



Mythology and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract:

Indian mythology is known for its spiritual philosophy. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are two of the most famous Epics. It is said that Draupadi was the main cause of the Mahabharata War. But Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a striking reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, one of India's most enduring epics, by retelling it through the eyes of Draupadi. This novel bridges the gap between mythology and modernity. It presents a narrative that resonates with contemporary readers while remaining rooted in ancient tradition. Divakaruni challenges patriarchal silences and reclaims female agency within a text historically dominated by male perspectives by foregrounding Draupadi's voice. The novel reimagines Draupadi as a complex, self-aware protagonist and situates her struggles within broader themes of identity, desire, and autonomy that speak to modern feminist concerns. Divakaruni's diasporic position allows her to infuse the retelling with intercultural sensibilities, making the Mahabharata accessible to global audiences. The text becomes a site of cultural negotiation, where Indian mythology interacts with Western literary traditions and feminist discourse. This fusion highlights how mythological narratives are reshaped to reflect contemporary realities, offering new ways of understanding Indian identity in a globalized world. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates that mythology is static and dynamic, capable of evolving to address modern questions of gender, power, and belonging. Divakaruni creates a narrative that is both timeless and timely, reaffirming the relevance of mythology in shaping intercultural identity today.

Keywords: Mythology, Modernity, Feminism, Intercultural Identity, Diaspora, Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahabharata etc.

Introduction:

Indian mythology has long served as a reservoir of cultural narratives which shapes the collective identity, moral frameworks, and social imagination. Epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are stories; they are cultural texts that continue to influence values, traditions, and philosophical thought across centuries. These myths have historically provided models of duty, sacrifice, and heroism, while also reflecting the complexities of human relationships and ethical dilemmas.

In recent decades, however, contemporary Indian writers have revisited these

myths with fresh perspectives, using them as vehicles to address modern concerns such as gender equality, globalization, and intercultural belonging. This trend reflects a broader literary movement in which mythology is treated as static heritage and as a dynamic narrative resource that is reshaped to resonate with present-day realities. Writers like Shashi Tharoor, Amish Tripathi, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have contributed to this reimagining, each bringing unique lenses—political, spiritual, or feminist—to ancient texts.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) exemplifies this modern engagement with mythology. She retells the

Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective; Divakaruni foregrounds a female voice that has traditionally been marginalized in epic narratives. Draupadi, often portrayed as a symbol of suffering or as a catalyst for war, is reimagined here as a complex, self-aware protagonist who articulates her desires, frustrations, and ambitions. This shift in narrative perspective transforms the epic into a feminist text, challenging patriarchal silences and reclaiming agency for women within mythological discourse.

Further, Divakaruni's diasporic position as an Indian-American writer allows her to infuse the retelling with intercultural sensibilities. Writing in English for a global readership, she situates Indian mythology within the broader framework of world literature. This intercultural dimension makes *The Palace of Illusions* a feminist reinterpretation and a bridge between Indian tradition and modern global concerns. Themes of identity, belonging, and autonomy resonate across cultural boundaries, making the novel accessible to diverse audiences. *The Palace of Illusions* demonstrates how mythology is reimagined to reflect modernity while retaining its cultural depth. It highlights the adaptability of myth as a narrative form, capable of addressing contemporary issues without losing its timeless relevance. With the blended ancient myth with modern feminist and intercultural perspectives, Divakaruni creates a narrative that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to the demands of modern identity.

Literature Review:

Indian mythology has consistently provided a foundation for cultural narratives, shaping collective identity and moral frameworks. In recent decades, scholars and writers have emphasized that mythological retellings are static reproductions as well as

dynamic reinterpretations that allow ancient texts to speak to modern audiences. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (2010) demonstrates how epic narratives are transformed into political allegories that critique contemporary society, while P. Lal's *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* (2015) give emphasis to the adaptability of myth across generations and contexts. Vasumathi and Nivedhadevi (2024) further argue that mythological retellings provide a lens to examine female trauma, showing how reinterpretations highlight psychological and cultural dimensions often overlooked in traditional narratives.

Feminist revisions of mythology have become particularly important in reshaping the role of women within epic traditions. Aruna Sivaramakrishnan (2012) notes that feminist retellings challenge patriarchal silences by foregrounding female voices that were historically marginalized. In the case of Draupadi, critics such as Sreekala (2024) emphasize how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reimagines her as a self-aware protagonist, transforming her from a passive sufferer into an active agent of her destiny. Maitray Kaushik (2025) adds that silence itself is interpreted as resistance, suggesting that Draupadi's narrative refusal becomes a feminist strategy within mythological discourse. These perspectives collectively highlight how feminist reinterpretations of epics reclaim agency for women and reshape cultural memory.

Diasporic contexts also play a vital role in the reinterpretation of mythology. Divakaruni, writing from the United States, blends Indian myth with global literary traditions, making her work accessible to international audiences. Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2008) explains how diaspora writers negotiate belonging by reworking cultural texts to reflect hybrid identities. Jasbir Jain (2014) similarly

argues that postcolonial and diasporic literature functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity, allowing myths to be reframed for global readerships. In this light, *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies how mythology is reinterpreted through feminist and intercultural lenses, situating Draupadi's story within both Indian tradition and global modernity.

Objectives:

1. To analyze how Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi's identity in modern feminist terms.
2. To explore the intercultural dimensions of mythological retelling in diaspora literature.
3. To assess how *The Palace of Illusions* negotiates between tradition and modernity.

Methodology:

The methodology for this research paper combines textual analysis with theoretical frameworks drawn from feminist criticism and postcolonial studies. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi's identity in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), situating her narrative within both Indian tradition and global modernity.

Textual Analysis:

The primary method employed is close reading of Divakaruni's novel. Textual analysis will focus on narrative voice, characterization, symbolism, and thematic concerns. Particular attention will be given to Draupadi's introspection, her articulation of desire, and her negotiation of duty and autonomy. With the comparison of Divakaruni's portrayal with traditional versions of the *Mahabharata*, the

study will highlight divergences that reveal feminist and intercultural interventions. This comparative lens emphasizes how mythological retellings transform cultural memory by foregrounding marginalized perspectives.

Feminist Framework:

Feminist theory provides an important lens to examine Draupadi's reimagined identity. Scholars such as Sivaramakrishnan (2012) and Sreekala (2024) argue that feminist retellings challenge patriarchal silences by reclaiming agency for female characters. This research will apply feminist criticism to analyze how Divakaruni constructs Draupadi as a self-aware protagonist who resists traditional roles of passivity and suffering. Maitray Kaushik's (2025) notion of silence as resistance will be used to interpret Draupadi's narrative strategies, showing how her voice destabilizes patriarchal structures embedded in myth.

Postcolonial and Diasporic Lens:

Postcolonial theory and diaspora studies will be employed to contextualize Divakaruni's work within global literary traditions. Vijay Mishra's (2008) concept of the "diasporic imaginary" will inform analysis of how Divakaruni negotiates belonging and identity through mythological retelling. Jasbir Jain (2014) emphasizes that diasporic literature functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity, a perspective that will be applied to understand how *The Palace of Illusions* reframes Indian mythology for international audiences. This lens highlights the intercultural dimension of Divakaruni's narrative, situating Draupadi's story within both Indian heritage and global feminist discourse.

The combination of textual analysis, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies ensures a comprehensive methodology. Textual analysis

grounds the study in the literary features of the novel, while feminist criticism foregrounds gendered identity and agency. Postcolonial and diasporic frameworks situate the text within broader cultural negotiations, emphasizing its relevance to global readerships. These approaches allow for a holistic understanding of how mythology and modernity intersect in Divakaruni's retelling.

Analysis:

1. Draupadi's Voice as Feminist

Intervention: One of the most striking features of *The Palace of Illusions* is its narrative voice. Divakaruni allows Draupadi to tell her own story, Divakaruni reclaims agency for a character who has traditionally been portrayed as a catalyst for conflict rather than as a subject with her own desires and reflections. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often remembered for her humiliation in the Kaurava court, where she is disrobed before the assembly. Divakaruni reimagines this moment as a site of trauma and as a turning point in Draupadi's assertion of dignity. Draupadi reflects: "*I had been dragged into the court like a slave, but I would not let them strip me of my pride.*" This articulation transforms her from a passive victim into a figure of resistance, aligning with feminist readings that emphasize women's agency in patriarchal contexts.

Moreover, Draupadi's voice is deeply introspective. She questions her role as wife to five husbands, her longing for Karna, and her frustration with societal expectations. These reflections resonate with modern feminist concerns about autonomy and desire. As Sreekala (2024) notes, Divakaruni's Draupadi becomes a "self-aware protagonist," challenging the patriarchal silences of the epic.

2. Mythology in a Global Context:

Divakaruni's diasporic position shapes her retelling. Writing in English for a global readership, she situates Indian mythology within world literature. This intercultural framing allows non-Indian readers to engage with Draupadi's story while recognizing universal themes of love, betrayal, and destiny. For example, Draupadi's longing for Karna—her unfulfilled desire—echoes the tragic love stories familiar in Western literary traditions. She confesses: "*In my heart, I carried a secret flame for the man I could never have.*" This moment of vulnerability humanizes Draupadi, making her relatable across cultural boundaries.

Vijay Mishra's (2008) concept of the "diasporic imaginary" is useful here. Divakaruni negotiates belonging by reworking cultural texts for hybrid identities. Draupadi's story becomes an Indian narrative and a global one, accessible to readers who may not share the cultural background of the *Mahabharata*.

3. Negotiating Tradition and Modernity:

Divakaruni retains the grandeur of the epic but infuses it with modern psychological depth. Draupadi's introspection reflects contemporary concerns about identity and autonomy. For instance, when she questions her role as a wife to five husbands, she muses: "*Was I a queen, or merely a pawn in a game of men?*" This rhetorical question highlights her struggle to reconcile traditional duty with personal desire.

The novel also reinterprets mythological symbols in modern terms. The palace itself, built by Maya, becomes a metaphor for illusion and desire. Draupadi remarks: "*The palace was beautiful, but it was also a trap of my own making.*" This symbolism resonates with modern readers, suggesting that identity and ambition are both empowering and confining.

4. Intercultural Identity: Divakaruni's retelling embodies hybridity—rooted in Indian culture yet shaped by global feminist discourse. Jasbir Jain (2014) argues that diasporic literature functions as a bridge between tradition and modernity. *The Palace of Illusions* exemplifies this by situating Draupadi's story within both Indian heritage and global feminist concerns.

For example, Draupadi's questioning of her role as a woman resonates with feminist debates worldwide. Her reflections on autonomy, desire, and duty echo the struggles of women across cultures, making her story universally relevant. At the same time, the novel remains deeply rooted in Indian mythology, preserving the cultural richness of the *Mahabharata*.

5. Silence as Resistance: Maitray Kaushik (2025) suggests that silence is interpreted as a form of feminist resistance. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's moments of silence are powerful. When confronted with humiliation in the court, she chooses to plead and to stand in dignified silence, forcing others to confront their complicity. This silence becomes a strategy of resistance, challenging patriarchal power structures. Similarly, Draupadi's silence about her love for Karna reflects both repression and resistance. She resists societal expectations while maintaining her autonomy. This nuanced portrayal aligns with feminist readings that emphasize the complexity of women's strategies in patriarchal contexts by refusing to articulate her desire openly.

Findings:

- Divakaruni's retelling foregrounds Draupadi's voice, transforming her into a feminist protagonist.

- The novel situates Indian mythology within global literary traditions, making it accessible to diverse audiences.
- Draupadi's introspection reflects modern concerns about identity, autonomy, and desire.
- Silence emerges as a powerful strategy of resistance, challenging patriarchal structures.
- The text embodies intercultural identity, bridging Indian tradition with global feminist discourse.
- Mythology serves as a flexible cultural resource, adaptable to modern feminist and intercultural concerns.
- Draupadi's reimagined identity reflects both Indian tradition and global modernity.
- Divakaruni's diasporic lens enriches the narrative, making it accessible to diverse audiences.

Conclusion:

The Palace of Illusions exemplifies how mythology is reinterpreted to reflect modern values and intercultural identity. Divakaruni's retelling empowers Draupadi and situates Indian mythology within global literary discourse. This fusion of mythology and modernity highlights the dynamic nature of cultural identity in contemporary Indian fiction.

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