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Rewriting Draupadi: Gender, Dharma, and Resistance in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract: Draupadi from The Mahabharata has long embodied contested notions of dharma. While the canonical texts situate her within the patriarchal framework, the contemporary retellings break away from this tradition to reclaim her agency to critique gendered violence and articulate new form of justice. In this paper, two pivotal retellings: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions (2008) and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978) has been examined. This analysis traces how disparate socio-political contexts shape female resistance by juxtaposing these two works. Divakaruni's Draupadi navigates the "palace"—a space or domain of privilege and domesticity employing psychological exploration and discursive negotiation and dialogues to challenge the epic's masculinist ethos or male-oriented values. In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi inhabits and resides in the "jungle," a conflict zone where requires physical resistance. Stripped of divine intervention, Dopdi weaponizes and uses her violated body against state oppression, breaking down the social contract of shame that defines and characterizes the royal Draupadi. While both texts reconfigure and reshapes Draupadi as a figure or symbol of protest against patriarchal and political power, they reveal and showcase distinct feminist trajectories: Divakaruni offers a "palace feminism" of voice and subjectivity, whereas Mahasweta Devi presents a "subaltern feminism" of radical, material resistance. Collectively, these retellings demonstrate that when interpreted through diverse feminist lenses, dharma transforms from an instrument of patriarchal oppression into a site of liberation, exposing the persistent silences of classical narratives.

Keywords: Dharma, Draupadi, Gender Justice, Subalternity, Literary Retellings.

Introduction

The Vastraharan Draupadi's attempted public disrobing in the Kuru assembly stands and serves as the "primal wound" of the Mahabharata. In the canonical Vyasa epic, this harrowing and distressing moment is often simplified to a tableau of patriarchal paralysis or divine intervention, rendering and making Draupadi a silent and muted, passive vessel or compliant figure through which male definitions of honor and status are contested. For thousands of years, her story has been linked to a principle of inevitable suffering and wifely duty. However, contemporary literature has ruptured or broken this silence, reclaiming and redefining the epic not as an unchanging tale of male bravery, but as a dynamic genealogy of female resistance and defiance.

At the core of this reclamation is the examination of dharma. Rather than a universal, divine absolute, dharma is depicted in these retellings as a rigid, gendered, and exclusionary construct and framework designed to consolidate and strengthen patriarchal power and authority by defining the boundaries of "virtuous" womanhood. This paper examines this paradigm shift by juxtaposing two distinct retellings: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions (2008) and Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978). It has been argued that while both authors successfully and effectively free or liberate the heroine from the margins or periphery of the canon, their approaches to resistance are fundamentally linked to their specific socio-political landscapes and contexts: Divakaruni utilizes and employs a "palace feminism" characterized by psychological interiority and depth, while Mahasweta Devi adopts and utilizes a "subaltern feminism" defined by physical reality. To analyze these divergent paths, this article is structured in three parts: first, it establishes a theoretical framework anchored in postcolonial and subaltern studies; second, it provides individual analyses of each text's unique negotiation with power; and finally, it offers a comparative synthesis, demonstrating that when interpreted through diverse feminist lenses, dharma transforms from an instrument of oppression into a site of liberation.

Theoretical Framework

To critically analyse and engage with these retellings, it is essential to establish or create a framework that considers for the intersection of mythology, postcolonial feminism, and the political economy of the body. Rewriting and revising canonical texts are not just a literary exercise; it is an act of "decolonizing" the mind. By challenging and contesting the hegemonic authority of the Mahabharata, both Divakaruni and Mahasweta Devi participate and engage in a counter-discourse that exposes how gender and dharma have been historically utilized and leveraged to maintain and uphold patriarchal hierarchies.

At the core of this analysis is the concept and idea of the "subaltern," a term extensively theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her seminal essay, Can the Subaltern Speak?, Spivak interrogates and examines the limits of representation for the marginalized subject—specifically, the postcolonial woman. This lens or perspective is vital for examining Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi, a character devoid of the symbolic value granted to royal or aristocratic women. Mahasweta Devi's work forces a challenge or confrontation with the failure of liberal discourse; when the state acts as the ultimate arbiter or final judge of dharma, the subaltern woman is silenced within the legal and political frameworks. Thus, her resistance or opposition must necessarily occur beyond the structures of "voice" and "law," instead transforming towards the radical autonomy of the body.

Additionaly, this paper draws upon the theory of the "body as text." Judith Butler's work on the discursive limits and boundaries of the body helps clarify how gendered violence is not just a physical act but a tool of social discipline and regulation. Within the palace, Divakaruni's Draupadi perceives the body as a site of negotiation, her beauty and fertility are "assets" to be managed and handled within a marriage-centered economy. In contrast, in the jungle, Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi experiences and perceives the body as a means of strategic resistance. By declining to dress again herself after state-sanctioned violence, she performs what Hélène Cixous might define and characterize as a radical, somatic rupture or bodily break. She ceases to be a "subject" of the state and transforms into a terrifying or formidable "object" of resistance and defiance, forcing her oppressors to face the material reality of their violence and brutality. Through the synthesis these frameworks, it can be observed how the "Palace" and "Jungle" are not just settings, but distinct theoretical landscapes of struggle and conflict.

The Palace of Illusions: The Reclamation of Interiority

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni represent a profound and significant shift from the classical epic by focusing the story on the singular voice and perspective of Draupadi or Panchaali, as she is known in the text. By shifting and changing the perspective from the detached, patriarchal chronicler and narrator to the first-person subjectivity and experience of the heroine, Divakaruni fundamentally transforms the power dynamics of the Mahabharata. This selection of narrative is not simply a stylistic one; it represents a form of epistemic recovery. In the canonical tradition, Draupadi's inner life—her desires, her fears, and her intellectual critiques or analytical views of dharma is often silenced. Here, she becomes the architect of her own history, allowing the reader to access a "palace feminism" that prioritizes emotional autonomy and independence and memory over the battlefield triumphs and glory of her husbands.

The title, The Palace of Illusions itself serves as a dual metaphor for the Maya Sabha's physical structure and the socio-political reality of Draupadi's life and existence. The palace, as a structure, exemplifies divine architecture, but it also functions as a "gilded cage." It is a location of unmatched privilege and luxury, yet it confines Draupadi within the limitations of domestic life and marital responsibilities. In this realm, Divakaruni explores and examines the paradox or contradiction of the elite woman's power and influence: she wields and exerts influence within the walls of the palace, managing the complex emotional dynamics of her five husbands and navigating the strict expectations and demands of her mother-in-law, Kunti. However, this power remains isolated. Her influence and impact do not reach to the halls of political decision-making, where the "Great War" is orchestrated and directed by men.

Divakaruni's Draupadi persistently subverts domesticity by constantly questioning the "righteousness" of her circumstances. She questions and wonders why dharma requires her to embrace polyandry while also insisting demanding absolute fidelity from her. She exposes the ridiculousness of being a queen who has everything, yet owns nothing, not even her own body, which is gambled away in a dice game. Her resistance and opposition are essentially verbal; it exists in the realm of reflection and voice. By recounting her life through the perspective of an older, wiser self-looking back, she creates and establishes a critical separation from the epic's masculinist ethos or male-centered values.

Furthermore, memory acts as a primary tool of resistance. Throughout the text, Draupadi does not allow the "official" narrative of events define and shape her legacy. By documenting her own life and experiences, she claims that her experience is as significant to the Mahabharata as the movements of kings or the intervention of gods. This act of writing/speaking aims to break down the "illusions" surrounding the morality of the Kuru dynasty. Though she stays tied to the overarching plot of the epic her marriage, the war, and the loss of her sons her internal thoughts transform her from a pawn into a protagonist. She engages with dharma not by rejecting it entirely, but by revealing its internal contradictions, turning her intellectual curiosity into a tool against the rigid structures that aim to render her a silent participant in her own fate.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi": The Materiality of Resistance

In sharp contrast to the opulent, carefully designed setting of The Palace of Illusions, Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1978) immerses the reader in the raw, unglamorous landscape of the Jharkhani forest. In this narrative, the narrative is not concerned with the psychology of an elite queen rather on the survival of a tribal insurgent, Dopdi Mejhen, caught in state-sponsored counter-insurgency efforts in West Bengal.

By shifting the setting from the royal court to a "conflict zone," Mahasweta Devi successfully removes the myth's sacredness. The forest is not a magical space; it is a battleground characterized by hunger, thirst, strategic avoidance, and the constant threat of state violence.

The most significant shift in Mahasweta Devi's story is the total absence of the divine. In the Mahabharata and Divakaruni's retelling, the Vastraharan concludes with the "miracle of the sari"—a divine intervention or act by Krishna that saves the heroine from the pain of humiliation. This miracle reinforces the patriarchal social agreement: female dignity and honor is equivalent with the covering of the body. Mahasweta Devi brutally shatters this myth. For Dopdi, there is no Krishna to save her from the soldiers; only the harsh, systematic violence of the state. The "disrobing" in Mahasweta Devi's text is not a mere attempt at shame; it represents a completed act of systematic violation. Multiple soldiers assault and rape Dopdi, leaving her broken and bleeding.

However, the genuine subversion happens in the aftermath of the narrative. When the General (Senanayak)—the figure representing the "dharma" of the state—commands Dopdi to clean and get dressed before being meeting him, she refuses. In a moment of extreme defiance, Dopdi tears her own clothes into pieces with her teeth and walks toward the General, completely naked. This moment signifies the shift of the body from an object of violation to a tool of political resistance. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously notes in her analysis of the story, Dopdi's nakedness is not a sign of humiliation but of absolute terror for the oppressor.

In choosing not to dress herself, Dopdi strips the General of his authority. In his logic, he is the conqueror reestablishing order (his interpretation of dharma), while she is the subaltern body to be controlled and disciplined. Her nudity collapses and dismantle this power dynamic. She becomes an "unarmed target" that the armed General cannot confront. He finds himself incapacitated not through divine influence, but by the stark, raw and unfiltered confrontation with the truth and reality of his own

violence. Dopdi transforms her assaulted or violated body into a tool that reveals the hypocrisy of the state; she demonstrates that the "law and order" the General upholds is simply a structure based on the abused bodies of women. In contrast the royal Draupadi, who seeks to negotiate her place within a moral order, Dopdi exposes the fact that for the subaltern, there is no moral order—only the struggle for survival and the power to refuse the labels of victimhood and shame.

Comparative Synthesis: The Palace vs. The Forest

When placed in conversation, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" showcase that the range of female resistance is fundamentally determined and shaped by the subject's closeness or proximity to power. The divergence between these two texts is most clearly seen through the perspective or lens of their respective spatial geographies: the palace and the forest. These settings and environments are not just backdrops; they determine the "language" of survival and rebellion available to the heroine.

In the "Palace," resistance is a mental and cognitive endeavor. Divakaruni's protagonist, situated at the pinnacle of royal authority, possesses the privilege and luxury and the weight of self-reflection. Her struggle is to carve out a sense of identity within a restrictive marital agreement or contract. Her resistance is based on the security afforded by the palace walls; she can dare to question, negotiate, and recall because her immediate physical survival and safety is not at stake. In this context, the "Palace" symbolizes the home environment where women are expected to be silent bearers of tradition. By refusing this silence, Divakaruni's Draupadi performs an act of restoration—reclaiming her place in history as a subject, rather than an object.

On the other hand, in the "Forest," resistance manifests as a physical, bodily action. Mahasweta Devi's Dopdi functions within a realm of absolute precarity. There is no domestic shelter, no divine protection, and no "royal" status to shield her from the violence of the state. As a result, the forest serves as a metaphor for the subaltern experience, where the line between the personal from the political has been blurred by systemic oppression. In this situation, there is no space for intellectual debate as the state is actively attempting to annihilate and destroy the subject. Resistance, thus, must be absolute and uncompromising.

The nature of the "male gaze" in these writings further highlights and emphasize this separation. Inside the palace, the gaze is patronizing and patriarchal; the men around Draupadi view her as a prize to be won, a wife to be managed, or a body to be wagered. Her defiance of this gaze is managed through dialogue and emotional intelligence. However, in the forest, the gaze is aggressive and tactical. The state forces do not want to "manage" Dopdi; intend to "discipline" her. By refusing to comply with the shame that such a gaze attempts to impose, Dopdi completely shatters the power dynamic entirely. She shifts from a victim into a terrifying mirror, forcing and compelling her oppressor to see his own moral failure reflected in her naked, bleeding body.

Ultimately, both texts converge on a radical critique of dharma. Divakaruni illustrates that dharma operates as rigid, masculine framework that can be questioned and expanded through voice and agency. Through Mahasweta Devi, it can be observed that dharma frequently serves as a disguise for state violence, an illusion that must be torn away to reveal the stark and raw, unrefined power dynamics lying beneath. Both retellings serve as a dual-pronged intervention: Divakaruni teaches us that the "Palace" of tradition can be rewritten to include female subjectivity, while Mahasweta Devi warns us that we must also recognize the "Jungle" of reality, where justice cannot be granted by the system—it must be seized by the body itself. Together, they prove that Draupadi is not a singular victim of a single era, but a multifaceted symbol of resistance for every woman navigating the hierarchies of power.

Conclusion

The act of rewriting the Mahabharata—a text that has served as the foundational bedrock of Indian cultural consciousness for millennia—is an inherently transgressive project. By displacing the male heroes and centering the female experience, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Mahasweta Devi do not merely revisit a myth; they dismantle the ideological foundations upon which that myth was built. Their retellings expose the silences of the canonical Vyasa epic, transforming Draupadi from a passive pawn in a game of dice into a multidimensional agent of her own destiny.

However, as this comparative analysis has demonstrated, the trajectory of this agency is fundamentally shaped by the socio-political context of the retelling. Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions performs an act of restoration, reclaiming the heroine's subjectivity from within the mythological framework. By granting Draupadi a voice—eloquent, introspective, and capable of narrating her own history against the grain of the epic—Divakaruni offers a "palace feminism" that prioritizes psychological depth and emotional autonomy. Conversely, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" performs an act of radical interrogation. It strips the epic of its divine veneer to expose the raw, material violence of the state, offering a "subaltern feminism" where the body becomes the primary site of resistance.

Ultimately, these two texts illustrate the spectrum of resistance available to the postcolonial female subject. Divakaruni invites the reader to empathize with the queen, while Mahasweta Devi challenges the reader to confront the insurgent. They teach us that there is no singular mode of feminist defiance; there is only the context-specific necessity of survival and struggle.

Together, they ensure that the figure of Draupadi can no longer be contained within the passive boundaries of the classical tradition. She stands rewritten, both as a speaker of truth and a destroyer of illusions, serving as a powerful reminder that when dharma is interrogated through feminist and subaltern perspectives, it ceases to be a tool of oppression and becomes a site of liberation. The Draupadi of the future is not a figure who waits for divine salvation, but one who possesses the courage to strip away the illusions of power and confront the truth of her own existence.

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