



Reclaiming Panchaali: Voice, Interiority, and the Reconstruction of Shakti in

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Munish Kumar Thakur ¹, Neeru Vashisth ²

¹ Singhanian University, Pachari Bari, District Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

² Singhanian University, Pachari Bari, District Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding author: munish@singhanianuniversity.ac.in

Abstract

Contemporary feminist retellings of Indian epic literature have increasingly relocated feminine power from theological or symbolic reverence to lived psychological and political experience. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) exemplifies this movement by reconstructing the Mahabharata through the first-person voice of Draupadi (Panchaali), transforming a figure traditionally rendered through male narration into an interior, speaking subject. This article examines how Divakaruni reconfigures the concept of Shakti by relocating it from ritual and cosmic symbolism into narrative voice, embodied memory, and political judgment. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of transcendence and the Other, Judith Butler's account of gender performativity, Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of subaltern silencing, and bell hooks's distinction between reform and structural transformation, the article analyses key episodes, the *svayamvara*, the negotiated polyandrous marriage, the disrobing and vow of vengeance, and Draupadi's role in instigating war, as sites where feminine agency is reconstructed through voice rather than institutional office. The article argues that Divakaruni's Shakti operates primarily through narrative and psychological reclamation rather than through the kind of institutional empowerment associated with other contemporary mythological fiction, and that this distinction, between voice and office as two routes to feminist reconstruction, offers a productive framework for evaluating the broader genre of Indian mythological revisionism.

Keywords: Shakti, Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Feminist Narratology, Mahabharata, Gender Performativity, Subaltern Voice, Mythological Fiction

1. Introduction

The early twenty-first century has witnessed a sustained feminist reimagining of India's epic inheritance, in which authors return to canonical narratives not to preserve them intact but to interrogate the silences that structure them. Among the most influential of these interventions is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of the *Mahabharata* narrated in the first person by Draupadi, known in the novel by her given name, Panchaali. Where Vyasa's epic renders Draupadi largely through the perspective of the men whose fates she shapes, her birth, her marriage, her humiliation, and her vow of vengeance are each mediated by masculine witnesses, Divakaruni relocates the narrative centre of gravity into Draupadi's own consciousness. The result is not simply a retelling but a redistribution of narrative authority, one that has significant implications for how Shakti, the Hindu principle of feminine cosmic energy, is understood in contemporary literary practice.

Classical Shakti philosophy conceives Shakti as the active, generative dimension of ultimate reality, the force without which even the supreme male deity remains inert. Yet, as feminist scholars of Hindu religious history have long noted, the theological exaltation of the goddess has historically coexisted with the social constraint of actual women, whose conduct within family and caste structures was regulated by patriarchal interpretations of dharma (Chakravarti, 2003). Draupadi occupies a particularly fraught position within this paradox. Revered as an incarnation of Shakti and one of the *panchakanya*, or five exemplary women of Hindu tradition, she is simultaneously the character whose consent is violated at nearly every turn of the epic: staked in a game of dice, dragged into a public hall, and subjected to attempted disrobing while the assembled elders remain silent. Her story, in other words, dramatizes precisely the gap between symbolic reverence and lived subordination that this article seeks to examine.

Divakaruni's intervention is to close that gap not through institutional reform within the narrative world, Panchaali does not become a general or a head of state, but through the reconstruction of voice itself. By granting Draupadi first-person narration, interior monologue, and retrospective judgment over the men and events that shaped her life, the novel performs what Hélène Cixous (1976) calls *écriture féminine*, a mode of writing through which women reclaim authorship over bodies and histories from which they have been estranged. This article asks what kind of Shakti emerges when feminine power is reconstructed through narrative interiority rather than through political office, and what such a model reveals about the limits and possibilities of feminist mythological revisionism more broadly.

This distinction matters because much of the existing scholarship on *The Palace of Illusions*, while valuable, tends to describe Draupadi's transformation in celebratory terms, as the recovery of a silenced voice, without asking whether narrative voice alone constitutes emancipation in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's more exacting sense, or whether it remains, like the institutional empowerment found in other contemporary retellings, a significant but partial achievement (Spivak, 1988). Building on close textual analysis of four key episodes

and on a comparative theoretical framework drawn from Beauvoir, Butler, Cixous, Spivak, and hooks, this article argues that Divakaruni reconstructs Shakti as psychological and narrative sovereignty: Draupadi is granted authorship over her own suffering, desire, and judgment, even as the political and marital structures that constrain her remain largely unaltered by the novel's end. Voice, in this account, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the dismantling of patriarchal order, a conclusion that has broader implications for how contemporary mythological fiction is read and evaluated.

2. Shakti, Draupadi, and the Paradox of Epic Womanhood

The position of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* has long been intriguing, just because of the paradoxes that it brings with itself. Alf Hiltebeitel applies the term dharmic architecture to this epic in his influential work and identifies Draupadi with the Goddess and sovereignty at the same time as the events of her personal life are continually decided by the choice of men around her (2001). Wendy Doniger is also struck by the way the Radha and Draupadi-like characters in the epic are “reconstructed” to play “vehicles” by means of which male dharma is illustrated; Draupadi's disrobing is not an ending in itself but, rather, an “occasion for demonstrating” Krishna's “protective power” and the Pandavas' “righteous vengeance” (Doniger, 2009). Uma Chakravarti takes this further into the realm of social history here, arguing that the “symbolic elevation of women” in religious discourse often goes together with, and even underpins and can arguably rationalize, their subordination within domestic, caste and inheritance relations (Chakravarti 2003).

This is the very paradox which contemporary feminist retellings attempt to question. Instead of unearthing the guts of the epic for a heroic read of the male perspective, revisionist fiction finds out what is happening inside of Draupadi's *Sravana*. This transformation aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's conceptualisation of women in relation to the masculine subject as the Other and not creating their own selfhood and existence beyond it (Beauvoir, 2011). When Beauvoir applies her framework to the writing of epic literature, Draupadi is read as an object of interest rather than an author of the narrative, as she is traditionally described: conniving, jealous, frustrated and yet triumphant via male violence acting on her. In feminist versions of the story, such as the one by Divakaruni, does she exist as an object, but without the severance necessary for the reconstruction as a subject, losing her mythological and civilizational weight one way or another?

Judith Butler's discussion of gender as re-enacted rather than inherent, as culturally produced rather than natural, foregrounds what is involved in gender reconstruction (1990). Rewriting their inner lives, in effect, is not only a form of literary practice but an intervention into the discursive production of gender, through the figures of epic heroines who function as models for ideals of chastity, endurance, and wifely devotion, passed along and naturalized across the generations. Offering herself over to Panchaali, Divakaruni repeatedly performs femininity in a way that goes beyond the norms handed to Draupadi by the classical text, she desires, she calculates, she resents, she plans, disrupting the performative repetition through which Draupadi has traditionally been made legible. Against this theoretical background, it is in this context that the rest of this article considers the process of reconstructing Shakti that Divakaruni undertakes by using certain parts of the narrative and certain moments of textuality.

3. The Place of the Interpretational Point of View in “Postmodernist” Literature

The most important formal choice in *The Palace of Illusions* is its narration. Conceived and written with a not-quite-omniscience point of view, Vyasa's *Mahabharata* follows Draupadi's experience as told through the reported speech and reactions of the male characters, while Divakaruni cannot be considered a “reporter” at all, but instead presents his lame-duck account of Draupadi's birth, education, marriage, humiliation, and old age from her own narrative point of view. It appears to make history more like what Elaine Showalter, in her seminal history of gynocriticism, refers to as the recovery of a different female literary tradition, with narrative structures centred around the feminine and a female tradition of authorship (Showalter 1977). Instead of placing a woman in an existing male-centred story, Divakaruni reconfigures the entire machinery of the epic, so that all the most vital actions of the epic pass through a woman's critical mind.

Theoretically, this reorganisation is not just a matter of literary technique. Cixous's demand that women return their bodies through their words, return a body and turn their subjectivity to the right, to a history of which they were previously alienated, has an intimate parallel in Divakaruni's project (Cixous, 1976). The disconnect between the way Panchaali is perceived by the rest of the world and the way she perceives herself is called out on a number of occasions through Panchaali's narration. Her own marriage, for instance, elaborates on her opinion about the suitors who gathered around her and her personal sadness that she had not been able to marry the boy who was, in her opinion, the best suited due to a caste rule that precludes women from chasing their own husbands even when they get the chance (Devi & Vats, 2025).

Simultaneously, the first-person narrative retrospective offers a bunch of problems; the ones that scholars have been correct to flag have not been the only ones. Concurrently, the narrative of an each-person agenda retrospective is loaded with each risk, and the ones that scholars have pointed out have not been the only ones. Hiltebeitel warns that psychologically interior retellings may face this danger of overzealously imposing contemporary Western individualistic understandings of selfhood onto a text that is organized around a different philosophical and ethical framework, one that is collective, more communal (Hiltebeitel, 2001 as cited in Devi & Vats, 2025). An influential question here, posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is not whether the novel gives a historically voiceless woman a voice in its fictional world but how it might be that she finds one. It might be that this voice has been created in the novel but is lacking in real life, as is the case for the woman, whose voice is neither here nor the girl's, but was created in late capitalist society by a novel such as this (Spivak, 1988). Feminist interpreters are not limited to merely reconstructing the world the original claimed her character encountered; they may also come up with

a new world, as is done here in the ending of Divakaruni's Panchaali, although the question of whether that is the world we want may be as much a critical question as anything else.

4. Reconstructing Panchaali's Shakti: Textual Analysis

The following analysis examines four episodes central to Draupadi's characterization, the svayamvara, the negotiation of her polyandrous marriage, the dice-hall humiliation and vow of vengeance, and her role in precipitating the Kurukshetra war, to trace how Divakaruni reconstructs Shakti as narrative and psychological agency.

4.1 The Svayamvara: From Object of Contest to Subject of Judgment

In the classical epic, the svayamvara is organised as a competition of suitors; Draupadi is the prize of the competition to be given to the prince who succeeds in stringing the bow and hitting the target, and her wishes take less into account than the rest of the competition. The gods are present only fleetingly, a mere review of the contest, but the retelling centres around Panchaali's evaluative gaze as she observes, privately judging each suitor and following her own heart's inclinations to accept Karna and mourn the caste status quo that bars her from expressing that affection openly (Devi & Vats, 2025). Though all the formal deeds remain the same, the scene is made into a demonstration of a woman's judgement, and therefore her efficacy. This qualification is worthy of mention: It is the institutional mechanism of the svayamvara which is not addressed by the retelling – only the reader's access to the consciousness that is being evaluated.

4.2 Polyandry Renegotiated: The Agnisala as Feminist Space

According to the classical epic, Kunti unknowingly gave the panch pandava the names of her five husbands, and a dharmic excuse for the marriage was provided by sages, thereby making the marriage decision hardly responsible for Draupadi (Hiltebeitel 2001). On the other hand, Devika's husband, Divakaruni, reacts not with fury as she does but with negotiations first, exile if necessary: he wants more private rooms, specific rules about how much time can be spent with each husband and exile as punishment if a brother refuses to follow the tailored rules (Devi & Vats, 2025). The reframing first makes a shift from polyandry as a passive yielding to a divine or maternal demand to that of a negotiated arrangement framed as something "enforceable" in Devi & Vats' recent reading – for Draupadi, imposing personal boundaries on the imposed constraint (2025). It's a reconstruction, but one that exists entirely within the framework of the institution of mulberry marriage itself, the authority but not the rejection of such marriage, which is a crucial example of what this article refers to as agency without office, in so far as Panchaali changes the conditions of her marriage without being able to displace the institution of marriage altogether.

4.3 The Dice Hall: Vow, Rage, and the Politics of the Unbound Hair

The dice-hall scene in which the game of dice becomes a vehicle for Yudhishtira to lose Draupadi, with her involvement not even acknowledged with the same honesty was the blockbuster; the most concentrated telling of women's powerlessness in the face of a menacing, oppressive law in the epic. Divakaruni poses a penetrating question to the elders gathered, asking, in one of the most noteworthy quotes from the novel's key critical accounts (Deviani & Vats, 2025, esp. 155), whether Yudhishtira had any claim to stake her after she lost herself. Her later promise to keep her hair bound until it drinks the blood of her tormentor is interpreted by Devakarunin not as hysterical grief, but as political strategy, a psychological ploy which influences the Pandavas' resolve to fight a war (Devi & Vats, 2025). Butler's description of performativity is apposite in this context: when Panchaali's unbound hair, as a traditional epic emblem of feminine dishonour and mourning, is acted out by the character herself, it instead serves as a sustained performative of political demand that suggests the normalised act will never take place, thereby disrupting the norm it represents to enact (Butler, 1990).

4.4 Architect of War: Draupadi's Political Agency

While the classical epic describes Draupadi's abjection as a reason for waging a war, the planning and carrying out of which is the responsibility of men, the choices of the Pandavas in Divakaruni's book have been shaped by Draupadi, who decides to pursue it despite being opposed by the eldest Pandavas brother, Yudhishtira or Bhishmacharya, every step of the way from arranging a marriage with Krishna, to challenging his early hesitation from fighting a war (Devi & Vats, 2025). This puts her in this recent criticism's terms as a war architect and not just a war's pretext, or a justification for war. Even so, Panchaali's power is not seen as coercive, but is demonstrated instead through persuasion and confidential positive exhortation; she does not wield any military or political position, and a war is organized exclusively on the basis of the power of men. Her Shakti (literally, her energy) is an informal but no-less-significant power-play within a functional, established patriarchal framework, and not a formal job title like general or state minister.

5. Voice without Office: A Comparative Reading of Feminist Empowerment in Contemporary Mythological Fiction

Comparing Divakaruni's reconstruction of Draupadi with other popular, contemporary, Indian mythological writings, two distinct models emerge in which Shakti is depicted in the genre. In certain reenactments, the feminine power is re-institutionalized – that is, heroism becomes inscribed in their military insignia or status (e.g., a formal military rank, office, or dynasty). *The Palace of Illusions*, however, is a different story: its Shakti is almost entirely constructed through the narration of the book, through introspection, and through non-refuge-two-walls politicking, as Panchaali does not work inside the formal structures that make up her religion.

Bell hooks's terms of expanding women's voice within systems and restructuring those that have created inequality as a result are to be examined as part of an evaluation of both models (hooks, 2015). For other retellings, a type of institutional inclusion can be seen to produce a stronger institutionalization of a form of empowerment, as it gives women institutionalized authority within the power structures of the fictional world and remains largely devoid of challenges to the institutional power structure. Unlike a voice versus office man-to-woman model, however, Divakaruni's model unveils and exposes the psychological and ethical tolls imposed by the institutional structures, without assigning the formal power to women to change them directly; nor, for the greater part of the story, does Divakaruni's heroine. But both models fail, on the evidence of the text itself, to meet Spivak's more demanding criteria of emancipation, where the subaltern's speech would need to change not simply to narrate her condition of subalternity, but to "change" it (Spivak, 1988).

There seems to be a larger-scale framework this analysis proposes for the study of modern mythologic novels: Feminist reconstructions of Shakti can be conveniently distinguished on the basis of either the institutional office or the narrative/psychological voice, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. What Divakaruni has done is to delineate the voice on its own, as interiority, judgment, retrospective authorship of one's past and as a significant reconstruction of the agency of women writers, even though it doesn't (or doesn't always) disrupt the institution of writing in which that agency is exercised.

6. Conclusion

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines the idea of Shakti: from theological icon to epic omniscient, she makes her way to the first-person introvert, Draupadi, herself. With constant interior monologues, Divakaruni allows the figure to speak for herself - to articulate her own point of view and interests and her own political perspectives. This transformation is real and impactful, as the analysis of the svayamvara, which is a negotiated polyandrous marriage, the dice-hall vow, and Draupadi's informal architecture of war will show.

Yet, in the present article I've suggested a different way of empowering our role models: via voice, rather than through office. And this is an important point to consider when evaluating feminist success in the novel. As one reads Beauvoir's description of transcendence, Butler's theory of performativity, Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, Spivak's more astringent definition of a subaltern emancipation, and hooks's difference between reform and structural change, Panchaali's Shakti becomes a tangible revision of its feminine subjectivity which at the same time does not significantly change the institutional and dynastic structure of her world. This is not an attempt to detract from Divakaruni's accomplishment, but an effort to shift away from an overly simplistic understanding of how contemporary mythological fiction is assessed, it is not enough for the retelling to give its protagonist a voice; it must also grant her the ability to change the structures her voice points to. This model could then be expanded in a comparative fashion to look at other recollections of epic and Puranic women that use one of these two structures or another, such as an institutional office or voice of the narrative, to work out the persistent conflict between empowerment and emancipation explored by this piece.

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