



# Echoes of Fire and Earth: Feminist Reimagining of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi and Sita

<sup>1</sup>M. Vijayavalli & <sup>2</sup>Dr. A. Suryanarayanan

<sup>1</sup>Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English

Takshashila University (Tamil Nadu State Private University), Villupuram, Tamil Nadu

Assistant Professor of English, C.S.I. Ewerts Women's Christian College, Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor of English, Takshashila University (Tamil Nadu State Private University), Villupuram, Tamil Nadu



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## Abstract

*The epics Mahabharata and Ramayana have long shaped Indian cultural and moral frameworks, which supports patriarchal norms through their portrayal of women. In her novels The Palace of Illusions and The Forest of Enchantments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits these texts through a feminist lens, granting narrative agency to the silenced women, Draupadi and Sita. This research article titled, "Echoes of Fire and Earth: Feminist Reimaginings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi and Sita" proposes to explore how two mythological women, long confined to the margins of epic narratives, are given voice to their inner world. It also aims to show how Divakaruni reimagines Draupadi and Sita not as idealised symbols of virtue or sacrifice, but as complex, feeling, thinking women navigating love, duty, betrayal, and inner conflict. Draupadi burns with questions and anger, while Sita endures with quiet strength, yet both emerge as courageous women.*

**Keywords:** patriarchal, margins, reimagines, mythological and epic narratives

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a celebrated Indian-American writer known for blending myth, history, and feminism in her storytelling. In her novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, she turns to Indian mythology to reimagine the lives of two iconic women – Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* and Sita from the *Ramayana*. These epics have long held a central place in Indian cultural consciousness, yet their female characters are often portrayed through a narrow lens, defined by obedience, sacrifice, and silence. Divakaruni's

retellings give voice to these women by narrating the stories from their perspective. Through this shift in narrative focus, she challenges the patriarchal undercurrents of the original texts and invites a deeper reflection on the roles women have been assigned in both myth and literature. This research article examines how Divakaruni applies feminist literary strategies to reconstruct the identities of Draupadi and Sita, who have long suppressed the female voice.



Numerous scholars have studied Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* as feminist retellings of ancient Indian epics. Rachna Tyagi interprets *The Palace of Illusions* as a powerful reclamation of Draupadi's voice, highlighting how Divakaruni destabilizes the patriarchal framework of the Mahabharata (Tyagi 170). Shweta Narayan analyses *The Forest of Enchantments* as a narrative of silent resistance, examining Sita's moral agency and interiority in a male-dominated cosmos (Narayan 25). Priya S. and Anupama Bhat emphasise the significance of female narration in reclaiming subjectivity from canonical myths, noting how Divakaruni's heroines act as narrative agents rather than symbolic figures (Priya and Bhat 105). However, existing scholarship often treats the two novels in isolation or as individual case studies of gendered resistance. This article seeks to bridge that gap by offering a comparative feminist literary analysis of both novels, exploring how Divakaruni constructs a continuum of mythic womanhood through Draupadi and Sita. By placing these two reimaginations, this study identifies a shared narrative strategy that critiques patriarchal ideology, celebrates feminine agency, and reshapes the Indian mythological canon through the lens of female experience. This comparative approach reveals deeper understanding of how myth can be reappropriated to empower contemporary gender discourse.

Draupadi, the narrator of *The Palace of Illusions*, is one of the most enigmatic and controversial figures in the *Mahabharata*. Born from fire, she is often portrayed in the epic as a cause of destruction, a woman whose pride and defiance triggered a devastating war. Yet, her own voice is conspicuously absent. In Divakaruni's retelling, Draupadi speaks boldly, vulnerably, and with reflection. Her internal monologue reveals a woman who grapples with identity, duty and love, resisting the roles imposed upon her by fate and patriarchal norms. This reclaiming of voice is at the heart of feminist literary practice. Draupadi, in *The Palace of Illusions*, is not the passive instrument of male

action. She is acutely aware of the political implications of her choices and the hypocrisies of the men around her. Her marriage to five brothers is not romanticised but depicted as a source of emotional dissonance. She struggles with her divided affections and the burdens of polyandry, acknowledging how little control she has over her destiny even as she attempts to assert herself within its confines.

Divakaruni uses Draupadi's perspective to unmask the gendered power structures within *Mahabharata*. The infamous disrobing scene, wherein Draupadi is dragged into court and humiliated, becomes a crucible of feminist resistance in Divakaruni's hands. Instead of being a silent victim, Draupadi confronts the elders with piercing questions: "What is dharma? Who decides it? And why does it always favor men?" (Divakaruni 189). These interrogations challenge the moral foundations of the epic itself, positioning Draupadi as a critic of the very text that created her.

*The Forest of Enchantments* rewrites *Ramayana* through Sita's eyes, which gives an intimate look at a woman who was long idealised but seldom understood. Sita is traditionally revered for her loyalty, chastity, and unwavering obedience. However, these very traits have been used to bind women within narrow definitions of virtue. Divakaruni's Sita complicates this image. She is gentle yet assertive, spiritual yet questioning, and above all, conscious of her place in a world governed by male codes of honour. Sita's narrative begins not with her abduction or her trials, but with her love for storytelling and nature, framing her as a creative individual. As she recounts her life, Sita reflects on the societal expectations that define her. Her marriage to Rama is filled with affection but marked by an unbridgeable distance, since he is more loyal to his kingly duties than to her emotional needs. When Rama banishes her to the forest based on public gossip, it is not merely a betrayal of their relationship, but an indictment of a system that values appearances over justice.

Divakaruni's Sita is not a passive recipient of suffering. While she endures exile, loneliness and



rejection, she also questions, resists, and chooses to walk away from a world that refuses to acknowledge her truth. Her final decision to return to the earth is not a defeat but a reclaiming of agency. In contrast to the traditional reading where Sita's return to the earth is an act of sacrifice, Divakaruni presents it as a refusal to compromise her dignity further. A woman, choosing self-respect over societal validation becomes a powerful feminist gesture in her novel.

Both novels utilise first-person narration that grants voice to women historically relegated to the margins. Through interior monologues, emotional reflections and pointed critiques, Draupadi and Sita emerge not as ideals or villains but as fully human. This narrative strategy challenges traditional male-centered storytelling. By giving a deep and personal access to the thoughts and feelings of epic women like Draupadi and Sita, Chitra Banerjee made them a real central character to the novels.

Divakaruni engages in intertextual dialogue with the original epics. Her novels are not merely modern adaptations but they are counter-narratives. By reinterpreting pivotal events such as Draupadi's swayamvar or Sita's trial by fire, Divakaruni reveals the gendered undercurrents of these stories. She challenges the glorification of war, duty and honour, showing how these ideals often come at the expense of women's well-being. The author also critiques the myth of the ideal woman. Both Draupadi and Sita are subjected to impossible standards. Draupadi is scorned for being outspoken, yet expected to uphold family honour. Sita is celebrated for her purity, yet discarded at the first sign of scandal. Divakaruni portrays how these myths continue to shape contemporary gender norms and highlights the need to revisit and revise the epics.

In crafting these retellings, Divakaruni also pays attention to female relationships, another key concern of feminist theory. Draupadi's bond with Krishna, her complex interactions with Kunti, and her jealousy of Subhadra depict a spectrum of emotions and alliances. Sita's friendships with Mandodari and the women of the ashram provide a vision of solidarity amidst suffering. These relationships affirm that women's lives are not solely

defined by their connection to men. Through these narratives, Divakaruni not only reclaims female characters from myth but also interrogates the institutions that continue to regulate women's lives – marriage, motherhood and societal expectations. Her protagonists do not conform to the ideal of the submissive woman. Instead, they struggle, protest, and redefine their identities.

This study finds that both *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* are feminist interventions that reclaim narrative space for women in Indian mythology. Divakaruni's use of voice, interiority and resistance provides a nuanced critique of patriarchy and offers a reimagined mythology where women are not merely symbols but agents of their destinies. The novels challenge the traditional valourisation of suffering as a feminine virtue and instead advocate for self-awareness, dignity and choice.

The implications of Divakaruni's work extend beyond literary innovation. In an age where reinterpretations of cultural heritage are shaping new identities, these novels encourage readers to question inherited norms for a more expansive understanding of femininity, identity, and resistance. They urge a re-examination of what it means to be a woman in a society. By giving Draupadi and Sita the power to narrate, reflect and rebel, Divakaruni does not simply retell epics but she transforms them. Through *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives Draupadi and Sita a voice of their own which was denied for them in centuries of tradition. No longer confined to silence or sacrifice, these women rise from myth with fire in their words and the strength of the earth beneath them. They no longer follow the paths written for them but they rewrite them. In reclaiming their stories, Divakaruni reclaims a space for all women to speak, resist and transform.

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