



# **Breaking Stereotypes: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Portrayal of women in Indian Epics, *The Palace of Illusion* and *The Forest of Enchantments***

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## **Abstract**

The Mahabharata and the Ramayana, ancient Indian epics, have been passed down through generations. These tales, shaped by the historical context and the evolving philosophies of each era, offer insights into various ideologies. The present study aims to explore diverse facets of feminism and the notion of a "New Woman" while providing a renewed perspective on a prominent Hindu epic. The research seeks to challenge the societal positioning of women and contemplate the notion of female autonomy within a patriarchal framework. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines and reconceptualizes female characters from the prominent Indian mythologies, unveiling their inner strength, agency and conventional challenges. Throughout the history, women have often been unfairly blamed and made scapegoats in the pursuit of establishing dharma. Divakaruni adroitly uncovers the torment endured by the innocent women in the process of upholding dharma. The paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of feminism, emphasizing the significance of tracing the developmental journey of female characters as they evolve into robust identities.

**Keywords:** New woman, Feminism, Ideologies, Indian mythology

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, feminist, dramatist and novelist, was born on July 29, 1956 in Kolkata. Divakaruni, a feministic and diasporic writer, captures reader's attention through vivid descriptions, emotional depth and compelling story telling creating a solid foundation for her work. She excels in reimagining epics and myths, infusing them with fresh

perspectives and identities. Her storytelling technique encompasses a captivating blend of realism, historical elements, magical realism, myth and fantasy. She explores a wide range of themes in her works that includes cultural identity, women's empowerment, family and relationships, immigrant experience, economic disparity, love and mythology. Her remarkable accomplishments are *The Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Queen of Dreams*, *One Amazing Thing*, *Oleander Girl* and *Before We Visit the Goddess*. She won American Book Award in 1996, Bay Area Book Reviewer's Award, PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award in 1996 and Pushcart Prize in 1997 and 2003.

*The Palace of Illusions* was published in 2008 by Picador India. The novel retells the Hindu epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, also known as Panchaali, offering a portrayal of a woman navigating a patriarchal society. Bheeshma, Drona, Karna, Yudhishthir, Bhima, Arjun, Krishna and Duryodhan, major characters in the Mahabharata, imparted profound life lessons concerning virtues, vices and the ramification of desires that are impossible to forget. The significance of numerous powerful and complex women, who played crucial roles in influencing the action, has often been overlooked in conventional Mahabharata. In this narrative, Divakaruni presents her protagonist Draupadi as a defiant female voice within a society predominantly dominated by men. Divakaruni scrutinized the psyche of Draupadi as she harbored a desire to be a man. The novel delves into Panchaali's emotions, desires and experiences offering a unique narrative of the events leading up to the great war. Further the novel explores themes of love, ambition, power, family and the complexities of human relationships against the backdrop of ancient India's rich mythology.

*The Forest of Enchantments*, published in 2019, brings Sita at the center of the narrative reimagining much-told epic Ramayana through the eyes of Sita. While the novel primarily focuses on Sita's voice, it also sheds light on misunderstood women of past such as Kaikeyi, Surpanakha and Mandodari. Divakaruni has transformed the greatest epic into battle of wills, challenging the traditional notion of Ramayana as a tale driven by the desire of vengeance. Banerjee has weaved the epic into greatest love story that has been strangled in the pursuit of establishing dharma. The novel skillfully explores the duties of women as a wife, mother and sister resonating with women today. The narration vividly brings to life the personalities and quandaries of the characters in the Ramayana. In Divakaruni's rendition, Sita emerges as an epitome of courage and self-respect, paving way for all women to find strength within themselves. In addition to being a morality tale, Ramayana is a profound love story.

*The Palace of Illusions* is a thought-provoking and imaginative retelling of the great epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi. The novel begins with the birth of Draupadi from fire, to her complex relationship with five Pandava brothers and her feelings drawn towards the enigmatic man who is her husband's formidable adversary. She is known for being fiery and strong-willed, often defying the conventional societal norms and questioning the tradition. She faces hardships and injustices, including public disrobing that becomes a pivotal moment in the tale. Her role in the epic takes center stage as she

navigates familial conflicts, political intrigues and personal dilemmas. Her strength and resilience are tested throughout, and she becomes a symbol of empowerment in a patriarchal society. The novel explores Draupadi's friendship with other female characters like Kunti and Gandhari, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by women in ancient India.

Through the eyes of Draupadi, one can gain deeper understanding of the complex characters and appreciate the strength and resilience of women in the face of adversity.

*The Forest of Enchantments* is the reimagination of the famous Indian epic Ramayana through Sita's eyes. The story begins with Sita being found as child on the Mother Earth, symbolizing her deep connection to the land. She is raised in the Kingdom of Mithila as a princess who marries Ram, the Prince of Ayodhya who gets banished for fourteen years along with Sita and his dearest brother Lakshman. Sita's unwavering faith is tested when she is abducted by the demon Ravana, the king of Lanka. She endures captivity and faces numerous challenges, all the while maintaining her dignity and resilience. The novel explores her complex relationship with her husband Ram, highlighting the deep love, devotion and the strains placed upon her by societal expectations and cruel circumstances. The narrative portrays her as a multifaceted and empowered woman who challenges societal norms and defies expectations.

The Mahabharata has been passed down through generations in various versions and interpretations. The conventional Mahabharata sidelines women characters treating them as secondary figures within the epic whereas, in *the Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni places female characters in the forefront, showcasing their resilient, strength and dignity. In the novel, Draupadi exemplifies resilience, remaining steadfast in the face of challenging situations and never abandoning her husbands, regardless of the circumstances they lead her into. Throughout the epic, her true character emerges, revealing her subjectivity, power, and unwavering pursuit of justice and vengeance. Her idiosyncrasies have elevated her to a symbol of women's empowerment, earning reverence from many. Beyond her boldness, Draupadi is portrayed as a devoted wife, virtuous, spiritual, and compliant to dharma, making her an iconic figure in Hindu mythology. Her distinction among other women in the epics is well-deserved, as she demonstrated strength and assertiveness, often commanding her husbands with confidence and insight.

In the novel, Draupadi is depicted as a bold and free-thinking character who possesses an aura of authority. Despite her ability to assimilate into the patriarchal sphere of regal life, she ultimately questions the diplomatic and administrative affairs of the court, challenging the male supremacy that dominates her world. However, underneath her boldness, Draupadi is also portrayed as shattered, disillusioned, and mystical. Draupadi's strength, boldness, adherence to dharma, and her ability to command her husbands earned her a distinguished position in Hindu mythology, far ahead of her time. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* challenges traditional interpretations and emphasizes her fight against injustices in a patriarchal world. Draupadi's character symbolizes women empowerment, displaying

strength, subjectivity, and her unwavering quest for justice. She will be remembered as a woman who defied societal norms and fought against all odds. “We’ll no longer be the ones watching from behind men’s back” demonstrates a unique perspective on the Mahabharata that diverges from the traditional interpretation.

The conventional Ramayana objectifies events, actions and decisions of the divine and mortal characters. This conventional Ramayana places Sita as secondary character, often overshadowed by the heroic deed of Ram and the divine aspects of the tale. While Sita’s significance is acknowledged, her personal struggles and inner journey are not completely explored. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni gives center stage to Sita, presenting a feminist retelling that amplifies her character and challenges the traditional narrative. The novel delves into Sita's resilience and experiences as a woman navigating her role as a wife, mother, and queen. It sheds light on the injustices and constraints imposed on her due to societal norms, while also emphasizing her strength and courage.

In *the Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is portrayed as an embodiment of virtue and moral integrity. She adheres strictly to the ideals of dharma, fulfilling her duties as a daughter, wife, and queen. Throughout the novel, she exhibits unwavering loyalty, compassion, and adherence to truth. She is depicted as a fiercely independent and strong-willed woman. She is not afraid to voice her opinions and put forth her ideas, even in the face of opposition from others. She is deeply devoted to him and sacrifices her own desires and comforts to support him on his journey. “I will be Sita, the strong one, the one who stands by her choices” exemplifies Sita’s resilience and inner power. Her unwavering dedication to her husband and her willingness to endure suffering for his sake showcases the depth of her love. She is highly intelligent and spiritually inclined. She engages in philosophical discussions, contemplates on the nature of existence and the meaning of life, and seeks self-realization and inner peace. Sita's character is rendered with depth, showcasing her strength, resilience, compassion, and unwavering commitment to her ideals. She defies societal expectations, challenges injustice when necessary, and emerges as a powerful and inspiring figure in her own right.

The portrayal of women in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* underscores the timeless and complex nature of female characters in Indian mythology and literature. The author delves into the emotional, psychological, and societal challenges faced by these iconic women, highlighting their resilience, intelligence, and the ways in which they navigate patriarchal structures. In both novels, the author reclaims the narratives of the iconic female characters, providing them with depth and dimension beyond their traditional roles.

The reinterpretation of these epics serves as a commentary on societal expectations and the empowerment of women. Through their storytelling, Divakaruni prompts readers to reconsider and question established gender norms, offering a refreshing and empowering perspective on the portrayal of women in ancient epics. Divakaruni's novels highlights female empowerment in a way that is not as prominent in the

conventional Mahabharata and Ramayana. It challenges patriarchal norms and gives voice to the struggles faced by Draupadi, Sita and other women in the story. Therefore, both *the Palace of Illusions* and *the Forest of Enchantments* gives voice to female characters that has been suppressed for centuries.

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