



# A Journey From Silence to Speech: Women's Quest for Identity in Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*

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**Abstract**— *The modern, contemporary feminist rewritings of myth allow a much-needed reconstruction of the ancient mythical women and also challenge traditional narratives that have historically silenced these women's voices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in The Palace of Illusions and The Forest of Enchantments reimagines Indian epics through the perspectives of female protagonists marginalized in canonical texts and hence, becomes able to re-tell the saga afresh in the voice of these mythical heroines. This paper attempts to explore how Divakaruni has managed to reconstruct figures like Draupadi and Sita. Through her retelling she has attempted to transform these women figures from passive receivers of destiny into strong, self-aware narrators of their own experiences. This gradual but powerful movement from silence to speech represents a profound quest for identity, agency, autonomy and self-recognition. By granting these women narrative authority Divakaruni, not only reconstructs the myth, but also tackles contemporary questions and challenges revolving around gender power and personal agency. This paper argues that such retellings serve as a potent medium to create literary spaces where suppressed voices regain dignity. These retold sagas, also, redefine womanhood in both mythic and modern contexts. Moreover, these narratives encourage the modern readers to reassess their inherited traditions, question patriarchal structures, and acknowledge the transformative potential of women's storytelling in reforming cultural memory as well as historical consciousness.*



**Keywords**— *Feminist Rewritings, Traditional Narratives, Quest for Identity, Women's Storytelling, Cultural Memory, Historical Consciousness*

Mythological epics are not only a racial memory but they have, often, traditionally served as carriers of cultural values, moral ideals, and social codes. They shape collective memory and define accepted models of heroism, devotion, and righteousness. However, while preserving tradition, these narratives have also reinforced patriarchal norms by centering male experiences and reducing women to symbolic or idealized roles. In the original versions of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, women like Draupadi and Sita are revered as embodiments of virtue and endurance, yet their inner lives, personal conflicts, and emotional struggles remain largely unexplored. Their identities are

constructed through male viewpoints, and their silence is interpreted as obedience and moral perfection rather than as a sign of suppressed individuality. This traditional representation reflects a cultural pattern in which women are remembered more for their sacrifice than for their selfhood. In this regard Suzette H. Eikelenboom has rightly opined that:

Mythology is often considered to consist of archetypal and universally applicable stories about the nature of the universe and human life. As a result, this has often led to the notion that myth is stagnant and unchangeable precisely because of its

universality and timelessness. However, like all storytelling, myths evolve and adapt. (Eikelenboom 4)

Modern feminist literature seeks to address this imbalance by revisiting myths from women's perspectives. Retelling becomes an act of questioning inherited authority and reopening spaces that were previously closed to female consciousness. Feminist revisionist mythology challenges the idea that epics are fixed narratives and instead presents them as living texts that can be reinterpreted to include excluded voices. Within this literary movement, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni emerges as a significant and influential voice. Her novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagine the Indian epics through the eyes of Draupadi and Sita, granting them emotional depth, psychological complexity, and narrative freedom. Divakaruni does not merely add women's voices to old stories but reshapes the very structure of storytelling by allowing female protagonists to become self-aware narrators of their experiences.

This paper examines how Divakaruni reconstructs female identity through voice, memory, and self-expression. The transition from silence to speech becomes a powerful metaphor for the broader struggle of women to claim agency, dignity, and selfhood within patriarchal traditions. Draupadi questions destiny and challenges unjust authority, while Sita reflects on love, loyalty, and personal integrity. Their voices transform them from passive figures of fate into conscious individuals shaping their own meaning. Through such retellings, myth becomes a dynamic discourse where women reclaim their stories and redefine their place in cultural history. Divakaruni's reimagined epics thus bridge ancient tradition and contemporary feminist thought, reminding readers that when women speak, history itself gains new perspective and renewed humanity. Divakaruni does not merely retell Indian epics but reinterprets them through a distinctly feminine consciousness that reshapes the meaning and purpose of myth itself. Her act of rewriting becomes a powerful literary intervention that challenges inherited authority and questions the long-accepted dominance of male centered narratives. Krishna Mondal and others have rightly opined in one of their research papers that:

Myths and mythology of India, establish patriarchal ideologies and tend to marginalize women within society by positioning them to inferior roles. Feminist revisionists provide a fresh perspective, specifically a female point of view that destabilizes the grand narrative and questions conventional androcentric ideology. (Mondal et al. 700)

Traditional epic storytelling has historically positioned women as supporting figures whose identities are defined

by male heroes and social expectations. She disrupts this structure by shifting narrative control to female protagonists, thereby transforming the way readers engage with familiar mythological events. Through this creative re-visioning, she reclaims narrative space that was once denied to women and uses it to explore emotional depth and psychological truth. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi narrates her own life story. This narrative choice allows readers to witness the events of the *Mahabharata* not as distant historical episodes but as lived experiences shaped by personal feelings and inner conflicts. Draupadi reflects on her desires, disappointments, ambitions, and moral dilemmas with remarkable honesty. Her voice reveals the cost of duty and the pain of injustice, elements that were minimized in traditional versions. By presenting Draupadi as a self-aware storyteller, Divakaruni gives her authority over her own identity. She is no longer a silent figure remembered only for her humiliation in the royal court but a thinking and questioning individual who interprets her own destiny. Soumya Priyadarshini and Manisha Upadhyay in their research paper have stated:

Through reversing the roles and putting Draupadi to an equal position of one who tells the story, Divakaruni challenges the traditional portrayal of women in myths and reinvents their roles as reasoners, will-considerers and transformers. (Priyadarshini and Upadhyay 782)

Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita recounts her trials with deep introspection and self-dignity. Divakaruni presents Sita not merely as an obedient wife but as a woman capable of reflection, resistance, and inner strength. Her narration explores emotional vulnerability alongside moral courage. Sita speaks of love, loyalty, loss, and isolation in ways that humanize her beyond idealized devotion. This retelling allows readers to understand her choices and sufferings from within rather than through the judgments of external voices. Her speech becomes an assertion of selfhood in a world that once demanded her silence.

These narrative strategies break the monopoly of male centered storytelling and challenge the idea that traditional versions hold absolute authority. Women in Divakaruni's novels are no longer spoken about but speak for themselves. This shift questions the authenticity of inherited narratives and opens myth to multiple interpretations where women emerge as creators of meaning rather than objects of destiny. Divakaruni thus transforms myth into a democratic space of storytelling where forgotten voices gain power and cultural memory is rewritten with empathy and justice. In the classical Indian epics, silence functions as a powerful tool of control that sustains patriarchal authority and defines the limits of female existence. Women are often expected to endure suffering without protest, and their silence is

celebrated as a sign of virtue, devotion, and moral strength. Draupadi, in the *Mahabharata*, is publicly humiliated in the royal court, yet her cries for justice are dismissed and her voice is rendered powerless in a space dominated by male authority. Similarly, in the *Ramayana*, Sita is forced into exile and subjected to a trial by fire to prove her purity, while her suffering is framed as an ideal of wifely devotion. In both narratives, silence becomes a means through which women are disciplined, their individuality suppressed, and their agency denied. Their experiences are remembered, but their inner voices remain unheard. Divakaruni brilliantly exposes the injustice of such imposed silence by reimagining these women as conscious individuals whose inner worlds demand recognition. In her retellings, silence is no longer a noble virtue but a condition born of emotional repression, social obedience, and forced endurance. Draupadi's silence is shown as a burden that weighs upon her spirit, filled with unspoken anger, humiliation, and longing for justice. Sita's quiet suffering is reinterpreted as a survival strategy in a world that refuses to listen to women's pain. Divakaruni reveals that behind the traditional image of the silent woman lies a complex emotional landscape that deserves expression. By highlighting the psychological cost of silence, she questions the cultural glorification of female endurance.

However, these novels do not remain within the realm of voiceless suffering. Gradually, silence is transformed into a space of self-reflection and inner strength. Draupadi begins to understand her worth beyond the roles imposed upon her, while Sita discovers dignity in solitude and self-awareness. Their silence becomes a phase of introspection that prepares them for speech. The movement from voicelessness to expression thus becomes a symbolic journey of reclaiming identity. When these women finally articulate their thoughts and emotions, their speech carries the weight of truth shaped by experience. In Divakaruni's vision, speaking truth becomes an act of resistance against unjust traditions. Draupadi questions the morality of a society that dishonors her, and Sita challenges the expectations placed upon her as an ideal wife. Their voices confront authority and disrupt the silence that once controlled them. Through this transformation, Divakaruni asserts that breaking silence is not merely personal liberation but a cultural and political act. The journey from silence to speech ultimately represents the awakening of selfhood and the reclaiming of dignity in a world that once demanded submission.

Voice in Divakaruni's novels becomes the true representation of selfhood and personal identity. In traditional epic narratives, women are often defined by their relationships and duties, their individuality overshadowed by the expectations of patriarchal society. Divakaruni disrupts this pattern by granting her female protagonists the

power to speak, reflect, and narrate their own experiences. Their voices become a medium through which suppressed emotions, hidden desires, and unacknowledged suffering are finally expressed. This act of speaking transforms them from silent figures shaped by fate into conscious individuals who actively interpret their lives. Voice thus becomes the foundation of self-awareness and the first step toward autonomy. Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* questions destiny, challenges dharma, and interrogates the roles imposed upon her as daughter, wife, and queen. Her speech reflects anger, pride, vulnerability, and wisdom, revealing a layered personality far removed from her traditional portrayal. Similarly, Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* redefines devotion not as blind submission but as a conscious and ethical choice rooted in self-respect. Through introspection and narration, Sita explores the meaning of love, loyalty, and endurance, presenting devotion as strength rather than surrender. Their speech is not limited to external dialogue but takes the form of inner narration where they analyze their experiences and assign meaning to their suffering and joys.

This narrative authority allows both women to redefine concepts such as honor, love, duty, and sacrifice from their own perspectives. Honor is no longer linked to public approval, love is freed from possession, duty is balanced with self-worth, and sacrifice becomes a chosen act rather than forced submission. Through speech, they construct identities that are independent of male validation and societal expectations. Divakaruni thus presents speech as an act of liberation that challenges the structures of silence and obedience. Storytelling itself becomes a tool of empowerment, allowing women to reclaim their histories, assert their presence, and inspire future generations to recognize the power of their own voices. Both protagonists in Divakaruni's reimagined epics undergo profound psychological journeys that redefine their sense of self. Rather than remaining static figures bound by destiny, Draupadi and Sita emerge as emotionally complex individuals who confront inner conflicts and external pressures. Their journeys are shaped not only by the events around them but also by their responses to suffering, love, betrayal, and expectation. Through this inward exploration, Divakaruni transforms legendary women into relatable human beings whose struggles resonate with readers across time and culture.

Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* wrestles with pride, ambition, desire, and a deep sense of injustice. She is conscious of her intelligence and strength, yet she is repeatedly trapped within political games and patriarchal norms. Her inner monologues reveal conflicting emotions of love and resentment, hope and despair. She questions the fairness of fate and challenges the moral codes that demand

her silence. This internal struggle shapes her evolving identity, as she learns to recognize her worth beyond the roles imposed upon her. Her psychological journey reflects the tension between personal aspiration and social expectation, a conflict faced by many modern women. Similarly, Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* embarks on a different yet equally significant quest. She searches for belonging, dignity, and inner peace in a world that constantly tests her loyalty and virtue. Exile, isolation, and misunderstanding force her to turn inward and discover her own emotional strength. Her reflections reveal patience, courage, and self-respect that grow stronger with every trial. Sita's journey becomes a path toward self-realization, where endurance transforms into wisdom and acceptance becomes empowerment.

In Divakaruni's vision, identity is not fixed but continuously evolving through experience, suffering, and self-understanding. These women are no longer distant mythic icons but individuals shaped by doubts, desires, anger, and hope. Such emotional realism bridges the distance between ancient myth and contemporary womanhood. Their quests mirror the struggles of modern women who balance tradition and individuality, duty and desire, silence and speech. The search for identity thus becomes universal and timeless, reminding readers that the journey toward selfhood transcends history, culture, and myth.

Divakaruni's retellings of Indian epics resonate deeply with modern feminist discourse because they challenge long established narratives that have traditionally defined women through sacrifice and obedience. In canonical versions of the epics, female suffering is often portrayed as noble and desirable, reinforcing the belief that endurance and silence are essential virtues of womanhood. Divakaruni's novels question this cultural conditioning by exposing the emotional cost of such expectations. Her reimagined narratives invite readers to critically re-examine stories that have shaped social attitudes toward gender for centuries. By giving women the power to narrate their own experiences, Divakaruni urges readers to recognize how cultural traditions have often normalized inequality under the guise of moral duty.

These novels also suggest that tradition need not be entirely rejected but thoughtfully re-interpreted with justice, empathy, and inclusiveness. Divakaruni does not discard the epics or undermine their cultural significance. Instead, she reconstructs them from perspectives that were previously unheard, proving that tradition is not static but open to renewal. Her retellings maintain the spiritual and ethical essence of the original texts while challenging their

patriarchal interpretations. This balance between respect for heritage and the demand for gender justice creates a meaningful conversation between the past and the present. By rewriting the epics, Divakaruni creates a dialogue across time where women reclaim history and reshape cultural memory. Draupadi and Sita are no longer remembered only through male centered storytelling but as women who understand, question, and define their own lives. This reclamation of narrative space allows forgotten emotions and silenced experiences to enter collective consciousness. Cultural memory thus becomes more inclusive and representative of diverse voices. These stories inspire contemporary readers to recognize their own voices in societies that still struggle with gender inequality. Women readers in particular find reflections of their personal conflicts between tradition and autonomy, duty and self-respect. Divakaruni's retellings remind them that speaking out is not a betrayal of culture but a necessary step toward transformation. In this way, her novels extend beyond literature to become instruments of social awareness, encouraging a future where equality and empathy guide the reinterpretation of tradition.

From silence to speech represents a transformative journey of reclaiming selfhood. Divakaruni's reimagined epics restore dignity and agency to women whose voices were overshadowed by patriarchal storytelling. Draupadi and Sita emerge not as mere symbols of endurance but as conscious narrators of their own destiny. Through voice, memory, and self-expression they achieve identity and autonomy, challenging the limitations imposed upon them by tradition. These feminist retellings redefine myth as a living tradition capable of reflecting justice, equality, and human truth. Divakaruni's work ultimately reminds readers that when women speak, history itself begins to change. Cultural memory becomes more inclusive, and silenced experiences find rightful expression. Her narratives encourage future generations to question inherited norms, resist injustice, and embrace the power of their own voices, proving that storytelling can become a force of transformation in both literature and society.

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