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The Conditioned Woman and The Search for Selfhood in The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: The aim of this research paper is to address the question of female conditioning and the search for selfhood in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The present novel presents a retelling of the Mahabharata by giving narrative voice to Draupadi, who was traditionally marginalised. The present paper also explores how women are conditioned through patriarchal expectations, gender roles, marriage, and sacrifice. It also focuses on the psychological conflict of Draupadi as she struggles to maintain a balance between personal desire and social duty. It also addresses how she stands strong against oppression and silence. For those who have read the epic of Mahabharata, it is important to understand how the story transforms when the perspective is changed. The researchers have also referred to the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet to talk about the transformation of Draupadi into a strong symbol of female agency, identity, and independence. It also highlights how the retelling allows Draupadi to reclaim control over her identity, dignity, and selfhood.

Keywords: Female Autonomy, Conditioning, Patriarchal, Silence, Resistance, Mythology.



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Introduction

A popular way of retelling and revisiting the stories of marginalised women in patriarchal narratives has been recognised as Indian mythological retellings. One famous and celebrated retelling authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is *The Palace of Illusions*, which is a work that offers a feminist re-interpretation of the epic Mahabharata. In this work, the author has told the story from the perspective of Draupadi. For a very long time, Draupadi's role has been assigned as that of a catalyst of war. Many traditional narratives ignore her own story. They neglect her struggle for identity and selfhood entirely, as the focus is on male characters. Divakaruni's work is celebrated for studying her as more than just a silent mythological figure. The author talks about Draupadi as a psychologically complex character who questions her confinement within oppressive structures.

The author uses the character of Draupadi to talk about the situation of women who are conditioned by patriarchal expectations. Divakaruni also places a lot of emphasis on the emotional condition of women in Indian society along with the conflicts they face. A very important aspect of modern feminist theories and criticism is related to the idea of female conditioning. To explain this work, one must refer to the following statement by Simone de Beauvoir:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

(Beauvoir, 283)

The above statement is very important when talking about the idea of female conditioning. Women receive a lot of discrimination. It is not surprising to notice that this discrimination is not because of their biological characteristics. Instead, this happens because of social conditioning. Because of being brought up in a patriarchal society, young girls are taught that they are different, often inferior, simply because of their gender. Gender roles in society are very rigid and often force women to live their lives in a predetermined manner. This means that the idea of being a woman is based on what society and social institutions expect from women. A major basis of these expectations is patriarchal ideas. Patriarchal ideas mean that women's traits are silence, tolerance, servitude and obedience. These are considered as traits of a virtuous woman. They are raised to depend on men for everything. This conditioning makes them think that this is not something that is being imposed on them, but it is natural and inevitable. And when someone dares to question then, they are punished and forced into conformity.

The novel talks about the life of Draupadi and how she has been conditioned from the moment she was born. Like many other women, Draupadi is also taught from a very young age, even before she could understand what marriage is, that she should learn how to be a good wife and take care of the household. She is instructed about the duties of an ideal woman. She is also taught that her desires and happiness will always remain secondary to what is expected from her by her family and society. Divakaruni writes:

“Through the long, lonely years of my childhood, when my father’s palace seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn’t breathe, I would go and ask the nurse for a story.”
(Divakaruni, 1)

These words set the tone of the entire novel, it highlights how women often feel in their parent’s homes and even their matrimonial homes. Since she was a little girl, Draupadi felt like a stranger in her own house, as she says that her father’s palace often felt like it was suffocating her. She realised very early that the palace was her father’s, she did not belong there. She found refuge in the stories Dhai Ma was telling her, as she felt alienated from the people and the reality around her. When Draupadi was living under her father’s roof, she felt like a stranger, like she was suffocating. This is because the people around her never viewed her as a human being, even her own father. She was always treated as “The Girl Who Wasn’t Invited” as her Dhai Ma phrases it.

In the majority of Indian epics, women have been represented through a perspective that is largely male-centred. One cannot deny that Draupadi is one of the most important characters in the Mahabharata. In fact, she is one of the strongest female characters. She is the crux of the story. When she is born from the sacrificial fire, along with her brother, the heavens announced that the son Drupad asked for will bring him his revenge but they added that the daughter he has received will “change the course of history”. However, in traditional narratives, she appears to be tied to the ideas of beauty and pride. She is looked at as the cause of war and her own suffering is often ignored. This has been opposed by many feminist writers who try to give her a voice so that she can tell her own story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni also does the same. Her novel is known for talking about Draupadi as a strong woman that she was. She represents her as an independent character. The focus of Chitra Banerjee is on the aspects of Draupadi’s character which are often ignored. She talks about her as a very conscious woman who has opinions and ideas.

A vital part of the characterisation of Draupadi is her struggle between what she wants and what society expects from her. This is something which causes a lot of emotional turmoil for her as she tries very hard to balance it. Draupadi has many roles. She is a wife, a daughter, and a queen. This means that there are also a lot of responsibilities for her to fulfil. Her life tells us how much she has struggled to acquire a place in this patriarchal structure that pushes her out constantly.

A very important part of the present study is understanding what patriarchal conditioning means. In layman's language, patriarchal conditioning occurs when people are taught certain ideas since childhood, over the course of their lives, through social structures of punishment and reward that they start internalising them in a manner that they become part of their identity. This also happens in India, where women are praised for losing their identity and serving their male relatives for their entire lives while men are taught that women are inferior to them. In the novel, this happens to Draupadi. As a young girl, she is taught about sacrificing everything for the greater good of her family. But she does not accept this blindly and raises her voice against injustice.

Draupadi often feels outraged because of how her father chooses to treat her. Her brother faces a similar situation. However, he appears to be simply complying. Draupadi is not the same. Despite being told from a very young age that her entire life is supposed to be devoted to fulfilling her father's motives, she does not simply accept it. She is not like her brother, who remains silent. She is a brave woman who has the capability of seeing beyond the conditioning that she has been subjected to. She says:

“Why won't you ever admit the truth?” I spoke bitterly. “We're nothing but pawns for King Drupad to sacrifice when it's most to his advantage. At least I'm just going to be married off. You- he's willing to push you to your death just so he can have his revenge.”

(Divakaruni, 58)

Draupadi has been taught from a very young age that it is a man's world. However, they are both victims of patriarchy. It does not just subjugate women; it subjugates men to other men as well. Drupad is the patriarch of the palace and everyone else is just there to fulfil his wishes under the guise of duty. Divakaruni brings this to our attention by pointing out the meaning of the names chosen by Drupad, "Dhrishtadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadi, Daughter of Drupad." Even here, he names them as what he sees them in relation to him. A man is also sacrificed at the altar of another man's hunger for power and revenge. Discrimination and injustice are not just the result of who faces the oppression more, but who forces people to face such oppression and who benefits from it. Ultimately, Draupadi's father, a man, benefits from the suffering of his son as well as his daughter, as it only takes place because of his need for revenge. In the words of Kate Millet, one can understand patriarchy in the following terms:

"If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be two-fold: male shall dominate female, elder male shall dominate younger."

Patriarchy creates an environment where women are reduced to existing only in relation to the male members of society. Their value, worth, and identity are defined only in terms of what the men around them think of them and how useful they are to them. The Mahabharata gives an example of this. Draupadi is objectified to the extent that her husband's gamble her away in a game of dice. But like most women blinded to the injustices of patriarchy, she cannot believe it can happen to 'her'.

"Denials collided with each other inside me. I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Drishtadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (Divakaruni 190)

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Draupadi remembers reading in a book "The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave." However, Draupadi is a strong woman, and she does not accept this treatment helplessly. She raises her voice against it. She remembers Nyaya Shastra and says, "Ask the elders: Is it not true that once you disturbed was the property, he had no right to measure me?" She questions the integrity of every man present in that court who allowed such a thing. When she realizes that no one will come to her rescue, she prays to Lord Krishna for courage who protects her dignity. She faces her humiliation without fear and takes an oath of vengeance.

Re-Reading The Mahabharata Through a Feminist Lens

The researchers believe that what Divakaruni has done amounts to reinterpreting the Mahabharata. The traditional interpretation of the Mahabharata has a lot of patriarchal ideas and assumptions. A feminist reinterpretation of the same allows the readers to read the epic without these assumptions. Traditionally, this epic is treated as a story of heroism and warfare. However, it is essentially limited to the role of men. It treats women as objects or accessories for men. They are not regarded as something more than daughters, wives, or mothers. And why would not they be when they are written by men, read by men and interpreted by men for generations. This necessitates a woman's perspective of the epic. Divakaruni does talk about men or their achievements and failures. But she focuses on the character of Draupadi and how she represents the women of her time. By allowing her to narrate the entire story, the author gives her a lot of power and also gives the readers an opportunity to learn about an unheard side of the Mahabharata. In a lot of mythological stories, the male writers claimed to know and understand the motivations, emotions and experiences of female characters when they were only writing and interpreting what they wanted to believe. Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, points out that like most human beings the philosophers themselves are not objective seekers of truth. In fact, they too are under the influence of their personal experiences, biases, drives, and cultural conditioning.

“Every great philosophy up till now has consisted of— namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography; and moreover that the moral (or immoral) purpose in every philosophy has constituted the true vital germ out of which the entire plant always grown.”(Nietzsche, 13)

Nietzsche's philosophy that “there are no facts, only interpretations” strongly suggests that repeated narratives can construct and deconstruct reality for someone. In traditional ideas, a woman was praised only if she was devoted to her male relatives and served them with all her strength. This limits the role of women in patriarchal literature. Their characters are not given a lot of depth or complexity because they are not the focus of these narratives. Simone de Beauvoir says:

“Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.” (Beauvoir, 15)

The above statement explains the situation of Draupadi in traditional telling of Mahabharata very well. She was not allowed an independent existence or identity. Unlike the Pandavas, she was always described in relation to a male character. Her personal life and story were not considered important. Instead, her identity was largely tied to the male characters around her. She was first described as the daughter of Drupad, then the wife of the Pandavas, and ultimately as the cause of the Kurukshetra war.

In the traditional Mahabharata, Draupadi is largely treated as an object. Divakaruni resists this objectification. In her novel, she focuses on the desires, fears, and frustrations of Draupadi. She also exposes the emotional violence faced by Draupadi, which has been hidden behind patriarchal customs. In this novel, Draupadi openly questions the patriarchal structures that try to take her voice away from her.

“But I was distressed by the coldness with which my father and my potential husband discussed my options, thinking only of how these acts would benefit—or harm—them. My brother protested hotly, but they brushed his youthful words aside. Why didn’t Arjun speak up in my defense? Surely, now that they were considering my possible death, he should have felt some responsibility? Some tenderness?” (Divakaruni, 118)

These lines reveal how she is aware of the erasure of female identity in patriarchal societies. Draupadi’s marriage is not treated as companionship even by her own father. Her father also views it as a tool to benefit him. First, he sets up a swayamwar for Draupadi but she is not allowed to choose, it is a challenging test of Archery by which Drupad wants to gain a great warrior as his son-in-law. Then when Kunti asks her sons to share Draupadi, a dilemma arises. He acts as if his own daughter has no desires. He along with the Pandavas coldly weighs whether it is beneficial to marry her to five husbands or her death to uphold his esteem. A death where she should willingly die to uphold her father’s honour. In Indian society, marriage is often glorified as fulfillment for women. However, in the novel, Divakaruni exposes it as a mechanism of exploitation and control. She criticises the social conditioning that forces women to find fulfillment in male relationships only.

“Why should things be different now, just because I was a wife? The old restlessness from my girlhood that I’d thought I was done with—if only I could have been a man—rose in me as I watched them clap each other on the back.” (Divakaruni 139)

Draupadi has been marginalized to a great extent. Her marginalisation can be seen through her social position as well as the denial of emotional agency. She wants to be just a friend to her childhood friend Krishna but she is bound by the laws of society that tells a married woman how to behave with a man other than her husband. She is a very intelligent woman. Despite this, she is repeatedly excluded and deliberately kept out of political decisions that affect her life. She is a spectator to her own life's important events. But when she is humiliated in the full court of Hastinapur, something stirs, something shifts in her. She always carried the fire in her that she was born from but the incident teaches her to take charge, when it matters, No one will protect her. Her struggle is not just physical; she faces tremendous emotional abuse. In fact, abuse and violence against women becomes normal in patriarchal societies. If they protest, they are forcefully silenced or ignored. This is not the case with Draupadi. She sees injustice, and it is impossible for her to stay silent.

The Conditioned Woman in The Palace of Illusions

A remarkable feature of The Palace of Illusions is how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has represented Draupadi. She has explained the upbringing and surroundings of Draupadi in detail to show the readers how she has been deeply conditioned. As a girl, she faced a lot of conditioning through various social institutions like education, marriage and family. She received different kind of education than her brother, who was taught politics, history, maths and ethics while she was taught to be the perfect woman.

“An unending stream of women flowed through my apartments each day, attempting to instruct me in the sixty-four arts that noble ladies must know. I was given lessons in singing, dancing and playing music. I was taught to draw, paint, sew and decorate the ground with age-old auspicious designs, each meant for a special festival.” (Divakaruni 29)

Because of her interactions with these social institutions, she started internalising the idea of what a woman should be. She feels obligated to act according to society. This soon becomes very toxic as she is not able to do what she actually desires because she feels obligated to fulfil her duty towards her family and society. This leads to immense psychological turmoil. Patriarchal societies create a lot of burden for women as they expect them to naturally tolerate and sacrifice for others all the time.

Divakaruni has highlighted how patriarchal societies often do not treat women as independent individuals. It is as if a woman can not exist independently of her association with a man. From a very young age, Draupadi is repeatedly taught that she has to be a good daughter, sister and wife. She becomes a mere vessel for male ambition. Everyone just overlooks her individuality and treats her like an object which has no feelings. The tutor tells her,

“A kshatriya woman’s highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfill a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.”(Divakaruni, 26)

Another important aspect of patriarchal conditioning is rigid gender roles. In patriarchal structures, every task, work, and act has a gender. The demarcation is very strict. The majority of the weight of these gender roles is usually carried by women. From a very young age, girls are taught about their duties, what society expects from them and how they are different, weaker than man. As a young girl, Draupadi too gets confined in these gender roles before she has even understood herself. Everyone expects her to remain loyal, obedient, modest, silent, and charming. This can be seen in her education as well, where the majority of what she is taught relates to what pleases men. However, as she grows up, she becomes increasingly aware of this inequality and feels suffocated. She says:

“And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?” I burst out as soon as we were alone. “A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life.”
(Divakaruni 26)

Hence, we can say that her upbringing has affected her a lot. It is very important to note that her birth was from a sacrificial fire. This has a lot of meanings attached to it. Because of this, she was also immediately transformed into a vehicle for her family’s expectations revolving around destiny and revenge. In the above excerpt as well, we can see that she feels agitated when she is told a man must decide what her purpose is. She feels outraged, as she can not even grow freely. She and her brother are an example of how people are conditioned from the moment they are born. However, she always actively resisted this conditioning.

Divakaruni also talks about the instruments of this conditioning. Conditioning does not take place on an individual level. It is carried out systematically at a larger level. Social institutions of marriage and family play a very important role in the process. Draupadi's marriage is not about companionship or affection. Her marriage is a twisted ploy of power and control. She is forced to marry five brothers. Her consent is irrelevant. She is expected to simply comply with whatever has been decided without questions. She loses what little autonomy she had.

In a patriarchal system, subjugation is tiered, the woman serves men as well as older women and men too serve the elders. She feels like marriage would be an escape for her from Drupad and his cold palace but it leads her to be under Kunti's (her mother-in-law) thumb. Draupadi respects Kunti for raising her five sons all alone even when targeted by the rivals for the throne but Kunti is a typical example of a strong independent woman brainwashed by her own conditioning who becomes the proponent of patriarchy. She divides Draupadi up for her five sons and expects total servitude. This is a very good example of how patriarchal societies normalise taking away a woman's rights and freedom over generations. Like a lot of other women, marriage is a cage for Draupadi. Because of having five husbands, she feels broken and fragmented. She has to divide herself and her identity into five parts.

The Quest for Identity and Selfhood

The identity of Draupadi has emerged as a very important concern in the novel. The author appears to be very clear about the fact that she does not want to portray Draupadi as a passive character, like she has been depicted for ages in traditional narratives. The author has focused on the character of Draupadi as a woman who is constantly trying to search for her own identity in a patriarchal society. It is not easy for women to establish their selfhood in patriarchal settings. Draupadi is criticized a lot for this. She does not want to be limited to her relationship with men in determining who she is. It is also important to understand that the journey and struggle of Draupadi is also representative of every woman who struggles in a patriarchal society. Despite being a queen and coming from a royal family, Draupadi does not get the same status as her husbands. She is always treated unequally, unfairly as a secondary citizen. Her voice and opinions are not considered important or worthy. The author has not just confined herself to retelling the Mahabharata. She has also talked about many feminist concerns.

While many people considered having a voice to be a very normal or trivial thing, for Draupadi, her voice is her biggest acquisition. Divakaruni gives Draupadi control over the narrative of her life, her suffering. The patriarchal structure takes away a woman's voice. Instead, her story and experiences are told by men. The author has wisely chosen Draupadi as the narrator of this novel. This simple act gives shifts the power to Draupadi as it allows her to tell her own story. Divakaruni writes

“I would uncover the story that lay invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. Better still, I would have one of them tell it herself, with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it. And who could be better suited for this than Panchaali? It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into in *The Palace of Illusions*.”(Divakaruni, xv)

Draupadi is a very brave and strong woman who is able to convert her silence into resistance. Many people try to reduce her to the status of an object. This is done by her own father and even her own husbands who gamble her away. She is also forced to face humiliation in the royal court only because of the actions of her husbands. However, she is not a passive victim who will accept all of this as his fate. She raises her voice against all of this injustice and does not feel shy in questioning the moral character of the men surrounding her. By doing so, she is able to break free from the ideas of patriarchy, which imposes *Sehansheelta* on women. *Sehansheelta* is considered the most important virtue in women and only in women, it means calm tolerance, patience and endurance while behaving politely and not showing any anger or distress. Always smiling in service of others. But she refused. Her personal desires and social expectations are always at conflict, and she tries her best to balance them, but fails as the latter is structured in a way that it does not take into account any individual feelings or desires of a woman.

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Draupadi was princess and a queen. She has a royal status and is considered to be a woman of public importance. Throughout the novel, we can see that physically, she is always surrounded by people. However, this does not pacify her internal loneliness and isolation. People misunderstand her or ignore her. People make decisions for her and talk about her, but they never talk to her directly. She feels very isolated in the separate section of Drupad's palace.

“I hadn’t realized how much I craved companionship. I’d long been curious about the queens—especially Sulochana—who flitted elegant and bejeweled along the periphery of my life. In the past I’d resented them for ignoring me, but I was willing to let go of that. Perhaps, now that I was grown, we could be friends.” (Divakaruni 31)

She wonders whether she can become friends with the court ladies and queens. She feels so lonely that she is ready to overlook the fact that the same queens had once ridiculed and sidelined her. She feels unwelcome in most spaces, as they are dominated by men. Hence, she feels it could prove fruitful for her to befriend the queens.

She feels very emotionally invisible. She cannot even talk to anybody about her feelings except her brother who is mostly busy and it is only her inner consciousness where she tries to identify and pacify her emotions. Her psychological depth is also an important aspect of the novel. Draupadi does not give up easily. She also does not accept injustice, thinking it is her fate. She is oppressed many times in the novel, and she is even humiliated in the royal court. However, she never stops asserting her individuality. Her character is also depicted as a very intellectual woman. She is curious by nature and questions everything. By doing so, she goes against patriarchal expectations. Kate Millet has said that a very important tool through which patriarchy survives in a society is through the socialization of temperament according to sex role. Draupadi does not believe that gender roles are predetermined. This allows her to retain her individual identity as a resilient woman. She claims her power as a woman and resolves to defend herself in the future.

“But women? Especially women who might bring change, the way a storm brings the destruction of lightning? All my life, they would shun me. But the next time, I promised myself as I wiped my angry tears, I would be prepared.” (Divakaruni 32)

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Draupadi As a Symbol of Female Agency and Resistance

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi has been represented as a powerful woman who is very aware of her desires and agency. Despite living in a patriarchal society where her identity and life are highly controlled, she tries to assert her individuality at every instance possible. Divakaruni challenges the typecasting of women in mythological tales.

The stereotypes that women lead to temptation and destruction only serves to shift the blame of men's actions on the mere existence of women. The present novel does not just focus on the role of Draupadi as the cause of the war, but it tries to draw attention to her character and nature as a woman who is resilient and intellectual. She does not accept patriarchal authority and control and raises her voice against it. As a woman, she faces a lot of discrimination, and a lot of people who force her to give up on her identity. However, she is not weak. She continues to challenge patriarchy through her actions and does not accept what society wants from her.

She is a rebellious woman who is very strong and refuses to be controlled by patriarchal expectations and social boundaries. She defines womanhood on her own terms instead of simply accepting what society dictates. She is also not scared to express her emotions bluntly. At many instances, she is not shy to express her rage and frustration which are emotions authorized only to men by patriarchy. As a young girl, she learns the skills that patriarchy expects from a woman but she is smart enough to know how to use those skills to defy authority:

“Dhai Ma herself taught me the rules of comportment—how to walk, talk, and sit in the company of men; how to do the same when only women are present; how to show respect to queens who are more important; how to subtly snub lesser princesses; how to intimidate the other wives of my husband.” (Divakaruni 30)

The author has presented Draupadi in a manner that focuses on her rebellious nature. She grew up in a patriarchal society. However, she does not accept it as the ultimate truth. She feels frustrated and starts questioning the patriarchal culture that expects women to be silent, obedient, and submissive. She is aware of her royal status and the power she holds. However, she soon realises that women are not immune to ill-treatment, no matter how high-born they are or how much power they hold. She realises that a woman may be the daughter of the most powerful king, but she will always remain an object for patriarchal society.

She is the only person in that royal court who is brave enough to expose hypocrisy of society. She will never be a submissive woman. She is defiant, and stands strong against patriarchy. Sabitri Dhakal writes in her research paper titled Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions: Challenging a Patriarchal Domain*:

“Human civilization has historically been patriarchal or male dominated. The domination and subjugation of women is clearly seen in the text. But despite those discrimination and subjugation women have come up with their powerful nature. How they have been able to make decisions on the actual time, how they have been able to raise the family in the absence of their better halves, these women are actually bold enough to become exemplary in society. They are able to create an identity of their own while rejecting the norms and values that have always marginalized the women. While challenging the patriarchal norms and values of the society these women have proved themselves to be someone not less than their male counterparts.”

Conclusion

Therefore, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a powerful feminist retelling of the epic Mahabharata. She focuses on the character of Draupadi and gives her a voice to narrate her own story. This novel has really elevated the character of Draupadi as it has focused on her identity as a resilient and strong woman instead of a victim. Draupadi is a woman who bravely fought against patriarchal structures. Despite being conditioned from a very young age, she emerged as an intellectual woman who was very aware of her individuality and was strong enough to raise her voice against injustice. Throughout her life, she struggles only because she is not ready to submit to patriarchal expectations and traditional ideas of passive womanhood.

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