



शोधामृत

(कला, मानविकी और सामाजिक विज्ञान की सहकर्मि समीक्षित, मूल्यांकित, त्रैमासिक शोध पत्रिका)

ISSN : 3048-9296 (Online)

3049-2890 (Print)

IIFS Impact Factor-4.0

Vol.-3; issue-1 (Jan.-March) 2026

Page No- 349-356

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<https://shodhaamrit.gyanvividha.com>

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Revisiting Myth and Patriarchy in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

Abstract : Myth has always been an important part of Indian literary and cultural life. It has shaped ideas about morality, gender, family, duty, power, and social values. In contemporary Indian fiction in English, writers often revisit myths to look at traditional ideas from new perspectives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an important contemporary writer who retells Indian myths through the experiences and voices of women. Her novels *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) retell the stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* mainly through Draupadi and Sita. By giving these women a central place in the narrative, Divakaruni presents their thoughts, feelings, choices, and struggles in a new way. The present paper studies how Divakaruni uses myth to question patriarchal ideas related to family, marriage, social honour, power, and gender relations. It also examines female identity, agency, desire, resistance, and selfhood in the selected novels. The study argues that Divakaruni does not simply repeat the traditional stories. She retells them from a woman-centred perspective and gives greater importance to the voices and experiences of women. In this way, her fiction creates a meaningful dialogue between tradition and modern life. The paper uses feminist literary criticism and close textual analysis to show how Divakaruni presents new ways of understanding women, their identity, and their position in society.

Keywords: Myth, Patriarchy, Feminism, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Draupadi, Sita, Female Agency, Indian English Fiction, Myth Retelling.

Introduction : Indian literature has a long and close connection with mythology. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are not only ancient epic stories but also important parts of Indian cultural and social life. These epics have influenced Indian ideas about morality, family, duty, power, religion, and social values. Characters such as Rama, Sita, Krishna, Arjuna, Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari have remained important in Indian literary and cultural traditions. Their stories have been understood and interpreted in different ways according to the needs and

concerns of different periods.

In traditional versions of Indian epics, women are often presented through social and patriarchal values. Sita, for example, is generally remembered as an ideal wife who represents obedience, sacrifice, purity, and devotion. Draupadi, on the other hand, is often remembered for her beauty, her marriage to the five Pandavas, her humiliation in the royal court, and her role in the conflict of the *Mahabharata*. Such traditional representations often give less attention to the personal feelings, desires, thoughts, choices, and individual identities of these women. Their stories are usually understood in relation to the male characters around them. Contemporary Indian writers have started to look at these familiar myths from new perspectives. Many writers have revisited traditional stories to examine questions of gender, identity, power, and social inequality. Feminist approaches to literature have also encouraged readers to examine how women are represented in traditional narratives. From this perspective, mythological retelling becomes a useful way of giving greater attention to women's experiences and voices. It also provides an opportunity to question social values that have traditionally limited women's freedom and choices.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an important contemporary Indian writer who has contributed significantly to this tradition of mythological retelling. Her fiction deals with women's lives, family relationships, identity, cultural traditions, memory, and the relationship between tradition and modern life. Her interest in Indian mythology is clearly seen in her novels *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of the *Mahabharata* mainly from the perspective of Draupadi, while *The Forest of Enchantments* presents the story of the *Ramayana* through the experiences and voice of Sita.

The importance of these novels lies in their change of narrative perspective. In traditional epic narratives, male characters and their actions often occupy the central position. Divakaruni changes this focus by placing women at the centre of the story. Through Draupadi and Sita, she presents the personal experiences, emotions, struggles, choices, and questions of women. This new perspective allows readers to see familiar stories in a different way.

Divakaruni's treatment of Draupadi and Sita also brings attention to several important issues related to patriarchy. These include marriage, family, social honour, gender roles, power, female sexuality, personal choice, and women's position in society. Her characters are not shown simply as silent or suffering women. They have their own thoughts, desires, doubts, and responses to the situations around them. In this way, Divakaruni gives greater importance to female identity and agency.

The present study examines the relationship between myth and patriarchy in the selected fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It focuses mainly on *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. The study argues that Divakaruni does not simply repeat the traditional stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Instead, she retells them from a woman-centred perspective. By giving Draupadi and Sita a stronger voice, she questions traditional ideas about ideal womanhood and presents women as individuals with their own identities, choices, and experiences.

Thus, Divakaruni's fiction creates a meaningful connection between Indian tradition and contemporary feminist thought. Her mythological retellings show that old stories can be read in new ways and can continue to raise important questions about women's lives and their place in society. Through her treatment of Draupadi and Sita, Divakaruni invites readers to reconsider familiar myths and to look at them from the perspective of women's experiences.

Objectives of the Study : To examine how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells Indian myths in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, focusing on patriarchy, women's identity, agency, desire, marriage, power, resistance, and feminist perspectives in contemporary society.

Research Questions : How does Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retell Indian myths to question

patriarchy, represent women's agency and identity, and present feminist perspectives through Draupadi and Sita in her fiction?

Research Methodology : The present study is qualitative and analytical in nature. It mainly uses close reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. These two novels are the primary sources of the study. Secondary sources include books and research studies on feminist criticism, mythology, gender studies, Indian English literature, and literary theory.

The study mainly uses feminist literary criticism as its theoretical framework. Important concepts such as patriarchy, female agency, gender identity, representation, voice, power, resistance, and women's position are used to examine the selected novels. The study also looks at the relationship between traditional Indian epics and their modern retellings.

The study does not treat mythology as a fixed or unchanging tradition. Instead, it views myth as a living form of narrative that can gain new meanings through reinterpretation. Therefore, the research focuses on how Divakaruni changes the narrative perspective and gives greater importance to women's experiences, voices, choices, and identities within familiar mythological stories.

Review of Literature : The study of mythology, gender, and patriarchy has a place in Indian literary studies. Feminist scholars have examined how traditional stories represent women and how social structures shape their lives. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, explains the link between gender, family, caste, and patriarchal values. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, in *Recasting Women*, also discuss women's position in Indian social and cultural structures. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's *Women Writing in India* shows the importance of women's voices in Indian literary traditions and culture. Janaki Nair's study of women and law helps in understanding the social position of Indian women.

Traditional Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have often presented women through roles related to family, marriage, duty, and social honour. Modern writers have revisited these stories from new perspectives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the *Mahabharata* mainly through Draupadi's voice, while *The Forest of Enchantments* presents the *Ramayana* through Sita's perspective. Both novels explore women's identity, desire, agency, relationships, and struggles within patriarchal society.

Earlier feminist studies provide a useful theoretical background, while Indian scholarship helps explain gender and social structures. However, a comparative study of these two novels, focusing on myth and patriarchy, needs attention. The present study therefore examines how Divakaruni gives new meaning to myths and presents Draupadi and Sita as women with their own voices, choices, and identities.

Myth, Gender and Patriarchal Representation : Myths are important cultural stories through which societies share ideas about behaviour, morality, duty, family, and social relationships. As myths are passed from one generation to another, they gain cultural importance. Their portrayal of men and women can therefore influence ideas about gender and social roles.

Patriarchy can be understood as a social system in which men generally have greater power and authority than women. It works through family, marriage, property, inheritance, social customs, morality, and cultural beliefs. These structures often define what women should do and how they should behave.

Literary texts can support such ideas, but they can also question them. Feminist literary criticism therefore studies how women are represented in traditional and modern literature. A feminist reading of mythology asks important questions: Who gets to speak? Whose point of view is given importance? Are women's desires and choices recognised? Who has the power to make decisions? What happens when women question or reject

traditional roles?

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction deals with these questions. By retelling well-known Indian myths from women's perspectives, she gives greater importance to their experiences, thoughts, choices, and struggles. Her novels encourage readers to look at familiar characters in a new way. Through Draupadi and Sita, Divakaruni questions traditional ideas about women, marriage, duty, power, and social expectations. Her work shows that myths can be retold to give women a stronger voice and a more independent identity.

Draupadi and the Rewriting of the *Mahabharata* : *The Palace of Illusions* is one of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's important mythological novels. The novel retells the *Mahabharata* mainly from Draupadi's point of view. This change in perspective is important because the traditional epic gives greater attention to the actions, conflicts, and ambitions of male characters.

Divakaruni changes this focus and places Draupadi at the centre of the story. She is not presented only as a character in the epic. Instead, the story is told through her thoughts and experiences. Her feelings, desires, doubts, ambitions, relationships, and struggles become important parts of the narrative.

The title *The Palace of Illusions* has a deeper meaning. The palace is not only a physical place but also represents power, status, desire, and illusion. Draupadi lives in a world where political power and personal relationships are closely connected. As a princess and later as the wife of the Pandavas, she has a high social position. However, this position does not give her full control over her own life.

Draupadi's story shows the difficulties faced by women in a patriarchal society. She can be powerful as well as powerless at the same time. Although she has social status and an important position, many decisions about her life are made by men. Through Draupadi's voice, Divakaruni questions these unequal power relations and presents her as a woman with her own thoughts, desires, choices, and identity.

Draupadi's Agency and Desire : One of the important features of Divakaruni's Draupadi is her complex personality. She is not shown as a passive woman who accepts everything decided by others. She questions many decisions and tries to understand her place in family and society.

Her feelings for Karna add another dimension to her character. They also challenge simple ideas about women's morality. Traditional stories often expect women to follow strict rules about love, marriage, and emotional behaviour. Divakaruni, however, allows Draupadi to express her own feelings and desires. She is shown as a woman who has emotions that may sometimes go against social expectations.

This representation is important from a feminist point of view. Draupadi is presented as a woman who has her own desires and feelings rather than only being seen through the wishes of men. Her emotional world is given importance in the story.

Her relationship with Krishna is also significant. Krishna becomes a close friend and someone with whom Draupadi can share her thoughts and feelings. Their relationship gives her emotional and intellectual support that is different from her marital relationships. It also shows her need for understanding and companionship.

Draupadi's freedom, however, is not complete. Her life is still controlled by family duties, political situations, social rules, and expectations about women. Even so, her ability to question, think, remember, and tell her own story becomes a form of resistance. Through her voice, Divakaruni presents Draupadi as a woman who seeks to understand and define her own identity.

The Politics of Draupadi's Marriage : Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas presents one of the most complicated aspects of her identity. The arrangement is largely determined by circumstances beyond her individual control. Her body and marriage become connected

with broader political and familial interests.

From a feminist perspective, this situation demonstrates how women can become instruments within political and social structures. Marriage is not always presented as an individual romantic choice; it can also function as a mechanism of alliance, property, prestige, and power.

Divakaruni's treatment of Draupadi allows readers to experience the emotional consequences of such an arrangement. The narrative does not reduce her to an idealised wife. Instead, it acknowledges her internal conflicts and attempts to give psychological depth to her experience.

Consequently, Draupadi becomes a figure through whom the novel examines the relationship between gender and power. Her social importance does not free her from patriarchal control. Rather, it reveals that even privileged women can be subjected to structures that limit personal autonomy.

The Disrobing of Draupadi and Patriarchal Violence : The episode of Draupadi's humiliation in the royal court is one of the most powerful representations of patriarchal violence in the *Mahabharata*. In Divakaruni's retelling, the event acquires renewed significance because the reader encounters it through Draupadi's emotional and psychological experience.

The humiliation is not simply an individual act of violence. It reveals the relationship between female honour, male power, political authority, and social morality. Draupadi is treated as an object within a political game, demonstrating how patriarchal systems can transform women into symbols of male prestige and rivalry.

Her resistance is therefore significant. She refuses to remain silent and questions the legality and morality of the situation. Her voice interrupts the authority of the male-dominated court.

This moment can be interpreted as a symbolic confrontation between patriarchal authority and female agency. Draupadi cannot immediately escape the material power of the men surrounding her, but her refusal to accept their assumptions challenges their moral authority.

Sita and the Rewriting of the *Ramayana* : *The Forest of Enchantments* similarly revisits an established Indian epic from a woman-centred perspective. The novel presents Sita not merely as an idealised wife but as a complex human being whose experiences extend beyond her relationship with Rama.

The traditional image of Sita has often emphasised obedience, purity, sacrifice, and devotion. Divakaruni's Sita retains elements of these qualities but is not confined by them. She is intellectually curious, emotionally complex, observant, and capable of making decisions.

The forest becomes particularly significant in this representation. Rather than functioning only as a place of exile, it becomes a space of transformation. Away from the formal structures of royal life, Sita encounters new experiences and develops a deeper understanding of herself.

The forest consequently becomes both a physical and symbolic space. It represents separation from conventional social structures and creates possibilities for self-discovery.

Sita, Marriage and Patriarchal Expectations : Marriage is one of the central institutions through which patriarchal expectations are represented in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Sita's identity is repeatedly connected to her role as wife. Yet Divakaruni's narrative complicates the assumption that an ideal wife must unquestioningly accept every social expectation.

Sita's relationship with Rama is characterised by love, loyalty, emotional attachment, and conflict. The novel does not reduce their relationship to a simple opposition between a virtuous wife and a powerful husband. Instead, it explores the emotional complexities of marriage within a society governed by social expectations.

The question of public opinion becomes especially important. Rama's decisions are frequently connected to the demands of kingship and social reputation. Sita, however, experiences the consequences of those decisions at a deeply personal level.

This difference between political responsibility and personal suffering reveals an important patriarchal contradiction. A woman may be expected to sacrifice herself for the reputation of the family or kingdom, while her own emotional and moral perspective receives less recognition.

The Question of Purity and the Agnipariksha : The idea of female purity occupies a central place in the traditional cultural representation of Sita. The *agnipariksha* is particularly significant because it establishes a moral standard imposed upon the woman.

From a feminist perspective, the episode raises questions about unequal standards of morality. Why must a woman repeatedly demonstrate her purity and loyalty? Why is female honour so closely connected to social legitimacy?

Divakaruni's reinterpretation encourages the reader to understand the emotional and ethical consequences of such expectations. Sita's identity cannot be reduced to her physical purity. Her dignity and humanity exist independently of the judgements imposed upon her.

The issue therefore becomes larger than Sita herself. It represents the broader patriarchal tendency to regulate women's bodies, sexuality, mobility, and social reputation.

Sita's response to her circumstances can consequently be read as an assertion of selfhood. Her strength does not necessarily take the form of open rebellion. It can also appear through endurance, reflection, moral independence, and the refusal to allow patriarchal judgement to define her entire identity.

Myth as a Feminist Space : Divakaruni's greatest achievement in these novels lies in transforming mythology into a space for feminist dialogue. She does not reject the cultural importance of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Instead, she enters into conversation with them.

This strategy is important because myth has considerable cultural authority. When a contemporary writer reinterprets a myth, the new version inevitably interacts with the older cultural memory. The result is not necessarily a replacement of the original story but a multiplication of possible meanings.

Draupadi and Sita therefore become available for new interpretations. They can be understood not only as idealised cultural figures but also as women negotiating social expectations, personal desires, relationships, violence, and identity.

Divakaruni's fiction consequently demonstrates that cultural tradition is not static. It can be questioned, reinterpreted, and reconstructed.

Narrative Voice and Female Subjectivity : Narrative voice is central to Divakaruni's feminist intervention. The act of giving women narrative authority changes their position within the story.

When Draupadi and Sita narrate or become the primary consciousness of their stories, they cease to be merely objects of representation. They become subjects who interpret their own lives.

This distinction is crucial. Representation is never completely neutral. Whoever controls the narrative can determine how characters are remembered. By changing the narrative perspective, Divakaruni changes the reader's relationship with the characters.

The reader is encouraged to understand not merely what happened to Draupadi and Sita but how those events affected them. Emotional experience becomes an important source of knowledge.

In this sense, storytelling becomes an act of empowerment. To tell one's own story is to claim a degree of authority over one's identity and memory.

Comparing Draupadi and Sita : Draupadi and Sita represent different forms of female experience, yet both are deeply connected to patriarchal structures.

Draupadi is associated with political power, conflict, royal authority, and war. Her resistance is often outspoken and confrontational. Sita, on the other hand, is more closely associated with family, marriage, exile, morality, and emotional endurance. Her resistance is frequently quieter and more inward.

Despite these differences, both characters challenge the idea that women should be understood exclusively through their relationships with men.

Draupadi is not simply the wife of the Pandavas, just as Sita is not simply the wife of Rama. Both possess individual consciousness. Their identities include desire, memory, suffering, intelligence, moral judgement, and personal choice.

The comparison also demonstrates that resistance need not have a single form. Draupadi's questioning and Sita's self-definition represent different modes of negotiating patriarchal power.

Tradition, Modernity and Feminist Consciousness: Divakaruni's fiction occupies an interesting space between tradition and modernity. Her novels are deeply rooted in Indian mythology, yet their questions are unmistakably contemporary.

Issues such as female autonomy, emotional identity, marriage, social reputation, gender inequality, and the right to self-definition remain relevant to contemporary women. By placing these concerns within ancient narratives, Divakaruni demonstrates their historical depth.

Her novels suggest that the problems experienced by women cannot always be understood as purely modern phenomena. Patriarchal expectations have long histories, and their cultural representations can survive across generations.

At the same time, the novels do not suggest that Indian tradition is inherently oppressive. Instead, they demonstrate that traditions contain multiple possibilities of interpretation. A feminist rereading can uncover meanings that were previously overlooked.

Contemporary Relevance of Divakaruni's Mythological Fiction : The contemporary relevance of Divakaruni's work lies in its ability to connect ancient cultural narratives with modern questions of identity and gender.

In contemporary Indian society, women continue to negotiate expectations surrounding marriage, family, sexuality, social reputation, professional identity, and personal freedom. Although social conditions have changed considerably, patriarchal assumptions remain visible in many areas of life.

Divakaruni's fiction encourages readers to question the naturalisation of such assumptions. It asks whether sacrifice should always be considered the primary virtue expected from women and whether social honour should depend disproportionately upon women's behaviour.

Her novels also encourage a broader understanding of feminism. Feminist consciousness is not simply opposition to men. It involves questioning unequal structures and recognising women as autonomous subjects capable of making choices and defining their own identities.

Critical Discussion : A significant strength of Divakaruni's approach is that she does not completely abandon the traditional myths. Instead, she works from within them. This allows her to reach readers who already possess some familiarity with the epic stories while encouraging them to reconsider their assumptions.

However, the contemporary reconstruction of myth also raises an important critical issue. Any modern retelling is necessarily shaped by present-day concerns. Divakaruni's Draupadi and Sita are therefore not identical to their counterparts in earlier versions of the epics. They are literary constructions shaped by contemporary feminist consciousness.

This does not diminish their value. Rather, it demonstrates the continuing vitality of mythology. Myths survive precisely because they can be reinterpreted in changing historical contexts.

Divakaruni's novels therefore demonstrate the productive relationship between continuity and change. They preserve the cultural memory of the epics while opening them to new readings.

Conclusion : Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* represent significant examples of contemporary Indian mythological fiction in English. Through the stories of Draupadi and Sita, Divakaruni revisits two of India's most influential epic traditions and places female experience at the centre of the narrative.

Her approach to mythology is neither a simple reproduction of traditional narratives nor a complete rejection of cultural tradition. Instead, she creates a dialogue between inherited myths and contemporary feminist concerns. By foregrounding women's voices, she questions the patriarchal assumptions through which these characters have often been interpreted.

Draupadi's story reveals the relationship between gender, political power, marriage, humiliation, and resistance. Sita's story examines marriage, social morality, purity, sacrifice, and the struggle for self-definition. Although their experiences differ, both characters demonstrate that women possess identities that cannot be reduced to their relationships with men.

The feminist significance of Divakaruni's work lies particularly in her transformation of narrative authority. Draupadi and Sita are not merely women about whom stories are told; they become women through whom stories are understood. This change enables readers to recognise their interiority, desires, conflicts, and agency.

Ultimately, Divakaruni's fiction demonstrates that myths are not closed cultural texts. They can be revisited and reinterpreted according to changing social and intellectual conditions. Her mythological fiction creates space for questioning patriarchal representations and for imagining more complex forms of female identity.

Thus, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* contribute significantly to the contemporary discourse on gender and Indian English literature. They show how the feminist rereading of mythology can recover marginalised perspectives, challenge established notions of ideal womanhood, and create a meaningful dialogue between the past and the present. Divakaruni's work consequently establishes myth as a dynamic literary space in which questions of power, identity, gender, and resistance can continually be reconsidered.

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