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FEMINIST RETELLINGS OF DRAUPADI AND RANI JINDAN: POWER, VOICE, AND RESISTANCE ACROSS ERAS

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Abstract : This paper offers a comparative feminist analysis of two iconic female figures: Rani Jindan, the 19th-century Sikh queen, and Draupadi, from the Indian epic Mahabharata, to investigate how feminist retellings reinterpret their legacies as warrior queens opposing patriarchal oppression. Despite their differing origins in history and mythology respectively, both women are subject to narratives that marginalize female agency through dual forces of colonialism and patriarchy. Draupadi is re-examined as a strategist who challenges traditional rules (dharma) and uses social norms to claim her independence. Similarly, Rani Jindan is redefined as an independent leader who stood against British rule. Drawing on feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, this research examines how texts such as The Palace of Illusions and The Last Queen reconstruct these characters to become symbols of rebellion by using resistance, rhetorical skill, and resilience. Through comparative detailed reading, the paper traces how feminist frameworks help women regain their power, and what similarities exist when fighting gender-based power struggles. The study concludes that rather than passively updating myth or history, the feminist retellings reframe cultural memory, alter how we remember that past, offering new perspectives for understanding women's agency across eras.

IndexTerms- Draupadi, Rani Jindan, The Palace of Illusions, The Last Queen, feminist retellings, patriarchy, trauma, resistance, mythology.

I. INTRODUCTION

The image of the warrior queen occupies a complex and often contradictory place--- she is praised and celebrated for her strength and leadership, yet frequently constrained by narratives that show her as a victim and discredit her character. This duality of respect and neglect is particularly evident in the stories of Draupadi, the fireborn heroine of the Mahabharata (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions), and Rani Jindan, the last queen of the Sikh Empire, whose legacies oscillate between being honoured and being suppressed by patriarchy (Divakaruni, The Last Queen). While Draupadi emerges from the ancient Hindu epic as a polyandrous queen whose disrobing becomes a catalyst for a disastrous war, Rani Jindan, the 19th-century regent-mother, is remembered for her defiance against British rulers and her being portrayed as a "dangerous" woman in colonial archives. Though separated by time, genre, and context, they are portrayed not primarily as strategists or leaders but as catalysts of disruption, remembered for their perceived disobediences rather than resistance.

Draupadi, a key figure in the Mahabharata narrative (around 4th century BCE), was a fire-born queen whose polyandrous marriage defied the traditional patriarchal norms (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions). In a society that treated monogamy as sacred and a basic norm, her marriage to all five Pandava brothers challenged the social and cultural norms. However, her power is shrouded in the curse of being the emblematic woman who sparked the male conflict. The infamous dice game episode, where her husband Yudhishthira gambles her away to the Kauravas, leads to her public disgrace and humiliation--- an action that ignited the Kurukshetra war. Classical interpretations portray this event as a dishonour that justifies the Pandavas' quest for revenge, they tend to overlook Draupadi's powerful moral questions. She boldly asks-- "Can one stake a person who has already lost himself?" calling out the injustice and exposing flaws in the epic's claimed values (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions). Even though she influences the Pandavas' political path and rallies her husbands to reclaim their kingdom, she is remembered more as a symbol of lost honour than as a powerful political figure. Similary, Rani Jindan (1817–1863), the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, rose to eminence as the advisor queen of the Sikh Empire following her husband's death. She emerged as a formidable leader during the Anglo-Sikh Wars, resisting the British takeover. Her political acumen is evident in her letters, where she formed smart alliances with Afghan leaders, and in her speeches, which inspired both Sikh soldiers and the public to stand against colonial rule (Divakaruni, The Last Queen). However, colonial archives and few patriarchal Sikh historiographies portray her as a "seductress" manipulating court politics or a "misguided rebel" who weakened the empire (Atwal 133). British administrator Henry Lawrence infamously ridiculed her as "a woman of masculine understanding and resolve, but with the cunning of a schemer," framing her leadership as unnatural and dangerous. (Atwal 130). Such portrayals erase her legacy as a stateswoman, reducing her to a gendered caricature of hysteria and sedition.

Although Draupadi faces epic moral conflicts and Jindan's challenges came from political battles, both women are often viewed through patriarchal perspectives that paint them as sources of disruption. Their power reduced to images of either seduction or sorrow. What connects their stories is that both are told through male-dominated sources—Draupadi in Vyasa's epic and Jindan in British colonial records, which tend to amplify their vulnerability while downplaying their strength and independence (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusion); (Atwal 122).

Feminist scholars have examined and shown how patriarchal and colonial systems reduce women's resistance to stereotypes or overlook them completely. Gayatri Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" echoes in the way both Draupadi and Jindan are treated— Draupadi's voice is symbolically silenced by the epic's moral framing, and Jindan's is distorted by colonial accounts. (Spivak et al. 285). This paper views both as powerful warrior queens whose stories, when compared, show repeated patterns of women being silenced. Though their backgrounds are different, both are women who held power in male-led worlds, yet their stories are often simplified into opposites like "honour" vs. "shame" or "heroism" vs. "hysteria" (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions).

The tension between myth and history further complicates their legacies. Draupadi's strength is often turned into a symbol of cosmic justice, and her anger is metaphored as divine revenge. In the Mahabharata, her vow to "wash her hair with the blood of the Kaurava's" transforms her vengeance into a cosmic mandate, taking away human judgment of her choices (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions). Conversely, Jindan's defiance is documented (and distorted) in administrative records and Punjabi oral traditions, where she's seen as emotional rather than strategic (Atwal 134). But feminist retellings challenge these old views. In The Palace of Illusions (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives Draupadi a voice, showing her as politically smart and emotionally deep. In The Last Queen (2021), she also reclaims Jindan's story, showing her as a strong, strategic ruler facing imperialist aggression and internal betrayal (Divakaruni, The Last Queen). These retellings show both women as smart and powerful, using courage, language, and resistance to push back against the systems that tried to control them.

This paper argues that the warrior queen figure, embodied by both Draupadi and Jindan, goes beyond time and genre to reveal how patriarchy works to control female power. Though separated by centuries, their stories show that women's authority is often limited, questioned, and shaped by fear of strong women. Draupadi's bold question to Yudhishthira— "Who did you lose first, yourself or me?"—challenges his moral failure and the legitimacy of her objectification (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions). Jindan's powerful words to the British— "You have taken my son. What more is left?"—shows her refusal to submit to colonial rule, personifying maternal grief as political resistance (Divakaruni, The Last Queen; Atwal 142). These powerful moments, often ignored in popular versions, highlight their active fight against being silenced. The research paper offers a cross-genre framework for understanding how resistance can be articulated in myth and history alike. By combining myth and history, this study not only reclaims them as symbols of resistance but also offers a way to recover silenced histories.

Guided by three central questions, this study interrogates the interplay of power and erasure:

- How do patriarchal narratives portray Draupadi and Rani Jindan?
- How do feminist retellings challenge these portrayals?
- What intergenerational themes of resistance emerge across mythology and history?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly engagement with Draupadi and Rani Jindan shows a growing interest in feminist reinterpretations of disregarded female figures, though their narratives are separately studied within the boundaries of mythology and history.

2.1 Feminist Retellings of Draupadi

Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni (1984) shares one of these modern retellings of Draupadi's portrayal, emphasizing Draupadi's emotional and psychological depth while questioning her depiction merely as a passive figure in male-driven conflicts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions is another text that builds entirely on this approach, narrating the mythological epic through Draupadi's first-person perspective to highlight her political acumen and desire for independence and power. Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi's polyandry as an act of resistance rather than submission, positioning Draupadi as a "woman ahead of her time" confronting patriarchal norms (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions).

Scholars have examined Draupadi's role as a complex and symbolic figure. Alf Hiltebeitel's Rethinking the Mahabharata (2001), examines Draupadi's symbolic role as pāñcālī (woman of five husbands), arguing that her polyandry challenges traditional Vedic norms of monogamy and patrilineality. However, critics like Ruth Vanita's work complicates this by noting that even feminist readings ignore Draupadi's caste privilege and her role in upholding caste hierarchies—a tension seldom addressed in mainstream retellings. This is evident in Draupadi's contempt for the lower-caste character Nishada prince Keechaka in regional retellings that reveal how agency is shaped by caste privilege—an aspect often missing in popular narratives.

Recent works, such as Kavita Kane's The Outcast's Queen (2013), offer diversified perspectives on Draupadi's portrayal by exploring her relationship with marginalized figures like Karna, examining intersections of caste and gender (Kane 92). Kane's work highlights regional variations in the Mahabharata, showing how Draupadi's agency is emphasized in South Indian oral traditions but downplayed in Brahminical versions (Kane 104; Hiltebeitel 227). These retellings suggest the need for more intersectional feminist analysis that accounts gender alongside caste, class, and regional variations.

2.2 Rani Jindan in Feminist and Postcolonial Discourse

Rani Jindan's legacy, once overshadowed by colonial and male-centered histories, has gained renewed attention in feminist scholarship. Historical accounts, such as Khushwant Singh's A History of the Sikhs (1963), initially portrayed Jindan as a "tempestuous schemer," reverberating colonial biases that undermined her leadership (Singh, Khushwant 212). However, modern historians like J.S. Grewal (The Sikhs of the Punjab, 1990) and Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh (The Birth of the Khalsa, 2005) challenge these portrayals, highlighting her efforts to defend and protect Sikh sovereignty against British rule (Grewal 145; Singh, Nikky-Guninder 87). Anu Kumar's The Woman Who Ruled an Empire (2019) bridges historical and literary analysis, presenting

Jindan's bold resistance like her famous declaration— "I will not let the Khalsa's honor be trampled" as an early form of anti-colonial feminism (Kumar 98).
Works like Anita Anand's Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary (2015) and The Rebel Queen (2021) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni highlight Jindan's political strength, portraying her resistance to British rule as strategic rather than the "irrational rebellion" depicted in colonial records (Anand 176; Divakaruni 59). Anand's work meticulously reconstructs Jindan's diplomatic correspondence, revealing her alliances with Afghan leaders and mobilization of Sikh soldiers during the Anglo-Sikh Wars (Anand 198–201).
Postcolonial scholars like Aparna Vaidik's My Son's Inheritance (2020) contextualize Rani Jindan's resistance as part of a larger struggle against British efforts to weaken female-led rule in Punjab (Vaidik 67). Policies like the "Doctrine of Lapse" labelled women's rule as illegitimate to justify colonial takeover. Jindan's bold stand was both personal and political, challenging gendered colonial power. Her letters to the British, demanding the return of her son Duleep Singh, show her powerful voice: "You have taken my kingdom, my wealth, my son. What more can you take? My resolve?" (Kumar 105).

2.3 Theoretical Framework and Gaps

Feminist theories provide the primary critical lens for this study. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) provides a lens to analyze how they were seen as the "Other"—Draupadi as a symbol of violated honour, and Jindan as a threat to colonial control (de Beauvoir 26). Judith Butler's concept of performativity in Gender Trouble (1990) helps interpret their act of resistance: Draupadi through her bold questioning of dharma, and Jindan through her defiance of British authority (Butler 33–34).
Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) helps explain how subaltern women are spoken for rather than being allowed to speak. Draupadi and Jindan's voices were erased—Draupadi's voice is silenced by morality, while Jindan's words were distorted by colonial records. This exemplifies the "epistemic violence" Spivak describes (Spivak 287). Crenshaw's context on intersectionality (1989) adds depth by showing how multiple factors such as gender, caste, and colonial status shapes their struggles in different ways (Crenshaw 140).
While Draupadi and Jindan have been studied extensively within their respective genres—mythology and colonial history—comparative studies are still uncommon. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism (1987) and Romila Thapar Interpreting Early India (1992) have looked at gendered power in ancient and medieval South Asia, but not many have connected the dots between myth and history to explore how patriarchal systems persist across different periods (Chakravarti 89; Thapar 112).
Many existing studies tend to focus on just one aspect of identity, like gender or colonialism, and neglect the interplay of caste, religion, and empire. For example, Draupadi's caste privilege is rarely compared to Jindan's experience of religious marginalization under colonial rule. Similarly, both women face similar critiques—Draupadi is often called "overambitious," while Jindan is labelled "hysterical"—but no study fully compares these overlapping stereotypes (Spivak 287; Vaidik 71).
This study compares Draupadi and Jindan to show how patriarchal systems use similar stereotypes—victimhood, sedition, and hysteria—to undermine female power, whether in myths or colonial history. It deepens intersectional analysis by looking at how their resistance tackles overlapping forms of oppression
This study also examines the reception of feminist retellings. For instance, while The Palace of Illusions is praised for its bold approach, some critics feel it imposes modern feminist ideas on ancient stories. Similarly, in The Last Queen, Jindan is sometimes idealized as a "perfect heroine," which overlooks her political compromises. This study addresses the gap between these two figures and thus contribute to the intersectional feminist thought. It explores how both the narratives converge to reveal the persistent patterns of gendered silencing. Recognizing these complexities helps us see feminist reinterpretation as an evolving and imperfect process.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, interpretative approach based in feminist literary criticism and postcolonial feminist theory to analyse how Draupadi and Rani Jindan are portrayed in both patriarchal narratives and feminist retellings. The objective is not merely to recount their lives but to explore and critically examine how their narratives have been structured, silenced or reclaimed across mythology and history.

3.1 Research Design

The analysis dwells on two contemporary fictional writings: The Palace of Illusions (2008) and The Last Queen (2021) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which present Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective and reconstructs the life of Rani Jindan respectively. These texts were chosen for their explicit female frames, their popularity among readers, and their representational impact in reviving female voices.

The analysis is guided by two intersecting frameworks:
Feminist Literary Criticism: This lens interrogates how patriarchal systems silence, twist, or commercialize women's voices in literature and history. It prioritizes women's experiences, their agency, and how they resist. Simone de Beauvoir argues that gender is socially constructed, positioning woman as the "Other" in a male-centered world (de Beauvoir 26). Judith Butler supports this by asserting that gender is not innate but performed, with societal expectations reinforcing roles over time in her work stating "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 33–34).
Postcolonial Feminist Theory: Inspired by thinkers like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, it looks at how colonialism and nationalism intersect with patriarchy to further oppress women, like Jindan. Spivak emphasizes the dual struggles women face under colonial rule, warning of "epistemic violence" while Mohanty critiques Western feminism for overlooking how class, race,

and imperialism shape non-Western women's lives (Mohanty 71–72). It emphasizes how storytelling helps reclaim the histories that have been erased or ignored.

The analysis employs a thorough reading focussed on key narrative moments to understand how language, silence, and symbolism come across as forms of resistance. It compares mythological and historical accounts to uncover how women are often silenced, labelled as "seductresses and examines how caste (Draupadi's high status) and colonialism (Jindan's marginalized identity) influence their struggles. Despite limitations, such as biased colonial records and modern interpretations of ancient stories, the study uses oral histories and critical theories to highlight how feminist retellings disrupt traditional narratives. The study does not aim to conflate mythology and history, but rather to explore how similar discursive strategies operate across both.

3.2 Limitations

This study is limited due to its dependence on fictionalized retellings which may idealize their protagonists and project contemporary feminist ideas and values on to these mythological and colonial texts. The study acknowledges that regional or oral narratives though referenced, are not analysed in depth due to scope constraints.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section compares the historical and mythological contexts of Draupadi and Rani Jindan, focusing on how both women resist patriarchal systems in their respective narratives.

4.1. Historical and Mythological Context

Draupadi's Role in the Mahabharata:

Draupadi, born of sacrificial fire, holds a complex position in the Mahabharata. As the daughter of King Drupada, she is initially a political pawn in his alliance with the Pandavas, while her polyandrous marriage challenges patriarchal norms (Hiltebeitel 203). Despite being reduced to an object of male ambition, especially when her husband Yudhishthira gambles her away, Draupadi remains central to the epic's moral and emotional tension. This act of violation, where she is nearly disrobed in the Kaurava court, underscores her symbolic role as a catalyst for the Kurukshetra war. However, Draupadi defies victimhood through her sharp critique of dharma, notably when she questions, "Who did you lose first, yourself or me?" (Ray 234). Her rhetorical challenge positions her as an active figure who disrupts the epic's patriarchal structure.

Rani Jindan's Journey:

Rani Jindan's life was marked by power, resistance, and political struggle. After the death of her husband, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, she became the regent queen of the Sikh Empire, leading in a male-dominated court amid British colonial oppression. She played a key role in the Anglo-Sikh Wars, formed alliances with Afghan rulers, and resisted British annexation of Punjab (Anand, Sophia 54–56). Colonial accounts often dismissed her as a "scheming seductress," but her letters reveal her strategic acumen. Her identity as a mother deepened her defiance; after being exiled and separated from her son, Duleep Singh, she famously declared, "You have taken my son. What more is left?" Her exile to Nepal symbolized colonial efforts to erase female sovereignty, but she remains a powerful figure in Punjabi oral tradition, remembered for her resilience (Kumar 97).

Interconnection: Reclaiming Voice in Myth and History

Though from different eras and contexts, Draupadi and Jindan both face patriarchal systems that reduce their authority. Their respective humiliations—Draupadi's public disrobing and Jindan's forced exile function as symbolic punishments for women who step beyond sanctioned roles. Yet both display resilience: Draupadi challenges injustice with sharp questioning, while Jindan defies colonial rule through political action. Their stories—myth and history—expose how women are silenced across time, but also show how reclaiming their voices can reshape their legacies. Feminist retellings like The Palace of Illusions and The Last Queen recast them not as victims, but as powerful agents of change.

4.2 Power and Patriarchy

Draupadi: The Paradox of Authority in Myth

In the Mahabharata, Draupadi's power is shaped and constrained by patriarchy. As the agni-sutā (fire-born daughter) of King Drupada, she symbolizes divine purpose but is defined by roles as wife, daughter, and queen (Hiltebeitel 211). Her status as empress is shattered when Yudhishthira gambles her away, reducing her to property. The infamous dice game episode epitomizes this paradox: though she is a mahārāṇī (empress) of Indraprastha, Yudhishthira's act of staking her in a gamble reduces her to property, reflecting the fragility of female authority in a patrilineal world (Chakravarti 72). The disrobing scene (cheer-haran) amplifies this tension where her body becomes a site of male control, yet she resists through sharp critique: "Can a man who has lost himself claim another?" (Ray 243). Her question challenges the moral core of patriarchal rule. Even her polyandry, often seen as a curse, defies norms, marking her as a disruptor of tradition (Anand 64).

Rani Jindan: Colonial Erasure of Female Sovereignty

Rani Jindan's political authority was systematically undermined by British colonialism. As regent queen of the Sikh Empire, her leadership was dismissed as irrational and emotional, with officials like Henry Lawrence branding her as a "schemer" who "ruled through seduction". Her strategic moves during the Anglo-Sikh Wars were misrepresented as hysteria. The British annexation of Punjab in 1849 and her subsequent exile, they used her motherhood against her by taking her son Duleep Singh and exploiting the grief to depict her as a "hysterical" woman unfit to rule. Yet in her letters, Jindan asserted her strength: "You have seized my throne, but not my resolve." She transformed maternal grief into political resistance, refusing to be reduced to a passive figure.

Interconnection: Gendered Suppression Across Eras

Both Draupadi and Jindan show how patriarchy equates female power with disorder. Draupadi's disrobing and Jindan's exile were meant to silence them, yet their responses—Draupadi's challenge to dharma and Jindan's use of motherhood as resistance—reveal

that women's agency endures even under oppression. Their actions expose the gendered underpinnings of power itself i.e. how it is assigned, monitored, and revoked based on patriarchal fears of female autonomy.

4.3 Voice and Silence

Draupadi: Rhetoric as Resistance

Draupadi's voice in the Mahabharata is often dismissed as emotional, silencing her challenge to injustice. However, Draupadi's most critical intervention comes not through action, but through speech. Her question in the Kaurava court, "Did you lose yourself before you staked me?" (Ray 188) is met with patriarchal mockery. Her identity is reduced to a symbol of violated honour, her voice is framed dangerous, and her sharpness is interpreted as pride. However, feminist retellings like The Palace of Illusions give her agency. Divakaruni's Draupadi critiques the Pandavas' inaction and questions the ethics of war, reclaiming her role as a thoughtful, questioning figure rather than a passive victim. Divakaruni's Draupadi asks not only political but existential question through her inner monologue—"Why must I always be the spark that lights the fire?", thereby highlighting the burden of moral consequence unfairly placed on women in mythological narratives.

Rani Jindan: Colonial Silence through Maternal Defiance

Jindan's voice was subjected to a different but equally violent form of erasure by British colonial records. Official records, such as the Lahore Chronicle, dismissed her words as emotional outbursts, while Sikh court documents downplayed her political skill. However, Punjabi oral traditions and regional memories, Jindan's voice survives. Punjabi folk songs and ballads like"Rani Jindan di Vaar," preserve her courage and resilience: "My son is my flesh, but the Khalsa is my soul" not just as expressions of maternal grief but political resistance. (Kumar, 2019). These oral histories reject the colonial framing and instead cast her as a leader who refused to separate personal loss from public defiance. Michelle Moran's The Rebel Queen builds on this legacy, portraying Jindan as a leader who inspires resistance with powerful, maternal defiance: "They may take our land, but never our pride." (Moran 159).

Interconnection: Reclaiming Narrative

The voices of Draupadi and Jindan differ in tone and context, but converge in purpose. Bothe women are silenced not only through patriarchy but through the narrative structures itself. Feminist retellings break the silence around Draupadi and Jindan by putting their voices at the center not only to restore speech but to expose the terms under which women are allowed to speak at all. These stories shift them from passive victims to active figures, where their language becomes legacy, their words once muted or mocked are transformed into sites of cultural memory and resistance.

4.4 Trauma and Resilience

Draupadi: Vengeance into Justice

Draupadi's public humiliation sparks her transformation from a victim to a force of justice. Publicly disrobed, objectified, and dismissed by those sworn to protect her, she experiences not just personal betrayal but collective abandonment. Her vow -- "I will not bind my hair until it is drenched in Kauravas' blood" -- personal pain into a larger fight for dharma (Ray 211). In traditional readings, this moment is framed as a loss of honour, sparking the Kurukshetra war and casting Draupadi as a moral trigger for male vengeance. Feminist interpretations, however, reorient this scene as one of conscious reclamation. In The Palace of Illusions, Divakaruni emphasizes this transformation. Her resilience lies in her ability to weaponize her suffering, positioning herself as the central force of the Mahabharata. Even in exile, she pushes the Pandavas to act, refusing to let injustice stand.: "Will you hide in the forest like cowards, or reclaim what is ours?" (Divakaruni, The Palace of Illusions) Her resilience is not romanticized. She continues to carry the psychological burden of betrayal, exile, and war. Her emotional complexity makes her a compelling figure of feminine endurance. She is retold as a woman who weaponizes her grief without allowing it to define her entirely.

Rani Jindan: Exile and Subversive Motherhood

For Rani Jindan, trauma comes not through epic spectacle but through political displacement. Jindan's exile to Nepal and separation from her son, Duleep Singh, highlight how colonialism exploited her maternal trauma. Her motherhood that was once a source of political legitimacy was turned against her, used by colonial authorities to portray her as an emotionally unfit ruler. However, she redefined exile as a form of resistance, using her letters to British demanding the return of her son, condemning imperial overreach In The Last Queen, Divakaruni portrays these moments not as sentimental pleas but calculated confrontations. Jindan's pain becomes a medium through which she communicates the violence of colonialism, refusing to be dismissed as either a grieving mother or a failed queen. Through mentoring Sikh leaders and organizing secret networks, she transformed her grief into political action, maintaining her influence despite colonial efforts to erase her.

Interconnection: Trauma as a Political Tool

Both women turn their trauma into resistance. Both Draupadi and Jindan show how trauma, when framed through feminist retellings, becomes a generative force rather than a narrative conclusion. Draupadi's quest for vengeance reshapes her myth, while Jindan uses exile to lead anti-colonial efforts. They reject the patriarchal demand that trauma be internalized and private. Instead, they make it visible, vocal, and public. In doing so, they rewrite what resilience means—not stoic endurance, but active defiance.

4.5 Feminist Reimaginings and Cultural Impact

Draupadi: A Feminist Icon

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions reimagines Draupadi as a self-reflective narrator with ethical insights and political awareness. Divakaruni's version of Draupadi critiques the epic to reclaim ownership and autonomy over her body, desires, and fate. Her polyandry, traditionally viewed as a curse, is framed as a conscious act of rebellion (Divakaruni 74). The novel's success has led to adaptations of Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi (1978), which reinterprets her in the form of a tribal revolutionary who resists state and gender violence (Devi 23). Modern movements like #MeToo use Draupadi's disrobing as a symbol of systemic abuse and gendered silencing. However, some critics caution that these portrayals can risk idealization, projecting modern feminist values onto complex, historical figure. The popularity of Draupadi in elite feminist discourse, for instance, often eclipses the voices

of lower-caste or subaltern women in mythology, reinforcing the need for intersectional retellings that do not erase internal hierarchies.

Rani Jindan: Anti-Colonial Symbolism

Rani Jindan's contemporary resonance lies in her transformation from a vilified widow to a nationalist and feminist icon. The Last Queen brings Jindan back as a sharp strategist who fought both maternal and political battles against the British and a symbol of Punjabi identity. Rather than softening her resistance, the novel insists on her complexity, depicting her as a leader who makes strategic compromises while preserving her core political vision. Her defiance echoes in modern protests, like the 2020–2021 Indian farmers' movement, where women protesters proudly linked themselves to her legacy: "Like Jindan, we will reclaim our rights." This intergenerational invocation positions Jindan not merely as a historical figure but as a living symbol of resistance to state and patriarchal power. Scholars such as Anu Kumar have argued that Jindan's story sets dominant narratives of nationalism by centering a woman who directed both internal betrayal and external domination. Her maternal defiance becomes a form of feminist resistance uniquely suited to a colonial context where women's political voices were doubly suppressed by both gender and by empire.

Interconnection: Myth and History as Liberation

These retellings show that Draupadi and Rani Jindan are not fixed figures but evolving symbols of resistance. In reclaiming their voices, these narratives challenge dominant cultural memory, question inherited moral frames, and offer alternative models of agency. Draupadi's courtroom and Jindan's throne room became outlines for contemporary struggles against oppression, silencing, and gendered violence. Literature, creative performances, and protests thus become spaces where patriarchal and imposing narratives are undone, and women's voices are reclaimed.

V. CONCLUSION

This comparative study of Draupadi from the Mahabharata and Rani Jindan of the Sikh Empire illustrate how myth and history, though generically different highlight the enduring struggle of women to assert agency within patriarchal systems. Through the lenses of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial feminist theory, the analysis reveals how both women move beyond victimhood and secondary characterization, to emerge as symbols of resistance and strength. Draupadi's challenge of dharma and Jindan's defiance against colonial erasure show how patriarchal narratives silence women, but also how strategic resistance can challenge these systems. Feminist reinterpretations of myth and history do not merely recover but reimagine their stories. In works like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions Draupadi is reimagined as a politically astute narrator who questions the moral architecture of dharma. In The Last Queen, Rani Jindan is reframed into a sovereign voice of anti-imperial resistance, using her grief as a form of political power. These retellings show how patriarchal systems, whether in ancient epics or colonial records, use similar tactics of honour versus shame, strategy versus seduction, speech versus silence, and further replace them with complex portrayals of defiance, survival, and resilience.

More than literary work, these feminist retellings and interventions perform a crucial function: they reclaim narrative space for voices that were always marginalized and silenced. By tracing thematic continuities of resistance, authority and trauma as activism, the study underscores how storytelling itself becomes a way of feminist praxis. By focusing on Draupadi and Jindan, these texts refuse the erasure of women from cultural memory and offer alternative models of leadership that are not subjected to dominance, but are redefined and rooted in resilience and defiance.

This study suggests the need for expanded interdisciplinary research on female figures across genres and eras. By exploring figures like Sita in the Ramayana, Noor Inayat Khan in World War II, or Ahilyabai Holkar in the Maratha Empire, scholars can discover broader patterns of resilience and resistance. For instance, Noor Inayat Khan's anti-fascist espionage is an example of personified feminist resistance under imperial and fascist scrutiny, while Ahilyabai Holkar's governance challenges gender norms in precolonial administration. These comparisons would enhance feminist theory by showing how different cultural, historical, and mythological contexts shape expressions of female power. Doing so would further illuminate how gendered power operates across cultures and eras, and how its disruption continues to shape feminist historiography. This study affirms that reclaiming and reimagining women's stories is not merely an academic exercise but a powerful act of resistance, providing lasting inspiration for contemporary movements striving to dismantle patriarchal supremacy. They remind us that to tell a woman's story differently is not just to revise the past, but to reimagine the future.

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