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## The Never-Ending Silent Voice: Selective Amplification and Marginal Silences in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the dynamics of selective amplification and continuous silence in the epics or the epic retellings. This study particularly focuses on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions, the retelling of the great Hindu epic Mahabharata, from Draupadi's perspective. The study especially highlights the pivotal figures of Kunti and Karna, whose partial or muted presences contrast with the foregrounding of Draupadi's voice. Vyasa's Mahabharata marginalises many significant characters of the epic, and most importantly Draupadi. Using Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic model of narration, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern, the analysis demonstrates how silence in the novel serves not as absence but as a purposeful narrative and cultural strategy. Through close textual interpretations, this research paper explores how Kunti's authority is communicated through mediation and silence, whereas Karna's tragedy develops through unacknowledged regret and deferred recognition. The study makes an argument that Divakaruni's narrative choices illustrate both the liberating possibilities and the constraints of retelling myth across cultural boundaries by employing these silent voices within the context of diaspora. Ultimately, by theorising silence as a constant, generative force in story formation and cultural memory, this study advances research on diasporic literature, feminist narratology, and epic retellings.*

**Keywords:** Voice, Marginalisation, Articulation, Suppression, Narration.

## The Never-Ending Silent Voice: Selective Amplification and Marginal Silences in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Priti Basak

### Introduction

Epics across cultures function not merely as stories rather as archives of political imagination, ethical frameworks, and cultural memory. Among them, the *Mahabharata* is one of the most extensive and significant epics in world literature, having shaped South Asian philosophy for thousands of years. In addition to being a story heavily influenced by the dynamics of voice and silence, it is also a text about war and kinfolk, fate and dharma. The epic frequently marginalises or silences its feminine and liminal figures, even as it grants voice to kings, sages, and warriors. Important roles are played by characters like Draupadi, Kunti, and Karna, yet their core subjectivities remain obscured, refracted through patriarchal narrative systems.

Retellings of the *Mahabharata* in the modern era have attempted to fill these gaps by elevating the voices of women and other oppressed characters who were originally confined to the epic's periphery. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out among these retellings. The work, which is written from Draupadi's point of view, retells the epic story of Vyasa from the personal perspective of one of its most underappreciated yet crucial characters. Here, Draupadi, who in the original epic is frequently relegated to her roles as a wife, daughter, and pawn in dynastic struggles, emerges as a subject who talks back to her society, comments on it, and analyses it. By doing this, Divakaruni regains Draupadi's autonomy and contributes her voice to a global feminist and literary conversation.

However, *The Palace of Illusions* exposes the paradoxical permanence of silence even as Draupadi's voice is enhanced. Characters like Kunti and Karna, who are both essential to Draupadi's fate and the epic's moral core, are portrayed in a way that emphasises both their absence and presence. The matriarch whose decisions determine the destiny of kingdoms, Kunti, frequently uses mediation and constraint to communicate; her silence speaks louder than her words. The tragic hero Karna, who was born into obscurity, experiences a deferred recognition that shows up as regret and unfulfilled desire. According to this study, this type of narrative placement is known as the "never-ending silent voice," a condition in which characters vacillate between being heard and being muted, between articulation and repression.

The central argument of this paper is that, in *The Palace of Illusions*, silence serves as a deliberate narrative and cultural tactic rather than as a simple absence. Divakaruni shows the potential

and limitations of epic retelling in a diasporic setting by emphasising Draupadi while largely muting Kunti and Karna. According to this interpretation, silence becomes generative; it mediates authority, generates meaning, and preserves cultural memory over time and space. This investigation is situated within the theoretical frameworks of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic model of narration, which explains the dynamics of amplified and subordinated voices; Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which sheds light on the diasporic negotiation of cultural memory; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of the subaltern, which emphasises the boundaries of representation. These frameworks allow us to see silence not as nonappearance but as a productive force that works within the novel's narrative economy.

### **Literature Review**

*The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view, giving her the narrative power that Vyasa's epic lacks. From her miraculous birth to her marriage to the five Pandavas, her humiliation at the Kaurava court, and her post-war views, the novel follows her journey. Other characters continue to be partially hushed as Draupadi becomes the magnified narrative voice. While Karna's tragedy is characterised by silent longing and delayed recognition, Kunti, the matriarch, exercises authority via mediation and restraint. The novel's inspection of cultural memory and identity is supported by this conflict between articulation and silence.

Scholarly readings of *The Palace of Illusions* have widely acknowledged the role in reclaiming female subjectivity. It has been noted that Divakaruni recasts Draupadi as an autonomous character whose voice challenges the epic tradition of stifling women. According to some scholars, Draupadi evolves from a victim of fate to a narrator who actively challenges patriarchal systems through her narration. However, critical discussions also highlight how the text selectively silences other characters, especially Karna, whose position is reframed through absence, even as Draupadi is given more prominence. When taken as a whole, these readings support the book's twin approach of highlighting Draupadi and using silence as a purposeful structural element.

These dynamics are explained by theoretical debates of subalternity and silence. The claim made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "can the subaltern speak?" highlights the structural boundaries of representation and serves as a reminder that Draupadi's loud voice will always coexist with other quiet ones. Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity places Divakaruni's retelling within the diasporic dialectic between tradition and global feminist discourse, while Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony shows that while numerous voices can exist in story, they are not equally empowered.

### **Research Questions**

1. In what ways does *The Palace of Illusions* place characters like Kunti and Karna in quiet areas while deliberately amplifying Draupadi's voice?

2. How might the novel's "never-ending silent voice" be interpreted as a narrative and cultural device rather than as an absence?
3. In what ways do Karna's delayed recognition and Kunti's maternal constraint represent various forms of quiet in the text?
4. In what ways may theoretical frameworks like Bakhtin's polyphony, Bhabha's hybridity, and Spivak's subalternity shed light on the novel's use of voice and silence?
5. What does Divakaruni's diasporic retelling reveal about the potential and limitations of reclaiming marginalised voices in epic literature?

### **Objectives**

1. To analyse how Draupadi's voice is amplified as a feminist reclamation of a figure who has historically been muted in Vyasa's Mahabharata.
2. To examine how Kunti and Karna are positioned in the story as characters whose subdued appearances and partial silences act as essential counterpoints to Draupadi's exaggerated narration.
3. To conceptualise silence as the "never-ending silent voice", a cultural and narrative technique that denotes a generative force influencing memory, tragedy, and authority rather than absence.
4. To use theoretical frameworks to explain the speech and silence dynamics in the novel, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of polyphony, Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern.
5. To situate *The Palace of Illusions* in the context of diasporic feminist epic retellings, examining how Divakaruni's story uses silence and selective amplification to balance cultural heritage with a global readership.

### **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology that prioritises literary analysis as its main research method. Close textual reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a key component of the process. Episodes that highlight the dynamics of speech and silence in relation to Draupadi, Kunti, and Karna are given special attention. The analysis looks at both overt articulations and instances of narrative restraint in order to determine how Divakaruni uses selective amplification to reconstitute epic subjectivities. The *Mahabharata* by Vyasa serves as the classic backdrop against which the narrative is also viewed in comparison. This comparative perspective allows the study to track how feminist reclamation, diasporic negotiation, and narrative silences merge in the text by highlighting the ways in which the retelling deviates from or reconfigures the original.

The methodology is shaped by three theoretical viewpoints that structure the interpretive process. In particular, Karna's delayed recognition and Kunti's calculated silences challenge the boundaries of representation by applying Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony offers a framework for examining the unequal distribution of narrative authority and the coexistence of several voices in Draupadi's narration. Lastly, the novel is situated within the diasporic third space, where cultural memory is recounted for both local and international audiences, according to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Secondary research on female narrative theory and Divakaruni's book provides crucial background to these frameworks, guaranteeing that the study is firmly rooted in current scholarly discussions.

### **Discussion**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skilfully amplifies Draupadi's (Panchali) voice in *The Palace of Illusions*, turning her from a marginalised character in Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, typically portrayed as a passive symbol of honour and vengeance into a contemplative, interrogative narrator who asserts agency and challenges the patriarchal structures that define her life. This amplification supports the first study question by showing how the book places other characters, such as Kunti and Karna, in areas of partial quiet while emphasising Draupadi's subjectivity. The novel's polyphonic core is Draupadi's first-person narration, which gives her the ability to reclaim narrative authority that was lost to her in the original text by fusing epic events with intimate reflection.

A pivotal instance is when Draupadi is publicly humiliated and disrobed during the notorious dice game in the Kaurava court. Her cries are filtered through male witnesses in Vyasa's epic, making her a contentious figure. But Divakaruni gives her a defiant inner monologue: "Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bounds of decency" (Divakaruni 193). This instance is a prime example of selective amplification. Draupadi's voice challenges the quiet of the assembly and her husbands' inaction by emerging not only via conversation but also through unfiltered thought. The patriarchal code is further questioned by her: "What did I learn that day in the sabha? All this time I'd believed in my power over my husbands. I'd believed that because they loved me they would do anything for me. But now I saw that though they did love me—as much perhaps as any man can love—there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering" (Divakaruni 194-195). As she criticizes dharma as a means of male solidarity rather than as divine rule, her expanded storytelling here reveals the subaltern boundaries of women's representation. According to academic views that see Draupadi as representing current sensibilities of independence and resistance, this feminist reclaiming places her as a contemporary woman whose voice challenges canonical suppression.

Draupadi's voice changes throughout the book, expressing a balancing act between tradition and agency, from young, idealistic to disillusioned after the war. Her promise following the humiliation, "I will not comb it," I said, "until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (Divakaruni 194), drives the plot, highlighting her personal grudge and acting as a trigger for the epic's battle. She also uses narrative power in the home: "Still, it's never a good idea to let one's husbands grow too complacent. My displays of temper ensured that the Pandavas continued to regard me with a healthy respect" (Divakaruni 152). In addition to enhancing her, this portrayal draws attention to the tension in the book. Although her voice is dominant, it refracts other people's silences, exposing the limitations of myth recounting where complete empowerment remains illusory.

Silence in *The Palace of Illusions* manifests as the "never-ending silent voice", a narrative technique that uses the suspension between articulation and suppression to communicate sorrow, power, and authority. Divakaruni uses silence to create meaning, letting unsaid things advance the story and enhance the complexity of the characters. This is consistent with Spivak's subalternity, which asks if muted figures may ever fully speak through another's narration, and Bakhtin's polyphony, in which voices are dispersed unevenly inside Draupadi's monologic frame.

To enhance this analysis, take a closer look at Bakhtin's polyphonic model. In his research of Dostoevsky's works, Bakhtin theorises that polyphony is a narrative structure that produces dialogic interplay rather than monologic unity by incorporating multiple voices that are independent and not subject to a single authorial perspective. Although Draupadi's narration in the novel aims to achieve this polyphony by combining a variety of perspectives, her own criticisms, her husbands' implied opinions, and echoes of epic characters like Krishna, it falls short of complete polyphonic equality through selective suppression. For instance, Draupadi occasionally embraces silence strategically: "But this time I didn't launch into my usual tirade. Was it a memory of Krishna, the cool silence with which he countered disagreement, that stopped me?" (Divakaruni 30). Bakhtin's concept of narrator and character voices blending is demonstrated in this self-reflexive moment, yet the novel's structure reinforces authorial control by directing everything through Draupadi, creating tension that enhances the epic's moral difficulties. By democratising the myth without completely dismantling patriarchal hierarchies, Bakhtin's emphasis on polyphony as a rejection of narrative unity highlights how Divakaruni's silences produce centrifugal forces that enable marginalised epic elements to speak indirectly and advance feminist narratology.

Furthermore, Spivak's theory of the subaltern, which she developed in her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts that the oppressed, by intersecting colonial, patriarchal, and class structures, are unable to speak because dominant discourses systematically mediate, misrepresent, or obliterate their voices. Spivak questions whether it is feasible to restore these voices without re-establishing power disparities by using the example of sati (widow immolation) to show how Western

and elite Indian portrayals stifle the agency of subaltern women. In the novel, Draupadi states, “the laws of men would not save me” (Divakaruni 191), emphasising the systematic silencing of women’s cries and reiterating Spivak’s criticism of the boundaries of representation. Here, silence turns into a cultural tactic that preserves memory and moral ambiguity in the retelling, where unsolved conflicts reflect the diasporic author’s adaptation of an ancient narrative for a worldwide readership. The study expands on Spivak’s approach by theorising silence as generative; although Draupadi speaks, her narration unintentionally marginalises others.

As an example of the “never-ending silent voice” in maternal and matriarchal roles, Kunti’s positioning is a figure of partial silence, where her authority is expressed through mediation rather than direct speech. In Vyasa’s *Mahabharata*, Kunti frequently uses fate or divine favours to defend her choices, such as forsaking Karna or ordering the polyandrous marriage. Through Draupadi’s observations, Divakaruni reinterprets these as intentional silences that expose Kunti’s restraint as a source of power.

The marriage decree is a crucial example: According to Kunti, who misheard her sons’ account of winning alms (Draupadi), “...whatever you brought should be shared equally amongst all my sons” (Divakaruni 107). As Draupadi eventually realises, this wily command, “I finally began to see what the wily Kunti had in mind when she’d insisted that I was to be married to all of them” (Divakaruni 152), is never stated overtly as a plan; rather, it unites the Pandavas through an implicit goal. By influencing the destiny of kingdoms without explicitly stating it, Kunti’s silence here creates narrative momentum and subverts patriarchal directness as a kind of female authority. This is supported by her emotional repression when Sahadev narrated to Draupadi: “We paced outside her room, not knowing what to do. She’d always been so strong, our foundation stone. When she came out, we rushed to comfort her. But her eyes were dry. She said to us, I’ve used up all the tears of my life so that they will not distract me again” (Divakaruni 114). At pivotal moments, even in grief, Kunti becomes mute, like in “Even Kunti fell silent” (Divakaruni 305). However, at a point of irrevocable decision, it was too late. Similar to the silenced widows in Spivak’s analysis whose agency is overwritten by elite narratives, Kunti speaks through her actions and absences, her voice deferred yet authoritative in the polyphonic web. From Draupadi’s perspective, these silences represent not weakness but deliberate restraint, which is consistent with Spivak’s subaltern theory.

Alongside Bhabha’s hybridity, Kunti represents a third space in which subversive power combines with conventional maternal dharma. According to Bhabha, hybridity is the creation of new cultural forms from colonial contact zones, where dominant and subordinate identities meet to create transcultural, ambivalent identities that defy binary oppositions such as patriarch/matriarch or coloniser/colonised. Kunti’s silences in Divakaruni’s novel’s diasporic setting symbolise this hybrid negotiation: her restraint creates a superior cultural intelligence that maintains matriarchal influence in

the face of patriarchal erasure by bridging the gap between contemporary feminist ideals of indirect agency and ancient Indian epic traditions. This research highlights the novel's examination of cultural memory across boundaries by showing how silence, as a hybrid technique, simultaneously liberates and constrains.

Karna's silent voice appears as a liminal presence in Draupadi's narration, and his tragedy develops through unacknowledged sorrow and delayed realization. Karna's low birth and devotion to Duryodhana marginalize him in the original epic; Divakaruni intensifies this by suspending him between friend and antagonist through Draupadi's confused attraction and regret in retrospection. Karna, who was rejected by the swayamvara because of his caste, expressed wounded pride by remaining silent at the sabha and refusing to step in despite Draupadi's request: "For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride" (Divakaruni 195). Karna could have put an end to my agony with just one word, but instead he waited for me to beg him. There had already been a flash of agony in his ferocious smile, and he knew he would regret it. His unsaid desire for Draupadi, which is hinted at throughout, is postponed until Kunti's revelation: "Karna, who had lived all his life for honor only to lose it today" (Divakaruni 290). This suggested sorrow leads to catastrophe. "Nothing has more power over us than the truth. Each painful detail of Karna's story became a hook in my flesh, binding me to him" (Divakaruni 87), Draupadi echoed. This reveals his silence as a hook for her own regrets, embodying Bakhtin's polyphony where his muted voice haunts the dominant narration, refusing subordination and demanding ethical reckoning.

Applying Spivak's subaltern lens deepens this: as a warrior of low birth, Karna represents the subaltern whose speech (loyalty, remorse) is not heard in caste-ridden dharma, much like the political suicides that have been hushed and discussed by Spivak, where dominant histories co-opt subaltern agency. But Divakaruni's hybrid retelling (Bhabha) humanises him through cultural collision: Karna's tragedy hybridises epic heroism with diasporic empathy for the marginalised, creating new forms of postcolonial identity that challenge the original myth's binary. His deferred recognition, dying without familial acknowledgement, highlights the limitations of representation.

To shed light on voice-silence dynamics, make use of Spivak, Bakhtin, and Bhabha. Spivak's subaltern highlights Kunti and Karna's mediated presences, their speech channelled through Draupadi, raising concerns about the boundaries of representation and the moral perils of recovering voices that have been repressed. The dialogic tension of the book is revealed by Bakhtin's polyphony: while several voices coexist, silences impose unequal distribution, enhancing the story beyond monologic control. Because of Bhabha's hybridity, the diasporic retelling is framed as a third space, where cultural collisions give rise to transcultural forms. This allows Divakaruni to magnify Draupadi while maintaining silences as generative cultural echoes and navigating Indian traditions with global feminist discourse.

Finally, diasporic opportunities and limitations are revealed by Draupadi's voice, which is freed in the book, and promotes intercultural memory, yet silences such as Karna's remorse prevent complete reclamation, reflecting the author's mixed identity. This duality advances epic retellings by theorising silence as a continuous, creative force in gender, voice, and memory discourses, as these theories are interconnected, Bhabha's third space informs Bakhtin's dialogism, which in turn informs Spivak's critique of representation.

### **Conclusion**

This research has illuminated the complex relationships between the "never-ending silent voice" and selective amplification in *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's diasporic feminist adaptation of the *Mahabharata*. Divakaruni reclaims a subaltern figure from patriarchal erasure by emphasising Draupadi's reflective and defiant narrative. This gives her polyphonic agency to question epic frameworks of honour and power. The deliberate silences of Kunti and Karna, however, coexist with this amplification. Their mediated presences, Karna's postponed tragic recognition and Kunti's restrained maternal authority, serve as generating story forces rather than empty spaces. The third space of cultural negotiation is where these silences arise through Homi Bhabha's hybridity, connecting ancient Indian myth with international feminist discourse; Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphony reveals the uneven orchestration of voices within Draupadi's frame; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory highlights the enduring boundaries of representation, where even reclaimed voices unintentionally silence others.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's narrative decisions highlight the inherent limitations of epic retellings in a diasporic setting as well as their freeing potential. While Kunti and Karna's silences conjure unsolved regrets and ethical problems, Draupadi's speech supports feminist reclamation and preserves cultural memory, enhancing the text's examination of gender, caste, and identity. By theorising silence as a continuous, fruitful component of story construction, this "never-ending silent voice" advances academic discussions in feminist narratology, diasporic literature, and mythic reinterpretations. Future studies could investigate how silence navigates intersectional marginalities in international tales by applying this concept to additional retellings. By redesigning the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni not only amplifies the overlooked but also reminds us that true polyphony arises from the echoes of what remains unsaid.

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