



Male Gaze and Feminist Counter-Narratives in Ancient and Contemporary Epic Literature

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Received: July 02, 2025

Revised & Accepted: September 25, 2025

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Abstract

This paper compares the representation of Draupadi in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* through Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and feminist literary criticism. Draupadi's body, in the epic, is repeatedly framed as a site of male rivalry, most starkly in the swayamvara, disrobing, and exile episodes. Conversely, The Palace of Illusions reclaims her agency by granting her narrative voice and agency. While Mulvey's theory explains the mechanisms of Draupadi's objectification, the analysis also situates her voice within postcolonial feminist debates on female agency. The study argues that Divakaruni's retelling challenges the epic's gendered discourse by presenting Draupadi as a subject rather than spectacle, thereby offering a feminist counter-narrative to patriarchal traditions.

Keywords: Male gaze, Draupadi, patriarchy, agency, feminist counter-narrative

Introduction

The epics of the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa and the *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depict opposite images of Draupadi. Her body becomes a battleground between patriarchal possessions and feminist repossessions. In the *Mahabharata*, the female character of Draupadi is portrayed in a male-oriented manner, forcing to objectify in terms of beauty and sexuality in the pursuit and needs of male figures, starting with her swayamvara, to the disrobing scene she is forced to do in the Kuru assembly. Her body in the context of a man is a representation of masculine prestige and desire and is devoid of voice that delivers the patriarchal conditionings that frame the female gender as an object of male acquisition. The



physicality of Draupadi is repeatedly under public examination and commodification, and instances of this are available in the love scenes, where Draupadi evokes affection, jealousy, and aggression amongst the males such as Duryodhana, Karna, and Jayadratha. Her undressing in the sabha, where even the god-like figures like Bhishma are looking at her are a prime example of how the objectification of her own body results in nothing but specularity, which is a part of patriarchal ideology that values women in accordance to their beauty. The narrative framework of the text has given us the impression of a male handling the story where Draupadi is used as a prop as her cross is the enjoyment of male stories like polyandry or the unveiling of the Hindu, exposing the female to malicious gossip that is characterized by sacrifice and honor. The gendered discourse in the epic, the battlefield of women to exert male power, the lack of independent subjectivity in their body, is highlighted by this objectification. *The Palace of Illusions*, conversely, projects back within the tradition of reinterpreting or resituating the female character of the epic before the text to gain the agency of overturning the male gaze and regaining the female body which served as her territory of agency. Divakaruni also gives Draupadi the voice to express her internal struggle, urges, and opposition, especially in the way she thinks about the swayamvara and her silent attraction to Karna. The novel makes the character of Draupadi centre-stage and thus destroys the patriarchal construction of her sexual functions and does not portray her as the object of desire but as an individual with feelings and thoughts. Such a change counters the pattern of silence in the traditional epic, which presents a feminist criticism to the male gaze and emphasizes the need of Draupadi to cast off her identity against a constraining social platform. While Draupadi has been studied in both texts, little scholarship links Mulvey's gaze theory directly to *The Palace of Illusions*. In this paper, it is going to be argued that the opposing images of the body of Draupadi in the various images in the *Mahabharata* and *The Palace of Illusions* deliver a mismatch between masculine objectification and feminine rebellion.

Methodology

Using the perspective of Mulvey together with feminist literary criticism, the analysis shall shed light on how *The Mahabharata* initiates the construction of Draupadi as a body that is passive and a mere object of the male action in the narrative, whereas *The Palace of Illusions* reverses this, as her body is used as a venue of self-assertion as well as a critical response. This paper shall use significant moments, namely the swayamvara (sabha speech), the disrobing as well as the experiences of being in exile that Draupadi faced to conduct study on how these texts engage concerning the politics of gender highlighting the continued relevance of the stories of Draupadi in its ability to disprove the patriarchal beliefs and to redefine female subjectivity.

Literature Review

Since its publication, the character of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has attracted extensive attention on feminist and narratological levels, especially in terms of gender relations and violation of patriarchal discourse. The most notable fact to notice in this discussion is the male gaze concept introduced



by Laura Mulvey as it postulates the visual and narrative systems of the so-called patriarchal cultures present women as objects of male desire (Mulvey 62). Historians like Alf Hiltebeitel (2001) carry the consideration further to the *Mahabharata*, stating that the female body, in this case that of Draupadi, is used as a source of male rivalry, with her physical loveliness making male rivalry imminent (swayamvara) and her disrobing scene strengthening the hand of the male (Hiltebeitel 178). This follows Mulvey who states that women were relegated to mere objects in classic films whose action derived after male dominance. Feminist response to the *Mahabharata* also demonstrates the policing of the sexuality of Draupadi in the aspects of patriarchal norms. According to Arti Dhand (2008), Draupadi is seemingly ideally represented as the pativrata (chaste wife) and demonized as disruptive to kshatriya order at the same time her polyandry and beauty are constructed as threats to the order (Dhand 112). As Brian Black (2018) further says, the gendered categories of the epic (purusha active masculinity) and prakriti (passive femininity) normalize female oppression, as Draupadi is just a property of men (Black 94). These readings point to the way in which the epic duplicates what Mulvey refers to as the to-be-looked-at-ness of women in terms of which female identity depends on male gaze (Mulvey 63). However, Divakaruni, in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, resituates the subjectivity of Draupadi and resorts to what Gayatri Spivak (1988) terms strategic essentialism the appropriation of an essentialized feminine voice to disturb patriarchal discourse (Spivak 205). Namrata Chaturvedi (2016) posits that Divakaruni does the same in Draupadi (Panchaali), who refuses the gaze of men by spelling out lusts (e.g., lust towards Karna) and the patriarchal tradition of naming (Chaturvedi 134). By the same token, Deepti Priya Mehrotra (2012) discusses Draupadi recontextualizing her right to bodily autonomy and in the process subjecting objectification into a form of resistance in the disrobing scene (Mehrotra 88). Yet, there are still lapses relating the gaze theory through Mulvey and literary textual analysis on the issue of corporeality of Draupadi. Although authors such as Hiltebeitel and Dhand break down patriarchal schemes, there is little that is explicit in how *The Palace of Illusions* deconstructs the visual politics of the eponymous epic. In this paper, I will fill that gap by using Mulvey framework to both works asking how the body of Draupadi goes through a conflict over control as a patriarchal object (in the *Mahabharata*) and the struggle of female agency (in *The Palace of Illusions*). Juxtapose these tales, the thesis throws light at the ideological contradictions behind the representation of women in epic literature.

Draupadi's Body in Patriarchal and Feminist Narratives

In *Vyasa's Mahabharata*, Draupadi's body is consistently framed as an object of the male gaze, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that reduce her to a symbol of male desire and conflict. During the swayamvara, her beauty captivates the assembled kshatriyas, with the narrative emphasizing their fixation: "Like everyone else in the arena, Pandu's sons sat like infatuated boys, their eyes never leaving her face" (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 260). This description aligns with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, where Draupadi's body is positioned as a spectacle, her agency eclipsed by male desire. The disrobing episode in the sabha further intensifies this objectification, as Dusasana strips her garment, and "there was no man in that



sabha who did not stare. She was so ravishing: which man could resist looking?” (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 478). Even revered elders like Bhishma participate in the gaze, underscoring how Draupadi’s body becomes a battleground for male power, with her public humiliation serving to assert Duryodhana’s dominance over Yudhishtira. Her question—“Am I Duryodhana’s slave or still a free woman?” (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 473)—is silenced by the patriarchal assembly, highlighting her lack of agency within the epic’s male-centric narrative structure.

The *Mahabharata* further constructs Draupadi’s body as a site of patriarchal control through her polyandrous marriage, which is imposed without her consent. Yudhishtira’s decision to “share” her, validated by Vyasa’s decree, treats her as a possession: “Yudhishtira decided that what his heart cried out for and the best course for them were the same” (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 272). This commodification is compounded by Vyasa’s “boon” of renewed virginity, which prioritizes male benefit by ensuring Draupadi’s chastity for each husband (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 278). Such narrative choices reflect Arti Dhand’s observation that the epic views women’s sexuality with suspicion, framing Draupadi’s body as a tool to maintain patriarchal harmony rather than an expression of her individuality. Her objectification peaks during exile, where Jayadratha and Kichaka, driven by lust, attempt to abduct and molest her, further reducing her to a sexualized object: “Jayadratha... gazed her raptly. He wanted Draupadi to be his queen” (Menon, vol. 1, Virata Parva 739). These episodes collectively illustrate how the *Mahabharata* uses Draupadi’s body to perpetuate male power dynamics, denying her narrative agency.

In contrast, *The Palace of Illusions* reclaims Draupadi’s body as a site of agency and resistance, subverting the male gaze through her narrative voice. Divakaruni empowers Draupadi to reflect on her objectification, particularly during the swayamvara, where she observes the suitors’ fixation but asserts her emotional depth: “I longed to look into Karna’s face... but even I knew how improper that would be” (Divakaruni 92-93). Her unspoken affinity for Karna, described as pulling her into his “ancient sadness” (Divakaruni 69), shifts the focus from her physicality to her emotional subjectivity, challenging the epic’s tendency to reduce her to a spectacle. During the disrobing, Draupadi’s perspective in *The Palace of Illusions* transforms the episode into a moment of defiance: she runs to Virata’s sabha for justice, only to be met with silence, yet her resolve to seek revenge on Kichaka—“You might as well come to my bed” (Divakaruni 230)—marks her agency in resisting objectification. This aligns with Chaturvedi’s argument that Divakaruni’s Draupadi reconfigures her suffering as a catalyst for empowerment, disrupting the patriarchal gaze.

Draupadi’s self-naming as Panchali in *The Palace of Illusions* further rejects the male-imposed identity tied to her father’s name, symbolizing her reclaiming of her body and subjectivity: “Draupadi hates to be called Draupadi because this name lacks her self-identity” (Divakaruni 5). Her reflections on her palace—“I loved my palace, and in return I felt its warmth embracing me as though it were alive” (Divakaruni 148)—reframe physical spaces as extensions of her agency, contrasting with the *Mahabharata*’s depiction of her as confined by patriarchal spaces



like Drupada's palace or the exile forests. By narrating her own story, Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* challenges the male gaze, transforming her body from a battleground of male desire into a site of feminist resistance, where her voice and emotions take precedence over her physicality. This comparative analysis reveals how the *Mahabharata* perpetuates patriarchal objectification, while *The Palace of Illusions* empowers Draupadi to redefine her corporeality, offering a feminist counter-narrative to the epic's gendered discourse.

Body as a Site of Male Contestation

The *Mahabharata*'s portrayal of Draupadi's body as a site of male contestation is further evident in the Rajasuya Yajna, where her beauty is prophesized as a destructive force: "Narada's eyes wandered... to the face of the unreally beautiful woman... He saw the prophesy that she would be the nemesis of kshatriya kind" (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 431). This framing continues along Laura Mulvey's lines of a male gaze, analyzing Draupadi, submitting her body as an object/entity which men fight over, devoid of any agency. Her body is not only objectified, but also blamed for the following war, perpetuating patriarchal myths that blame women's sexuality for societal upheaval. This narrative choice, as Arti Dhand notes, reflects the epic's suspicion of female sexuality, positioning Draupadi's beauty as a dangerous lure rather than an aspect of her individuality. Similarly, during her exile, the male gaze persists as Jayadratha's infatuation leads to her abduction: "He gazed her raptly. He wanted Draupadi to be his queen" (Menon, vol. 1, Virata Parva 739). This recurring motif of Draupadi's body inciting male desire underscores how the *Mahabharata* constructs her as a passive object within a male-driven narrative, her agency curtailed by the patriarchal need to control her sexuality.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni counters this objectification by granting Draupadi narrative control, allowing her to reflect critically on how her body is perceived. During the swayamvara, she acknowledges the weight of the male gaze but redirects it toward her inner conflict, particularly her attraction to Karna: "His eyes were filled with an ancient sadness. They pulled me into them" (Divakaruni 69). This shift from external spectacle to internal emotion subverts Mulvey's gaze, positioning Draupadi as an active subject who interprets and resists male desire. Her refusal to marry Karna, influenced by Krishna and societal norms, is reframed as a moment of personal sacrifice rather than passive compliance: "We'd both been victims of parental rejection—was that why his story resonated so?" (Divakaruni 78). By articulating her empathy for Karna, Draupadi transforms her body from a patriarchal trophy into a site of emotional depth, challenging the *Mahabharata*'s reductionist portrayal.

The disrobing episode in *The Palace of Illusions* further highlights Draupadi's resistance to the male gaze. Unlike the *Mahabharata*, where her humiliation is a public spectacle—"Dusasana was stripping her garment... and there was no man in that sabha who did not stare" (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 478)—Divakaruni's Draupadi narrates her trauma with agency, focusing on her defiance: "I ran to... Virat's sabha... I cry out to Virat for justice, but he sat as though deaf" (Divakaruni 230). Her subsequent resolve to retaliate against Kichaka marks a reclaiming of her body, as she orchestrates his downfall, asserting control over her narrative. This aligns



with Namrata Chaturvedi's view that Divakaruni's Draupadi reconfigures suffering as empowerment, using her voice to challenge the patriarchal gaze that seeks to define her solely through her physicality.

Draupadi's final journey in the Mahaprasthanika underscores the ideological contrast between the two texts. In *The Mahabharata*, her fall is attributed to her partiality for Arjuna, a patriarchal judgment that punishes her emotional agency: "Draupadi loved Arjuna most. It was her sin which caused her fall" (Menon, vol. 2, Mahaprasthanika Parva). This reinforces the epic's tendency to discipline her body and desires. Conversely, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's reflections during the journey reveal her unyielding spirit: "Karna would never have abandoned me thus... He would have happily given up heaven for my sake" (Divakaruni 347). Her lingering thoughts of Karna reclaim her emotional autonomy, defying the patriarchal constraints that seek to erase her desires. Through these episodes, *The Palace of Illusions* transforms Draupadi's body from a battleground of male desire into a site of feminist resistance, contrasting sharply with the *Mahabharata*'s objectifying narrative.

The *Mahabharata*'s depiction of Draupadi's body as a site of patriarchal spectacle is starkly evident in her treatment during the game of dice, where Yudhishtira's wager reduces her to a commodity: "'Won!' he roared... 'Draupadi is ours!'" (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 466). This moment, where Draupadi is staked and lost, aligns with Laura Mulvey's male gaze framework, as her body becomes a trophy for male power dynamics, stripped of agency as Dusasana drags her to the sabha like an "animal" (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 473). The narrative's focus on her physicality—described as "ravishing" even during her disrobing—reinforces her objectification, with the Kuru elders' gazes, including Bhishma's, complicit in her humiliation (Menon, vol. 1, sabha parva 478). As Arti Dhand notes, the epic's discourse casts women's sexuality as a disruptive force, and Draupadi's body is disciplined to uphold patriarchal norms, her protests—"Am I Duryodhana's slave or still a free woman?"—silenced by the male assembly, underscoring her lack of narrative control.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reconfigures Draupadi's body as a site of resistance, granting her the narrative voice to challenge the male gaze. During the game of dice, Draupadi's perspective transforms her objectification into a moment of agency: she recounts running to Virata's court for justice, only to face silence, yet her resolve to retaliate against Kichaka—"I became resolute to take revenge on him" (Divakaruni 230)—marks her refusal to be reduced to a passive object. Her reflections on her body's vulnerability, such as during her exile when Sudeshna warns, "You're too beautiful... What if my husband falls in love with you?" (Divakaruni 225), reveal her awareness of the male gaze but also her strategic navigation of it. By articulating her trauma and defiance, Draupadi subverts the *Mahabharata*'s portrayal, aligning with Namrata Chaturvedi's argument that Divakaruni empowers Draupadi to reclaim her subjectivity through self-narration.

The *Mahabharata*'s patriarchal framing of Draupadi's body extends to her polyandrous marriage, where her body is shared to maintain fraternal unity, a decision imposed by Kunti and validated by Vyasa: "The five brothers may marry your daughter, and the Gods will bless



them” (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 278). This arrangement, coupled with the “boon” of renewed virginity, prioritizes male benefit, reducing Draupadi to a vessel for patriarchal harmony (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 278). Her body is thus a battleground for male agendas, with no regard for her desires, as seen when Yudhishtira’s brothers “never took their eyes off Draupadi” (Menon, vol. 1, Adi Parva 272). In contrast, *The Palace of Illusions* allows Draupadi to critique this imposition: “I’d expected [Arjuna] to be my champion... When a voice whispered, Karna would never have let you down like this, I did not hush it” (Divakaruni 109). Her lingering thoughts of Karna reframe her body as a site of unfulfilled desire, challenging the epic’s patriarchal control over her sexuality.

Draupadi’s experiences in exile further highlight the ideological divide between the texts. In the *Mahabharata*, her body remains a target of male desire, as seen when Kichaka, captivated by her beauty, assaults her: “He was charmed by her beauty... He wanted her to be his wife” (Menon, vol. 1, Virata Parva 739). This incident reinforces the epic’s tendency to define Draupadi through her physicality, her agency curtailed by the failure of male protectors like Virata. Conversely, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi’s narration of the Kichaka incident emphasizes her resilience: “I ran to... Virat’s sabha... but he sat as though deaf” (Divakaruni 230), yet her subsequent plotting against Kichaka transforms her from victim to agent. By foregrounding her strategic defiance, Divakaruni disrupts the male gaze, presenting Draupadi’s body not as a passive object but as a site of feminist empowerment, thus offering a counter-narrative to the *Mahabharata*’s patriarchal discourse.

Conclusion

The contrasting representations of Draupadi in Vyasa’s *Mahabharata* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* illuminate the ideological tension between patriarchal objectification and feminist empowerment, with Draupadi’s body serving as a central battleground. In *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often looked at through the eyes of men. Her beauty becomes the reason for many problems—like during her swayamvara, the disrobing scene, and when she is mistreated during exile. These events show that her body is seen as something that causes male desire and fights. This idea matches Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “male gaze,” which says women are shown as things to be looked at, not as people with their own voice.

Draupadi does not have much freedom in the *Mahabharata*. She has to marry five husbands, is used as a bet in a dice game, and is treated like property. These things show that the story is told mostly from a male point of view. But in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi gets to tell her own story. She expresses her feelings, dreams, and anger. For example, she shares her hidden thoughts about Karna and stands up against men like Kichaka. In this version, her body is not just about beauty—it also represents her thoughts and emotions. The author, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, makes Draupadi a strong and powerful woman.

When we compare the two texts, we see that *The Mahabharata* shows Draupadi as someone controlled by men, while *The Palace of Illusions* shows her as someone who takes control of her own life. This shows how retelling old stories from a woman’s point of view can challenge



traditional ideas and give new meaning to old characters. This research draws our attention to future studies that explore various aspects of Hindu mythology, in relation to our contemporary society. Future research can expand this comparative framework by examining other retellings of Draupadi's story across regional, linguistic, and cultural variations, including folk traditions and theatrical adaptations.

Funding Statement: No fund available from any institution

Transparency Statement: I confirm that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: Author can provide data.

Conflict of Interest: I declare there is no conflicts of interest.

Authors' Contributions: Tara Prasad Adhikari conducted all research activities i.e., concept, data collecting, drafting and final review of manuscript.



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