




Mythological Gaslighting: A Feminist Study of Psychological Manipulation in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract

Indian mythological narratives have traditionally privileged male heroism while marginalizing female consciousness. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) rewrites the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, exposing not only patriarchal structures but also subtler forms of psychological control. This paper introduces the concept of *mythological gaslighting* to examine how Draupadi is emotionally and psychologically manipulated by familial, marital, and social forces that constantly invalidate her perceptions, desires, and moral judgments. Drawing on feminist literary criticism and psychological theories of gaslighting, this study argues that Draupadi's suffering is not merely a result of overt oppression but of sustained emotional invalidation that compels her to doubt her own agency. By foregrounding gaslighting as a narrative strategy embedded within myth, the paper seeks to demonstrate how Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a modern feminist consciousness resisting epistemic injustice. This study contributes to contemporary feminist mythological studies by reframing Draupadi not as a tragic victim but as a woman navigating and exposing psychological manipulation within sacred narratives.

Keywords: Mythological Gaslighting, Feminist Retelling, Draupadi, Psychological Manipulation, Patriarchy, *The Palace of Illusions*

Introduction

Mythology does not merely narrate the past; it actively scripts emotional behavior for the present. Sacred epics such as the *Mahabharata* function as cultural textbooks that teach societies what to tolerate, whom to worship, and—most crucially—whose pain is legitimate. While feminist scholarship has rightly exposed the overt patriarchal violence embedded in these narratives, a subtler mechanism often escapes scrutiny: the systematic psychological manipulation that persuades women to accept injustice as destiny. This paper introduces *mythological gaslighting* as a critical concept to explain how emotional invalidation operates beneath the grand rhetoric of *dharma*, honor, and cosmic order.

My original intervention in this study lies in the argument that mythological gaslighting is not accidental but structurally necessary for sustaining epic morality. The *Mahabharata* requires women like Draupadi to internalize doubt, silence, and guilt so that male ethical dilemmas can appear noble and tragic. In



other words, the epic's moral universe survives only by making female suffering psychologically invisible. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* disrupts this structure by restoring Draupadi's interior voice, revealing that what has long been celebrated as moral complexity is often sustained emotional manipulation.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel does more than retell myth from a female perspective; it exposes how women are trained to mistrust their own perceptions. Draupadi is repeatedly instructed—by husbands, elders, and even divine figures—that her anger is excessive, her humiliation inevitable, and her questions inappropriate. Such repeated invalidation mirrors what contemporary psychology identifies as gaslighting. When embedded within myth, this manipulation gains sacred legitimacy, making resistance appear immoral rather than necessary.

By foregrounding this process, the paper argues that Draupadi's struggle is not solely against patriarchal authority but against epistemic erasure—the denial of her right to interpret her own suffering. Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a narrator who refuses moral anesthesia. Her storytelling becomes an act of feminist resistance, challenging not only the epic's events but the psychological conditioning that has normalized women's silence for centuries.

Feminism and Gaslighting

Feminist literary criticism has long emphasized the ways in which women's voices are silenced or distorted within patriarchal narratives. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" underscores how social structures shape female identity through repeated acts of control and normalization (Beauvoir 283). Gaslighting operates as one such mechanism, particularly effective because it leaves no visible scars.

Psychologist Robin Stern defines gaslighting as a form of manipulation that erodes an individual's confidence in their own perceptions (Stern 2). Within patriarchal systems, women are particularly vulnerable to gaslighting because emotional expression is often pathologized as irrational or excessive. In mythological contexts, this manipulation is sanctified by religious and moral authority, making resistance appear sinful rather than justified.

Divakaruni's feminist retelling aligns with what Elaine Showalter terms *gynocriticism*—a framework that centers women's experiences as sources of meaning rather than deviations from male norms (Showalter 128). Draupadi's narrative challenges the epic's moral absolutism by revealing how *dharma* itself becomes a tool of psychological coercion.

Gaslighting within Marriage: Polyandry and Emotional Erasure

Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas constitutes one of the most intimate and enduring sites of mythological gaslighting in *The Palace of Illusions*. While the epic tradition frames this polyandrous union as divinely sanctioned and morally unquestionable, Divakaruni reinterprets it as a sustained psychological ordeal in which Draupadi's emotional needs are repeatedly minimized, rationalized, and



erased. Marriage, which should function as a space of mutual recognition, instead becomes a mechanism through which patriarchal authority penetrates the private sphere of female consciousness.

The decision that binds Draupadi to five husbands is made without her consent, yet it is immediately cloaked in the language of destiny and obedience. Draupadi is instructed to accept the arrangement not because it fulfills her emotional or ethical needs, but because it preserves male unity and dynastic stability. This reframing exemplifies gaslighting: her discomfort is not acknowledged as legitimate but is reclassified as personal weakness. As Draupadi reflects, “They spoke of destiny as though it were a gift, while it felt to me like a sentence” (Divakaruni 88). The constant insistence that her suffering is meaningful gradually pressures her to question her own emotional reality.

Yudhishtira, as the moral axis of the Pandavas, plays a central role in this emotional invalidation. His devotion to *dharma* repeatedly supersedes his responsibility as a husband. Whenever Draupadi voices pain or protest, Yudhishtira responds with ethical abstractions rather than empathy. In doing so, he transforms moral philosophy into a tool of psychological control. Draupadi notes bitterly that righteousness, when stripped of compassion, becomes indistinguishable from cruelty. Her anguish is thus neutralized by being absorbed into moral discourse.

The rotational structure of polyandry further fragments Draupadi’s sense of self. Reduced to a shared responsibility rather than an individual partner, she is compelled to divide her emotional life according to rigid schedules that prioritize male harmony over female wholeness. This division produces a chronic loneliness that the narrative repeatedly emphasizes. “I belonged everywhere and nowhere,” Draupadi confesses, capturing the paradox of being constantly surrounded yet emotionally isolated (Divakaruni 97). Such enforced emotional compartmentalization deepens the gaslighting effect by normalizing deprivation as order.

Krishna’s presence, often read as a source of solace, introduces a more complex form of manipulation. While he validates Draupadi’s intelligence and strength, he simultaneously encourages endurance over rebellion. His counsel reframes suffering as preparation for a greater purpose, subtly discouraging Draupadi from prioritizing her immediate emotional truth. Though less overt, this divine reassurance participates in gaslighting by postponing justice in the name of cosmic design. Draupadi senses this contradiction, recognizing that consolation does not equate to validation.

What makes marital gaslighting particularly devastating is its cumulative nature. Unlike public humiliation, which is episodic, emotional erasure within marriage is continuous. Over time, Draupadi begins to measure her worth through male approval and moral compliance. She wonders whether her dissatisfaction signals ingratitude rather than injustice. This internal conflict illustrates how gaslighting succeeds by converting systemic inequality into personal guilt.

Yet, Divakaruni does not allow this erasure to remain total. Draupadi’s narration itself resists the mythic normalization of marital sacrifice. By articulating loneliness, resentment, and emotional neglect, she disrupts the cultural expectation that women must suffer silently within marriage. Her voice exposes polyandry not as divine exception but as patriarchal convenience disguised as fate.

In reimagining Draupadi’s marriages through the lens of psychological manipulation, *The Palace of Illusions* reframes domestic duty as a contested ethical space. Marriage emerges not as a sacred refuge but as a site where gaslighting operates most efficiently—through intimacy, moral authority, and



emotional dependency. This reconfiguration compels readers to reconsider how myth legitimizes marital inequality by denying women the right to name their own suffering.

The Dice Game: Public Humiliation and Collective Gaslighting

The dice game episode in *The Palace of Illusions* represents the most concentrated and devastating manifestation of mythological gaslighting, where psychological manipulation operates not privately but as a public, institutional act. Divakaruni reframes this moment not merely as Draupadi's humiliation but as a collective failure of moral reasoning sustained through emotional invalidation. The violence inflicted upon Draupadi is not limited to the threat of disrobing; it lies equally in the systematic refusal to acknowledge her logic, dignity, and personhood.

Draupadi's question—"Did Yudhishtira lose me before or after he lost himself? (Divakaruni 190)."—is ethically precise and legally sound, yet it is met with deliberate silence. This silence is not ignorance but strategy. By refusing to answer, the elders of the court enact a form of collective gaslighting, implying that Draupadi's reasoning is irrelevant, excessive, or disruptive. Her clarity is reframed as impropriety, and her demand for justice is recast as emotional excess. In this moment, the epic reveals how patriarchal authority maintains itself not by counter-argument but by emotional erasure. Bhishma's paralysis exemplifies this manipulation. As the moral patriarch of the epic, his inability—or unwillingness—to respond transforms ethical responsibility into philosophical abstraction. Draupadi recognizes this deflection, noting that wisdom becomes cowardice when it refuses to name injustice. The court's insistence on procedure over humanity illustrates how gaslighting operates institutionally: by privileging rules that exclude women from interpretive authority while pretending neutrality.

Divakaruni's retelling emphasizes that Draupadi is not confused during the dice game; she is made to appear confusing. Her certainty threatens the fragile moral equilibrium of the court, which depends upon her compliance. When her rage is later condemned as dangerous, the narrative performs a secondary act of gaslighting—shifting blame onto the victim for disrupting social order. The humiliation is thus doubled: first through violence, and then through moral misrepresentation.

Krishna's miraculous intervention, while preventing physical violation, does not undo the psychological trauma of the moment. Divakaruni subtly critiques the tendency to romanticize divine rescue by foregrounding Draupadi's lingering sense of betrayal. The miracle saves her body, but it cannot restore the dignity stripped away by collective silence. In this way, the novel refuses mythological consolation and insists on confronting emotional truth.

The dice hall becomes a symbolic space where patriarchal power is exposed in its rawest form—a public arena in which a woman's humanity is debated while she stands present. Divakaruni's Draupadi remembers this moment not as a lesson in fate but as an awakening to the realization that justice denied through silence is as violent as justice denied through force. By centering Draupadi's consciousness, *The Palace of Illusions* transforms the dice game from an epic turning point into a feminist indictment of collective gaslighting embedded within mythic tradition.



Internalized Gaslighting and Female Self-Doubt

One of the most insidious effects of gaslighting is its ability to transform external oppression into internal self-surveillance. Over time, Draupadi begins to police her own emotions, wondering whether her anger is the true source of chaos. She confesses, “I began to fear my own fire, to suspect that everyone was right and I was the curse” (Divakaruni 214). Such moments reveal how patriarchal narratives succeed not by silencing women outright but by persuading them to silence themselves.

Draupadi’s self-doubt reflects what feminist psychologists describe as internalized misogyny—the process by which women absorb cultural narratives that frame their assertiveness as destructive. Mythological gaslighting intensifies this process by cloaking manipulation in divine sanction. Draupadi is not merely doubting herself; she is doubting herself *in the name of righteousness*. Yet, Divakaruni carefully charts Draupadi’s gradual awakening. Memory becomes her weapon. She refuses to forget the dice hall, refuses to accept philosophical justifications for her trauma. “I stored my anger like a seed,” she reflects, “waiting for the day it would crack open the earth” (Divakaruni 217). This conscious preservation of anger challenges traditional ideals of feminine forgiveness and positions rage as a legitimate ethical response.

Rewriting Myth: Draupadi as a Feminist Consciousness

One of the most radical achievements of *The Palace of Illusions* lies in its reconfiguration of myth itself—not merely as a story retold from a female perspective, but as an ideological structure exposed from within. Divakaruni’s Draupadi does not simply occupy the margins of the epic; she interrogates the very moral architecture that has historically justified her suffering. In doing so, the novel demonstrates that rewriting myth is not an act of rebellion against tradition but a reclamation of suppressed truth.

Traditional mythological narratives often demand female endurance while celebrating male ethical conflict. Draupadi’s pain, humiliation, and emotional turmoil are treated as necessary sacrifices that enable the epic’s grand moral resolutions. Divakaruni dismantles this logic by foregrounding Draupadi’s consciousness, revealing how mythological grandeur depends upon the normalization of female silence. Draupadi explicitly recognizes this imbalance when she reflects that her life was shaped by decisions in which her consent was never sought, only assumed. Her narration exposes how myth trains women to equate obedience with virtue and suffering with destiny.

Through this narrative strategy, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into what may be described as a feminist epistemic agent—a woman who insists on the validity of her own interpretation of events. This insistence directly challenges what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms *epistemic violence*, the process by which dominant discourses erase subaltern knowledge. Draupadi’s voice resists this erasure by refusing to moralize her trauma into silent acceptance. Instead, she names betrayal, anger, and injustice as lived realities rather than philosophical abstractions.

Importantly, Divakaruni does not portray Draupadi as a flawless heroine or a modern feminist transplanted anachronistically into myth. Her doubts, jealousy, desire for recognition, and longing for love remain intact. This complexity strengthens the feminist intervention of the novel. Draupadi’s resistance is not performative perfection but conscious awareness. By allowing Draupadi to



acknowledge her contradictions, Divakaruni resists the patriarchal tendency to idealize women only when they are self-sacrificing.

Rewriting myth, in this sense, becomes an act of psychological justice. Divakaruni restores emotional causality to events that the epic renders inevitable. The dice game is no longer a lesson in fate but a trauma that shapes memory; polyandry is no longer divine arrangement but emotional fragmentation; exile is no longer heroic endurance but prolonged erasure of dignity. Through Draupadi's reflective voice, the novel insists that myth must answer to human psychology.

Ultimately, Draupadi emerges as a feminist consciousness not because she overturns the epic's outcome, but because she refuses its emotional silences. Her narration destabilizes the myth's moral certainty by exposing how righteousness is often sustained through women's psychological suffering. In reclaiming her story, Draupadi does not destroy myth—she humanizes it. This act of reclamation stands as Divakaruni's most profound feminist intervention, transforming *The Palace of Illusions* into a site where myth is not merely retold but ethically reimaged.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *The Palace of Illusions* reveals mythological gaslighting as a pervasive form of psychological manipulation that sustains patriarchal authority. By examining Draupadi's relationships, public humiliation, and internal conflicts, the study demonstrates how emotional invalidation operates within sacred narratives. Divakaruni's feminist retelling does more than revise myth; it interrogates the psychological foundations of gendered injustice. By framing Draupadi's suffering through the lens of gaslighting, this research offers a fresh critical approach that bridges feminist literary studies and psychological discourse. In doing so, it positions *The Palace of Illusions* as not merely a retelling but a radical feminist intervention that compels readers to question the moral certainties of mythology itself.

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