

# Unveiling the Feminine Psyche: A Karen Horneyan Analysis of Draupadi in the Palace of Illusions

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## Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a re-envisioned Draupadi, examined through a feminist lens concerning the character's psychological conflicts. This research employs Karen Horney's Feminine Psychology to evaluate Draupadi's character, emphasising her defiance against patriarchal conventions and her quest for self-actualisation. Draupadi's journey reflects these psychological conflicts, as she directs her life through forced marriage, humiliation, and her desire for independence. Ultimately, the novel portrays her as a woman striving to assert her identity beyond societal expectations. This paper argues that *The Palace of Illusions* not only reconstructs Draupadi's story through a feminist lens but also aligns with Horney's vision of female self-actualisation. By connecting mythological fiction and psychological theory, this study gives a deeper understanding of Draupadi's identity, mainly contributing to feminist literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Draupadi, Karen Horney, Feminine Psychology, Patriarchy, Self-Realization, Literary Feminism

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a re-envisioned Draupadi, examined through a feminist lens concerning the character's psychological conflicts. This research employs Karen Horney's Feminine Psychology to evaluate Draupadi's character, emphasising her defiance against patriarchal conventions and her quest for self-actualisation. The earliest Indian literature was the *Veda*, written in *Sanskrit*, followed by prose notes like the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*. *Sanskrit* literature flourished from 1500 BCE to 1000 CE, producing diverse genres like devotional lyrics, court poetry, and folktales. Buddhism and Jainism used different languages, leading to the development of modern northern Indian languages with roots in ancient Indian texts. ("Indian literature")

It was when the British arrived in India, that English was introduced and the literature was also influenced. Today Indians write literature in various languages including in English and the native languages of India. "Mythology is the study and understanding of sacred tales or stories of a culture known as myths or the collection of such stories which deal with various aspects of the human condition, human origins, the origin of place-names, animals, cultural values, and traditions; the meaning of life and death, the afterlife and celestial stories of the gods or a god. Myths express the views and values about these subjects held by a certain culture. What one calls "mythology" in the present day was the religion of the ancient past." (Mark and Raddato)

Another aspect to focus on is mythology's influence on Indian literature. India's ancient texts have deep

roots in mythology. Mythology and literature go hand in hand.

Even though literature cannot be reduced to myth and myth cannot be reduced to literature, neither can exist on its own: myth has always been an integral element of literature.

Myth epitomises the very origin of literature, which is rooted in oral tradition and the performance of literary texts. (Lovely)

Myth generally features god like ruling gods & heroes, but with a lower rank than gods. Sometimes, a god's daughter or son is fully mortal, & these characters possess supernatural abilities and forces that raise them beyond average human beings. Myths are mostly very old and have ruled the world because, as they are now, science, philosophy, and technology were not very clear.

Indian culture, religion (mainly Hinduism) and mythology are closely interwoven. India's ancient texts have deep roots in mythology. Hindu mythology dates back to the 2nd millennium BCE and is believed to have originated around the Indus River. (Tolentino)

Indian mythology holds great prominence that it is sometimes considered as not a myth but as the historical records of events in ancient India. Mythological themes in Indian literature can be extensively explored in the two main Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Both texts are given great prominence and considered holy texts.

Focusing on the epic *Mahabharata* is considered one of the most well-known and important texts in Indian mythology. Consisting of hymns and an epic story, the *Mahabharata* has been woven by bringing different intricate characters together.

The most well-known version of the epic is the one written by sage Vyasa or Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa. He is notable as Veda Vyasa as he is believed to have divided the *Vedas* into four parts – *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, the fundamentals of Hindu mythology can be found in these four *Vedas*. He has also authored other important Sanskrit texts like the *Puranas* and the *Brahma Sutras*.

The *Mahabharata*, being one of the greatest Indian epics, is divided into 18 books or sections called *Parvas*. These *Parvas* narrate the story of the *Kuru* dynasty, the *Kauravas*, and the *Pandavas* including the Kurukshetra War and its outcome.

“The 18 *Parvas* are *Adi Parva* (The Book of the Beginning), *Sabha Parva* (The Book of the Assembly Hall), *Vana Parva* also *Aranya-Parva* (The Book of the Forest), *Virata Parva* (The Book of Virata), *Udyoga Parva* (The Book of the Effort), *Bhishma Parva* (The Book of Bhishma), *Drona Parva* (The Book of Drona), *Karna Parva* (The Book of Karna), *Shalya Parva* (The Book of Shalya), *Sauptika Parva* (The Book of the Sleeping Warriors), *Stri Parva* (The Book of the Women), *Shanti Parva* (The Book of Peace), *Anushasana Parva* (The Book of the Instructions), *Ashvamedhika Parva* (The Book of the Horse Sacrifice), *Ashramavasika Parva* (The Book of the Hermitage), *Mausala Parva* (The Book of the Clubs), *Mahaprasthanika Parva* (The Book of the Great Journey), *Svargarohana Parva* (The Book of the Ascent to Heaven).” (TemplePurohit)

The concept of *Mahabharata* revolves around *dharma* and *karma*. Focusing on the righteous duties one should follow in one's life. Involving the story of gods, kings, queens, betrayals, and conspiracies the epic's primary focus is on the traditional and cultural value system of India or *Bharat* during that time. Although there are different versions of the *Mahabharata*, Sage Vyasa's is considered to be the most accurate and original version.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni re-narrates the story of *Mahabharata* from a modern perspective. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known Indian-born American writer who is known for her works based on the themes of immigrants in America, Indian culture, Indian migrant experiences, history, myths, women,

and re-interpretations of mythology. She has received numerous awards, authored 21 books, and has been published in over 50 magazines. Her works have been translated into 29 languages.

Among her books, *The Palace of Illusions* is considered to be one of the most popular. Published in the year 2008, the book belongs to the genre of mythological fiction.

Divakaruni constructs her novel *The Palace of Illusions* based on the story of *Mahabharata*. The events of the novel are the same as the epic but Divakaruni narrates the story novel by making Draupadi the protagonist narrating the events of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's point of view giving the novel a feministic approach.

The novel is divided into 43 chapters which are *Fire, Blue, Milk, Cosmology, Smoke, Incarnations, Fish, Sorceress, Portrait, Births, Scorpion, Song, Scar, Brinjal, Lac, Boon, Grandfather, River, Palace, Wives, Afterlife, Discuss, Lake, Games, Sari, Rice, Tales, Lotus, Visitations, Disguise, Preparation, Field, Sight, Secrets, Avalanche, Wheel, Owl, Pyre, Ash, Snake, Reed, Snow and Fire*. (Divakaruni)

This study analyses the novel's character through the lens of Karen Horney's Feminine Psychology. Rejecting Freudian theory like penis envy, Horney's theory explores how oppression in society affects women's neuroses, which are manifested through compliance, aggression, and withdrawal.

### **Karen Horney's concept of Feminine Psychology**

The next concept analysed in the novel is Feminine psychology introduced by Karen Horney. She was a brilliant psychoanalyst and psychiatrist born in Germany who later came to fame in the US. She is best known for her concept of feminine psychology and theory of neurosis. She was also a pioneer in the field of feminine psychiatry.

Horney was a Neo-Freudian. She opposed Freud's ideology of women, which was centered around male superiority.

She criticised Freud's theory of penis envy ( the idea that females envy male because they lack a penis) stating that the theory was constructed based on he society's idea of patriarchy. She declared it to be both inaccurate and demeaning to women.(Acharya)

Feminine psychology is an area of psychology that focuses on the political, economic, and social issues that pervasively confront women. (Horney 1967)

Horney put forth her theory of womb envy in contrast to Freud, stating that males envy a woman's ability to nurture and give birth. "Horney believed that both men and women have a drive to be ingenious and productive. Women are able to satisfy this need normally and internally—to do this they become pregnant and give birth. Men satisfy this need only through external ways; Horney proposed that the striking accomplishments of men in work or some other field can be viewed as compensation for their inability to give birth to children." (Acharya)

She emphasised in 1926 and in her later work the importance of cultural factors on women's "inferior position," and that what women really envy is not the penis but the superior position of men in society. (O'Connell 85)

"It was towards this end that Horney, in "The Problem of Feminine Masochism" (1 935) competently refutes previous theories about female masochism and challenges the pervasiveness of this phenomenon. She effectively demonstrates that cultural factors and approved sex roles encourage women to be dependent upon men for love, prestige, wealth, care, and protection. This dependence results in overemphasis on pleasing men, on the feminine "cult of beauty and charm," and on the over-evaluation of love (1934). This emphasis is compatible with the ideology that a woman's life is given meaning through

others, e.g., husband, children, and family.” (O’Connell 86).

According to Horney, women's psychological battles are the result of the unfair systems of male-dominated cultures. Horney believed that women's neuroses are the result of being dominated in a men's world. She described three primary consequences of patriarchal conditioning: neurosis, self-alienation, and the pursuit of self-realisation. She defined neurosis as an internal struggle brought about by conflicting desires imposed by societal norms. Women conditioned to be submissive but at the same time exhibiting strength experience an internal struggle that establishes itself as neurotic needs—mechanisms coping with oppression.

According to Horney, self-alienation occurs when a woman internalises patriarchal expectations, and therefore she suppresses her authentic desires in favour of socially approved behaviour. Suppressing therefore brings about a broken personality, where the woman is withdrawn from her desires and feelings. Horney theorised that for a woman to achieve self-actualisation, it is important to surrender the artificial self-imposed by patriarchy and embrace their true self. This involves liberating oneself from both societal expectations and internalised oppression. All these aspects can be seen in Draupadi’s character in the novel.

In the novel, Draupadi is seen conforming to the societal construct as an independent and self-confident woman, yet she is consistently getting the advice of her "supposed duty" as a wife and a queen. Her involuntary polygamy is a reflection of how male-dominant norms of society outdo human feelings, causing her psychological turmoil. Her aggressive rebelliousness in the Kauravas court contrasts with moments where she must suppress her emotions to maintain her social role as a queen, showing the neurotic push-and-pull between submission and resistance. These pulls show Draupadi’s neurosis, as she oscillates between obedience (accepting societal expectations), aggression (open defiance), and withdrawal (emotional detachment).

Draupadi’s life is marked by moments of self-alienation, even while growing up, she along with her brother lived separately in a place distant from the others. Although it was an imposed isolation by her father, it did have an impact on feeling isolated in her.

In the instances when Draupadi longed for Karna but had to suppress these feelings due to her imposed marital obligations. Even in her most glorious moments, such as demanding revenge for her humiliation, she grapples with an internal void—an inability to find complete fulfilment in her relationships or victories. This alienation is a direct result of the “feminine ideal” imposed upon her, forcing her to constantly negotiate between duty and desire, honour and personal fulfilment.

Horney argued that for a woman to achieve self-realisation, she must reject the false self-imposed by patriarchy and embrace her authentic identity. This involves breaking free from both societal expectations and internalised oppression. Draupadi’s journey in *The Palace of Illusions* reflects this struggle. Despite the constraints placed upon her, she asserts her voice, challenges authority, and refuses to be a submissive victim.

Her relationship with Krishna serves as a guiding force, not as a saviour figure but as a mentor who encourages her spiritual and psychological growth.

By the end of the novel, Draupadi moves beyond her anger and suffering, embracing a deeper understanding of herself and her role in the larger cosmic narrative. Her quest for self-realisation aligns with Horney’s notion that a woman must reject dependency, overcome neurotic coping strategies, and assert her authentic self to break free from patriarchal conditioning.

## Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* gives a psychological and feminist twist to Draupadi. She is portrayed as a woman who travels the path of identity, power and self-realisation within a patriarchal world. The study applies Karen Horney's Feminine Psychology to throw light on how Draupadi's psychological problems of neurosis, self-alienation and defiance which are products of the sociocultural constraints imposed on her.

Horney's rejection of Freudian beliefs such as that of penis envy and emphasis on patriarchal conditioning shaping the formation of women's identities offer a striking example of Draupadi's internal conflict and a consistent path toward actualisation. Throughout the entire novel, Draupadi oscillates between obedience to societal orders and her inner self. She thus manifests all three neurotic coping strategies identified by Horney: compliance, aggression, and withdrawal. With her forced polyandry, public humiliation in the Kaurava court, and deep but unappeasable emotional desires (especially those related to Karna), the suppression of these desires is a clear indication of a struggle between the imposed roles and individual needs.

However, unlike traditional texts, where Draupadi is rendered, a tragic figure consumed by vengeance, Divakaruni's depiction of her frees her and allows the exploration of more subtle sides in the psyche of Draupadi. Her relationship with Krishna, though very much marked with divinity, does not reduce from her action but instead acts as a surprise to her final realisation of herself. Another addition to the new feminist critical collection, it recognises the relevance of both psychological and mythic figures meaningfully.

Finally, Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* symbolises the ideal journey of women struggling against societal obstructions; hence, her journey becomes a powerful tale of rebellion, resolution, and self-identification. Through lenses provided by Horney, this study turns into an observation of how literature engages with more deep psychological dimensions of the female world, thus producing more complicated readings of women's inner lives.

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