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Flesh and Fire: Embodiment and Sacrality in the Myth of Draupadi

Abstract: *This paper examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions through the interconnected frameworks of embodiment, sacrality, and ritual control, with particular attention to feminist retellings of myth. While Draupadi has long been depicted in the Mahābhārata as both divine and disruptive—born of fire yet condemned for catalysing war—her voice has traditionally been silenced within patriarchal narrative structures. Divakaruni's retelling shifts this dynamic by granting Draupadi first-person narration, thereby transforming her from an object of epic discourse into a subject of her own story. The analysis situates Draupadi's experiences within the context of Ritual theory, Victor Turner's liminality, Catherine Bell's concept of ritualisation as power, feminist critique, Luce Irigaray's notion of the "Other," Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and semiotic disruption, and embodiment studies, which highlight how myths inscribe meaning onto female bodies. Episodes such as her miraculous birth, polyandrous marriage, and humiliation in the dice hall are read as ritual spectacles that both sacralise and subjugate her body, yet also provide grounds for resistance.*

By foregrounding Draupadi's emotions—shame, rage, desire—as counter-rituals, Divakaruni reimagines fire not as destiny but as inner strength. The study argues that The Palace of Illusions functions as a feminist intervention, reclaiming Draupadi's voice, challenging patriarchal ritual control, and demonstrating the transformative potential of mythological retellings.

Keywords: embodiment, sacrality, ritual control, Draupadi, myth, retelling.

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Introduction

Bharat, the land of myths, beliefs, and rituals, has preserved through centuries the timeless epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These narratives have not only shaped Indian cultural imagination but also inspired countless subgenres of poetry, prose, fiction, and non-fiction worldwide. This paper examines the *Mahābhārata*, composed by Rishi Vyasa, whose expansive narrative depicts the conflict between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, a struggle that shapes the destiny of the nation. While some argue that human beings are mere puppets in the hands of the gods, suffering trials and tribulations for divine sport, the *Mahabharata* demonstrates otherwise. Again, it is the thoughts, actions, and decisions of individuals that shape destiny, for better or worse. Among the vast range of characters in this epic, one figure stands apart. Though often treated as a marginal presence, she can also be seen as the very spark that ignited the catastrophic Bharata Yuddha—the war that destroyed the Kaurava lineage. This figure is none other than Draupadi, also known as Panchali: daughter of King Drupada of Panchala, sister of Dhrishtadyumna, wife of the Pandavas, and above all, the cherished friend of Krishna (*Mahabharata* 1.169).

Draupadi, born from fire due to her father's scheme for revenge, had an unusual birth and childhood. She led a secluded and isolated life, with little interaction with her father's other wives and children. She was destined to be the harbinger who would change the course of Bharat's history. The prophecy proclaimed at her birth pushed her from the periphery of the action to the centre stage. Draupadi was destined to be both the cause and catalyst for the war between the Kauravas and Pandavas, bringing unimaginable and irrevocable loss to both sides (Karve 84).

Significance of The Palace of Illusions as a Retelling

First published in 2008, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* received widespread acclaim for reimagining the timeless epic *Mahabharata* from a woman's perspective. The novel highlights Draupadi, who tells her life story in her own voice — from her fiery birth and unconventional childhood to her deep bond with her brother, her complex friendship with Krishna, her marriage to the five Pandava brothers, and her unspoken admiration for Karna, the sworn enemy of her husbands. By allowing Draupadi to narrate her own story, Divakaruni gives voice to a woman historically confined to the margins of the epic tradition (Divakaruni 12).

In this retelling, Draupadi is no longer a silent figure within a patriarchal narrative but an active commentator on her circumstances. Her words resonate with anguish, defiance, and protest, challenging the structures of power that attempt to silence her. Unlike conventional heroines who are expected to embody obedience and submission, Draupadi refuses to surrender. She endures adversity, confronts injustice, and articulates her dissent.

Thus, the Draupadi of *The Palace of Illusions* becomes more than a mythological figure; she holds up a mirror to contemporary society, exposing the persistence of customs and ideologies that continue to relegate women to the position of “the other.” Divakaruni’s retelling is significant not merely as a reinterpretation of the epic but as a feminist intervention that questions historical silences and reclaims narrative agency for women (Sutherland 56).

Clarifying Key Terms

Divakaruni’s retelling not only highlights Draupadi’s agency but also explores broader theoretical issues such as embodiment, sacrality, and ritual control. Clarifying these terms is crucial, as they show how Draupadi’s body, identity, and sacred status are built, challenged, and reshaped in the text.

- Embodiment describes how cultural meanings and social hierarchies are inscribed on the body, transforming it into a site of both subjugation and resistance. In the epic tradition, Draupadi’s body is often reduced to an object of desire or humiliation, but in Divakaruni’s retelling, it becomes a medium of voice and protest (Csordas 5).
- Sacrality refers to the sacred aura surrounding Draupadi’s miraculous birth and her connection to fire. While this holiness elevates her above ordinary women, it is also used to reinforce patriarchal control, turning her sacred status into a tool of domination (Hiltebeitel 210).

Ritual control demonstrates how cultural and religious rituals govern women’s lives by defining roles, obligations, and limitations. Draupadi’s marriage to five husbands, her role as queen, and her public shaming are all shaped by these rituals, showing how her body and identity are constantly influenced by structures of power (Bell 81).

Purpose and Scope of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the depiction of Draupadi through the lenses of embodiment, sacrality, and ritual control. It explores how society manipulates and subjugates women by restricting them within cultural norms, systems, and rituals. Although the scope of this study is limited to these three concepts, a wide range of interpretative variables could be included. However, the focus remains on these specific areas.

Thesis Statement

This paper argues that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* redefines Draupadi from a marginal epic figure into a central voice of resistance, where her embodiment, sacrality, and experiences of ritual control not only challenge patriarchal structures but also demonstrate the transformative potential of mythological retellings.

Literature Review

Draupadi has held a central yet contested position in both classical and modern imagination. In the *Mahābhārata*, she is remembered for her remarkable birth, her unusual marriage to five men, and her key role in the dice hall that triggered the devastating war. Traditional interpretations often portray her as both sacred and disruptive: born of fire, linked to divine purpose, yet also blamed for sparking the conflict.

Scholars such as Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* interpret Draupadi as a psychologically complex character whose sharp questioning in the dice hall exposes contradictions in the logic of dharma (Karve 96). Alf Hiltebeitel's ethnographic study *The Cult of Draupadi* extends this perspective by showing how she is not confined to text alone but lives on as a goddess in South Indian rituals, where she is simultaneously revered as divine and remembered for her suffering (Hiltebeitel 218). Such work underscores the tension between Draupadi's sacralized image and her human vulnerability.

The rise of feminist retellings in the late twentieth century marks an important shift in how Draupadi is viewed. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1984, trans. 1995) was among the first to give Draupadi her own reflective voice, enabling her to tell her life story from within the patriarchal framework of the epic. Critics highlight how Ray emphasizes Draupadi's internal struggles with duty, sacrifice, and polyandry, portraying her as a symbol of endurance rather than blame (Ray 142).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) advances this trajectory by presenting Draupadi through first-person narration. Scholars note how Divakaruni's Draupadi is portrayed as intelligent, ambitious, and passionate; her relationships with Krishna, Arjuna, and Karna are driven by desire and dissent (Sutherland 60). The novel serves not only as a retelling but also as a feminist intervention that reclaims narrative agency for a woman who has traditionally been marginalized.

Alongside these, Mahasweta Devi's radical short story *Draupadi* (1978; trans. Spivak 1981) places the heroine in a modern insurgent setting. In this story, Dopdi Mejhen, a tribal woman captured by state forces, re-enacts the disrobing scene by refusing to cover herself before her oppressors. Critics interpret this as a subversive reversal of epic humiliation, where embodied shame becomes a tool of political resistance (Spivak 183). Collectively, these retellings shift Draupadi from a symbol to a subject, recasting her body and voice as central to feminist politics.

Beyond literary retellings, theoretical approaches to embodiment and ritual further illuminate Draupadi's importance. Victor Turner's concept of liminality has been used to describe her role as a constant threshold figure—neither fully wife nor fully queen, positioned “betwixt and between” categories (Turner 97). Catherine Bell's focus on ritualisation as a strategy of power aligns with Draupadi's polyandrous marriage and her disrobing, both serving as ritual spectacles meant to regulate and control the female body (Bell 92).

Feminist theorists add another dimension: Luce Irigaray critiques the construction of woman as “the Other” in patriarchal discourse, a position Draupadi occupies in the epic (Irigaray 87), while Julia Kristeva's concepts of the semiotic and abjection clarify how her emotions and body continually destabilize the symbolic order of dharma (Kristeva 13). Embodiment studies, particularly those that view the body as socially inscribed rather than merely biological, emphasize how Draupadi's fire-born origin, marital arrangements, and public humiliation transform her into a cultural text where sacrality and subjugation are inseparable (Csordas 12).

Despite this rich scholarship, two major gaps are still evident. First, much existing work either isolates the classical epic or focuses on modern rewritings; fewer studies systematically connect epic philology, ritual ethnography, and feminist narratology within a single analysis. Consequently, Draupadi's dual role as both mythic figure and reimagined subject remains scattered across disciplines. Second, although recent criticism has highlighted Draupadi's juridical voice in the dice hall—her sharp questioning of dharma and law—less attention has been given to affect as a form of resistance. Shame, rage, and desire appear repeatedly as key motifs in Draupadi's story, but their political and ritual significance has not been fully explored. These emotions can be seen as counter-rituals that disrupt patriarchal spectacle, providing alternative sources of power and protest (Chakraborty 202).

This paper addresses these gaps by analyzing Draupadi through the dual perspectives of embodiment and sacrality in both the epic and its feminist retellings. By exploring how her body is simultaneously consecrated and oppressed—marked by fire and flesh—it argues that Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* redefines Draupadi not as a marginal figure but as a prominent voice of resistance.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is based on ritual theory, feminist criticism, and embodiment studies. Together, these approaches clarify how Draupadi's body and voice are influenced by myth and cultural discourse, while also demonstrating how Divakaruni's retelling reclaims her as a figure of resistance and agency.

Victor Turner's ritual theory offers a useful point of entry. Turner describes ritual as a form of “social drama” through which societies negotiate conflict and transformation. His concept of liminality, the threshold state of being “betwixt and between,” helps explain Draupadi's ambiguous roles: she is

simultaneously daughter and queen, wife and possession, sacred figure and humiliated woman. Her unusual marriage to five men keeps her perpetually suspended in this liminal space. The dice hall scene, a public ritual of humiliation, further demonstrates how dharma and honour can collapse under pressure. Through Turner's lens, Draupadi embodies the contradictions of ritual, which both defines and destabilises her position within the epic world (Turner 97–99).

While Turner highlights the transformative aspect of ritual, Catherine Bell shifts focus to ritual as a means of power. For Bell, ritualisation is not a neutral cultural act but a way of marking certain practices as authoritative, thereby legitimising hierarchy. Draupadi's marriage, seen as divinely sanctioned, is one such ritual expression of patriarchal control. The attempted disrobing acts in a similar manner, as a ritual event intended to reduce her to spectacle and reaffirm male dominance. However, Bell emphasizes that ritual also has the potential to disrupt. Draupadi's refusal to remain silent, her public questioning of dharma, and her assertion of dignity demonstrate how ritualised acts can be turned into sites of resistance (Bell 81–83).

Feminist thinkers deepen this framework further. Luce Irigaray's critique of phallogocentric systems highlights how women are constructed as "the Other," defined in relation to men rather than as autonomous subjects. In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadi holds this position. However, in Divakaruni's retelling, she becomes a subject: she tells her own story, expresses her desire for Karna, and voices her anger at injustice (Irigaray 89). Julia Kristeva's distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic is equally relevant. Draupadi embodies the semiotic—the rhythms of emotion, passion, and bodily force—that constantly challenge the rigid symbolic order of dharma. The dice hall episode depicts her body as abject, both sacred and shamed, but through her defiance, she reclaims abjection as strength (Kristeva 15).

Finally, embodiment studies reveal how myths assign meaning to women's bodies. Draupadi's fiery birth and polyandrous marriage sanctify and politicize her, while her near-disrobing ritualizes violence against the female body. Yet in Divakaruni's retelling, her embodiment shifts from a passive symbol to lived subjectivity—her body becomes not only a site of oppression but also a means of protest and voice (Csordas 12).

In this way, Turner and Bell reveal the ritual strategies that establish control, Irigaray and Kristeva expose Draupadi's hidden subjectivity and disruptive power, and embodiment studies demonstrate how myth encodes—and can be reimagined through—the female body. Together, these perspectives present *The Palace of Illusions* as more than a literary retelling: it becomes a feminist intervention that reclaims narrative and bodily agency from patriarchal myth.

Fire-Born and Fate-Bound: Sacrality as Patriarchal Control

From the very beginning, Draupadi's life in *The Palace of Illusions* is surrounded by fire, prophecy, and destiny. Her extraordinary birth from flames is not an ordinary arrival but a divine intervention that immediately sets her apart from other women of her time. Along with her fiery origins comes a prophecy: she is destined to play a crucial role in changing the course of history. This dual burden—being both special and predestined—casts a shadow over every part of her life. Even before she is old enough to understand her own desires, Draupadi is constantly reminded that her future has already been decided (Divakaruni 24).

Her childhood reflects this contradiction. Although she longs to share in the intellectual training her brother receives, Draupadi is excluded from such instruction. Instead, she is limited to the narrow knowledge considered appropriate for women: domestic skills, social manners, and marriage preparation. Divakaruni uses this early denial of education to highlight the gap between Draupadi's intelligence and the restrictions placed on her because of her gender. Krishna, mysterious and elusive, becomes the only steady presence who recognizes her potential as more than a daughter destined for marriage (Divakaruni 37). In these moments, the novel shows Draupadi's inner conflict: her awareness of her abilities alongside her understanding that her world refuses to accept them. She is thus depicted as a young woman caught between prophecy and patriarchy, eager to write her own story yet constrained by cultural expectations.

This tension is most clearly visible in Draupadi's marriage, which Divakaruni portrays not as a matter of individual choice but as a societal ritual spectacle. The swayamvar, supposedly an event for a woman to choose her husband, is depicted as a contest of strength and skill, accessible only to men who can meet nearly impossible challenges. Choice, in this context, is hidden beneath ritual performance. Draupadi's rejection of Karna highlights this contradiction. On the surface, it seems to be her own act of agency. In truth, it is influenced by loyalty, ritual, and the weight of prophecy (Divakaruni 66). Her questioning of Karna's lineage, voiced impulsively, becomes a lifelong source of regret. She frequently imagines alternate possibilities where her choice was different and wonders if aligning with Karna might have resulted in a more fulfilling life (Divakaruni 98). However, the swayamvar leaves no room for ambiguity; once the contest ends, Draupadi's marriage is no longer her own decision and instead becomes a symbol of dynastic power and patriarchal hierarchy.

Her subsequent polyandrous marriage further illustrates how ritual is used to inscribe patriarchal control onto the female body. When Kunti instructs her sons to share what they have brought home, Draupadi becomes the object of division and redistribution. Framed as divinely sanctioned, this marriage elevates her to the status of sacred femininity, aligning her with mythic archetypes. Yet beneath this veneer of sanctity lies a deeper violence: her body becomes a site of political negotiation, an instrument through which alliances and legitimacy are consolidated (Karve 102). Divakaruni

underscores Draupadi's doubts and fears—her anxiety about whether her longed-for union with Arjuna was worth the sacrifices it entailed, and her recurring reflections on her rejection of Karna. These moments highlight Draupadi not merely as a passive figure entrapped by ritual but as a woman acutely aware of her constrained position.

The marriage scenes can thus be interpreted through Catherine Bell's framework of ritualisation. Ritual, Bell contends, is not a neutral cultural form but a strategic means of naturalising authority and hierarchy (Bell 85). Draupadi's marriage exemplifies this process: presented as divine, it serves to discipline her body and voice. Even her elevated status as a divine feminine figure does not free her; instead, it binds her more closely to patriarchal expectations. Her experience demonstrates the paradox of ritual: it sanctifies even as it subjugates, providing symbolic power while also diminishing personal agency.

Despite these constraints, Divakaruni does not depict Draupadi as entirely silenced or submissive. Her encounters with fate and prophecy reveal both the influence of external forces and her efforts to resist them. The episode of her visit to the prophet is especially illustrative. Trying to gain control over her destiny, she instead becomes burdened with fear and insecurity. The prophecy does not empower her but turns into another form of entrapment (Divakaruni 122). However, the very act of seeking knowledge shows her desire for self-determination—a willingness to face forces that scare her in the hope of reclaiming her story.

Her mysterious attraction to Karna further emphasizes this theme of resistance and desire. Karna, marginalized due to his disputed parentage, reflects Draupadi's own feeling of otherness. Their unspoken bond represents an alternative narrative—one that might have allowed Draupadi to exist beyond the strict limits of prophecy and ritual (Ray 188). Although this connection remains mostly speculative, it functions as a symbolic counterbalance to her limited reality, a space of imagined freedom within the epic's patriarchal structure.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi as both fire-born and fate-bound illustrates the dual nature of mythic embodiment. On one hand, her divine origins elevate her above the ordinary, aligning her with sacred destiny. On the other hand, these qualities are manipulated as tools of patriarchal control, justifying the regulation of her choices and the ritualisation of her body. Embodiment studies help clarify this paradox: Draupadi's body is not merely biological but socially inscribed, layered with meanings imposed by myth, prophecy, and ritual (Csordas 9). Her fiery birth sacralizes her, her polyandrous marriage politicizes her, and her humiliation in the dice hall attempts to reduce her to abjection. Yet through her persistent questioning, refusal of silence, and imaginative resistance, she transforms this embodied narrative into one of agency and protest.

The Public Body: Shame, Spectacle, and Disrobing

In literary traditions, the climax often marks the peak of tension and the turning point that leads to resolution. In the *Mahābhārata*, however, this moment occurs not on the battlefield but within the royal court of Hastinapur during the fateful dice game. Driven by Shakuni's manipulation and Duryodhana's malice, and permitted by Yudhishtira's reckless gambling, the Pandavas lose their wealth, kingdom, and even their freedom. The climax of this downfall is the wagering of Draupadi herself, summoned to the assembly as a stake in the game. This act dehumanizes her, reducing her from queen to object. The attempted disrobing (*vastraharan*) that follows is not merely a personal humiliation but a ritualized spectacle aimed at shattering her dignity and damaging the honor of the Pandavas (Divakaruni 152).

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* depicts this episode with piercing intensity, emphasizing Draupadi's narration of the trauma. Her voice conveys both the deeply personal violation and the wider symbolic meaning of being made a spectacle. She is forced into the hall, faced not only by her tormentors but also by the silent complicity of her elders and protectors. Her pleas for justice—to Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and even the ideal of dharma itself—are met with silence. This refusal to act results in a double humiliation: first, the threat of disrobing itself, and second, the denial of communal responsibility (Hiltebeitel 211).

The dice hall scene reveals how rituals of power often use women's bodies as stages for public spectacle. The assembly becomes a theatre of patriarchal control where Draupadi's humiliation is designed to hurt her husbands' honour. The Kauravas, encouraged by Karna's insulting words, see that degrading Draupadi is equivalent to attacking the heart of the Pandavas' pride. This idea is not unique to the epic: across different cultures and times, women's bodies have often been used as symbols of conquest, trophies of war, and tools of male rivalry. Draupadi's *vastraharan* exemplifies this pattern, turning her body into the center of collective political conflict (Ray 190).

Equally striking in Divakaruni's retelling is her emphasis on silence. The hall of Hastinapur is filled with figures of moral and political authority—Bhīṣma, the guardian of Kuru honour; Droṇa, the revered teacher; Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the ruling monarch. Yet each remains mute as Draupadi pleads for redress. Divakaruni frames this silence not as helplessness but as tacit approval, a form of violence that exposes the hypocrisy of those who claim to uphold *satya* and *dharma*. Here, silence becomes consent, allowing patriarchal injustice to unfold unchecked (Divakaruni 160).

This silence is intensified by the operation of the male gaze. Draupadi's humiliation is not a private violation but a collective spectacle performed before an audience of men. As feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argues, the gaze functions to position women as objects within systems of patriarchal meaning (Mulvey 11). In this episode, Draupadi is reduced to her vulnerability in the eyes of the court. Her individuality and sacred identity are eclipsed by the collective scrutiny that makes her

both sacred and abject. Divakaruni highlights this exposure, showing how humiliation is heightened not only by the act itself but also by the silent gazes of those who observe without intervening.

Yet, within this moment of profound vulnerability, lies the seed of resistance. Draupadi refuses to internalize the shame imposed upon her. Instead, she redirects it outward, asserting that the true dishonor belongs to her tormentors and to those who remain silent. Fire-born, she recalls her origins not as a curse but as a source of resilience. Her accumulated experiences of denial and ritual subjugation coalesce into an inner strength that refuses subordination.

The vow she utters in court marks a decisive turning point. She declares that she will not bind her hair until it has been washed in Duḥśāsana's blood. This vow is not only an oath of revenge but also a speech act that transforms her from victim to catalyst. Her humiliation, meant to silence her, instead becomes her most powerful assertion of voice. The vow sets into motion the destruction of the Kuru dynasty, demonstrating how Draupadi, once reduced to a spectacle, reclaims herself as an agent of destiny (Divakaruni 174).

Theoretical Reflections

When analyzed through Victor Turner's ritual theory, the dice hall episode functions as a "social drama" that reveals fault lines within the community. Draupadi, caught in liminality as both queen and slave, sacred figure and humiliated woman, embodies the contradictions of dharma (Turner 104). Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization further clarifies the event: the disrobing is a ritual performance aimed at naturalizing hierarchy and reaffirming male dominance. However, as Bell emphasizes, ritual also holds the potential for disruption, and Draupadi's vow exemplifies this reversal, turning subjugation into resistance (Bell 87).

Feminist theory adds another layer. Irigaray's critique of woman as "the Other" resonates in Draupadi's treatment as an object of exchange and humiliation (Irigaray 95). Kristeva's concept of abjection illuminates the symbolic violence of her threatened exposure, positioning her at the boundary between sacred and polluted (Kristeva 32). However, Draupadi's refusal to accept silence reclaims this abjection as empowerment. Embodiment studies reinforce this reading: her body, inscribed with ritual meaning, becomes the very medium of resistance, turning humiliation into agency (Csordas 14).

The Reclaimed Voice: Embodiment as Resistance

The *Mahābhārata*, attributed to Vyāsa, mainly features male voices. Heroes take center stage, and women appear only sporadically, often to support or challenge men's decisions. Figures like Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra, and Draupadi are strong characters in their own right, but their viewpoints are seldom highlighted. When they are included, their words are often filtered through male narrators or

overshadowed by themes of male bravery and political fate. In this narrative framework, women mainly serve as symbols of virtue, sacrifice, or disturbance—rather than as active narrators (Karve 76).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* radically shifts this balance. By moving the narration into Draupadi's own voice, the novel changes her from an object to a subject, from a figure spoken about to a figure who speaks. This narrative choice reorients the epic: instead of Draupadi serving as a pivot for male heroism, the story centers on her perceptions, emotions, and judgments. Her life is no longer a backdrop for the Pandavas' destiny; instead, the reader is invited to see the epic through her eyes, inhabiting her perspective. This reclaiming of narrative space is a feminist act, one that asserts that Draupadi's embodiment—her fire-born body, her emotions, her desires—is not just a site of political and ritual control but also a place of resistance and meaning (Divakaruni 6).

First-Person Narration and Reclaiming the Sacred Body

The first-person perspective of *The Palace of Illusions* allows Draupadi to reframe her body—traditionally considered sacred yet exploitable—as the foundation of her identity. In the *Mahābhārata*, her birth from fire establishes her sacrality but also sets her apart as “other”: she is not born of a woman, she is not ordinary, and she is destined for an extraordinary fate. While this sacrality elevates her, it also becomes a tool of control, used to justify her polyandrous marriage and her role in inciting war.

In Divakaruni's retelling, Draupadi reclaims this sacrality. Instead of being portrayed as a passive bearer of divine purpose, she reflects on her fire-born origins as both a blessing and a burden. By speaking of her body, her emotions, and her humiliations in her own voice, Draupadi interrupts the patriarchal narrative that aimed to reduce her to an object of exchange. The sacred body, once appropriated by ritual, is repossessed through narration (Divakaruni 25).

Desire, Agency, and Emotional Ownership

One of the most striking qualities of Divakaruni's retelling is its recognition of Draupadi's desire. In the epic, Draupadi is often depicted as the dutiful wife or the wronged queen; her inner life, especially her erotic and emotional longings, remains mostly unspoken. *The Palace of Illusions* breaks this silence by highlighting her attraction to Karna. Her desire, although suppressed by ritual and duty, challenges the patriarchal order that confines women to roles of obedience and self-sacrifice (Divakaruni 102).

By confessing her attraction to Karna and her lifelong sense of regret, Draupadi asserts a space for female desire within a cultural script that sought to suppress it. This expression aligns with Irigaray's critique of women's positioning as “the Other.” By voicing her longing, Draupadi refuses to remain a silent object of exchange and instead reclaims herself as a subject of desire (Irigaray 91). Kristeva's semiotic-symbolic distinction further clarifies this resistance: Draupadi's shame, rage, and longing

belong to the semiotic, the realm of affect, which challenges the rigid symbolic order of ritual and dharma (Kristeva 38).

Through these confessions, Draupadi reclaims emotional ownership. She narrates her rage at injustice, her grief over imposed burdens, and her fear of uncertain destiny. Instead of being shamed into silence, she transforms these emotions into acts of protest. Her voice demonstrates that affect—shame turned outward, rage declared publicly, desire voiced—can function as counter-rituals, destabilising patriarchal spectacles of control (Hiltebeitel 225).

Transformation of Fire from Divine Mark to Personal Power

Fire is the central metaphor of Draupadi's existence. In the epic, it represents her divine origin and her connection to destiny. However, fire also serves to bind her: her "fiery" nature is blamed for conflicts, her marriage is blessed as divinely ordained, and her humiliation is portrayed as the burning shame of her husbands. Fire thus fluctuates between holiness and stigma, a dual symbol that elevates her while also restricting her.

Divakaruni transforms this metaphor by internalizing it. Fire no longer remains just a divine sign imposed from outside; it becomes an inner strength, a source of resilience and protest. In the dice hall, her inner fire allows her to turn humiliation into resistance. Her vow not to tie her hair until it is washed in Duḥśāsana's blood is fire turned into a speech act: a declaration that redefines shame as power (Divakaruni 178).

This shift marks one of Divakaruni's most significant interventions. Fire, once emblematic of destiny, becomes a metaphor of agency. Draupadi learns to wield it not as a mark of fate but as a force of self-determination. In this sense, her embodiment ceases to be passive; it becomes dynamic, a site of both vulnerability and empowerment.

Contemporary Resonances

Although the events of the Mahābhārata belong to an ancient world, Draupadi's experiences in The Palace of Illusions resonate strongly with modern struggles over women's bodies and voices. Divakaruni intentionally blurs the line between myth and contemporary life, indicating that although the settings and characters may have changed, the core mechanisms of patriarchal control remain disturbingly familiar.

One striking pattern is the way women's bodies are controlled through cultural rituals and social expectations. Draupadi, born from fire and shared among five husbands, is treated as property within systems of power. In modern society, similar methods of control still exist, though they are masked by the language of tradition, honour, or morality. Practices such as child marriage, dowry-related violence, honour killings, virginity testing, and restrictions on reproductive rights all serve as ritualised

mechanisms that enforce control over the female body (Kishwar 122). The underlying idea remains the same as in Draupadi's story: a woman's body is rarely her own but is instead a site of negotiation for family honour, community prestige, or patriarchal authority.

The vastraharan episode, in particular, presents unsettling parallels in modern culture. Draupadi's public humiliation in the dice hall, where her dignity is reduced to a spectacle for male spectatorship, reflects how technology and media are used today to shame women. Cyber-harassment, revenge pornography, and the circulation of intimate images without consent all serve as twenty-first-century "disrobings," exposing women's vulnerability for public consumption (Nayar 56). The male gaze, silent yet complicit, continues to objectify women, whether in courtrooms, workplaces, or digital environments. Divakaruni's retelling urges readers to see that Draupadi's humiliation is not just ancient history but is repeatedly reenacted in new cultural contexts.

At the same time, feminist retellings serve as acts of resistance. By allowing Draupadi to tell her own story, Divakaruni challenges the silence that has long surrounded women in epic traditions. This action mirrors modern feminist efforts to reclaim narrative authority—through literature, theatre, film, or grassroots activism. Works like Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* also rewrite epic or historical figures to reveal the gendered violence woven into tradition. Each retelling, in its own way, acts as a counter-ritual, undoing scripts of humiliation by creating new scripts of voice, desire, and protest.

Thus, the resonance of *The Palace of Illusions* goes far beyond retelling an ancient epic. Draupadi's struggles raise questions that remain urgently relevant: Who controls women's bodies? Who narrates their stories? And how can shame be transformed into resistance? By placing Draupadi's experiences in dialogue with present realities, Divakaruni highlights that feminist retellings are not just about reclaiming the past but also about reshaping the cultural imagination of today.

Conclusion

This paper examines Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* through the lenses of embodiment, sacrality, and ritual control. The analysis shows how Draupadi's body is imbued with cultural meanings from the moment of her fiery birth, how her polyandrous marriage functions as a ritualized inscription of patriarchal power, and how her humiliation in the dice hall transforms her into both spectacle and subject.

Drawing on Victor Turner and Catherine Bell, the study shows how ritual both defines and destabilizes Draupadi's position, marking her body as sacred while also using that sacrality to justify subjugation. Feminist theorists Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva further clarify how Draupadi, positioned as "the Other" and rendered abject, disrupts patriarchal order by reclaiming her voice, her

desire, and her emotions as sites of resistance. Embodiment studies emphasize how myths inscribe meaning on female bodies, yet also how these bodies can be re-signified through feminist narration.

The findings suggest that *The Palace of Illusions* is not just a literary retelling but also a feminist intervention. By shifting the narrative into Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni reclaims a figure long silenced by patriarchal discourse, transforming her from an object of exchange into an active agent of history. Shame becomes a counter-ritual, fire turns into defiance, and the body becomes a site of protest rather than submission.

The implications go beyond the epic itself. Draupadi's story resonates with ongoing struggles over women's autonomy in modern societies, where ritualized forms of control still regulate bodies and voices. Feminist retellings such as Divakaruni's show the transformative potential of myth, illustrating how ancient narratives can be reinterpreted to challenge present-day inequalities.

Ultimately, Draupadi endures not just as a figure from the past but as a living symbol of feminist resistance. Her embodiment of fire and flesh, her sacrality and her suffering, her voice and her silence—all merge into a myth that still resonates today. In reclaiming her story, Divakaruni not only redefines Draupadi but also affirms the power of storytelling as a tool for cultural and political change.

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