship, and Gandhari, who voluntarily blinded herself upon marriage, relinquishing her authority as queen and mother, exemplify the complex and powerful female in the narrative. However, it is Draupadi (Panchaali) who stands out due to her marriage to five men, the Pandava brothers, renowned warriors of their era. Despite their influence, these women remained enigmatic, with their thoughts and motives shrouded in mystery. Their emotions were only depicted when impacting the lives of male heroes, ultimately relegating their roles to subservience to fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons. Emerging from the flames, Draupadi not only assumes a crucial role in the Mahabharata epic but also holds significant importance in Indian culture. Despite her significance, literature has largely overlooked her until now. *The Palace of Illusions* offers a compelling reinterpretation of the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata, through the perspective of its central female character, Panchaali. Divakaruni portrays Panchaali as a multifaceted character, deviating from the traditional image of a helpless sufferer. She presents her as formidable and resilient individual who questions societal expectations and confronts gender-based constraints. Through Panchaali's perspective, readers delve into the inner conflicts and challenges experienced by women in ancient India, exploring themes of identity, agency, and autonomy.

In the author's note, Divakaruni expresses to prioritize a female character in her interpretation of the Mahabharata. She aims to unveil the untold story that lurks beneath the facade of the men's exploits. This woman will narrate the entire tale, infusing it with her experiences of joy, doubt, struggle, triumph, heartbreak, achievement, strength, and flaws. Divakaruni highlights the woman's exceptional and enduring understanding of her world and place in it (Divakaruni 15). According to Beena Aggarwal, *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates Divakaruni's unique sympathy for mistreated female characters in Mahabharata, effectively transforming the narrative into a feminist consciousness that speaks for the entire human race. (Aggarwal 67). Others also see Divakaruni as a major feminist figure in Indian mythology because of how she portrayed women and her failure to follow "male-dominated religious hierarchy" (Ganguli 1990).

In *Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni selectively focuses on Draupadi's appearances in the epic, presenting the entire narrative from her perspective. This novel is a sincere attempt to delve into Indian epic history while positioning Divakaruni as an advocate for women's rights. Through the addition of fictional characters and a distinctive language style, the author has effectively reimagined and retold the epic, captivating readers with her unique approach. The account of Draupadi's birth is assigned to Dhairya Ma, a fictional confidant. Divakaruni expertly portrays the birth scene, allowing readers to envision Draupadi's emergence from fire. Drupad conducts a yajna with the intention of having a son who can seek vengeance against Drona. Through this ritual, he is blessed with a son named Dhristadyumna, and a daughter emerging from the sacred fire. Draupadi, the prophesied

daughter, is foretold to “Change the course of history’,” indicating her crucial role in shaping future events (Divakaruni 5).

Draupadi’s advocacy extends beyond mere surface-level equality for women. She challenges the notion that a woman’s duty is solely to pray when their fathers, husbands, brothers, or children go to battle. Finding parallels between herself and Karna due to their unusual births, she feels a deep empathy for him. Despite being swayed by Krishna’s words, she mistreats Karna in the assembly of rulers, only to later regret her actions. Placing the garland around Arjuna’s neck marks the beginning of her journey with him, accompanied by a surge of worries. Nonetheless, she confronts her challenges with remarkable courage.

Panchaali finds herself engulfed in a whirlwind of anger and helplessness as Kunti makes the decision for all five of her sons to marry Draupadi. She expects Arjuna, her husband, to defend and assert that she solely is his wife. However, her hopes are dashed when Arjuna complies with his mother's wishes without protest. She silently wishes for support from her father and brother but is left disappointed by their silence as well. As Draupadi’s father, brother, and the Pandavas deliberate on the practicality of Draupadi marrying five brothers, their primary concern is family honour and adherence to customs, completely disregarding Draupadi’s desires. This portrayal of Draupadi as an enraged woman navigating a patriarchal society highlights the subordinate status of women. The male figures in her life fail to prioritize her wishes, leading Draupadi to rationalize her predicament as perhaps a punishment for her mistreatment of Karna.

Not delighted with the configuration, as it would require her to serve as the wife of each brother for a year in a specific order, starting with the oldest and ending with the youngest. She perceives herself as nothing more than a shared vessel, passed from one brother to the next. Compounding her misery is the fact that she possesses a blessing, which guarantees her virginity every time she enters a new marriage. This boon appears tailored to satisfy her husband’s desires, neglecting her own needs entirely. She holds Kunti responsible for orchestrating this unfortunate situation, feeling resentful towards her for placing her in such a miserable predicament.

After enduring intense humiliation, Draupadi boldly denounced the silent onlookers, questioning “How is it that the wife of Pandus, the sister of Parsata, the friend of Vasudeva Krsna, could be brought before the assembly of kings? Tell me whether or not I, King Dharma’s wife, born of equal station, am a slave. Then I will do as commanded, Kauravas!” (Sutherland 66). This act wasn’t merely Draupadi’s humiliation but also exposed the failure of men present to intervene against injustice. Draupadi’s defiance not only spared her husbands from enslavement but also ignited the chain of events leading to the Mahabharata. Had she remained silent and accepted her fate, the events leading to the Mahabharata would never have occurred.

Draupadi endures disgrace and humiliation in the sight of king, attendants, and familiar faces during the game of dice. Despite being a princess of Panchal, a Kuru queen, and wife of valiant Pandavas, her integrity and pride are shattered, demanding justice. The adage “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” rings true in this instance. For Draupadi,

the impending war offers the only solace capable of washing away her humiliation and sorrow. The myth's portrayal differs as it is narrated from Draupadi's perspective. Initially, she believes in her influence over her husbands, convinced they love her and would do anything for her. However, she soon realizes that their love is conditional; they prioritize principles, loyalty to each other, and reputation over her suffering and shame. As she stands alone, abandoned by her five husbands, she comprehends that they would only seek vengeance for her if it brought them heroic recognition. This realization shatters Draupadi's faith, as she reflects on how she would have readily defended the Pandavas on that fateful day, prioritizing their dignity over public opinion. Unlike her, they remain passive spectators, with folded hands, enduring the scene without intervening.

The Pandavas failure to support Draupadi in her time of need leads to a significant shift in her relationship with them. No longer she relies entirely on them, becoming more self-sufficient and guarded against both their actions and external threats. This challenges the traditional notion of female dependence on men, empowering Draupadi to find inner strength and emotionally detach from her husbands. This portrayal in the novel resonates with women readers, encouraging them to believe in their own strength and independence, ultimately challenging male dominance and dependency.

Although Draupadi ultimately forgives her husbands, she harbors a strong desire for vengeance and swiftly acts against those who wrong her and her family. Her sense of right and wrong was unwavering, and she relentlessly sought justice. She held a position of great importance and commanded the respect of her husbands. Pandavas frequently asked Draupadi's counsel and sought her approval. Bhawalkar observes Draupadi's dynamic with her husbands, noting that "Draupadi was not a dumb follower of her husbands. She had her own individuality. Though soft speaking she used harsh words to her husbands and others when necessary" (Bhawalkar 143). Draupadi's fearless and uncompromising nature makes her an important figure in both mythological history and modern women's emancipation.

During their exile, Draupadi's audacious nature was prominently displayed when the Pandavas once left Draupadi in Nabendu's hermitage, where Jayadratha cast his seductive gaze upon her and kidnapped her. Upon their return, the Pandavas learned of Draupadi's abduction and waged war against Jayadratha. Despite his defeat and fleeing from the battlefield, the Pandavas, on Yudhisthira's suggestion, chose not to kill him. On hearing this decision, Draupadi became frantic and expressed her indignation to two of her husbands, Bhima and Arjuna. She demands them to reconsider, referring "If you want to do me a kindness, kill that lowest of humans, that outcast of the Saindhavas, that evil, wretched defiler of his family!" (Sutherland 69).

CONCLUSION

The authenticity with which Divakaruni portrays her female characters, depicting them as flesh-and-blood individuals, makes them highly relatable to readers. Through her writing, she captures the intricacies and subtleties of real people encountered in everyday life, allowing readers to engage with the characters on a personal level. Her women are

portrayed with such simplicity and ordinariness that they resemble the people one encounters individually, whether as mothers, sisters, wives, or friends. Divakaruni's Draupadi establishes a connection between the ancient and contemporary eras. Despite enduring numerous tragedies in her life, her spiritual radiance remains undiminished. This enduring quality is why Indian women hold her in such high esteem. Draupadi's resilience is evident in her statement "The more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the society's boundaries society has prescribed for women" (Divakaruni 343).

Divakaruni provides an overview of Draupadi's exceptional characteristics, such as her unwavering commitment to duty, resilience, industriousness, attentiveness, determination, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, moral discernment, honesty, resistance against injustice, humility, and adaptability to various circumstances. These attributes collectively define Draupadi and are reflective of similar qualities. Moreover, these traits are not limited by cultural boundaries but are universally applicable, transcending societal norms. Draupadi's courageous and principled nature earns her admiration, establishing her as a notable figure in the historical narrative of legendary women (Bhawalkar 151).

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