

## Voices Unbound: Feminine Agency in Mythological Retellings by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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### Abstract:

*The reinterpretation of mythological narratives in contemporary literature has opened new avenues for revisiting entrenched cultural paradigms, especially concerning gender roles and female subjectivity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent voice in diasporic Indian literature, reimagines mythological women through a feminist lens, granting them narrative authority, emotional depth, and intellectual agency. This research article explores how Divakaruni reconstructs feminine agency in her mythological retellings, particularly in *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. By foregrounding the voices of Draupadi and Sita, traditionally marginalized within patriarchal epic narratives, Divakaruni challenges canonical interpretations and offers a nuanced portrayal of women as active agents rather than passive recipients of destiny. The study employs feminist literary criticism, narrative theory, and cultural analysis to examine the transformation of mythological women from symbolic figures into complex individuals navigating identity, autonomy, and resistance. Ultimately, this paper argues that Divakaruni's retellings serve not merely as literary reinterpretations but as cultural interventions that redefine femininity and empower women's voices in both historical and contemporary contexts.*

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### Introduction:

Mythology, as a repository of cultural values and collective consciousness, has historically played a pivotal role in shaping societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles. In Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, female characters often occupy central narrative positions yet are paradoxically denied narrative voice and autonomy. Their identities are frequently constructed through the lens of patriarchal expectations, rendering them symbols of virtue, sacrifice, or transgression rather than autonomous individuals.

In recent decades, contemporary writers have revisited these mythological narratives to interrogate and reinterpret their underlying ideologies. Among them, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out for her compelling reimaginings of mythological women. Her works *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) present alternative perspectives by allowing female protagonists to narrate their own stories. Through these narratives, Divakaruni challenges the androcentric bias of traditional epics and foregrounds feminine agency as a central thematic concern.

**Objectives:** This article seeks to explore how Divakaruni reclaims and reconstructs feminine agency in her mythological retellings. It examines how her narratives disrupt traditional power structures, reframe female identity, and contribute to a broader discourse on gender and representation.

### **Theoretical Framework: Feminist Literary Criticism and Agency**

The notion of agency occupies a central position within feminist literary criticism, which critically examines how women negotiate autonomy within systems structured by patriarchal power. Agency, in this context, may be understood as the ability of individuals to exercise choice, assert independence, and actively shape their socio-cultural realities (Butler 1990). However, traditional mythological narratives frequently curtail such agency by confining female characters to roles that are constructed and regulated by male authority, thereby limiting their scope for self-expression and decision-making.

Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have foregrounded the idea that gender is not an innate or fixed identity but rather a socio-cultural construct shaped through repeated performances and institutional norms (Beauvoir 1949; Butler 1990). Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores the process through which femininity is culturally inscribed, while Butler further complicates this notion by emphasizing the performative nature of gender identity. Within such a theoretical framework, the rewriting of mythological narratives emerges as a powerful act of resistance, enabling authors to interrogate dominant ideologies and reconfigure the representation of women beyond traditional stereotypes.

The works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni resonate strongly with this feminist paradigm. By reimagining mythological women as conscious, articulate, and self-reflective individuals, Divakaruni disrupts the conventional portrayal of female characters as passive or peripheral figures. Her narratives foreground introspection, emotional depth, and ethical complexity, thereby transforming mythological women into fully realized human subjects. In doing so, she not only recovers suppressed voices but also redefines agency as an intrinsic and dynamic aspect of feminine identity (Divakaruni 2008; 2019).

### **Reclaiming Voice: Narrative Authority in Divakaruni's Works**

A significant strategy through which Divakaruni constructs feminine agency is the reclamation of narrative voice. In her novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, the stories are recounted from the perspectives of Draupadi and Sita respectively, marking a decisive shift from the male-centered narration of the original epics. This reorientation of narrative authority enables the protagonists to articulate their inner thoughts, desires, and conflicts, thereby asserting their subjectivity within a traditionally patriarchal narrative framework (Lanser 1992).

**Draupadi's Voice in *The Palace of Illusions*:** Draupadi, a pivotal character in the *Mahabharata*, has often been depicted as a symbolic figure whose role is largely confined to catalyzing the events leading to the Kurukshetra war. However, her psychological depth and personal experiences remain underexplored in the canonical text. Divakaruni's retelling challenges this limitation by positioning Draupadi as a reflective and assertive narrator who critically engages with the socio-cultural norms governing her life (Divakaruni 2008).

Through her first-person narration, Draupadi questions the structures of patriarchy that shape her destiny, including the circumstances of her polyandrous marriage and her humiliation in the royal court. She expresses a spectrum of emotions—anger, desire, ambition, and vulnerability—that are often muted or omitted in traditional portrayals. This articulation of suppressed emotions serves as an act of resistance, enabling Draupadi to reclaim her narrative space and assert her individuality. Consequently, Divakaruni transforms her into a multidimensional character whose agency lies in her capacity to question, interpret, and redefine her experiences.

**Sita's Perspective in *The Forest of Enchantments*:** In contrast, Sita's representation in the *Ramayana* has historically been shaped by ideals of obedience, chastity, and self-sacrifice. Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a revisionist perspective by allowing Sita to narrate her own story, thereby granting her narrative autonomy and emotional depth (Divakaruni 2019).

Through this reimagined voice, Sita emerges as an introspective and resilient figure who negotiates the tensions between personal desire and societal expectation. Her narrative foregrounds her emotional struggles, moral dilemmas, and enduring strength in the face of exile, abduction, and societal scrutiny. Importantly, her final decision to return to the earth is reinterpreted not as passive submission but as a conscious assertion of selfhood and dignity. In this sense, Divakaruni challenges the traditional glorification of female sacrifice and instead emphasizes self-respect, autonomy, and inner strength as essential components of feminine agency.

### **Feminine Agency and Resistance**

In the mythological retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the female protagonists transcend the role of passive narrators and emerge as active agents of resistance. Their narratives are not limited to recounting events but extend to challenging and negotiating the constraints imposed upon them by patriarchal structures. This resistance is expressed through emotional defiance, intellectual interrogation, and ethical resolve, thereby redefining the contours of feminine agency within mythological discourse (Divakaruni 2008; 2019).

**Emotional and Psychological Resistance:** Both Draupadi and Sita demonstrate remarkable emotional and psychological resilience in the face of profound adversity, including betrayal, humiliation, and exile. Their introspective narratives reveal an ongoing tension between internal desires and external expectations, highlighting the complexity of their lived experiences. This interiority, often absent in canonical versions of the epics, allows the protagonists to critically engage with their circumstances rather than passively accept them.

Draupadi's reflections on her humiliation in the Kaurava court, for instance, are imbued with anger and a sense of injustice, which challenge the normalization of her suffering (Divakaruni 2008). Similarly, Sita's contemplations during her exile and captivity reveal a deep awareness of her own dignity and self-worth (Divakaruni 2019). Such psychological depth reinforces their agency, as they resist internalizing the limitations imposed by patriarchal expectations. As feminist critics suggest, the articulation of inner consciousness itself constitutes a form of resistance, enabling women to reclaim their subjectivity (Showalter 1985).

**Challenging Patriarchal Norms:** A critical dimension of feminine agency in Divakaruni's works lies in the protagonists' ability to question and subvert patriarchal norms embedded within mythological traditions. Draupadi's interrogation of her treatment in the royal court exposes the inherent injustice of a system that commodifies women and denies them autonomy. By voicing her dissent, she destabilizes the moral authority of the patriarchal order and asserts her right to dignity and justice (Divakaruni 2008).

In a similar vein, Sita challenges the rigid ideals of purity and chastity that define her societal value. Her resistance is particularly evident in her refusal to conform unquestioningly to the expectations placed upon her, especially during the trial by fire and her eventual abandonment. By reinterpreting these episodes through Sita's perspective, Divakaruni critiques the ideological constructs that equate female virtue with submission and suffering (Divakaruni 2019). Such acts of questioning align with feminist assertions that resistance begins with the deconstruction of normative frameworks that perpetuate gender inequality (Butler 1990).

**Rewriting Destiny:** Traditional mythological narratives often emphasize the inevitability of fate, thereby limiting the scope for individual agency. In contrast, Divakaruni's retellings foreground the capacity of individuals to shape their own destinies through conscious choice and moral deliberation. Her protagonists are not merely subjects of destiny but active participants who engage with and reinterpret their circumstances.

Draupadi's determination to seek justice and assert her identity reflects a refusal to be defined solely by the events that befall her (Divakaruni 2008). Likewise, Sita's ultimate decision to return to the earth is portrayed not as an act of resignation but as a deliberate assertion of autonomy and self-respect (Divakaruni 2019). By emphasizing choice and self-determination, Divakaruni reconfigures destiny as a dynamic interplay between external forces and individual will, thereby reinforcing the centrality of agency in her narratives.

### **Identity and Selfhood**

The exploration of identity and selfhood constitutes a fundamental aspect of Divakaruni's mythological retellings. Her protagonists engage in an ongoing process of self-definition, seeking to transcend the roles and identities imposed upon them by societal norms. This thematic focus underscores the transformative potential of agency in shaping individual identity (Hall 1996).

**Negotiating Multiple Identities:** Draupadi and Sita inhabit multiple roles—as daughters, wives, queens, and individuals—each of which carries distinct expectations and responsibilities. Their narratives reflect the challenges of negotiating these overlapping identities while striving to maintain a sense of personal integrity. Divakaruni portrays this negotiation as a fluid and dynamic process, wherein identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed in response to changing circumstances.

Draupadi's struggle to reconcile her personal desires with her duties as a queen and wife illustrates the tensions inherent in navigating multiple identities (Divakaruni 2008). Similarly, Sita's journey highlights the complexities of balancing her roles as a devoted wife, a mother, and an autonomous individual (Divakaruni 2019). This multiplicity aligns with contemporary feminist theories that view identity as fragmented and evolving rather than fixed and singular (Hall 1996).

**Assertion of Individuality:** Despite the constraints imposed upon them, both protagonists assert their individuality in significant ways. Draupadi's intellectual curiosity and assertiveness distinguish her from the passive archetype often associated with mythological women. Her willingness to question authority and articulate her desires underscores her commitment to self-expression and autonomy (Divakaruni 2008).

Similarly, Sita's moral strength and introspective clarity enable her to assert her individuality, even in the face of societal rejection. Her refusal to undergo repeated trials to prove her purity represents a powerful assertion of self-respect and independence (Divakaruni 2019). Through these portrayals, Divakaruni emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and personal conviction as essential components of feminine agency.

## Cultural and Contemporary Relevance

The mythological retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni extend far beyond the mere reworking of ancient narratives; they function as critical interventions in contemporary discourses on gender, identity, and empowerment. By re-envisioning mythological women as conscious agents rather than symbolic figures, Divakaruni effectively bridges the divide between tradition and modernity. Her narratives reinterpret culturally embedded myths in ways that resonate with present-day concerns, thereby transforming mythology into a living and evolving discourse (Divakaruni 2008; 2019).

Through this process of reimagining, Divakaruni challenges the static and often patriarchal interpretations of classical texts, offering instead a dynamic framework in which mythological figures can be understood in relation to contemporary feminist ideologies. As scholars have argued, the reinterpretation of myth serves as a powerful cultural tool for questioning dominant narratives and reconstructing marginalized voices (Doniger 2009). In this sense, Divakaruni's work not only revisits the past but actively reshapes it to address the ethical and social imperatives of the present.

**Relevance to Modern Feminism:** The thematic concerns in Divakaruni's works—such as autonomy, identity formation, resistance, and self-articulation—closely align with the central tenets of modern feminist thought. Her protagonists, Draupadi and Sita, embody the struggle for selfhood within restrictive socio-cultural frameworks, thereby reflecting the lived realities of women across different historical and cultural contexts.

Draupadi's assertiveness and refusal to remain silent in the face of injustice resonate with feminist calls for vocal resistance against systemic oppression (Divakaruni 2008). Similarly, Sita's introspective strength and eventual assertion of independence challenge traditional ideals of feminine passivity and sacrifice, aligning with contemporary feminist critiques of gendered expectations (Divakaruni 2019). These portrayals echo bell hooks' emphasis on the importance of resistance and self-definition in the struggle against patriarchal domination (hooks 2000).

Furthermore, Divakaruni's reimagined characters serve as empowering figures for modern readers, illustrating that agency can be exercised even within deeply restrictive environments. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, her narratives contribute to an ongoing feminist project of reclaiming history and redefining the parameters of female identity.

**Impact on Literary Discourse:** Divakaruni's contributions have played a pivotal role in reshaping the genre of mythological retellings, particularly within the context of Indian English literature. Her focus on female perspectives has challenged the dominance of androcentric narratives and encouraged a re-evaluation of canonical texts from a gender-sensitive standpoint.

By centering women's voices, Divakaruni has inspired a new wave of writers to explore mythological narratives through feminist lenses, thereby expanding the scope and diversity of contemporary literature. This shift reflects a broader trend in literary studies, where marginalized voices are increasingly foregrounded as sites of critical inquiry (Spivak 1988). In giving narrative authority to characters like Draupadi and Sita, Divakaruni not only reclaims their stories but also redefines the possibilities of storytelling itself.

Her work thus occupies a significant position within the evolving landscape of feminist literature, where the act of rewriting becomes both a literary and political endeavor aimed at dismantling hierarchical structures of representation.

## Comparative Insights: Draupadi and Sita

While Draupadi and Sita share common experiences of marginalization within patriarchal frameworks, their expressions of agency differ markedly, reflecting the diversity and complexity of feminine subjectivity. Divakaruni's nuanced portrayals underscore that agency is not a monolithic concept but one that manifests in varied and context-specific forms.

Draupadi's resistance is often explicit, confrontational, and outwardly directed. Her vocal defiance in the royal court and her persistent questioning of authority exemplify a form of agency that seeks to challenge and overturn oppressive structures (Divakaruni 2008). In contrast, Sita's agency is more introspective and internalized, characterized by moral resilience, emotional strength, and quiet defiance. Her decisions, particularly her final withdrawal into the earth, signify a deeply personal assertion of dignity and autonomy rather than overt rebellion (Divakaruni 2019).

This contrast aligns with feminist arguments that resistance can take multiple forms, ranging from overt political action to subtle acts of self-preservation and self-definition (Butler 1990). By presenting these differing modes of agency, Divakaruni highlights the multiplicity of women's experiences and resists the homogenization of feminine identity.

Ultimately, the comparative study of Draupadi and Sita reveals that feminine agency is both diverse and dynamic, shaped by individual circumstances as well as broader socio-cultural contexts. Through these characters, Divakaruni not only reclaims mythological narratives but also redefines the ways in which women's voices and identities are understood in literature and society.

## Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythological retellings represent a significant departure from traditional narratives by centering the voices and experiences of female protagonists. Through her nuanced portrayals of Draupadi and Sita, she reclaims feminine agency and challenges the patriarchal structures embedded in mythological traditions. Her works demonstrate that mythology is not a static body of knowledge but a dynamic and evolving discourse that can be reinterpreted to reflect contemporary values. By giving voice to previously marginalized characters, Divakaruni not only enriches literary narratives but also contributes to a broader cultural movement toward gender equality and empowerment.

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