

Re-imagining Draupadi: Tracing the Journey from Nationalist Icon to Subaltern Voice in *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

The research paper aims to explore the evolution of the character of Draupadi in the Indian epic Mahabharata and how she has been portrayed in various adaptations throughout history. From being a simple housewife in the original epic to a nationalist icon during the colonial and post-colonial eras, Draupadi has undergone significant transformations in the way she is depicted. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in subaltern studies, which seek to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. As a result, Draupadi has been reimagined as a subaltern figure, exploring the complexities of her experiences as a subaltern woman and a victim of political manipulation. This paper focuses on the subaltern portrayal of Draupadi in the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee, where she is depicted as a courageous and bold woman who defies societal expectations and reclaims her agency. The study highlights the significance of revisiting ancient texts and reinterpreting their characters in light of contemporary perspectives. This research paper provides ample evidence of Draupadi's transformation from a nationalist icon to a subaltern subject in the novel *The Palace of Illusions*.

Keywords: Subaltern Woman, Draupadi, Nationalist Icon, Marginalized

Introduction

The *Mahabharata*, acclaimed as the finest epic of all times tells the story of the Kuru clan. It is a complex narrative about the conflict between cousin brothers, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, is the major character of the epic. She is depicted as a strong woman. The character of Draupadi, a wife of the Pandavas in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, has been a subject of much fascination and retelling over the centuries. From being a simple housewife in the original epic to being portrayed as a nationalist icon in adaptations during the colonial and post-colonial eras, Draupadi has undergone several transformations in the way she is depicted. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in subaltern studies, which seek to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. This has resulted in the emergence of new depictions of Draupadi as a subaltern subject, who is seen as a voice of resistance and courage in the face of oppression and injustice. In the nationalist reading of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often considered a symbol of Indian womanhood and a role model for the ideal Hindu woman. However, there is a significant shift in this perspective as new adaptations of the *Mahabharata* have presented Draupadi as a subaltern figure, exploring the complexities of her experiences as a subaltern woman, and a victim of political manipulation.

In early adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi was often portrayed as a nationalist icon. During the colonial period, Indian writers sought to reclaim their cultural heritage and assert their independence by creating nationalist versions of the epic. These versions emphasized Draupadi's loyalty to her husband, the Pandavas, and her unwavering devotion to the Hindu cause. However, as India moved towards independence, the depiction of Draupadi changed. In the 20th century, writers began to reinterpret the epic from a feminist perspective, emphasizing Draupadi's strength and courage in the face of adversity. One of the recent examples of this new interpretation is Mani Rao's translation of the

Mahabharata. Rao portrays Draupadi as a proud and dignified woman who refuses to be silenced in the face of injustice. The translation emphasizes Draupadi's resistance and refusal to be dominated by the male figures in the story. In more recent years, Draupadi has undergone yet another transformation. In Chitra Banerjee's novel *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is depicted as a subaltern subject, a woman who has been marginalized and oppressed by the patriarchal society in which she lives. The novel challenges the traditional depiction of Draupadi as a passive victim and instead portrays her as a courageous and bold woman who voices resistance against the forces of oppression.

The research paper explores the various avatars of Draupadi throughout history and it attempts to chart the journey of her transformation from a nationalist symbol to a subaltern subject in the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee. The paper will first provide a brief overview of the Mahabharata and the character of Draupadi, before delving into the various adaptations and retellings of her story, and the different ways in which she has been depicted during the nationalist period. The main focus of the paper will be on the subaltern portrayal of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*, and how the author has used her to voice the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. The paper will conclude by highlighting the significance of the subaltern portrayal of Draupadi in the current historical and cultural context.

The Role of Draupadi in The Nationalist Narrative

The nationalist reading of ancient Hindu texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* emerged during the nationalist period i.e. the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During the period, writers, translators, poets, etc. tried to reclaim India's cultural heritage and assert its independence from British colonial rule through the nationalist readings of these texts. Thus, Draupadi, the central figure of the *Mahabharata* emerged as a model for the ideal Hindu woman. She is portrayed as a strong, virtuous, and chaste woman who remains loyal to

her husband, even in the face of great hardship. This view of Draupadi was reinforced by the writings of Indian nationalist leaders like Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, who saw her as a symbol of India's cultural and spiritual heritage. Thus the representation of Draupadi transformed as writers sought to reclaim and reinterpret India's glorious cultural heritage. Following are some examples of adaptations from this period:

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath* was written during the period of Indian Independence and it chronicles the history of the Indian nationalist movement. In the novel, Draupadi is depicted as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, and Chatterjee employs her character to propagate his religious and political views. He portrays Draupadi as a devout Hindu woman who does not waver in her devotion to Hinduism, even in the face of adversity. Through her character, Chatterjee endorses the importance of Hindu dharma as a source of strength and resilience for the Indians.

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* uses the character of Draupadi to depict the deplorable condition of Indian women under colonial rule (Tagore 58). Through her character, Tagore critiques the subjugation, and patriarchal norms of Indian society and highlights the need for women's empowerment. He portrays Draupadi as a woman who is constantly struggling between two worlds - the traditional Indian world, which is oppressive towards women, and the modern Western world, which offers women more freedom but also new forms of oppression. Through her struggles, Tagore debates the need for Indian women to reclaim their agency and resist patriarchal norms.

Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* is a work of political philosophy that was written during the Indian independence movement. In the work, Gandhi portrays Draupadi as a symbol of India's cultural and spiritual heritage, using her character to argue for the need for India to reclaim its cultural roots and resist colonialism (Gandhi 47). He depicts Draupadi as a woman who embodies the cultural and spiritual values of India and argues that these values

are essential for India to regain its independence and resist colonial rule. Through her character, Gandhi calls for Indians to resist colonialism and reclaim their cultural heritage.

In R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, Draupadi is portrayed as a symbol of the changing status of Indian women. Through her character, Narayan explores how Indian society is transforming as a result of colonialism (Narayan 76). He portrays Draupadi as a woman who is caught between two worlds - the traditional Indian world, which is patriarchal and oppressive towards women, and the modern Western world, which offers women more freedom but also new forms of oppression. Through her struggles, Narayan argues for the need for Indian women to reclaim their agency and resist patriarchal norms, even as they navigate the changing realities of modern India.

In the early 20th century, the *Mahabharata* was also adapted into several nationalist plays and adaptations, as part of the Indian independence movement. In these adaptations, Draupadi was portrayed as a symbol of nationalism, and a strong, courageous woman who fought for the rights and freedom of her people. To illustrate, in the play *Kalyana Sougandhikam* by the Malayalam playwright K.P. Kesava Menon, Draupadi was portrayed as a nationalist icon who challenged the colonial powers and spoke out against injustice and oppression (Menon, 1989, p. 32). . Similarly, in the play *Bhakta Prahlada* by the Telugu playwright, Gurazada Apparao, Draupadi was depicted as a brave and bold woman who fought against the oppression of the British colonial powers (Apparao, 2012, p. 45). Through these adaptations, Draupadi was transformed into a powerful symbol of resistance, who inspired the Indian people to fight for their rights and freedom.

Thus, writers during the nationalist period sought to reinterpret and reclaim the character of Draupadi to propagate their political and cultural ideology. Through their adaptations, they presented a counter-image of India by challenging colonial representations of India and also asserting India's spiritual and cultural heritage. Thus the character of

Draupadi was used to explore the changing status of Indian women and the impact of colonialism on Indian society. These writers sought to advance their political and cultural agendas by depicting Draupadi as a symbol of Hindu nationalism, women's empowerment, cultural heritage, and changing societal norms. Writers deployed her character to endorse Indian values and heritage.

A New Perspective on Draupadi: Exploring Her Subaltern Identity

In recent years, Draupadi has emerged from a nationalist ideal to a subaltern figure. She is depicted as a victim of political manipulation. The subaltern reading of Draupadi highlights her oppression and tends to understand her experiences as a woman in a male-dominated patriarchal society. She is no longer just an ideal of Indian womanhood, but a complex figure who embodies the contradictions and complexities of the experiences of women in India. The section will analyze the character of Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee's novel *The Palace of Illusions* as an instance of subaltern reading. In this novel, Banerjee voices the experiences and complexities of Draupadi's life by recreating the story of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective. Thus, Draupadi is no longer just an ideal of Indian womanhood but becomes a symbol of womanhood that embodies the complexities of the experiences of women.

The growing interest in subaltern studies during contemporary times seek to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. This has resulted in the emergence of new depictions of Draupadi as a subaltern subject, who is seen as a voice of resistance and courage in the face of oppression and injustice. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee presents a subaltern portrayal of Draupadi, who is depicted as a woman who must navigate the complexities of gender, class, and caste in a patriarchal society. Despite her situation, she voices her resistance against patriarchal norms and refuses to be a passive victim. To illustrate, when she is disrobed in public, she raises her voice against the injustice

of the situation and refuses to be silenced. This depiction presents Draupadi as a subaltern woman who resists patriarchal norms subverting traditional representations of her as a passive victim and instead portrays her as a powerful and assertive character.

Through her experiences and perspectives, the author sheds light on the struggles and challenges faced by marginalized communities, and how they resist and challenge the dominant cultural and political norms. For example, in the novel, Draupadi is shown to be a voice of resistance against the patriarchal norms and values of her society, as well as the dominant cultural and political norms that perpetuate oppression and inequality. Through her struggles and challenges, she provides a powerful representation of the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities, and how they resist and challenge the dominant cultural and political norms.

Representation of her identity: In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often portrayed as a passive wife who is subservient to her husbands. However, in the novel, she is depicted as a strong and independent woman who constantly challenges patriarchal norms (Divakaruni, 45). This depiction of her character is a significant departure from the original text and highlights how modern adaptations aim to empower subaltern subjects.

Depiction of her relationship with the Pandavas: In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's relationship with the Pandavas is largely centered around her role as a wife. However, in *The Palace of Illusions*, the writer explores the emotional complexities of her relationship with each of the Pandavas, making her a more multi-dimensional character.

The portrayal of her inner thoughts and emotions: In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's thoughts and emotions are not often explored. However, *The Palace of Illusions*, gives voice to her innermost thoughts and feelings, allowing the reader to understand her perspective and experience (Divakaruni, 125). This serves to humanize her character and make her a more relatable figure.

Depiction of her agency: In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often portrayed as a passive victim of circumstances. However, in *The Palace of Illusions*, she is depicted as a proactive and assertive woman who takes charge of her own life. This representation of her character highlights how modern adaptations aim to challenge patriarchal norms and empower subaltern subjects. These examples demonstrate how the representation of Draupadi has transformed a nationalist subject in the *Mahabharata* into a subaltern subject in modern versions such as *The Palace of Illusions*. Through these adaptations, the character of Draupadi has been reinterpreted and reinterpreted in ways that aim to empower subaltern subjects and challenge patriarchal norms.

Draupadi's courage and boldness are also central themes in the novel. Throughout the story, she demonstrates her bravery and determination by standing up against patriarchal violence and speaking out against oppressive structures of power. For example, when she is forced into a polyandrous marriage, she refuses to accept the situation passively and instead asserts her agency by speaking out against injustice. This depiction of Draupadi as a courageous and bold woman who resists patriarchal violence and speaks truth to power subverts traditional representations of her as a passive and submissive character and instead portrays her as a powerful and assertive woman.

The depiction of Draupadi as a voice of resistance is a key aspect of her character in the text. Throughout the novel, she refuses to be silenced and instead speaks out against the injustices and oppressions that she faces. For example, when she is disrobed in public, she refuses to accept the situation passively and instead speaks out against the injustice, asserting her agency and resisting patriarchal violence. This depiction of Draupadi as a voice of resistance subverts traditional representations of her as a passive victim and instead portrays her as a powerful and assertive woman who is unafraid to speak out against injustice. The novel represents a significant departure from traditional representations of Draupadi as a

passive victim of patriarchal violence. In the novel, Draupadi is portrayed as a subaltern, courageous, bold, and assertive woman who resists patriarchal norms and oppressive structures of power through her words and actions. This depiction of Draupadi as a voice of resistance, courage, and boldness challenges traditional representations of her as a passive victim and instead portrays her as a powerful and assertive woman who is unafraid to speak out against injustice and oppression. This representation of Draupadi is an important example of how women's voices can be amplified and their resistance celebrated through literature and storytelling.

Conclusion

The character of Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharata* has undergone a significant transformation in modern adaptations and translations, particularly in the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee. From being portrayed as a nationalist icon in early adaptations, she has now evolved into a subaltern subject who voices her resistance and challenges the patriarchal norms of society. The author has depicted Draupadi as a courageous and bold woman who defies societal expectations and reclaims her agency.

The research paper analyzed the various adaptations and translations of the *Mahabharata*, highlighting the transformation of Draupadi's character from a nationalist icon to a subaltern subject. The analysis was carried out by examining the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, R.K. Narayan, Mahatma Gandhi, and Chitra Banerjee. Through the use of examples from their works, the research paper showcased how each writer has portrayed Draupadi differently, reflecting the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they were written. The study highlights the significance of revisiting ancient texts and reinterpreting their characters in light of contemporary perspectives. By portraying Draupadi as a subaltern subject, Chitra Banerjee has challenged the patriarchal norms of society and given voice to the resistance of marginalized communities. This

research paper is a testament to the transformative power of literature and the importance of revisiting and reinterpreting ancient texts in contemporary times. The novel provides ample evidence to depict Draupadi's transformation from a nationalist icon to a subaltern subject.

In the novel, Draupadi reclaims her agency and defies societal expectations by challenging patriarchal norms and asserting her desires. For example, she refuses to submit to the practices of polyandry and instead chooses the man she wants to marry. Similarly, Draupadi is depicted as a woman who speaks out against injustice and oppression. In one scene, she courageously stands up to Duryodhana, the primary antagonist, and denounces his actions, despite being outnumbered and outgunned. The novel presents Draupadi as a subaltern woman who subverts patriarchal norms and expectations. She does this by rejecting the traditional role of a wife and instead pursuing her own goals and desires. It celebrates diversity and inclusiveness, as demonstrated by Draupadi's acceptance of people from different castes, religions, and backgrounds. This is a significant departure from the nationalist icon portrayal of Draupadi, which often perpetuated the dominant cultural and religious norms. Throughout the novel, Draupadi is depicted as a courageous and bold woman who defies societal expectations and challenges patriarchal norms. She is a symbol of resistance and courage, inspiring others to stand up for their rights and beliefs. These examples demonstrate the transformation of Draupadi's character in the novel from a nationalist icon to a subaltern subject. The novel provides a contemporary perspective on the Mahabharata, reinterpreting its characters and exploring the themes of resistance, agency, and subversion of patriarchal norms.

Thus, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee represents a major departure from traditional interpretations of the character of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. Instead of depicting her as a passive, submissive wife, the novel portrays Draupadi as a subaltern woman who reclaims her agency, voices resistance against patriarchal oppression, and

subverts societal expectations. This transformation from a nationalist icon to a subaltern subject reflects a broader shift in contemporary representations of women in Indian literature and society. By celebrating diversity and embodying courage, Draupadi serves as an inspiring role model for contemporary readers, demonstrating the power of resistance and the importance of challenging oppressive norms.

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