



The Goddess and the Mortal: Duality of Female Archetypes in Modern Retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Amit Ghosh

Assistant Teacher, Sunia K. Vidyabhaban
Email: aamitghosh86@gmail.com

Abstract:

*The reinterpretation of mythological narratives in contemporary literature has enabled a critical reassessment of female archetypes, particularly within the framework of Indian epics. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythological retellings, notably *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, foreground a compelling duality in the representation of women—as both divine figures and mortal beings. This duality challenges traditional constructions of femininity that often confine women within rigid archetypal roles such as the goddess, the nurturer, or the sacrificer. This research article examines how Divakaruni reconfigures the dichotomy between the goddess and the mortal by humanizing mythological women while simultaneously preserving their symbolic and cultural significance. Drawing upon feminist literary criticism, archetypal theory, and postcolonial perspectives, the study explores how characters like Draupadi and Sita negotiate the tensions between divinity and humanity, power and vulnerability, duty and selfhood. The article argues that Divakaruni's narratives dismantle idealized archetypes and reconstruct them as fluid identities, thereby enabling a more inclusive and empowering representation of women. Ultimately, these retellings serve as transformative texts that bridge mythology and modern feminist discourse.*

Keywords: *Female Archetypes, Goddess, Mortal, Feminist Retellings, Draupadi, Sita, Identity, Divakaruni.*

Introduction:

Mythological narratives have long served as foundational texts that shape cultural values, moral frameworks, and gender roles. Within Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, female characters are frequently depicted through archetypal lenses—either as divine embodiments of virtue or as mortal figures bound by duty and sacrifice. This binary representation creates a duality that both elevates and constrains women, positioning them as idealized symbols rather than complex individuals.

In contemporary literature, authors have sought to revisit and reinterpret these archetypes to address their limitations and implications. Among such writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands out for her nuanced retellings of mythological narratives. Her works challenge traditional depictions by presenting female protagonists who embody both divine and human qualities, thereby destabilizing the rigid dichotomy between goddess and mortal.

Objectives: This article explores the duality of female archetypes in Divakaruni's retellings, focusing on how her narratives reconcile the tension between transcendence and immanence, idealization and realism. By examining characters such as Draupadi and Sita, the study highlights how Divakaruni reconstructs archetypal femininity to reflect contemporary concerns of identity, agency, and empowerment.

Theoretical Framework: Archetypes, Feminism, and Duality

The concept of archetypes, as articulated by Carl Jung, refers to universal symbols and recurring patterns embedded within the collective unconscious that shape cultural narratives and human understanding (Jung, 1968). Within mythological traditions, female archetypes frequently emerge as the goddess, the mother, the temptress, or the sacrificial figure. While these archetypes serve significant symbolic and cultural functions, they also risk reducing women to fixed and essentialized representations, thereby limiting the scope of feminine identity.

Feminist theorists have critically interrogated these constructions. Simone de Beauvoir argues that such representations contribute to positioning woman as the "Other," defined in relation to male-centric norms and denied autonomous subjectivity (Beauvoir, 1949/2011). In a similar vein, Judith Butler conceptualizes gender as performative, asserting that identity is constituted through repeated social practices rather than inherent or essential qualities (Butler, 1990). These perspectives challenge the stability and universality of archetypal representations, exposing their ideological underpinnings.

Within this theoretical framework, the mythological retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be interpreted as acts of both deconstruction and reconstruction. By blending divine and human attributes, Divakaruni destabilizes rigid archetypes and reconfigures femininity as fluid, dynamic, and contextually shaped. This duality enables a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences, transcending simplistic binaries such as divine versus mortal, ideal versus flawed.

The Goddess Archetype: Power, Symbolism, and Idealization

Divine Femininity in Mythological Tradition: In traditional Indian mythological narratives, goddesses are often associated with *shakti* (divine power), moral authority, purity, and spiritual transcendence. Figures such as Sita are venerated as embodiments of ideal womanhood, representing devotion, patience, and self-sacrifice (Doniger, 2009). Likewise, Draupadi, though complex, is frequently linked to divine origins and a predestined cosmic role within the epic framework of the *Mahabharata*.

However, this elevation to divine status often entails the loss of individuality. The goddess archetype imposes expectations of perfection and moral infallibility, leaving little room for emotional ambiguity, personal desire, or psychological depth. As a result, the lived realities of women are often overshadowed by idealized symbolic roles, reinforcing prescriptive norms of femininity.

Reimagining the Goddess in Divakaruni's Works: In her novels, Divakaruni retains the symbolic resonance of the goddess while simultaneously humanizing her characters. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is conscious of her extraordinary origins, yet she grapples with deeply human emotions such as jealousy, longing, anger, and ambition (Divakaruni, 2008). This interplay between divinity and humanity disrupts the notion of the goddess as an unattainable and static ideal.

Similarly, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's divine identity does not insulate her from suffering, moral conflict, or existential questioning (Divakaruni, 2019). Instead, her divinity coexists with her human experiences, producing a layered and multifaceted characterization. Through such portrayals, Divakaruni transcends traditional archetypal limitations and redefines the goddess as both powerful and vulnerable, idealized yet deeply human.

The Mortal Dimension: Vulnerability, Emotion, and Experience

Humanizing Mythological Women: One of Divakaruni's most significant contributions lies in her emphasis on the mortal dimensions of mythological women. By foregrounding their emotional lives, interpersonal relationships, and inner conflicts, she transforms these figures into relatable and psychologically complex individuals.

For instance, Draupadi's anguish during the episode of her public humiliation and Sita's profound loneliness during her exile highlight the depth of their human experiences (Divakaruni, 2008; 2019). These moments of vulnerability challenge the conventional perception of mythological women as invulnerable or purely symbolic beings, instead presenting them as subjects capable of suffering, resilience, and self-reflection.

Emotional Complexity and Psychological Depth: Divakaruni's narratives are marked by a strong emphasis on psychological realism and emotional depth. Her characters navigate intricate experiences of love, betrayal, identity formation, and resistance, reflecting the complexities of human existence. This focus on interiority aligns with modern literary approaches that prioritize subjective experience and character development.

By portraying her protagonists as thinking, feeling, and evolving individuals, Divakaruni effectively bridges the gap between myth and contemporary reality. Her retellings thus render ancient narratives accessible and relevant to modern readers, while simultaneously challenging reductive archetypal representations. In doing so, she reclaims mythological space as a site for exploring nuanced and evolving forms of feminine identity.

Duality in Action: Negotiating Goddess and Mortal Identities

Draupadi: Fire-Born Yet Human: Draupadi emerges as one of the most compelling embodiments of the duality between the goddess and the mortal in the mythological retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Though her fire-born origin marks her as a figure of divine significance, her emotional and psychological experiences firmly situate her within the realm of human reality. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi navigates complex emotions such as love, jealousy, ambition, and humiliation, revealing the depth of her humanity (Divakaruni, 2008).

Her longing for recognition and her resistance against the injustices inflicted upon her—particularly in the episode of her public humiliation—underscore the tension between her elevated, symbolic status and her lived experiences. This dual positioning allows Draupadi to challenge patriarchal norms while retaining her mythic and cultural significance. As scholars have noted, such reinterpretations foreground the agency of marginalized voices within epic traditions, thereby destabilizing dominant narratives (Spivak, 1988).

Sita: Divine Ideal vs. Human Agency: Sita's characterization further intensifies the interplay between divinity and humanity. Traditionally revered as the epitome of ideal womanhood, Sita is associated with purity, devotion, and moral strength. However, in Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, her portrayal extends beyond these idealized attributes to emphasize her individuality and agency (Divakaruni, 2019).

Despite her divine status, Sita undergoes profound trials—exile, abduction, and social scrutiny—that test her emotional resilience and personal identity. Divakaruni foregrounds Sita's capacity for self-definition, particularly in moments where she questions societal expectations and asserts her autonomy. Her final act of returning to the earth can be interpreted as both a reaffirmation of her divine origin and a conscious assertion of selfhood, encapsulating the dynamic interplay between transcendence and personal agency (Doniger, 2009).

Deconstructing Archetypes: Feminist Interventions

Divakaruni's mythological retellings function as powerful feminist interventions that interrogate and dismantle the limitations of traditional archetypes. By presenting female characters as simultaneously

powerful and vulnerable, divine and human, she disrupts the binary opposition between the goddess and the mortal that has historically defined representations of women.

This narrative strategy aligns with contemporary feminist thought, which emphasizes the plurality and fluidity of women's identities. bell hooks asserts that empowerment lies in the ability of women to define themselves beyond socially imposed roles and restrictive cultural scripts (hooks, 2000). Divakaruni's protagonists embody this principle by negotiating their identities in ways that resist fixed categorization.

Furthermore, her work contributes to a broader cultural and literary movement that seeks to reclaim mythological narratives as spaces for alternative interpretations and subversive voices. By reimagining canonical figures through a feminist lens, Divakaruni not only redefines femininity but also challenges the ideological structures that sustain gender hierarchies. In doing so, her narratives advocate for a more inclusive, dynamic, and context-sensitive understanding of womanhood.

Cultural and Contemporary Relevance

The duality of female archetypes in the works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds profound relevance for contemporary readers, particularly in the context of ongoing debates surrounding gender roles, identity, and selfhood. Her reimagined characters mirror the lived realities of modern women, who often find themselves negotiating multiple, and sometimes conflicting, expectations imposed by family, society, and cultural traditions. This intersection of roles—professional, personal, emotional, and social—echoes the simultaneous existence of the “goddess” and the “mortal” within a single identity.

By bridging mythology and modernity, Divakaruni constructs narratives that are deeply rooted in cultural tradition while remaining critically engaged with present-day social concerns (Divakaruni, 2008; 2019). Her retellings challenge the authority of inherited narratives and encourage readers to interrogate the normative ideals of femininity perpetuated through mythological discourse. In doing so, she aligns with the insights of Stuart Hall, who conceptualizes identity as a fluid and evolving construct shaped by historical and cultural contexts rather than as a fixed essence (Hall, 1996).

Moreover, Divakaruni's portrayal of women as both divine and human resonates with contemporary feminist efforts to move beyond reductive binaries. Her narratives invite readers to embrace a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of femininity—one that accommodates strength alongside vulnerability, autonomy alongside relationality. This layered representation underscores the continuing relevance of myth as a dynamic site for negotiating identity in a rapidly changing world.

Comparative Analysis: Divergent Expressions of Duality

While both Draupadi and Sita embody the duality of goddess and mortal, their expressions of this duality diverge significantly, reflecting the multiplicity of female experiences and modes of agency. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's duality is characterized by assertiveness, ambition, and open defiance of patriarchal constraints. Her voice is marked by a desire for recognition and justice, and she actively challenges the structures that seek to silence or subordinate her (Divakaruni, 2008). Her resistance is outward and confrontational, aligning with forms of agency that emphasize visibility and transformation.

In contrast, Sita's duality in *The Forest of Enchantments* is expressed through introspection, emotional resilience, and moral strength. Rather than overt defiance, her resistance often takes the form of quiet endurance and reflective self-assertion. Her choices—particularly in moments of crisis—demonstrate a deeply internalized sense of dignity and ethical conviction (Divakaruni, 2019). This mode of agency, though less visibly confrontational, is equally powerful in its capacity to challenge societal expectations.

This contrast between Draupadi and Sita highlights the absence of a singular model of female empowerment. Instead, it affirms the feminist argument that agency is context-dependent and manifests in diverse forms. As

Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests, the experiences of women must be understood within specific cultural and socio-historical contexts, rather than through universalized frameworks (Mohanty, 2003). Divakaruni's nuanced portrayals thus resist homogenization and celebrate the plurality of women's voices and identities.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's mythological retellings offer a transformative reimagining of female archetypes by integrating the divine and the human. Through her nuanced portrayals of Draupadi and Sita, she challenges traditional binaries and presents women as complex, multifaceted individuals. The duality of the goddess and the mortal serves as a powerful framework for understanding the evolving nature of femininity. By dismantling rigid archetypes and embracing fluid identities, Divakaruni not only enriches literary narratives but also contributes to a broader discourse on gender, identity, and empowerment. In essence, her works reaffirm the idea that women are not confined to singular roles or identities; they are, instead, dynamic beings capable of embodying both strength and vulnerability, divinity and humanity.

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