

Reimagining Women's Freedom and Rights: A Study of Draupadi's Portrayal in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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ABSTRACT

The heroine of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, speaks out on the value of women's liberation and rights in a patriarchal society. The narrative of Draupadi, the fire-born princess, is told in the book *The Palace of Illusions*, which also highlights Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's significant contribution to the portrayal of women as strong, brave, and resolute individuals who have the ability to alter history. It portrays the predicament of women in antiquity and highlights their bravery and will to lead fulfilling lives. The female characters in Divakaruni are fearless, self-assured, and driven to fulfil their life's ambitions. She has the ability to make history that people remember for years to come. In her works, she has given women a more prominent position. The female characters are represented as equals to men in the patriarchal society. As seen in the story, women have a variety of roles in their life, including that of daughter, wife, mother, sister, and friend. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* sheds insight on the reasons for the pain and difficulties faced by female characters, in contrast to the epic *Mahabharata*. It draws attention to their significance in household life and helps people realise that they are both a part of earthly events and the great battle's forerunner. Chitra Banerjee breaks the taboo of all the powerful female characters in *The Palace of Illusions*, whose oppression and quiet gave them the resolve to oppose the systems that weigh down their sense of self. As a result, one of the most well-known female figures from ancient India is Draupadi.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, *Mahabharata*, *Paanchali*, *Draupadi*.

Draupadi, the protagonist of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, voices the significance of women's freedom and rights in the patriarchal society. The novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, is a narration through Draupadi, the fire-born princess, and unveils the important contribution of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the presentation of women as powerful, courageous, and determined beings who can change history. It depicts the situation of women in the ancient period and reveals the brave nature of women, and their determination to live a happy life. The female characters of Divakaruni are bold, confident, and determined to achieve the desired goal in her life. She can create a history that one remembers even years later. She has given a stronger role

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to the women in her novels. The women characters are represented as equals to men in the patriarchal society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws inspiration from the epic *Mahabharata* to portray her women protagonist, Draupadi, to establish her identity as Paanchali, the woman epitome of the Kingdom of Paanchal rather than the daughter of King Drupad. She explores the character of Draupadi and represents her unique qualities like mental strength, courage, determination adaptability, and nobility. The novel narrates Draupadi's unpredictable journey with an extraordinary birth, unusual marriage, unprecedented molestation and finally the most terrible war in history. Renuka Narayanan in the Hindustan Times (2008) writes about the novel, *The Palace of Illusions* as, told in the first person, Divakaruni's tale takes us through the epic in Draupadi's voice. From being born of the sacrificial fire (thus her beautiful name 'Yajnaseni', though the author doesn't use it, preferring 'Panchali'), to her strange, lonely childhood, her tricky marriage to have men with a persecution problem and a control freak mother, her own, lovely home at last, and then the unbelievable traumas that follow that nobody should have to go through (but millions of refugees do). (12)

The birth of Draupadi is unwelcomed by her father because he preferred a male heir. The birth of Draupadi from the sacred fire in the Yajna, may not be true literally but is significant in the Indian epic as it symbolizes her character that she is not a passive woman but one who will be fiery.

Dhai ma, the nurse and the caretaker of Draupadi fulfill the role of parent and she is the one who gives a graphical description of the birth of the prince, Dhristadyumna, and princess of Paanchal. She narrates that,

Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too- (4)

She voices the spell of omens as, "...Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history" (4-5) as the birth of Draupadi is unexpected. Her 'unnatural' birth elevates her from common human beings, who are born from their mother's womb, but such a birth brings her closer to nature as she is

considered to be the child of Mother Nature. Draupadi is happy that her life even at the time of her birth is unique and auspicious.

Draupadi is a beautiful princess of Paanchal, who has eyes like lotus petals and faultless features endowed with youth and intelligence. Her physical attributes are much like that of the earth from where she has emerged. For Draupadi, nature acts not only as a source of identification but also as companionship, comfort, solace, guidance, and training for future hardships. Though the king, Drupad protects and takes care of Draupadi, she feels deprived of her paternal love and care. She identifies the palace to be a prison house to her and she expresses her wish to recreate an alternative reality that will reform the misery of her existence:

Starting down from the rooms at the bare compound stretching below, I'd feel dejection settle on my shoulders like a shawl of iron. When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmines, and in the midst of it – but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take. Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (7)

Draupadi tries to put an end to the dreadful monotony of her existence as she believes that her birth is as significant as her brother.

Draupadi gains the love and affection of her brother, Dhristadyumna, who is born out of the same sacrificial fire. Her zeal and enthusiasm to change her life history lead her to Veda Vyasa's hermitage to know more about the secrets of her future. She fights to get her right to education and joins her twin brother, Dhri to study Shastras and laws of governance, which are typically associated with the notions of training male children. She is aware of the importance of women's education and expresses that, "These were the lessons... that conferred power. They were the ones I needed to know if I were to change history" (27). Brought up amidst affluence, orthodoxy, and luxury, the daughter of King Drupad has grown up to be an aggressive woman who speaks her mind in a world where women suffer in silence.

Draupadi critically analyses the names that are given to her brother and to herself. Dhristadyumna means 'destroyer of enemies' and her name merely means 'daughter of Drupad'. Ms. PVL Shailaja and N. Ramakrishna, in the article "Rediscovering the Early Years

of Divakaruni's Draupadi" (2011) state that, "The name, Draupadi would link to her father whose control and authority represented the crimes of patriarchy while the name Paanchali would bestow her with a unique identity connecting her to the land in which she was born" (108). Chitra Banerjee calls Draupadi as Paanchali as she is the princess of the kingdom of Paanchal rather than Draupadi, daughter of Drupad. The protagonist categorically states that "...Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (26). The strong desire to have an identity of her own is seen in her dislike of her name Draupadi. Draupadi is unhappy about it because she feels a woman who has been created to change the course of history must have been given a better name. The name Draupadi according to her smacks off patriarch and so says, Dhri's name fell within the bounds of acceptability— though if I were his parent I might have picked a more cheerful appellation, like Celestial Victor, or light of the universe. But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name. (5)

Draupadi gives herself a heroic name as the 'offspring of vengeance or the unexpected'. The fancied name turns out to be true when the *Mahabharata* war takes place and changes the course of history in India. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as the maker of her own history. Draupadi is considered to be the feminine form of Lord Krishna and is given another name – 'Krishnaa'. She has a platonic friendship with Lord Krishna, who has a towering influence in her life. Lord Krishna plays the role of a mentor, counsellor, and guide to Draupadi; he is always present beside her in times of trouble and saves her from distress. He advises Draupadi saying, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself" (9).

Draupadi is trained to suit herself to be qualified as the princess and the bride as it is the time to learn much about all the circumstances as she is now fully grown as a beautiful yuvathi or a young girl of marriageable age. Her lessons begin with how to sidestep questions that she does not want to answer, how to dress as a queen without the help of her attendants and she practices un-queenly skills like lying on the floor at night and to wear the cheapest and most abrasive cotton saris. She undertakes penance, fasts, and practices yoga that fills her with energy to tune her body to survive for days without food. She learns to cook with the meagre available

ingredients and learns medicinal values to cure one's illness with no help. She is now groomed to face different situations that may or may not appear in a princess's life after her marriage.

King Drupad organizes the 'Swayamvar' for Draupadi to choose her husband, which is an ancient practice of royal families in India where the ceremony is conducted by the father of a princess to give his daughter the freedom to select her husband. The swayamvar being a pre-fixed event leaves Draupadi with few choices. It is a political strategy devised by king Drupad and she is merely a trophy, a prize to be won. Draupadi is excited when Dharmaraj conveys the message about the arrangements of her father for her 'Swayamvar'. King Drupad invites the princes of other kingdoms, from Bharat to Paanchal, and among the invited grooms Draupadi could choose a man whom she wants to marry. Among the competitors, the Pandavas, disguised as Brahmin priests, and Karna, the orphan son of Kunti and the Sun God, are also present.

Draupadi is filled with exhilaration to share about her swayamvar with her brother and tells him that, "I can't believe I'm going to pick my own husband! I cried, Why didn't you tell me? ...You're just jealous that I get to choose my own spouse when you don't!" (54-55). She gets to know from her brother that before the wedding a skill test would be conducted and the man who wins the test will be the one whom she will garland. She hears that it is an extraordinary test for the suitors, who have to pierce a metal fish revolving high on the ceiling of the wedding hall using Kindhura, the heaviest bow in existence where only a handful of warriors can lift and string it. She is unhappy when she gets to know that her swayamvar is for a namesake and there is no choice for her to choose a husband to her liking. She vehemently questions "Why even call it a swayamvar, then? I cried. Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry" (56) and feels that she is "...nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (57).

Draupadi hides her love for Karna, who wins the contest in the swayamvar but he is declared to be disqualified when she rises to garland the groom. Lord Krishna stops Draupadi stating that Karna is the son of a mere charioteer and he cannot be chosen to be the groom since he hails from the low caste. King Drupad is shocked and suspicious because he had designed the test in such a way that only Prince Arjun of Hastinapur would be able to succeed. Karna leaves the court in anger and vows to declare his vengeance. He never forgives Draupadi, King Drupad and the Kingdom of Paanchal, for bringing him disgrace while Draupadi's conscience pricks her throughout her life, for deceiving his valour.

Draupadi is coerced by King Drupad, Lord Krishna, and her brother, Dhri to choose Arjun as her husband in the swayamvar. Arjun, the student of Drona, a valiant

archer, performs efficiently in the test of skill, and wins the hands of Draupadi. Draupadi is happy to start her new marital life but her destiny becomes melancholic when her mother-in-law, Kunti, asks his sons to equally share among themselves the prize of Arjuna's victory. Kunti, who is unaware of Arjuna's prize, puts the life of Draupadi at stake. Without the consent of Draupadi, she is compelled to accept a polyandrous marriage when Kunti does not take the word back that is promised to her five sons. The emotions of Draupadi are suppressed and it reveals the position of an Indian woman, who is forced to obey the dictates of her mother-in-law.

Arjun never likes to share Draupadi with his brothers because his wife is unique and exclusive but as an obedient son, he has nothing to say but to abide by the words of his mother. Draupadi favours Arjun over others and secretly has a fondness for him. Draupadi decides to be the wife of the Pandavas but has one condition to all her five husbands, that she will never share her household with anyone and that none of her husband should bring another woman to share her place while she is in InthraPrastha but in course of time, due to situations, Arjun marries Subhadra and Chitrangada; Bheem marries Hidimba and Valandhara; Yudhisthir marries Devika; Nakul marries Karenumati and Sahadev marries Vijaya. Draupadi cannot be criticized but is a woman to be appreciated as it is not her choice to marry all the five brothers. At this point Draupadi has to be well understood that it is a great sacrifice on her part to accept the wish of her mother-in-law, Kunti.

Draupadi has become the wife of Pandavas not out of desire but by accidental circumstances. She hears from Krishna that in her previous birth, she has been the daughter of Nala and Damayanthi, named Nalayani. She then prays to Lord Shiva to grant her a husband with fourteen desired qualities. Lord Shiva is pleased with her devotion and grants her the wish but also says that in her next birth she will have fourteen husbands. Hence the fourteen qualities are present in the Pandavas, who are considered to be former Indhras and they are individually imperfect but collectively perfect.

The five Pandavas have unique characteristics. Yudhisthir is known for his wisdom of dharma; the powerful Bheem is known for his strength that exceeds for a thousand elephants combined; the valiant Arjun is known for his courage and knowledge of the battlefield; and the exceedingly handsome Nakul and Sahadev is known for their love. Draupadi questions Lord

Shiva whether her marriage to the Pandavas is a boon or a curse. This is a boon since the Narada purana and Vayu purana claim Draupadi as the composite avatar of goddess Shyamala (wife of Dharma), Bharati (wife of Vayu), Shache (wife of Indra), Usha (wife of Ashwin) and Parvathi (wife of Shiva) who has married the earthly compartments in the form of five Pandavas.

Lord Shiva promises that Draupadi will regain her virginity each morning when she takes bath. This is an evolution of a special code of martial conduct to keep harmony among the five brothers and is considered a special boon of virginity granted to Paanchali as she is concerned about the day-to-day life as a wife of five different men. She is worried that there might be misunderstandings and jealousy if she is not able to express her affection or divide her time equally among the Pandavas. Krishna, as a friend, provides Draupadi with a solution to spend one year with each of the five brothers starting with Yudhisthir, the oldest, and at the end of the year, start to live with the next one. When she lives with one brother, the other brothers would be barred from entering her room. Thus, Draupadi begins her marital life. Her smartness is revealed when she serves as the wife to five husbands. The Pandavas after their marriage with Draupadi becomes bold enough to come out of hiding and demand half of their inheritance from their uncle, Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas often seek Draupadi's guidance and approval in matters related to reigning the kingdom. Draupadi is widely recognized for her aggressive attitude and her enemies are wary of her power.

Draupadi is pushed immediately into household work by Kunti and since she has well practiced living an unqueenly life before her marriage, she allows herself to adapt to her surrounding to do all the work allotted by her mother-in-law with no regrets and proves herself as the perfect wife for her husbands. Soon they all move to Hasthinapur and begin to build their new kingdom, Indra Prastha in Khandava forest. The name Indra Prastha has a reference to the residence of Lord Indhra, the king of gods. The name Indra Prastha is chosen by the Pandavas, who are believed to be Indhra's in their formal life but Paanchali wants to call it as 'Palace of Illusions' as this place is going to be envied by every king in the universe.

The palace built by Mayasura, is the most magnificent dwelling on the earth made of marbles and magic; composed of excellent materials, furnished with golden walls and archways, and glorified with many varied pictures. The palace is well-built and has many specialties such as the surface of a pool of still water. Pandavas invite Duryodhan for attending the Rajasuya Yagna. Duryodhan is amazed to see the wonderful illusions in the palace. He envies the

imperial court which is excellent in its puzzling artistic workmanship. Mayasura places a peerless tank of lotuses with leaves of dark-coloured gems and its bank is overlaid with lakhs of costly marble set with pearls. Apart from this he also adds that “I give you more: floors looking like rivers, waterfalls looking like walls” (145). Many kings mistake it to be land and fall into it and Duryodhan is one among such kings who falls into the pond. Seeing this, Draupadi, who along with her attendants burst into laughter and gives a drastic comment that, “It seems the blind king’s son is also blind!” (173). She is a brave woman who would not think twice before insulting anyone. As a consequence, there is a bad phase in her lifetime, when she is disrobed, insulted, and humiliated.

Duryodhan makes a vow that he will take revenge on Draupadi for humiliating him. Duryodhan and his uncle, Sakuni, start thinking of a devious plan to oust the Pandavas from Indra Prastha. Soon Paanchali and her husbands are invited to a feast in Hasthinapur. Kunti wants Yudhisthir to leave Paanchali behind as they are invited by Duryodhan. Yudhisthir replies to his mother that, “You’re always imagining the worst. Paanchali will be just fine. In fact, she’ll make sure that the rest of us don’t do anything imprudent” (178). The words of Yudhisthir express the power of Paanchal’i. Being men, the Pandavas feel that Paanchali will be the protector to take care of them if anything happens at the palace during the feast.

A marvellous feast is arranged to welcome Draupadi and her five husbands, but she does not know that she is about to fall into Duryodhan’s trap. After the feast, a game of dice is announced. According to a long-standing pact of Kshatriyas, a king could never say no to a game of dice and thus the Pandavas accept the invitation. During the dicing event, Sakuni comes into the play for Duryodhan devising a scheme to rob Yudhisthir of all his possessions. Yudhisthir’s ineptitude, addiction to the game, and inability to resist the challenge gambles away his entire kingdom, his wealth, his four brothers, and even his wife. There is a dramatic change of fortune for the Pandavas and Draupadi. Yudhisthir challenges to play the game of dice but he loses everything and in the end pawns Draupadi.

Draupadi, who is an empress, is now suddenly reduced to the status of a Dasi, a slave maid. She is horrified when she learns that she is staked in the game of dice and has become Duryodhan’s slave. She is not able to accept herself as a slave since she is the wife of the Pandavas and not anyone’s possessions to be gambled. Paanchal’i ventilates her passion after she knows about the failure of the Pandavas and says that, “The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave” (190). When she is called upon in the courtroom she

refuses to go because, if Yudhisthir has lost in the gamble, there is no way that he could gamble on her as she is not only the wife to Yudhisthir but also to the other four brothers as well. When the attendant comes to Paanchali's chamber to summon her to the saba, she interrogates, "But women never go there! And why would he and not my husbands sent for me?" (189). She is informed that her palace has also been lost in the game. Draupadi becomes wild with passion and challenges the authority of her husband, "My palace?... He had no right!" (190). The act of losing the palace of her husband cannot be tolerated by her because her husband has lost it without her consent. This shows that she has equal rights in all aspects to that of her five husbands.

Draupadi instead of feeling nervous gets a fresh realization of her identity and screams that, "I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad. sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of greatest on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (190). Draupadi gains the support of Vikarna, the younger brother of Duryodhan but he is silenced by Karna, stating that he is too young. Draupadi screams to everybody to rescue her, but it is in vain. Draupadi argues and questions the legality of staking her but she is forcefully dragged into the court; she describes her situation as, "...The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of ourtime!" (193). Duryodhan humiliates Draupadi in front of the five Pandava brothers as well as many well-known dignitaries of the time.

Paanchali implores help from all the elders – Bheeshma, Drona, and her husbands but it proves to be of no help to her. It explores the sensual apathy that society can set down the norm but it cannot provide protection against the ignominy of male arrogance.

On the realization of her position, Draupadi almost becomes wild with anger and mentions that, "...I demanded help from my husbands. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed. I could see that in their minds they were already Duryodhan's vassals, chained by Yudhisthir's word" (191). Now she has no choice but to be the slave of Duryodhan. At this point Paanchali stands alone even though she has five husbands, who are speechless and can do nothing in order to save her life. This shows that these men have not honoured her life as their wife and have gone to an extent of losing her, who has come to sanctify their life. Duryodhan as revenge of his humiliation in The Palace of Illusions takes the chance to hold Draupadi by her hair and drags her in and further orders her to sit on his lap. He and Dussasan despicably try to disrobe her to nudity.

Draupadi finds that a hundred male eyes are burning to see her disrobed, so cries out and challenges every man who never cared to provide protection for a woman. She says, “Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bonds of decency” (193). Draupadi knows the only one who can provide her consolation against uncompromising dismay is Lord Krishna. She closes her eyes and surrenders herself to Lord Krishna for help and he helps her in such a way that the Kauravas fail in their misadventure. Lord Krishna, who comes to her rescue says that, “No one can shame you, he said if you don’t allow it” (193). She worships, trusts, and believes him, and in turn her friend, Lord Krishna stands up to her at all times. Immediately a miracle occurs when Dussasan starts to unwrap layers and layers of sari and is forced to stop, due to exhaustion. It is then that Draupadi vows that she will not wash her hair until she first washes with the blood of Dussasan and Duryodhan. Kauravas have lost and Pandavas are full of shame as this is nothing but declaring war.

Draupadi actually wins as she stands clothed while Dussasan gets exhausted and fails miserably. Draupadi with the fire of anger shouts in a voice like a block of cracking ice that, All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day’s work. Yours mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I’ve wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman. (194)

These words of Draupadi are so significant because what Draupadi says or does, is not so much for herself but more so for the whole female kind. She warns the Kauravas not to mess with women and their chastity, dignity, and integrity.

Draupadi verbally eviscerates the entire court threatening that if her father hears about his daughter’s insult, he would tear Hastinapur to the ground. Just as she is about to curse the Kuru dynasty, Gandhari, the wife of king Dhritarashtra intervenes. Gandhari is a remarkable woman; very brave and rooted in her own convictions unable to bare the harsh treatment of men towards Draupadi in the saba interrupts in order to rescue Draupadi. She knows that they cannot undo what has already been done but offers Draupadi with three boons. Draupadi with the respect towards Gandhari accepts the boon. For the first boon, Draupadi asks for her five husbands to be freed from bondage so that her sons will not be called Dasas (servants). For her second boon, she asks to restore all the wealth that Yudhisthir has lost in the game of dice. She does not make

the third wish thinking that the two boons are enough to make up for her loss and leaves the hall.

Paanchali is ready to accept anything that is said by Gandhari, who is admired for her patience though she is from the enemy clan but is a real warrior, who has fought throughout her life to make her sons follow the path of dharma.

Gandhari serves as the pillar of man's life. Without the presence of Gandhari, her husband, her brother and the whole Kaurava clan would have been destroyed by the Pandavas. Gandhari never gives up her duty as a wife and a mother. She often insists her husband and sons about the ideal path of humans to be followed to achieve moksha and to serve God. She is a woman who has been chosen by God to give moksha from the earthly life. She knows that a man's life will be drawn into darkness without the presence of dharma and thus she drags her family towards the path of dharma in order to save them. She is celebrated as an ideal consort till the present, for her solid sacrifice by blinding herself when she comes to know that her husband is visionless. She never regrets for her son's death as she knows that their life will fall under the feet of Pandavas as they are dharmis and the victory fall on the side of dharma. Both Kunti and Gandhari have played equal roles. They both are blessed by God for their endless sacrifice. They stand as a symbol for Draupadi to make her follow them in her life; to learn tolerance; fight for their rights. Women are considered as the gift from God. They are the real blessings of God to enrich a family. They shower their love and care to their family and expect nothing in return. They are the social warriors to protect their family from all the evil power. The followers of women are considered as the followers of God; the follower of dharma. Thus, man is dependent on women to achieve the glory of success in his life.

Pandavas again waste Draupadi's boon by accepting another game with modified rules which states that the loser of the game would go into exile for twelve years followed by a year of anonymity. The Pandavas once again loses and Draupadi accompanies them into exile for thirteen years. Draupadi has never been able to forget the insult heaped upon her in the dice-hall. She often laments that Yudhisthir's obtuseness and the other husbands' worthlessness are the roots of all her misery. Yudhisthir tries on many occasions to console her. Bheem, too, repeatedly vows that he will not let matters rest till he has drunk Dussasan's blood and breaks Duryodhan's thigh. The other three also often try to tell her that thirteen years will pass soon and hope to see good days again. But all in vain, Draupadi, unable to suppress her anger, finally stops talking to them. She has never been able to ignore the grief of losing the

kingdom. Draupadi vows that she would not tie her hair until she first washes them with the blood of Dussasan and Duryodhan. Bheem takes her side and makes a pledge that he will pluck Dussasan's arm and kill him. This stand taken by Draupadi is so significant. She does not confer with her husbands, or her brothers or even Krishna, she knows exactly what she has to do.

The forest life of the Pandavas and Draupadi begin. Draupadi immediately adapts to the forest life by giving up her royal life style. Draupadi's beloved friend, Lord Krishna visits to make them aware of their duty on their exile and also promises Draupadi that he will visit when she is in need of help. The Sun God gives an Akshaya Patra, the magic vessel, which would not become empty until Draupadi has had her meal. She does not hesitate to give food to those in need even at the time of their exile, which shows that she is generous and compassionate. One day while walking in the forest she plucks a fruit in the tree and when she is about to eat, her Sakha, Krishna stops her and says Sakhi, this fruit is for the sage who is to break his fast after observing for twelve years.

Draupadi asks Krishna for help and he says that when each one of the Pandavastells the truth, the fruit will move two feet upwards and finally it will take its original place. When each of the Pandavas tells the truth, the fruit moves two feet upwards but when it is Draupadi's turn, she professes her love for the Pandavas, but the fruit does not move upwards which means that she did not reveal the truth. She later laments that if she had married Karna as per her wish, she would not have suffered such miseries. Draupadi, on revealing the truth, the fruit goes back to its place. This is an instancethat gives a chance to Draupadi to share her thoughts and feelings but the Pandavas are shocked to hear the truth.

Draupadi has many challenging times in the forest. She is the temptation and a terror of man. Jayadrathan, the son of Vriddhakshatra and the husband of Duryodhan's sister, Dussala, in order to fulfill his desires, asks Draupadi to desert her husbands, who have fallen upon bad times but she points out that it is wrong on her part to desert one's spouse when they are in difficulty and tells him the kind of time he will have to face when they return. Draupadi is abducted by Jayadrathan and when the Padavas are after him, she is left free. Another incident is when Keechak, the brother of Sudeshna, and the commander of King Virat's forces, is filled with lust when sees Draupadi and asks her to marry him. Draupadi refuses saying that she is already married and that her husbands are very strong and he will not be able to escape death at their hands. He ignores her words and tries to molest her but Draupadi escapes and later is

consoled by Arjun. Arjun and Bheem hatch a plan to kill Keechak and they do so since he is an adharmi and no longer a man to live, as he is a man who mistreats women.

After twelve years of exile, the Pandavas have to spend their last year in anonymity. It is a condition that during the last year if Duryodhan discovers them, they have to endure another twelve years in exile. So, Draupadi charts a plan and asks her five husbands to be in disguise in the palace of Virat, the king of Matsya country. Yudhisthir disguises himself as a pious Brhamin in the name of Kanka Bhatta; Bheem as Ballav, joins to serve in the kitchen; Arjun, as Brihannala, disguises as a eunuch to teach the art of dancing to the princesses; Nakul with the name Granthi, joins as the supervisor of the royal stable and Sahadev as Tantri Pal, looks after the palace dairy.

Draupadi in the name of Sairindhri introduces herself to the Queen Sudeshna, as the wife of five Gandharvas, who are divine musicians. She also mentions that she has been the hairdresser of Draupadi. Knowing that she has attended Draupadi who is the most fashionable modern girl of that age, and a woman of extraordinary beauty with fiery temperament, the Queen Sudeshna immediately accepts her as the maid. After the period of their disguise, the king, Virat and the queen beg pardon for treating them as their labourers.

After the completion of thirteen years of exile, the Pandavas ask Kauravas to return their five villages which they refuse and send a messenger to the Pandavas advising them to live a life of alms under Duryodhan's rule. The unfair game and the public shaming of Draupadi are the reasons for the Kurushetra war. The war is an attempt to establish the rule of just. At the time of war, Draupadi is present in the camp on the eighteenth day and the last night of the great battle, when she loses all her five sons born to each husband and her victorious husbands are in the camp of the defeated enemy. In the end, Draupadi repents the loss of all her sons in the war and thinks that it should not have taken place but she makes herself strong to accept death in her own family as it is the only way to attain dharma.

Indian women are usually passive and silent in nature, but when injustice arises in the world they become furious as fire, abandon their tolerance, and burst out their emotions as Goddess Kali. Draupadi damns the Kauravas when she says, "I lifted up my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because I knew that everything I said would come to pass. I will not comb it, ... until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood" (194).

Draupadi's vow gets fulfilled when Bheem kills Duryodhan and she washes her hair with the blood of Dussasan. Paanchali at her final journey says "I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Paanchali" (360). Draupadi is physically no match to men but makes a good match mentally. She mentally handles the situations which most women cannot and these are the experiences that make her stronger.

Draupadi is a great administrator. She feels her destiny is fulfilled by ruling the kingdom in the path of dharma and by gaining a respectable position for women by breaking all the restrictions in a patriarchal society. She is conscious enough about her responsibilities as a wife. She says "I'd played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I'd shared their hardship in Khandav. I'd helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung" (151). She rescues her husbands like a boat that is drowning in a sea of sorrows.

Draupadi is the first female of Indian mythology, who starts with women power, self-being, and to be self-confident. She never claims herself as a weak woman of her time. Draupadi is aggressive and spoke her mind always – be it her wedding courtroom discussion or during war. Although Draupadi is desperate for revenge on those who humiliated her, her distinction between the right and the wrong is rarely clouded and she is always in pursuit of justice. She remains unparalleled in personifying womanhood in its wholesomeness and uniqueness with all its glory, honour, retaliation and resilience.

Draupadi in all her tragedy proudly stands as a dignified lady; strong, determined and exceedingly powerful. Women draw inspiration from Draupadi, as she is a person, who relied on her inner strength and unwavering faith. Draupadi and womanhood are inseparable in a woman's journey from the immediate present to the remote past.

The other known women characters in the novel fight for their duty to be fulfilled. Kunti and Gandhari, the mother of Pandavas and Kauravas respectively, are the two powerful women who influenced the turn of events in the epic. As a young child, Kunti pleases the sage, Durvasa and so he teaches her a mantra that enables her to invoke any god of her choice and have a son born out of him. Out of curiosity, Kunti decides to test the power of the mantra and she recites and invokes the Sun god. Kunti asks for a son who would be born with golden armour and earrings. She gives birth to a boy, Karna before her marriage. Expect for Kunti's foster mother,

no one knows about this and so with her foster mother's help, in silent misery and guilt, Kunti floats the baby away in the trunk on the Yamuna River.

Soon, the marriage of Kunti is arranged by her father, when she attains the marriageable age. She happily marries Pandu, the prince of Hasthinapur. Kunti is a woman of tolerance and begets her husband with five sons by her unique mantra when her husband falls into the curse of incapability to be a father of his own child. Later the queen of Hasthinapur carries out her maternal responsibility of bringing up the five Pandava princes, who are very young at the time of their father's death. This act of Kunti prizes her self-effacing behaviour as a mother.

Kunti wants her brave husband's name and glory to be presented and her sons to get their due. She stood all alone to raise her sons in the forest without expecting anyone's support. Kunti goes to Hastinapur to live there with her sons as she has her rights to live in her husband's palace. Kunti has no interest in the kingdom but accepts their invitation regarding her sons' welfare. She lives an ordinary life in the palace and happily serves the king and the queen. She loves and cares for the Kauravas more than her sons which reveal her impartiality toward her family and the kingdom. Kunti teaches the lesson to the woman's community that they should be impartial in order to bind the family and maintain togetherness within the family.

Kunti also places herself as a supporting pillar for the queen, Gandhari to rule the kingdom. Kunti finds her sons in danger and begins to protect and guide her sons from the treacheries plotted by the sons of Gandhari. As part of her way in bringing up her sons, she exposes them to experiences at all levels of living. She is appreciated for her maturity, the ability to observe life, to learn from experiences and take swift decisions.

Kunti sends her son, Bheem to fight Balasura, the monstrous eater as she feels that it is the king's duty to protect his people and it is an act of dharma. This act of Kunti picturizes her as a kshatriya woman who does not fear for the death of her husband or son in the war, but prays for the welfare of the people who believe them to be their shield. Her sons are her shadows, who follow her path and are ready to sacrifice anything for the word of Kunti which makes them marry Paanchal's daughter against all social norms. The respect and implicit obedience of her sons is a tribute to Kunti and her motherhood. This is something that Gandhari fails to achieve.

Gandhari, the beautiful princess of Gandhar, is an ideal consort who hides her attractive eyes behind a scarf by knowing her husband is blind. This shows her love and respect towards her husband as a wife. She never lets her husband fall into difficult situations in the kingdom,

instead, she does her duty as a queen. She has the skill to be aware of a war which is unannounced and has the ability to manipulate all the difficulties. She is a single woman army to fight against the adharmic act of her husband and sons. She enjoys her royal life but never steps back from her duty and continuously struggles to make her sons to follow the path of dharma. She equally loves Pandavas and treats them like her sons. She often praises them for their brave achievements in the war in which her sons fail to be the winners.

Gandhari believes that the people of the kingdom follow the path of the king and stands alone in the crowd of the adharmic to continue her duty as a noble queen in the righteous path. Gandhari never tolerates her sons' act to disrespect a woman in the virtuous king's court which is a place that provides justice for the people. She accepts Paanchal'i's curse for the whole Kaurava clan as she knows that it will be the lesson for the future men to respect women. Even at the time of war, Gandhari blesses her sons that the victory falls where virtue stands. This shows that she is a queen who holds her dharma and ready to accept her sons' death. As a mother, in order to ensure the safety of her sons, she humiliates herself, reveals the misdeed of her youth and begs Karna to join the Kaurava brothers.

Gandhari by her strong blind meditation, gifts her son Duryodhan a shield which cannot be broken or cracked by anyone, but he wastes her boon by his foolish act and dies in the hands of Bheem. Even when Gandhari loses all her hundred beloved sons because of Paanchali's curse and the owe of Bheem, she does not curse Paanchali and Bheem for their act but instead welcomes them and praises them for their victory. This act shows that she is a woman of justice. She wishes that the kingdom should be ruled by Yudhisthir, who has no desire for pleasurable life. Gandhari with no desire to live the life of queen in the palace starts her journey to the forest with her husband to live a peaceful life. Kunti gracefully recedes to the background and lets Draupadi take over the duty of taking care of her sons. As a mother she protects and guides her sons in every way and guards them amidst all the venal politics of the Kuru court. She is ready to go along with the former king and the queen to serve them. This act of sacrifice expresses her dutiful mind as she must take care of her husband's brother and his wife in the absence of her husband.

Women play various roles in their lives as daughter, wife, mother, sister, friend as depicted in the novel. Unlike the epic, *Mahabharata*, the novel, *The Palace of Illusion* throws light on the causes, sufferings and challenges of female characters. It highlights their role in domestic life and makes one to understand that they are part of the worldly affairs and the harbinger of the

great battle. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee breaks the silence of all the prominent women characters whose silence and subjugation provide them the strength of will to challenge the existing systems that are a burden to their human identity. Hence Draupadi is one of the celebrated women characters of ancient India.

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