

# Gender Anxieties: Draupadi's Perspective on Trauma and Pain in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on analyzing the psychological trauma among women society through a nuanced writing of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This paper intensifies gender anxieties from female perspectives by virtue of Feminist Trauma theory. According to Judith Herman's Feminist Trauma theory and Judith Butler's Gender norms, this novel illustrates the complexities of the anxiety of cultural practices, remembering, forgetting, resilience, societal oppression, identity, gender and ability that shapes the experience of trauma. Studies put forward that anxiety is a conventional term among people today. Especially compared to men women came to accept anxieties exceptionally in their psyche in day to day life due to many external circumstances like family, society etc. This point is vividly analyzed and furnished by the author in her work *The Palace of Illusion*. Through the critical inspection of Divakaruni's work examines how traumatic experiences carry in her quest of life, which prolong her pain, survival and empowerment through reclaiming power.

**Key Words:** trauma, pain, empowerment, identity, patriarchy, anxieties, survival.

Trauma theory, emerging from psychology and expanding into literary and cultural studies, offers a framework to analyze how narratives record and respond to extreme suffering. As Judith Herman observes in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), trauma is both an individual and collective phenomenon, shaped by social power structures and historical contexts. In Indian mythology, Draupadi's story in the *Mahabharata* embodies such entanglements of personal and systemic violence. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) reimagines the epic from Draupadi's perspective, centering her psychological wounds and acts of resistance. This paper applies Herman's three-stage trauma model—Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection and Integration—supplemented by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, to explore how Draupadi's life reflects the intersection of patriarchal oppression, gender-based violence, and the struggle for agency.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning Indian-American author, activist, professor, speaker and the author of 21 books. She is a well known author of Indian English fiction, and her Indian Heritage profoundly increases her work, particularly her engagement with Indian mythology especially the epics The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, she presents a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, offering a narrative that centers on Draupadi and unfolds from her

perspective as there is no space for women to share their encounters while the man was in exile or in the battlefield. A review about *The Place of Illusions* in The publisher's weekly journal describes it as the 'Vivid and inventive ... Divakaruni's rich, action-filled narrative contrasts well with the complex psychological portrait of a mythic princess'

*The Palace of Illusions* takes us to the realm of the Indian epic The Mahabharata - an era that is part history, part myth, and entirely enchanting. Through her narrator Panchali, the spouse of the renowned five Pandava brothers, Chitra Banerjee offers a unique feminist perspective on this epic tale. Divakaruni's inherent inclination towards the empowerment of women appears to have inspired her to narrate the ancient epic Mahabharata from a female perspective. Although the mythological narrative relegates Panchali to a secondary role, Divakaruni, in her contemporary retelling, positions her at the forefront of the story. The novel is presented in the first person, with Panchali as the narrator. It chronicles Panchali's journey, commencing with her extraordinary birth from fire as the daughter of King Drupad. Born from flames, it was foretold prior to her arrival that she would alter the trajectory of history.

Divakaruni's depiction of a patriarchal societal structure significantly influenced the narrative and sustained trauma. Through Draupadi's viewpoint, the novel exposed the ways in which patriarchal conventions marginalize women, objectify them, strip them of their agency, and result in both individual and communal trauma. The narrative critiques these power dynamics while portraying Draupadi as a symbol of resistance and strength. Divakaruni portrays her female character as bold and self-assured, dedicated to achieving her life goals. Through this portrayal, Divakaruni critiques the male-centric narrative that influences Draupadi's experiences and suffering.

In the context of patriarchal society, women are simultaneously revered as symbols of virtue while being constrained by strict gender roles. They endure oppression, often suppressing their desires and are frequently denied the freedom to express themselves. According to Judith Butler's concept of Gender Performativity (1990), which asserts that gender is not an intrinsic or stable identity, but instead a social construct that is established and upheld through recurrent actions and societal norms. These performances, although they may seem natural, are in fact shaped by social expectations and power dynamics. In the context of trauma, this notion aids in comprehending how women are rendered victims of gender-based violence and patriarchal domination. This could be evidenced in Divakaruni's narration.

Draupadi experienced trauma that originated in her childhood, stemming from her desire for her father's love and attention. King Drupad unequal treatment of her compared to her brother exemplified deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs. This could be evidenced in the narration of Draupadi, "No matter how much I begged, king Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchal!"(p-23).

This circumstance resulted in Draupadi finding herself in a traumatized state. In another instance when Draupadi asserted "the day Sikhandi left for the forest, I longed to go with him. To leave the palace behind without a backward glance. To live out my life in peace under the trees. To escape the bloody fate toward which I've been pushed every moment since I was born"( p-88). This may serve as evidence of how Draupadi desires to live independently by departing from the palace and rejecting the patriarchy.

According to Judith Herman's initial phase of Trauma and Recovery involves establishing safety and stabilization, which fosters a secure environment, both physically and emotionally, to assist individuals in coping with intense symptoms and starting to regulate their emotions. This could act as proof when Draupadi asserted "I hated the thick grey slabs of the walls" (p-6), "When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different..... I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home"(p-7). She views the palace as a confinement rather than a home, and she articulates her desire to construct an alternate reality that would alleviate the suffering of her life. This situation reveals the expectation of women within patriarchal frameworks, thereby reinforcing Herman's insight that trauma is sustained by the environment.

In ancient India, a woman eligible for marriage would select her spouse from a group of prospective partners presented to her during a swayamvar ceremony. According to Judith Herman, trauma is not just personal but also shaped by social and political contexts: it connects personal traumatic experiences, including abuse and domestic violence, to broader structures of power and oppression (1999). This could be evidenced when Draupadi vehemently questions "why even call it a swayamvar, then" I cried. "Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry."(p-56). This rhetorical question exposes the illusion of female agency in patriarchal structures, reinforcing Herman's observation that trauma is perpetuated by systemic power imbalances. Draupadi, who endured her father's dominance, had high expectations for her marriage. However, those end on a negative note.

According to Herman's second stage of Trauma and Recovery: Remembrance and Mourning, the focus is on remembering and processing the traumatic event. This could be evidenced when Draupadi asserted "I can't be gambled away like a dog of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave"(p-190). This circumstance resulted in Draupadi finding herself in a traumatized state. She went through extreme mental torment as there was no one to protect her though the court was full of men. Draupadi's feelings of betrayal-by her husbands, who wager her in the dice game, and by her elders, who fail to protect her-highlight the emotional trauma caused by familial and societal failures. This situation reveals how the trauma experienced in the context of Herman's Remembrance and Mourning involves significant losses related to safety, trust, and a prior sense of self.

The aftermath of war and the impact on trauma played a major role in *The Palace of Illusions*. As this was emphasized in Herman's Remembrance and mourning could be identified in the processing of the traumatic experience and its repercussions. This phase entails recognizing the trauma, comprehending its effects, and mourning the associated losses. Part of recovery was grief, losses and acknowledging the impact of trauma. Draupadi in desperateness and guilt asserted "The night before the coronation, I stood at my window, unable to sleep. It saddened me to think that this was the place where I would be living out the rest of my life" (p-321). This may serve as evidence of how the effects of trauma can lead to a profound sense of loss, as reinforced in Herman's work on Remembering and Mourning. As she was the one who witnessed all the incidents that were encountered on the battlefield. She was completely aware of that war and its consequences. Despite her allegiance to the Pandavas in their quest for justice, she was plagued by doubts regarding the value of the devastation incurred.

The conflict has resulted in the loss of numerous lives, including those dear to her, prompting Draupadi to reflect on whether the quest for retribution was indeed the appropriate course of action. This causes her to experience the distress and pain caused by feeling abandoned or isolated. She witnessed all her sons die when she wanted to live a peaceful life after the war. But this turned into futile.

The third phase of Reconnection and Integration, as articulated by Herman in his *Trauma and Recovery*, where people have developed a new sense of identity that includes their trauma but also recognizes their growth and resilience. In the novel, Draupadi was portrayed as someone who was searching for her own identity and independence, determined to establish her self-definition outside of the usual roles of being a daughter, wife, and queen. Revenge helped Draupadi to attain empowerment.

The promise made by Draupadi to wash her hair in Dushasana's blood represents her defiance of patriarchy. Paanchali, during her last journey, expresses her thoughts “I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable..... And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Paanchali” (p-360). This may serve as evidence of how Draupadi discovers her sense of self, as well as the meaning and purpose of life, through Herman's process of Reconnection and Integration. Her experience of trauma transformed into a mechanism of resistance. Following the events of the dice game, her profound anger and perception of injustice drive her to advocate for the restoration of the Pandavas to the throne, thereby positioning herself as a pivotal character within the political dynamics of the epic.

Draupadi was more than just a queen or a victim: she was a warrior and a symbol of female strength and defiance that resonated across generations. Draupadi’s narrative in *The Palace of Illusions* challenges traditional interpretations of the Mahabharata, offering a feminist critique that resonates with modern discussions on gender, trauma, and agency. In the classical Mahabharata, Draupadi is frequently portrayed as a catalyst for conflict—the woman whose degradation precipitates the events at Kurukshetra.

In Divakaruni’s reinterpretation, Draupadi articulates her own voice, asserting her subjectivity. Her aspirations, insecurities, and ethical challenges are highlighted, rather than being mediated by male storytellers. Moreover, applying Trauma theory indicates that Draupadi's actions following her disrobing are not acts of irrational vengeance, but rather responses to trauma. Her vows and her demand for justice arise from a necessity to regain agency after experiencing a significant violation—transforming her from a perilous catalyst into a survivor who is navigating systemic injustice. Draupadi's evolution can be interpreted as a form of partial restoration—she develops resilience, acquires agency, and reasserts her voice, yet the scars persist. Consequently, her “empowerment” is characterized by ambivalence—it is genuine in that she rejects the role of victim, but it remains incomplete as it is still rooted in unhealed emotional injuries.

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