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Power Narratives in the Selected Works of CB Divakaruni

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Abstract:
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a pioneering author who skillfully reinterprets ancient Indian epics through a feminist and foucauldian lens. The present paper examines Divakarmi's two novels, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, which provide innovative perspectives on the lives of Draupadi and Sita, two pivotal figures in Indian mythology. By reimagining these iconic women, Divakaruni enables them to reclaim their own stories, offering a fresh, feminist perspective on traditional Indian epics. Her works are more than mere retellings; they are complex counter-narratives that challenge canonical oppressions and stereotypes surrounding gender, authority, and identity. At the core of Divakaruni's reimagining lies a powerful narrative that boldly reorients readers' understanding of gender, authority, and identity. Through her writing, Divakaruni presents a feminist perspective that not only challenges traditional views but also inspires new readers to think critically about these issues.

Keywords: Epic, Feminism, Gender, Mythology, Power Narrative.

Introduction:

      This paper analyses power dynamics through a multidisciplinary lens, drawing on diverse theoretical frameworks. Foucault's concepts of culturally constructed bodies and the personal as political serve as a foundation to explore the embedded hierarchies within these narratives. Furthermore, the paper incorporates Jacques Lacan's concept of the symbolic order and Freudian psychoanalytic perspectives to illuminate the psychological dimensions of power, as exemplified by the characters of Draupadi and Sita. In general, these concepts can be applied to dissect this nexus between the societal expectations that shape the exercise of

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individual agency and identity. This paper explores three broad objectives. In the first place, it shall investigate how power features in the works of Divakaruni by considering struggles, negotiations, and resistances among her characters. Secondly, it discusses how Divakaruni employs these narrative strategies to express power dynamics regarding first-person narration, symbolism, and intertextuality. Last but not least, the paper determines the overall impact that such power narratives have on readers, including how such narratives can promote more empathy and challenge hegemonic hierarchies. This paper will complement the plurality concerning identity by positioning Divakaruni's narratives within the context of diaspora and postcolonial feminist literature as well. Not only does Divakaruni give space to the muted voices prominent in Indian narratology, but it also gives space to the realities lived by women within the social power framework. This research will present how these novels interact with politics and selfhood, as well as discuss gender and cultural aspects in the form of *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* offer captivating retellings of Indian mythology and epics from a female perspective. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni skillfully reimagines the story of Sita, Lord Rama's legendary wife, through Sita's own voice. This thought-provoking novel delves into Sita's inner world as she grapples with her emotions, resilience, and identity, all while navigating the complex web of societal expectations and norms. Similar to this, Draupadi, one of the main characters in the epic Mahabharata, is the center of attention in *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi's voice is elevated by Divakaruni, who also highlights her agency, resilience, and weaknesses. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings offer a compelling reevaluation of the female figures in Indian mythology, challenging the traditional male-dominated narrative. Her works present a nuanced perspective, highlighting the complexity and agency of these women. By giving voice to the female characters, Divakaruni's books provide a platform for them to reclaim their stories and assert their presence in a patriarchal society, ultimately subverting the dominant narrative and offering a fresh, feminist perspective. Divakaruni's writing is captivating and provides a strong illustration of the strength and resiliency of women. The challenges, happiness, and victories of female characters who have been mainly overlooked or marginalized in conventional Indian mythology are brought to life in her works. She promotes diversity of viewpoints and emphasizes the value of representation in literature by doing this. The books written by Divakaruni are necessary for anyone who wants to investigate and comprehend the various facets of Indian mythology (Mahato 1).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works boldly confront social inequalities and challenge entrenched power structures, tackling pressing issues such as gender inequality, class disparities, and the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through her stories, Divakaruni advocates for a more just and inclusive world,

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emphasizing the transformative power of empathy, compassion, and understanding. Her writing exemplifies the long-standing tradition of using literature as a tool for social commentary and critique. Throughout history, socialist ideals and movements have influenced various literary genres, enabling authors to examine and challenge existing social and economic systems, promote social justice, and envision alternative societal structures. Divakaruni's works frequently feature female heroines who adeptly handle personal and societal challenges. These women face difficulties defining their own identities, gender roles, and cultural conventions. Divakaruni's literature highlights the struggles, triumphs, and tenacity of women while providing a platform for female voices. Divakaruni celebrates strong female heroes who navigate complex, often oppressive societies. Her characters challenge traditional gender roles, reject social standards, and assert their autonomy when faced with hardship. Divakaruni crafts multidimensional, brave, clever, and emotionally complex female characters that she portrays on her journey of self-discovery, empowerment, and personal growth (Chahal 3).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni seamlessly weaves myth into the fabric of her writing, utilizing it not only as a thematic element but also as a powerful tool for storytelling and self-expression. Throughout her works, Divakaruni skillfully employs legendary elements to illustrate the enduring significance of myth in human experience. By creating strong, complex female characters, she demonstrates how myth has been a source of inspiration, guidance, and empowerment for women across cultures and centuries. In Chitra Banerjee's novel, *The Palace of Illusions,* Divakaruni's affinity for myths and spiritual literature stems from her early recollections from childhood when her grandfather used to tell stories from the Indian Epics, namely The Mahabharata and The Ramayana. She used to wonder how

> "women were not given that much space and what they were thinking of, what they were feeling, we did not get to see that, and that's what really interested me because they were such complex characters as you know, Draupadi is a very complex character, and amazing things happen to her so what would be her reaction what was her participation we had just giver her a blanket line in many interpretations of the Mahabharata. Oh, Draupadi was responsible for the Mahabharata War. And I was like, wait, can you really put all the blame at her doorstep? so I became very interested in really analyzing her character and thinking about how she felt and what were the things she might say behind closed doors, you know, not just those one or two public statements that the Mahabharata gives us. So I think that was what really interested me, and that's been my project ever since I became a writer to shine a light on women's experiences and feelings, women's thoughts and reactions, to what happens to them and also to show what ways they are agents of their destiny. (Interview. 26 JUL. 2024)

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Despite five husbands, Draupadi is regarded as a woman of "purity." Panchali's narration is how Divakaruni tells the tale. In Divakaruni, Panchali is portrayed as a woman from antiquity with revolutionary ideas that are more advanced than those of a modern woman. She is fiercely independent, fearlessly confronts injustice, and adamantly maintains her will. Unknowingly, all five of you share what you have brought, according to Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas (Murugarajan 3). Draupadi marries all five in order to validate their mother's statements and respect Kunti alone. When asked to wed five different husbands, she makes the following negative remarks:

> To keep me chaste and foster harmony in the Pandava household, Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us. I would be wife to each brother a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. During that year, the other brothers were to keep their eyes lowered when speaking to me. (Better if they didn't speak at all.) they were not to touch me, not even the tips of the fingers. (...) Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again. (Divakaruni, 119-120)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives Sita a powerful weapon in the guise of a 'Quill' with which she voices the voiceless women of the epic Ramayana to fill the void of the preconceived narratives. As French feminist Helen Cixous, in her essay *Laugh of Medusa*, asserts:

> I shall speak about women's writing…Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Women must put themselves into the text— as into the world and into history— through their own movement. (Cixous, pp.347)

Sita's impulse to express her suppressed desires through "red ink" offers a profound revelation. The color red holds immense cultural significance in India, symbolizing various aspects of life. It marks the beginning of new endeavors, as seen in the drawing of swastik patterns. It also represents menstrual blood, a potent symbol of womanhood, fertility, and the feminine experience. Through this imagery, Sita's writing becomes a powerful metaphor for female empowerment, self-expression, and the reclaiming of feminine identity. But on the contrary, 'red ink' also represents power, passion, bloodshed, and the destruction of war in the novels. *Sitayan*, or *The Forest of Enchantments*, demonstrates the unwavering will of the unheard women of Ramayan, and *The Palace of Illusions* begins with menstrual blood when Draupadi was called into court after Yudhistir lost himself and had pawned his brothers and Draupadi as she was in her bleeding phase and ends up cursing:

> All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's

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work. Your mother's advice will weep for more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. No one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is a shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman. (Divakaruni, 194)

Lacan's theory of the symbolic order offers a useful lens through which to analyze the power dynamics in Divakaruni's works. According to Lacan, the symbolic order represents the societal structures and norms that govern human behavior, often at the expense of individual desire (Lacan 84). In *The Palace of Illusions*, this fight that Draupadi went through can be seen as a conflict with her wants and the symbolic order imposed upon her as a wife and queen. Of course, her questioning of and desire for freedom from societal norms is a resistance against the constraints of the symbolic order. Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's journey is marked by her negotiation with the symbolic order, as she seeks to balance her duties as a wife and queen with her own sense of justice and self-worth. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives, desire and agency are pivotal themes that shape the protagonists' complex relationships with power. These elements empower the characters to challenge societal norms and expectations. Draupadi's desire for justice and respect drives her actions, from resisting humiliation to playing a crucial role in the Kurukshetra war. Despite being bound by societal roles, she exercises agency by influencing the course of events. Similarly, Sita's choices are guided by her desire for love and fairness. She accompanies Rama to the forest, and later, she chooses to return to the earth, ultimately defying societal expectations. By portraying these women of Indian epics as driven by desire and agency, Divakaruni's narratives depart from the traditional, passive roles often associated with female characters in these stories.

Divakaruni's narrative strategies have far-reaching implications, extending beyond the epics to challenge readers' perspectives on power dynamics and societal norms. By reimagining Draupadi and Sita as multidimensional, empowered women, Divakaruni prompts readers to question traditional gender roles and examine how societal structures perpetuate inequality. Divakaruni's works inspire readers to engage critically with the epics, reflecting on their continued relevance in contemporary contexts and fostering a deeper understanding of the intersections of gender, power, and identity. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* employ a range of narrative strategies to depict power struggles. Through first-person narration, symbolic representation, and the interplay of myth and reality, Divakaruni reclaims the voices of Draupadi and Sita, challenging patriarchal norms and redefining notions of agency and autonomy. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the symbolic order as advanced by Lacan and working themes of desire and resistance, the works of Divakaruni offer profound insights into the complexities of power and identity. These narratives not only enhance our understanding of the epics

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but also motivate readers to examine power dynamics in their lives. In one of her interviews, Divakaruni said:

> I want to show that she is very strong and that she makes her own decisions, and you know, over the centuries, she has been misinterpreted as someone who is very meek and mild and obedient, and she is the damsel in the distress who's carried away but if you go back and really read Valmiki carefully or Krittivasi who is the Bengali writer of the Ramayana you'll see that she's quite feisty and she replies to Ram she will not just obediently accept what he's saying, in fact, he says to her, please stay in the palace in Ayodhya and take care of her in-laws while I go to the forest and she's like no I love you, and I will go with you on your adventure. (Interview. 26 JUL. 2024)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works offer a nuanced exploration of female representation, situating them within the broader context of postcoloniality. Here, issues of representation, identity, and voice emerge as central concerns. By rejecting universalism, Divakaruni seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals, often erased from dominant political discourses. This endeavor is particularly significant in postcolonial contexts, where homogenization can obscure diverse experiences. Through her reimagining of Indian epics, Divakaruni restores agency to previously silenced voices, including those of women, lower castes, and marginalized classes. Her narratives weave together these diverse threads, forming a rich tapestry that celebrates complexity and challenges dominant narratives.

This is consistent with Gayatri Spivak's explanation of "strategic essentialism," where people from oppressed groups come together to challenge the dominant narrative in a particular case while not losing their diversity (Spivak 123). By 'embodiment,' I mean that when Divakaruni imagines Sita and Draupadi, she remembers women's voices that were historically silenced in a patriarchal retelling. Divakaruni makes the impact of reimagining India through Sita and Draupadi's experiences as both relatable and universal. The feminist subversion offered in the narratives of Divakaruni does not end in feminist ideas alone but seeks to contest the idea of power itself. Using Foucault's concept of power and resistance, she shows how people find ways to exist within or against the power structures imposed on them. Despite being reduced to an object by the men around her, Draupadi's declaration of her self-determination displays the ability to resist even in the harshest of possibilities. Likewise, Sita's choice to reject Rama and her allying with someone other than him illustrates the ability and courage to decide what defines one (*The Forest of Enchantments* 246). These moments of defiance are some of the best ways to teach people, showing how other forms of resistance can be quiet self-assertion from the loudest rebellion (Kaur 5). Feminism has often viewed Divakaruni's works through the lens of Foucault's notion of power. Foucault argues that power does not

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only deploy physical force but resides in norms of society and relations that regulate the movements and existence of people (Foucault 27). *The Palace of Illusions* presents Draupadi's balancing power's intricacies. She, for instance, experiences power both externally as someone being oppressed and internally as an orchestrator of events. The embarrassment of women through the use of clothes in the act of disrobing is the prime example of the way power isolates women in society and how such power is treated as normal. On the contrary, Draupadi does not conform to this argument by appealing politically through her wisdom and charisma, demonstrating how people can emerge out of those systems and interrupt interior conditions. Likewise, *The Forest of Enchantment* accentuates Sita's defiance of what is expected of a queen and wife when she decides against going back to Ayodhya after being put through an Agnipariksha. She retorts back by abandoning the offer, saying,

> Because if I do what you demand, society will use my actions forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it." (357) Though she forgave her beloved long years back, her assertion to herself, "…though I don't deserve it. (358)

These examples illustrate how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narratives embody Michel Foucault's idea that the personal and political are inextricably linked, highlighting the intersections between politics and everyday life. Furthermore, Divakaruni's writing can be seen through the lens of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. According to Lacan, the "symbolic order" refers to the societal structures that shape an individual's identity, desires, and aspirations, simultaneously constraining and informing their sense of self. According to Draupadi's characters in *The Palace of Illusions*, her wish may have been to transcend and be recognized for her true self, but the symbolic order also had a firm stance on the specific roles that she was to play. Such desired identities exist in the context of ever-competing discourses of familiar structures, societal roles, and individual characters. In a comparable vein, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's motherhood, wifely, and filial roles shape and determine her personality as well. According to Lacan's view, it is possible to understand how these characters negotiate their positions in the symbolic order in terms of their aspirations and identities, thereby engaging with more extensive feminist perspectives against gender and power. Freud's views on the unconscious also add another angle to the stories of Divakaruni. Freud's concepts of repression and internal struggle are consistent with the complexity of the emotions of many characters in Divakaruni's novels. Evidence of this is Draupadi's psychological conflict, where her feelings for Karna stand in contradiction in the context of her feelings towards the Pandavas (Lacan 120). Sita, on the other hand, most certainly did not have such feelings but developed a great respect for Rama, who subsequently

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cast her out. In this scenario, we see a dichotomy between love and self-regard. There are many complex psychological issues restrained in Divakaruni's works that explain the condition of almost every woman.

Through Sita and Draupadi, Divakaruni's diasporic reimagining is situated partly within a critique of cultural essentialism. She emphasizes the relevance of such themes as marginalization and resistance by drawing on the current issues that a woman of the diaspora undergoes and those that her mythological characters go through. This technique is popular in her works and enhances the understanding of the bearers of cultural identity. For example, by introducing Draupadi's indecisiveness between being a queen and being a woman, she caters to the readers who struggle with such identity crises within a multicultural setting (*The Palace of Illusions* 159). Such stories instead of belittling such complex situations encourage people to accept having more than one identity rather than adhering to the binary concept assigned by the conventional elite narrative.

Apart from addressing problems, nurturing compassion, and self-reflection, Divakaruni's books induce change in the audience through cultural storytelling that promotes social and systemic changes. When speaking up for Draupadi and Sita, she makes it clear that narratives can subvert dominant narratives and change the societies' collective memory. Her reimagining motivates the audience to think critically about the narratives they have uncritically internalized. This strategy confirms Homi Bhabha's "third space" where an individual's multiple cultural identities contest the norm (Bhabha 54). Divakaruni's works, for instance, create such a third space wherein India's culture is reconciled with the contemporary world, which is more dynamic and holistic in its understanding of culture. The results of Divakaruni's reimagining pan out in other circles of literature as well, where her works become anchors in the discourse on the ideas of power and identity and the nature of representation. Her work goes on to become part of the feministic and postcolonial literature that aims to stretch the borders of storytelling by focusing on the oppressed and taking down the existing power structure. Extreme power structures are present not only within her stories but also within the canon of Indian diasporic literature. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* provide an extensive framework of how power and identity exist in complexity. These Indian epics, restructured by her in a feminist approach, show compassion towards the unheard voices and assist in reducing the cultural chasm.

Divakaruni's works advocate for critical reading on the topics of representation and resistance and thus are relevant contributions to the spheres of contemporary literature and social activism. Through the years, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works, such as *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, have been ground-breaking texts in feminist and postcolonial literature, making the

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voices of Indian women heard in the retelling of Bollywood epics. Such pieces also add to the collection of feminist retellings and highlight the postcolonial ideas of identity, representation, and power. Through her portrayal of Draupadi's and Sita's vivid characters, Divakaruni is able to give these previously side-lined characters powerful roles and stories where these women were not seen as subservient or subdued. In doing so, she encourages the reader to rethink the dominant social structures and perceptions of colonial histories and patriarchal systems. Unquestionably, Divakaruni's approach fits the feminist goal of silencing voices and "liberating" them through the written word. She does this by using a first-person perspective in her writings that allows Draupadi and Sita to dictate their versions of the myth rather than being used as props and having their stories narrated by men. Take Draupadi, for instance, who grapples with and fulfills the expectations of duty, desire, and vengeance and yet consistently operates on her own in the heavily politically charged masculine space. In a similar vein, Sita's voice in *The Forest of ENchantments* doesn't allow her to be envisioned more as a passive ideal of virtue but rather as a victim with agency, dignity, wisdom, and self-reflection. This agency is a classic case of rewriting history from the vision of women, hence forming a nuanced look towards patriarchal norms of narration. (Mohanty)

Divakaruni's novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagine Draupadi and Sita, respectively, as resilient, complex, and multidimensional characters who navigate the constraints of patriarchal norms while asserting their autonomy. Both Draupadi and Sita resist the societal expectations imposed on them, negotiating power through subtle and overt acts of defiance. Divakaruni's portrayal reveals the inner conflicts and moments of empowerment that define their resistance, echoing Freud's theory of the unconscious and its influence on behavior. Draupadi, the protagonist of *The Palace of Illusions*, resists patriarchal norms from the moment of her birth. Born from fire, she is depicted as extraordinary, destined to alter the course of history. However, her life is shaped by the expectations of men—her father, her brother, and later, her five husbands. Draupadi's voice in Divakaruni's retelling is assertive, challenging the docility often expected of women in patriarchal societies. For instance, when she refuses to forgive Duryodhana during the dice game in which she is publicly humiliated, it shows her defiance. Instead of being shamed, she seeks justice, a moment that represents her refusal to be silenced (Divakaruni 174). This also comes in the form of Draupadi questioning the double standards she is subjected to. When Yudhishthira gambles her away, she challenges his moral high ground, as this opens the inherent hypocrisy of the dharma wielded by men to justify their actions. Her agency is heightened while resisting objectification as property. This understanding of the unconscious, as posited by Freud, helps in comprehending the internal conflict of Draupadi—she is torn between her public role as a queen and her private self, which yearns for individuality and justice. Freud

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believed that unconscious desires and repressed emotions shape human behavior (Freud 30). The anger of Draupadi, which drives much of the epic's narrative, can be seen as an expression of these repressed emotions breaking through societal constraints. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's resistance is quieter but potent. Divakaruni reimagines the Sita figure not as some passive sufferer but as one who actively questions and bargains for herself. From childhood in Janakpur to her eventual exile in the ashram at Valmiki, Sita displays quiet strength as opposed to patriarchal norms. Even though the decision to follow Rama into exile is very romanticized, it has been portrayed as an act of deliberate self-will. In such a scenario where her fate otherwise would be decided for her by societal norms, she retrieves her agency. This is most clearly stated when, in the Agnipariksha, she refuses to let Rama's doubts about her chastity be her burden to bear. When she chooses to leave Rama and raise her sons on her own, it becomes one of the most powerful moments of subversion. By rejecting the throne and choosing to live in the forest, Sita claims her independence and reconstitutes herself outside of her definition as Rama's wife (Divakaruni 251). Here, Lacan's symbolic order is most applicable: that is, how societal language and norms limit the individual. Sita's decision to leave Ayodhya disrupts the symbolic order and, thus, the patriarchal text that defines her solely as a subservient wife. Both Draupadi and Sita present moments of subversion that challenge the patriarchal power structures. The moment when Draupadi laughs in the Kaurava court while being humiliated is a subversive act that turns the power dynamics upside down. Her laughter unsettles the men around her, forcing them to confront their moral failures. Similarly, Sita's act of bringing up her children in the forest is a repudiation of the societal expectations in which her worth was defined through her relationship with Rama. These moments delineate how both these women carve out spaces of autonomy within systems that are oriented against them.

Freud's model of the unconscious also helps us to understand the inner conflict that Draupadi and Sita confront. The two characters, when subjected to their self-suppression, go through mental stress over their deepest-rooted wishes and wants as against societal obligations. Draupadi's fierce desire for Karna but the inability to express it for the sole reason of being faithful to her husbands depicts some of the boundaries she has placed on her social obligations and personal hopes. Likewise, Sita's internal conflict in her self-exile also illustrates how she loved Rama but is seen growing irritated with his every step of behaving towards her instead of treating her like the ideal wife. Repression, another important Freudian term, helps explain the unfulfilled wishes and opposing ideas that would have influenced their behavior and provocations. (Freud 45)

Divakaruni employs narrative techniques that empower her protagonists, Draupadi and Sita, to reclaim their voices and challenge the patriarchal perspectives that have traditionally dominated these epics. By adopting a first-person narrative,

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Divakaruni's protagonists gain agency, offering a more authentic and personal account of their experiences. This storytelling approach subverts the conventional patriarchal narrative, allowing the women's voices to take center stage. Symbolism also plays a crucial role in emphasizing womanhood, agency, and resilience. Draupadi's unbound hair, for instance, serves as a powerful symbol of her defiance and determination to seek revenge against those who wronged her. Similarly, Sita's deep connection with nature highlights her instinctual and primal side. The juxtaposition of these symbols underscores the themes of womanhood, agency, and resilience, demonstrating how women can maintain their identity and autonomy even within rigid power structures.

This gives a deeper understanding of Draupadi and Sita as more than mere characters; they become changers and transformers of the power structures of the world around them. Embracing Draupadi and Sita's defiance from a modern perspective entails how they reshape patriarchal worlds. Instead of sane corporal punishment, why not encourage women? Why not deem female honor as crucial, as important? These notions are apparent in Sita and Draupadi's defiance against men and their honor, breaches that shunned male sanction and upheld autonomy. Resonate equal power. '*The Palace of Illusions*' is exemplary in understanding shared power relationships.

The narratives of Draupadi and Sita, as reimagined by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, are multifaceted and intersecting, extending beyond their gender to incorporate the complexities of caste, class, and family. For instance, Draupadi's experiences as a princess and queen compound her struggles as a woman, highlighting the challenges of navigating multiple roles and expectations. Similarly, Sita's status as a foundling exacerbates her quest for acceptance and freedom. Divakaruni's reimagining of these characters fits squarely within feminist critiques of power and representation. By portraying Draupadi and Sita as empowered individuals, Divakaruni subverts the patriarchal constructions that have traditionally relegated them to powerless roles. Her works also resonate with Foucault's assertion that power is not merely repressive but also creative and that new avenues for opposition and empowerment emerge (Foucault 92). Draupadi and Sita's stories fuel readers' motivation to rethink the boundaries established by society and look for other possibilities for constructing power and identity. For instance, Draupadi and Sita Sharma's narrations in Divakaruni's novels serve as case studies of how power can be procured and resisted without losing one's identity. They offer valuable insights into the dynamic of power by reinterpreting these iconic figures alongside Divakaruni, who vividly illustrates how these women exercise their agency by defying and rebelling against patriarchal constraints. This allows her to take part in a wider conversation about feminism, power, and representation in literature. In her epics, "*The Palace of Illusions*" and "*The Forest of Enchantments*," Chitra Banerjee

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Divakaruni advocates for feminism by altering the way she portrays history in her writing. This gives rise to empathy for marginalized voices and other powerless women like Draupadi and Sita, who are otherwise secondary characters when men write about the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. This aids in making the women's community a focal point of the narration. The powerful image of these women failing in the world they live in yet trying their best to 'endure' the societal pressure they are under easily gets the audience emotional as well as spurs them on, forcing the audience to reconsider their assumptions about agency and power. The gruesome reality of gender discrimination in nations and societies advocates for change, and by focusing on voicing against the objectification of women, the situation will only change for the better (*The Forest of Enchantments* 89). This humanization of female figures forces pupils to stop and think about the harmful idealization of the male heroes and instead encourages them to better understand the intricacies of being a female.

Divakaruni's works can also be used to break down power dynamics as they have been established. Being a feminist rewriting sexist texts, she dismantles the male-centered plots that have historical significance for women. In any case, the first-person perspective that she employs enables her protagonists to say what they think and feel about the sad and hard truth of living under oppression. For instance, Draupadi's monologues concerning her enforced polyandry provide fertile ground for the discussion of agency within a controlled patriarchal environment (*The Palace of Illusions* 143). Sita's inner voice in the case in question, for instance, reflects the work many women are executing to meet the expectations of society, which has always been stealthily ignored (*The Forest of Enchantments* 187). Writings of this type, without a doubt, enable teachers and readers to explore the prevailing culture that fuels gender power relations and any other cultural myths and histories of the past and present. On the other hand, Draupadi in Divakaruni is shown as the reason why the foes were destroyed. She accuses her father of selecting a name that would obscure her uniqueness and appropriate and undermine her place in history. In contrast to Dhri's teachings on justice and combat, she laments her instruction on "restrictive laws." Her father and the Brahmin Patriarch are both offended by her boldness in interfering with the lessons intended for men. She was better at "composing and solving riddles, responding to witty remarks, and writing poetry," according to Draupadi, but she was unprepared for the kind fate she was drawing. (Divakaruni 29).

To conclude, it can be said that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* provide an insider's view of power struggles through the lenses of Draupadi and Sita. Divakaruni, through her writings, seeks to narrate the story of these women figures, portraying them as both oppressed and empowered. Using the same heroine epics, Divakaruni dislocates the narrative

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from its usual patriarchal gaze and reframes it through a female gaze in order to speak about the inequalities, power struggles, and resistance against the misogynistic structures embedded in Indian society. Feminist theories in examining the workings of gendered power in these texts point out its ubiquity as outlined by Michel Foucault, especially in relation to the household, cultural, and political dimensions of society. Draupadi's and Sita's existence is dictated by systems of marriage and family, society's expectations, and all sorts of other life branches, and yet these figures defy these narratives in the most personal and often in the most defiling manner. For example, Draupadi manages to balance her roles in her multifaceted relationships, as well as her uniqueness, with all the politics, war, and other activities happening around her by using her sharp brain and strong will. In the same way, Sita exhibits steadfast endurance with regard to her values by working against the social binary role of femininity into which she is fit. These stories show that power leaves its trace with not only submission but also with the ability to resist, compromise, or define an existence devoid of power. The tension between power and victimization runs deep, and the strategies that Divakaruni employs in her narratives are instrumental in deepening these nuances. For the two women, Draupadi and Sita, she adopts a first-person perspective, allowing readers to feel their strength and struggles without the limitations of feeling and intimacy standing in the way. The two women's strength is conveyed through powerful objects working as symbols, such as Draupadi's sari and Sita's connections with the earth, all serving as greater metaphors providing the subject of dignity, survival, and nature. Through these facets, the plots gain momentum and also help the readers understand the sociocultural frameworks within which these women live more comprehensively.

Chitra Banatra Banerjee Divithree Banerjee Divakaruni's works excel in their social commentary, prompting readers to confront rigid gender norms by amplifying the female voice. She challenges readers to reexamine the historical exclusion of women from positions of power and the perpetuation of limiting female stereotypes. Divakaruni's novels invite the audience to reimagine the lives of female characters who have long been overshadowed by their male counterparts. Her works encourage a nuanced understanding of the intersection of myth and modern life, highlighting the intricate relationships between power dynamics, gender, and societal expectations. Ultimately, Divakaruni's exploration of gender and power strives to expose deeper social issues, inspiring readers to reassess their roles within existing power hierarchies and fostering a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of the world. A feminist approach is well advocated in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, where both, Draupadi and Sita, are given back their voices, while at the same time the effect of power, identity, and agency is addressed. Divakaruni creates stories that profoundly connect with readers today by fusing feminist criticism, postcolonial discourse, and sophisticated storytelling. This

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reinforces the epics' continued relevance in tackling contemporary gender and representation issues.

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