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Rewriting Myth, Reclaiming Voice: Female Agency in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Palace of Illusions

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ABSTRACT:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions (2008) retells the Mahabharata through the first-person voice of Panchaali, the woman better known in the epic tradition as Draupadi. This paper examines how the novel turns a figure who is acted upon in much of the epic into a narrating subject who judges, desires, protests and remembers. Using the idea of revisionist mythmaking (Rich, 1972; Ostriker, 1982), narratological work on focalization (Genette, 1980) and feminist and development-studies accounts of agency (Sen, 1985; Kabeer, 1999; Ahearn, 2001), the paper reads five episodes: Panchaali's birth and naming, her marriage, the building of the palace, the dice game, and the war and its aftermath. It argues that the novel reclaims voice in three ways: it changes who tells the story, it fills the epic's silences with emotional history, and it recasts relationships, especially with Krishna, Karna and Kunti, as sites where agency is exercised. The paper also asks where this agency stops. Panchaali remains bound by prophecy, royal duty and a plot whose main events cannot be changed, and her story is told by an upper-caste queen who cannot stand in for all women. The paper concludes that the novel's achievement is best understood as a negotiated agency, one that works inside constraints and makes those constraints visible.

KEYWORDS: *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Draupadi; female agency; feminist retelling; revisionist mythmaking; Mahabharata*

1. Introduction

Every long-lived story has a centre and a margin. In the *Mahabharata*, the centre is occupied by kings, warriors, teachers and sages, and the great events of the epic, the dice game, the exile, the war at Kurukshetra, are narrated mainly through their actions. Women are present throughout, and some of them, Kunti, Gandhari and above all Draupadi, are unforgettable. Yet they tend to appear at moments of crisis, as the cause or victim of what the men do, and the epic seldom lingers over what they feel on ordinary days. Divakaruni says in her own preface that she was drawn to this absence, to the women who stay half-hidden behind the exploits of the male heroes (Divakaruni, 2008).

The Palace of Illusions is her answer. It is narrated in the first person by Panchaali, who begins as a girl growing up in her father's court and ends as an old woman looking back on a life that has included five husbands, a magnificent palace, a public humiliation, years of exile and the destruction of almost everything she loved. The effect of this shift is more than technical. When the person at the centre of the story is also the person telling it, the reader sees events as she saw them, hears what she chose not to say aloud, and is invited to judge the epic's heroes by how they treated her.

This paper asks a focused question: how does Divakaruni's retelling construct female agency,

and what are the limits of the agency it constructs? The phrase "reclaiming voice" in the title is used with some care. Voice here means three things at once: the literal narrating "I" of the novel, the capacity of the character to speak and act within the story, and the cultural authority to retell a foundational narrative from a different position. All three are at stake in the book, and the paper treats them together.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework. Section 3 sketches Draupadi's place in the epic and its later retellings, because Divakaruni's intervention can only be understood against that background. Section 4 analyses the novel's narrative strategy. Section 5 reads five key episodes closely, and Section 6 considers the relationships through which Panchaali's agency is exercised. Section 7 considers limits and criticisms, Section 8 draws the argument together, and Section 9 concludes. A note on method: the analysis rests on close reading of the novel and on the secondary sources cited. Because editions of the novel are paginated differently, references to the novel are given at the level of episode and chapter, and readers who wish to cite specific lines should add page numbers from their own copy.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Revisionist mythmaking

Adrienne Rich (1972) described "re-vision" as the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes and entering an old text from a new critical direction. For women writers, she argued, this is not a matter of literary fashion but of survival, because a culture's inherited stories shape what women are able to imagine about themselves. Alicia Ostriker (1982) built on this idea in her influential account of what she called revisionist mythmaking. In her reading, women poets who return to myth do not simply retell it. They use it to challenge and correct the gender stereotypes embedded in the original, and they give women's experience a place at the centre of a story that had treated it as peripheral. Divakaruni's novel belongs to this tradition, though it works in prose and in a South Asian epic context that Ostriker's examples do not cover.

Adaptation theory adds a useful corrective. Hutcheon (2006) describes adaptation as repetition with variation, derivation without being merely derivative. A retelling remains in dialogue with its source, and its meaning depends partly on what the reader knows of the original. This matters for the *Mahabharata*, which most Indian readers have encountered, in one form or another, long before they open Divakaruni's book. The novel's choices, what it keeps, changes or adds, are therefore legible as choices.

2.2 Voice, focalization and polyphony

Genette (1980) separated the question of who sees from the question of who speaks, and called the first focalization. In the epic tradition, Draupadi is mostly seen by others and described by a narrator who is not her. In Divakaruni's novel, the one who sees and the one who speaks coincide. This does not make the narration neutral: a narrator who looks back on her own life shapes and selects as she goes, and Panchaali is aware of her own partiality. Cixous (1976) urged women to "write themselves," by which she meant to bring their bodies, desires and experiences into language from which patriarchal culture had excluded them. The novel's attention to Panchaali's feelings about her skin, her desire, her jealousy and her grief can be read as a fictional version of this impulse. Bakhtin's (1984) notion of polyphony offers a further angle. A polyphonic text lets several voices speak without reducing them to one authorial view. A recent reading by Tiwari et al. (2026) argues that Panchaali's first-person narration hosts and contests other voices rather than silencing them, and this is a helpful way of seeing how the novel keeps Kunti, Krishna, Karna and others present as speakers in their own right.

2.3 Agency

Agency is a contested concept, so it is worth being explicit about the sense in which it is used.

Sen (1985) distinguished a person's well-being from her agency, understood as the ability to pursue goals and values that she has reason to value, even where these do not directly serve her own comfort. Kabeer (1999), writing on women's empowerment, defined agency as the ability to define one's goals and act on them, and noted that it can take the form of decision-making but also of bargaining, negotiation, deception and resistance, including when it is exercised quietly. Ahearn (2001), from linguistic anthropology, defined agency as the socioculturally mediated capacity to act. These definitions share an important feature: they do not require absolute freedom. Agency is exercised within structures, and it can be partial, relational and constrained. That is the sense that suits Panchaali, whose world gives women very little formal power yet allows them to speak, to refuse, to bargain, to manipulate, to remember and to judge.

3. Draupadi Before Divakaruni

3.1 The epic Draupadi

The *Mahabharata* is not a single text but a vast and layered tradition. Scholars rely on the Critical Edition produced at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (Sukthankar et al., 1933–1966), and on translations such as van Buitenen's (1973–1978). In this tradition Draupadi is born from a sacrificial fire, a sign of her exceptional destiny, and is married to the five Pandava brothers after Arjuna wins her at a contest of skill. Her situation is unusual in every respect: polyandry is rare in the epic's world, and the circumstances in which she comes to have five husbands are presented as both a matter of destiny and a crisis of dharma. She is also one of the most vocal women in Sanskrit literature. In the assembly hall scene, when her husband has staked and lost her in a game of dice, she asks the elders a pointed legal question about whether a man who has already lost himself can wager his wife, and the assembly cannot give her a satisfying answer. This scene, discussed in detail in van Buitenen's translation of the Book of the Assembly Hall (1975), has long been recognised as one of the epic's moral turning points.

Scholars have emphasised Draupadi's assertiveness. Sutherland (1989), comparing Sita and Draupadi as female role models in the Sanskrit epics, argued that Draupadi is distinguished by her willingness to speak, argue and demand redress, in contrast with Sita's more acquiescent model of wifely virtue. Hiltebeitel (1988) traced the long afterlife of Draupadi as a goddess in the cult worship of South India, showing that her significance extends well beyond the Sanskrit text. In a different mode, Karve (1969) offered an influential set of essays on the epic's characters, including its women, that treated them as people with feelings and judgment instead of as ideal types. Together these studies make it clear that Draupadi was never simply silent. What the epic does not give her, however, is an extended interior life, and this is the space that modern retellings have taken up.

3.2 Earlier retellings and the wider field

Divakaruni was not the first to retell Draupadi's story from within. Pratibha Ray's Odia novel *Yajnaseni*, first published in 1984 and later translated into English (Ray, 1995), tells it as a first-person narrative, and many other Indian-language retellings, plays and performances have taken up the same task. The English-language market in recent decades has also seen a wave of retellings from the perspective of epic women, such as those gathered in *In Search of Sita* (Lal & Gokhale, 2009). Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1981, in Spivak's translation) does something quite different, borrowing the name for a tribal woman rebel who is tortured by the state, and so reminding readers that the name "Draupadi" can carry meanings far from royal courts. These variations matter because they show that retelling is not a single act. Each version makes choices about voice, class and political stakes, and Divakaruni's version should be judged as one position within a rich field, not as the only or the first feminist reading.

Recent critical writing on the novel itself has been largely appreciative. Tiwari et al. (2026), for example, read the novel as a polyphonic feminist reimagining that sets care and accountability

against the epic's patrilineal duty, and Joshikamathy and Sankar (2026) discuss the novel's presentation of Draupadi's resistance and selfhood. The present paper agrees with much of this appreciation but pays more attention to the constraints on Panchaali's agency, as Section 7 explains. The reader should note that the secondary literature on this novel is large and growing across many journals of varying rigour, and that this paper engages a selection of it alongside theoretical and epic scholarship.

4. Narrative Strategy: Who Tells the Story

4.1 A retrospective, first-person narrator

The novel's most important decision is its narrator. Panchaali tells her story as an older woman, which gives her the double perspective of experience and memory. She can describe how she felt as a girl and also comment, sometimes ironically, on how foolish or how right she was. This retrospective position allows the narration to move between immediacy and judgment. It also lets Divakaruni have it both ways with the epic's famous events: the reader knows what is coming, and Panchaali often knows too, so that the suspense lies less in what will happen than in how she will understand it.

The strategy has a further effect on authority. In the epic tradition, the story is attributed to Vyasa, a male sage, who is himself a participant in the events. In Divakaruni's version, Vyasa still appears as a figure who foretells and advises, but the telling belongs to Panchaali. She makes it clear that she is shaping her account, that she has her own interpretation, and that other people's versions would differ. Narrative authority is thus transferred, and the transfer is visible in the text.

4.2 Filling the silences

The novel invents a great deal that the epic does not contain, and the invention is not random. It provides Panchaali with a childhood: a nurse, Dhai Ma, who tells her stories and consoles her; a brother, Dhri, with whom she shares a birth and a destiny, but who is treated differently because he is male; a girlhood spent listening to what is taught to him; a body she is taught to be anxious about. It supplies her with desires and secrets that the epic never mentions, above all her complicated attachment to Karna, and with a long-running friendship with Krishna that is neither marriage nor mentorship but something closer to confidence between equals. By furnishing this inner world, the novel addresses exactly the gap that studies of the epic have identified: a Draupadi who is formidable in speech but without an extended emotional history.

This invention raises an interpretive question. Is the novel's Panchaali more truthful to what the epic's Draupadi "really" felt, or is she a modern woman placed in an ancient setting? Hutcheon's (2006) account of adaptation suggests that the question is badly posed. The novel does not claim to recover a hidden fact. It proposes a possible interior for a figure whose exterior the tradition has already supplied, and it lets readers decide whether the proposal convinces them. That the proposal reflects contemporary concerns, about female education, bodily self-image, marital consent and the cost of vengeance, is not a flaw. It is the nature of retelling.

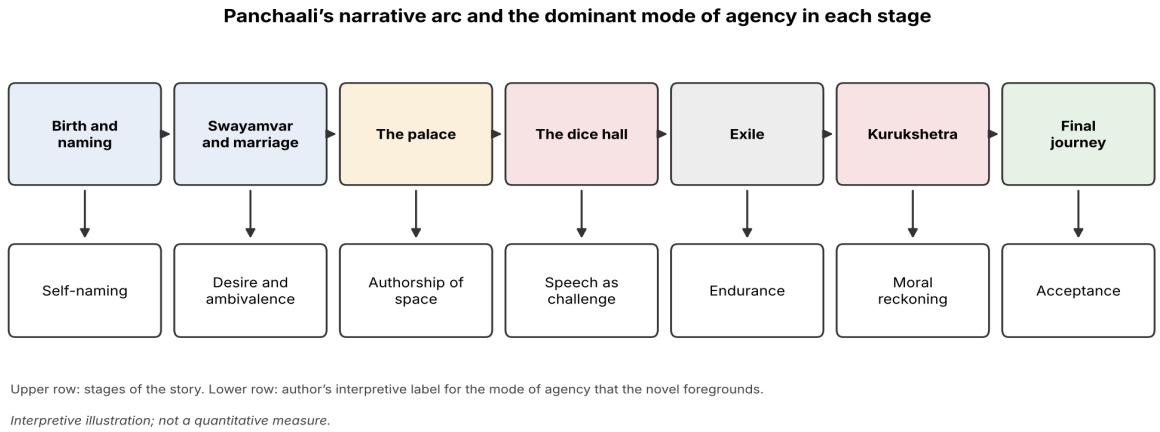
5. Reclaiming Agency: Five Episodes

The following readings track how Panchaali's agency is constructed across the story. Table 1 summarises the contrasts with the epic tradition, and Figure 1 shows the arc of the narrative and the mode of agency that each stage foregrounds. The labels in Figure 1 are interpretive, not quantitative, and reflect this paper's reading of the novel.

Table 1. The five episodes compared with the epic tradition

Episode	Epic tradition	Divakaruni's treatment	Effect on agency
Birth and naming	Born from sacrificial fire; names point to father and kingdom	Narrator reflects on the name's others give her and claims "Panchaali" as her own	Self-naming; education as first capability
Swayamvar and marriage	Won by Arjuna; Kunti's remark leads to marriage to five brothers	Interior account of unease, desire for Karna and lasting regret	Desire and ambivalence made visible; agency through negotiation
The palace	Indraprastha built with Maya's help; Duryodhana's humiliation sparks conflict	Palace as Panchali's own project; she laughs and later regrets it	Authorship of space; responsibility for consequences
The dice hall	Draupadi questions the assembly; later tradition adds Krishna's aid	Question retained; Krishna's aid present; vow of loose hair	Speech as resistance; its limits exposed
War and aftermath	War; sons' deaths; final journey in which she falls first	Reflection on the cost of vengeance; acceptance at the end	Moral reckoning; agency as interpretation

Figure 1. Panchaali's narrative arc and the mode of agency foregrounded at each stage.



Source: author's interpretive reading of Divakaruni (2008).

5.1 Birth, naming and the right to a self

The novel opens with Panchaali's birth from fire and with the question of what to call her. In the epic tradition, Draupadi's names point outward, to her father Drupada and to her kingdom, Panchala. Divakaruni's narrator is acutely aware of this. She reflects on the names others give her, and on how a name can bind a person to a family and a role. In her telling, being called by her father's name is a kind of belonging that she resents, and she finds in other names, including the one she uses for herself in telling the story, a means of declaring who she is. The simple fact that the narrator calls herself Panchaali, and invites the reader to do so, is an assertion of authorship over her identity.

The episode also introduces the contrast with her brother, who is welcomed as the son and warrior while she is treated as a by-product of the sacrifice. Panchaali's response is to seek knowledge, listening to the lessons that are not meant for her, asking questions about the world, and pressing the people around her to tell her stories of the past. Education in this novel is a first form of agency, and it is notable that the girl's hunger to know is shown as inseparable from her later capacity to judge. This early emphasis aligns with Kabeer's (1999) idea that agency is built from resources and capabilities as well as from decisions.

5.2 Swayamvar, marriage and the problem of consent

The swayamvar scene is where the epic's plot is most constraining, because the outcome is fixed: Arjuna will win her, and Kunti's remark that whatever the brothers have brought must be shared will lead to the polyandrous marriage. Divakaruni keeps the outcome and changes the experience. Panchaali enters the contest with hopes and fears of her own. She is attracted to Karna and wounded by the way the event unfolds around him, and when the moment comes she acts in a way she will later regret. The novel makes this regret a lasting emotional thread. In doing so it gives her a desire that is not sanctioned by dharma, and it declines to punish her for it by making her a villain or by erasing it.

Kunti's command and its consequences are treated with unusual care. Panchaali is shocked at the prospect of marriage to five men and at being passed, in effect, from mother to sons, and the novel allows her to feel the weight of the arrangement without turning the Pandavas into villains. She is not offered an escape, and a reader looking for open rebellion will not find it. What the novel offers instead is a record of how a woman handles an arrangement she did not choose: she negotiates the schedule of her life with her husbands, she learns what each of them needs from her, and she keeps her inner life apart. In Kabeer's (1999) terms, this is agency exercised through negotiation and endurance, not through refusal.

5.3 The palace: authorship of space

The palace that gives the novel its title is the most original symbol in the book. In the epic, the Pandavas' capital Indraprastha is built with the help of the asura architect Maya, and the later episode in which Duryodhana is humiliated within it is a major spark of the conflict. In Divakaruni's version, the palace is Panchaali's own project: she imagines it, takes pride in it, and treats it as an extension of her identity. For a woman whose life has been defined by others, a palace that reflects her tastes is a rare form of self-expression. The title's irony is that a building of illusions, in which floors look like water and water looks like floors, also describes the lives of those who live in it, who mistake power for security.

The famous incident in which Duryodhana stumbles in the palace is retold as an event for which Panchaali bears some responsibility. The novel has her laugh, an impulsive act that she later regrets, and it presents the laughter as one of the sparks that feeds the later hostility. The tradition varies on who laughed and how much the laughter mattered, so the novel's choice is an interpretation, not a recovery. The interpretation is notable because it gives Panchaali both a capacity to act and a responsibility for her act. Agency, in this novel, is not only the power to resist harm. It is also the capacity to do harm unintentionally and to carry the burden of having done so.

5.4 The dice hall: speech as resistance

The dice game is where the epic's Draupadi is most memorable, and Divakaruni retains its centrality. Panchaali's question to the assembly, the challenge to the legal and moral premises of a husband's right to stake his wife, is the high point of her public voice. The novel's narration lets the reader hear both the courage of the question and the fear that accompanies it. It is also here that Krishna's help enters the scene, in the form familiar from popular tradition, and the novel handles this with some subtlety: the aid is real, but the question was hers. The vow that

follows, to leave her hair loose until it is washed in the blood of the man who dragged her, becomes the central emotional engine of the later plot.

Read through the lens of agency theory, this episode shows that voice can be a form of power even when physical power is absent. Panchaali cannot stop the humiliation, but she can name it as injustice, force the men present to respond, and refuse to let the event be told as something that merely happened to her. The scene also exposes the limits of that voice: the assembly's silence shows how little her words can achieve against a wall of custom and fear. The novel does not conceal this irony. It lets speech be both necessary and insufficient.

5.5 War, loss and the final journey

The final third of the novel shifts from public confrontation to moral reckoning. Panchaali's thirst for revenge is fulfilled in the sense that the war happens and her enemies fall, but the novel refuses to present this as triumph. Her sons are killed, the kingdom she wanted is a ruin, and the vow that sustained her has cost more than she bargained for. Her narration becomes more reflective, and the older narrator's voice, previously ironic and quick, grows quieter. The novel does not condemn her anger, which it treats as understandable and even justified. It does, however, let her see what it has done to her and to others.

In the closing chapters, the old queen walks toward the end of her life with a clarity that she has not had before. The epic's plot requires that she fall first in the final journey, and the novel keeps this fact. What it adds is Panchaali's understanding of her own life: her acceptance of what she could not change, her recognition of what she could have chosen differently, and her peace with relationships that were never simple. Agency at the end is no longer about changing events. It is about interpreting them honestly, and it is exactly here that the first-person voice completes its work.

6. Relational Agency: Krishna, Karna, Kunti and the Women

Panchaali's agency is largely relational, meaning that it is exercised in and through her relationships with others, not as an autonomous individual act. This reflects a point made repeatedly in the feminist literature on agency: in settings where women have little formal power, influence and choice often run through bonds of kinship, friendship and obligation (Kabeer, 1999; Ahearn, 2001). The novel gives special weight to four relationships.

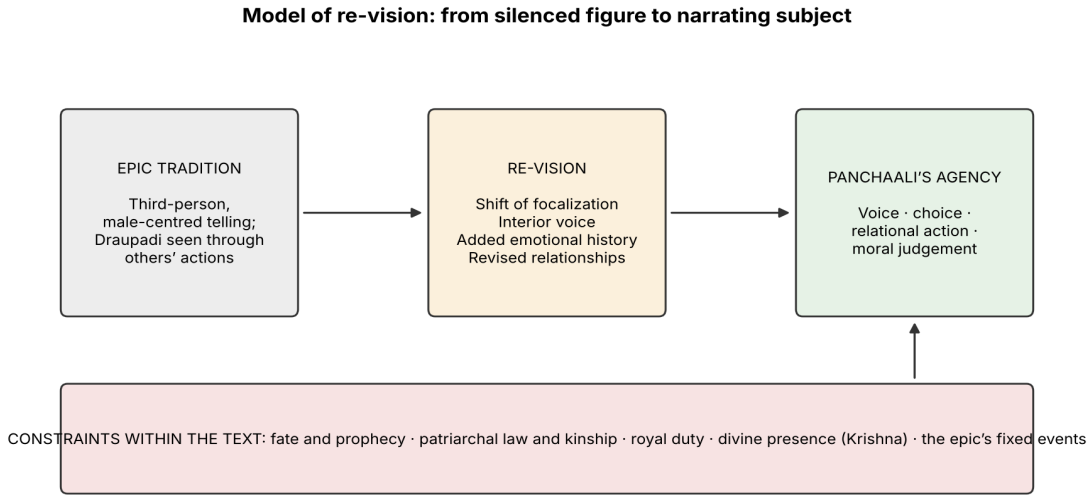
The first is her friendship with Krishna, whom she addresses as a trusted friend. Krishna is a god in the epic tradition, yet in the novel he is also a confidant who tells her things she does not want to hear, teases her about her pride, and guides her without commanding her. The friendship gives Panchaali someone before whom she can be honest, and it lends the novel a rare model of male-female relationship that is neither erotic nor familial. It also complicates the question of agency, because a divine friend who can foresee and sometimes intervene makes it harder to say where her choices end and destiny begins. This ambiguity is, in my reading, deliberate, and it is one of the places where the novel is most thoughtful.

The second is her unspoken attachment to Karna. The relationship is one of the novel's most discussed inventions, and it divides readers. For some, it gives Panchaali a measure of erotic autonomy within a marriage she did not choose, and acknowledges that women's desire is not exhausted by their husbands. For others, it risks reducing a politically formidable heroine to a romantic longing for a man who is, in the epic, her husbands' enemy. Both reactions are reasonable. What can be said is that the thread gives the novel its emotional tension and that it makes Panchaali's inner life morally complicated rather than simply admirable.

The third is her relationship with Kunti, the mother-in-law whose careless words shape her fate. The two women are in friction and sometimes in alliance, and the novel shows how female authority within a royal household can be both a source of constraint and a source of knowledge.

Panchaali's attempt to carve out her own space within a family dominated by Kunti's will is another small drama of agency. Finally, Dhai Ma and the other women of the story, including queens who are not as central, give the novel a texture of female companionship, and show women as sources of memory, comfort and instruction. These relationships put into practice the novel's declared interest in the women who are left out of the epic's exploits, and they provide the context in which Panchaali learns what she can and cannot control.

Figure 2. Model of re-vision and negotiated agency.



Source: author's synthesis of Rich (1972), Ostriker (1982), Genette (1980) and Kabeer (1999).

7. Limits and Criticisms

A responsible reading must also ask where the novel's construction of agency falls short, and what it leaves out. Four limits deserve attention.

First, Panchaali's agency is bounded by the epic's fixed plot. She cannot avoid the marriage, the dice game or the war, and the novel does not pretend that she can. Prophecies and divine interventions repeatedly suggest that the course of events is pre-set. This creates a tension that the novel does not entirely resolve. On the one hand, the heroine is credited with moral choices and consequences. On the other hand, much of what happens to her seems to have been foretold. Critics who value the novel's feminism will say that the tension reflects the real condition of women, who exercise judgment inside systems they did not design. Critics who are less persuaded will say that it limits how radical the retelling can be.

Second, there is the matter of class and caste. Panchaali is a princess, then a queen. Her struggles are real, but they are not those of a woman without property or status. Chakravarti (1993) argued that Brahmanical patriarchy in early India controlled women's sexuality in order to maintain caste and class hierarchies, and that women's experience of this system differed sharply by social position. The novel is attentive to gender but much less so to caste, and its women of the lower orders are mostly background figures. Spivak's (1988) well-known question about whether the subaltern can speak is relevant here. Panchaali speaks eloquently, but she is not a subaltern in Spivak's sense. Her voice cannot be taken as the voice of all women in the epic's world, and a comparison with Mahasweta Devi's very different Draupadi (1981) shows how much a name can hide.

Third, there is the question of audience and the market. The novel was written by an Indian-born author based in the United States and published for a global readership. Huggan (2001) argued that postcolonial writing often circulates in a global market that rewards a certain packaging of cultural difference, which he called the postcolonial exotic. It would be unfair to

reduce Divakaruni's book to this logic, since its engagement with the epic is serious and its reception in India has been warm. Still, the question is worth asking: how far does the novel explain the epic for an audience that does not know it, and does this explaining flatten some of its complexity? A reader can hold both views: that the novel is a skilled and moving retelling and that it is shaped, as every retelling is, by the conditions of its publication.

Fourth, some readers feel that the novel's feminism is gentle, a feminism that can be accommodated by mainstream tastes and does not unsettle the epic's deeper structure. The heroine questions the men around her, but she does not question the institution of kingship, the ideal of the warrior, or the legitimacy of the war in the way that more radical retellings might. This view is a matter of judgment, not fact, and it should be weighed against the novel's evident care for women's inner lives and its willingness to show the human cost of vengeance. Our point is simply that the novel's feminism is one among many possible feminisms, and that a fuller account would place it alongside more confrontational reinterpretations.

8. Discussion: Negotiated Agency

What emerges from the readings above is a picture of agency that is negotiated rather than absolute. Panchaali is not a modern rebel who has been dropped into the epic, and she is not a passive figure to whom things simply happen. She acts, and she acts with courage, as when she questions the assembly. She makes mistakes, as when she laughs at the wrong moment. She forms relationships that expand her sense of self and that sometimes cost her dearly. And she interprets her own life, which is perhaps her deepest form of agency. Figure 2 summarises the logic of this movement: re-vision changes who sees and speaks, which opens space for agency, which in turn operates inside persistent constraints.

The three senses of voice distinguished in the Introduction can now be reviewed. The *literal voice* of the novel, its first-person narration, is the clearest achievement, since it transfers authority from the epic's male-centred telling to a woman's account. The *voice within the story*, her speech and action, is more mixed. It is powerful in the dice hall, ambivalent in the marriage, and often exercised through endurance and negotiation. The *cultural voice*, the authority to retell a foundational story, is both claimed and qualified. The novel claims it by reworking the epic with confidence, and it qualifies it by acknowledging, through Panchaali's own admissions of partiality, that it is one version among many.

A further implication concerns the relationship between literature and the study of agency. Social-science definitions of agency tend to emphasise measurable decisions, such as who controls resources or makes household choices (Kabeer, 1999). A novel can show what these definitions cannot easily capture: the feeling of acting under constraint, the unspoken negotiation, the slow growth of judgment, the pain of choices whose consequences cannot be undone. Reading *The Palace of Illusions* alongside theories of agency therefore enriches both: the theories give us vocabulary for what Panchaali does, and the novel shows what it is like to do it.

9. Conclusion

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* takes a figure who has been celebrated and feared for centuries and lets her speak at length for herself. The retelling changes the focalization of the epic, fills its silences with emotional history, and recasts relationships as the places where a woman's agency is exercised. Its Panchaali is courageous, proud, jealous, funny and wrong at times, and she is allowed to be all of these at once. The paper has argued that the novel's achievement lies in this negotiated agency, an agency that works within the limits of fate, kinship and custom and makes those limits visible to the reader.

The paper has also tried to be honest about what the novel does not do. It does not alter the epic's major events, it speaks mainly for a woman of royal status, it circulates in a global literary

market, and its feminism is of a kind that many readers will find accommodating. These observations do not diminish the book. They place it in a long and still-growing conversation in which every retelling, from the oral performances of rural India to the contemporary English novel, makes its own claim on the story. Panchaali's own final insight, that a life is understood by being told, is the novel's quiet argument for why that conversation continues.

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