



Power, Politics and Patriarchy in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* reimagines the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata from the perspective of its most marginalized yet central female character - Draupadi. With Draupadi narrating in the first person, Divakaruni explores how women struggle through patriarchal ideologies that dominate political spaces. This paper analyzes how the novel mocks gender roles, exposes the illusion of power for women, and places emphasis on the political and emotional cost of a woman's voice in a world constructed around men. The analysis focuses on Draupadi's personal agency, her strategic engagement in politics, and how the structures of patriarchy continually undermine her authority, despite her intelligence and ambition.

Keywords: Marginalized, patriarchal, political, male-centric, ambition

In Indian epic traditions, women are often portrayed through the lens of their relationships with men - as daughters, wives, or mothers. *The Mahabharata*, one of India's most revered epics, follows a similar trajectory. Draupadi, though central to the epic's major conflict, is often relegated to a passive role in popular retellings. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) challenges this by offering a retelling through Draupadi's voice, thus shifting the epic's focus to gender, autonomy, and subjectivity. The novel does not just put Draupadi at its center; it remakes her as politically smart, emotionally sophisticated, and always negotiating with the constraints of a rigidly patriarchal world.

This essay attends to three big topics: how Draupadi moves through the politics, how her power is both actual and illusory, and how patriarchy ends up limiting her agency. Through these frames, *The Palace of Illusions* is not only a feminist reinterpretation, but a deep exploration of power, politics, and gender relations in both ancient and contemporary life.

Right from the start, Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* is more than mythic beauty or a mere pawn in the chess game of kings. She's born with destiny hanging in the balance and questioning the task that's been thrust upon her. As she grows up, her ambition unfolds - not just that she desires to marry a mighty



man, but she desires to be a mighty queen.

“I was never the sort of woman who could be happy with the embroidery hoop and the cookpot.”

(Divakaruni, 7)

This line marks a departure from the normative role that is expected of royal women. Draupadi is not content to stay at home; she desires voice and influence in political affairs. This aspiration is evident when she suggests that Yudhisthir construct the Palace of Illusions in Indraprastha, a physical representation of her fantasy and their political ambitions. The palace is symbolic - not simply of riches, but of prestige, voice, and vision.

However, her political acumen is either ignored or downplayed by the men in her life. Never accorded a formal place of authority, even in spite of her sense and intuition, she lives in private realms - consulting her husbands, protesting, or fighting against humiliation. Her power is unofficial, and that is the central problem: her power is there, but it is not in official capacity.

One of the major themes of the book is that of illusion - how things seem to be as opposed to what actually are. The palace itself, *Maya Sabha* in the epic, is an architectural wonder formed by illusions. It represents the Pandavas' aspirations and the glory of their reign. But for Draupadi, it also stands for the illusion of security and respect that ultimately breaks down during her public nudity in the Kaurava court.

This is the political and emotional turning point of the novel. Draupadi, who assisted in constructing this palace and saw herself as a queen with honor, is dragged into the court like a commodity. Her husbands - great kings and warriors - do not stand for her, opting for silence instead of confrontation. Here Draupadi meets the actual power structure in her world.

“Did Yudhisthir stake me before or after he lost himself?” (Divakaruni, 189)

This question, frequently emphasized in feminist interpretations, is a legal, moral, and emotional defiance of patriarchal systems. She is not asking for a game; she is questioning the system whereby a woman can be wagered away. Her question goes unanswered in court, standing as a metaphor for

women's voices being silenced within public political spheres.

Despite the attention this moment receives, Draupadi's strength lies in her refusal to be passive. She demands justice, not just for herself but symbolically for all women subjected to similar erasure. Still, her power is revealed to be conditional and vulnerable, dependent on the protection of divine or male figures like Krishna, not on institutional respect or rights.

“It was an illusion, all of it - the power, the pride, the permanence.”

(Divakaruni, 270)

This epiphany follows decades of torment, loss, and exile. The palace, her position, and her pride - all that she thought she had established - were illusory. This is the theme that compels readers to consider how ephemeral women's power is within patriarchal structures. Even when women such as Draupadi achieve seats of power, that power can be taken away from them instantly.

One of the most trenchant criticisms in *The Palace of Illusions* is how patriarchy disproportionately loads honor, shame, and responsibility on women. Not only is Draupadi blamed for the war - as a catalyst because she was humiliated - but she is also made to bear the guilt and sacrifice emotionally throughout.

Her polyandrous union is another instance. Though she didn't have a say in marrying five men, she still needs to control her dealings with all her husbands and keep herself in balance and decorum. Her feelings, particularly her emotions for Karna, are suppressed and are deemed shameful, although the men surrounding her may have many wives and lovers.

“Why should I feel shame for a longing I never acted upon?” (Divakaruni, 216)

This line reveals Draupadi's inner turmoil. She is intelligent enough to understand the hypocrisy of her culture, yet powerless to change it. The emotional price she pays for simply having thoughts or feelings outside of her assigned role speaks volumes about how patriarchy limits not only women's actions but their inner lives.



Even her relationship with Krishna, while reassuring, is set within limits. Krishna is her psychological supporter but never frees her from the societal arrangements she wishes to dissolve. He is a spiritual mentor rather than a liberator.

Moreover, the war itself, which results in massive death and destruction, is said to be for Draupadi's honor. Yet, no one asks her what she wants. She is used as a justification for male vengeance and political gain. This again reflects how women's bodies and identities are politicized in patriarchal societies.

Divakaruni's retelling is a powerful act of reclaiming narrative. By giving Draupadi a voice, she challenges the foundational silence surrounding women in epics. The novel is filled with introspection, reflection, and questioning. Draupadi is not always noble or selfless - she is flawed, angry, and deeply human.

This complicity is itself a political act. Rather than being a figure of virtue or victimhood, Draupadi is now a figure of resistance. Her narrative is not one of redemption, but of recognition. Through her, Divakaruni illustrates the ways that gendered politics shut women up, not only in myth, but in the world today.

By rewriting the epic from the point of view of Draupadi, Divakaruni highlights all the female viewpoints lost in patriarchal histories. Draupadi is emblematic of a larger category of women - intelligent, strategic, feeling women - whose efforts are structurally effaced or disregarded.

The Palace of Illusions is more than a retelling of the *Mahabharata*. It is a feminist intervention into one of the world's most enduring narratives. Through the character of Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni critiques the structures of power and patriarchy that limit female agency. Draupadi's

journey - from ambition and influence to disillusionment and wisdom - mirrors the struggles of many women in patriarchal societies, both ancient and modern.

Her tale demonstrates that power, in the absence of institutional rights and sanction, is always an illusion. The gender politics, as illustrated in the book, are inextricably rooted in family, law, and society and go against the very fabric of justice. Divakaruni's Draupadi is a voice for the voiceless, not because she succeeds, but because she has the courage to speak.

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