

The Supremacy of Feminine Regality in the Fictions of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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<p>Received: 12 Nov 2025; Received in revised form: 10 Dec 2025; Accepted: 16 Dec 2025; Available online: 20 Dec 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords – Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Women's Regality, Feminist Literature.</p>	<p><i>Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent contemporary Indian-American author, has consistently portrayed women as regal, empowered, and resilient figures in her literary oeuvre. From mythological retellings to diaspora fiction, her female protagonists exhibit moral strength, independence, and transformative agency. This paper explores how women's regality defined as their inherent dignity, sovereignty, and inner power remains a dominant theme in Divakaruni's work, particularly focusing on her novels <i>The Palace of Illusions</i>, <i>The Forest of Enchantments</i>, and <i>Sister of My Heart</i>. The study emphasizes on Divakaruni's reclaiming women's voices and challenges of patriarchal paradigms through mythic reimagining and immigrant narratives.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of feminist literary discourse has emphasized the importance of reclaiming female narratives, identities, and voices that have long been marginalized within historical and literary traditions. In this context, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed Indian-American author and poet, stands out for her powerful reimagining of women's roles across mythological and contemporary backdrops. Her literary oeuvre, encompassing novels such as *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), and *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and foregrounds women who are not merely passive participants in their destinies but are instead regal, self-possessed, and transformative figures.

The concept of "regality" in her works transcends literal monarchy; it symbolizes moral authority, emotional strength, autonomy, and resilience. In traditional Indian epics such as the *Mahabharata* and

the *Ramayana*, women often occupy secondary roles, and their narratives are shaped by patriarchal ideologies. Draupadi and Sita the central figures in these epics are typically portrayed through the lens of male protagonists. However, Divakaruni revisits these iconic women with a feminist gaze, challenging their conventional depictions and elevating them to sovereign protagonists of their own stories. This act of narrative reclamation is a potent feminist strategy, one that aligns with what Adrienne Rich describes as "re-vision" the act of looking back at texts from a new, empowering perspective (Rich, 1971). Through her revisionist storytelling, Divakaruni bestows a unique regality upon her female characters one rooted in emotional intelligence, inner strength, and ethical leadership.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is no longer a voiceless queen shared by five brothers. She becomes Panchaali a fire-born woman, unapologetically aware

of her desires, intellect, and agency. Her regality lies not only in her royal lineage but in her sharp political mind and unflinching moral compass. Draupadi's experience of humiliation in the Kaurava court and her relentless demand for justice make her an emblem of regal resistance. According to Sharma (2012), Divakaruni's Draupadi is "a woman of power, trapped in a world that seeks to diminish her, yet constantly asserting her sovereignty over her identity and fate."

Similarly, *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a feminist reinterpretation of Sita, traditionally idolized as the obedient and sacrificial wife. Divakaruni subverts this one-dimensional portrayal, presenting Sita as a multifaceted and regal figure. Her strength lies not in blind devotion but in moral clarity, self-respect, and principled defiance. When Ram questions her purity after her return from Lanka, Sita chooses exile over submission, declaring:

"I will not return with you, Ram. I will not be bartered again." (*The Forest of Enchantments*, p. 330)

This moment is not merely an act of personal resistance it is a declaration of sovereign will. As Sundararajan (2020) notes, Sita's characterization marks "a seismic shift from a passive ideal to an active agent of her destiny, establishing her regality not through power, but through profound self-respect."

Divakaruni's exploration of women's regality is not confined to mythological terrains. In her diasporic novel *Sister of My Heart*, the lives of Anju and Sudha unfold within a contemporary Kolkata and later the United States, showcasing the challenges faced by modern Indian women negotiating traditional expectations and personal ambitions. Despite their different temperaments Anju being outspoken and rebellious, Sudha gentle and compliant both characters exhibit regal resilience in their choices.

When Sudha decides to raise her child as a single mother, rejecting societal stigma and marital oppression, she reclaims her dignity in the face of patriarchal judgment. Similarly, Anju's pursuit of education and autonomy in a foreign land underscore her self-assertive regality. Banerjee (2005) observes that these characters "construct a private kingdom of sisterhood and mutual support,

establishing their own form of feminine sovereignty."

What binds Divakaruni's protagonists across myth and modernity is their capacity to resist domination and exercise agency, often in the most constrained circumstances. Their regality is not derived from conventional notions of power but from their determination to remain true to themselves. In this way, Divakaruni contributes significantly to feminist literature by presenting women who are both vulnerable and empowered, marginalized and majestic.

Her narrative style poetic yet assertive, emotional yet analytical plays a crucial role in crafting these regal women. She uses first-person narratives, inner monologues, and introspective voices to deepen our understanding of her protagonists. This technique, combined with her thematic emphasis on female solidarity, love, and sacrifice, creates a powerful literary framework where regality is not a static attribute but a dynamic process of becoming. As Showalter (1985) highlights in her theory of gynocriticism, the exploration of women's experiences and voices in literature must foreground their personal and psychological growth. Divakaruni's works, in this context, become feminist texts of transformation.

Furthermore, by giving mythological women like Draupadi and Sita their own perspectives, Divakaruni challenges the narrative authority of male-centric epics. This approach not only restores the complexity of these women's identities but also critiques the socio-cultural systems that silenced them. Her stories echo the feminist literary project of rewriting patriarchal texts to center female voices and experiences, akin to what Elaine Showalter (1977) terms "female literary tradition."

The regality of Divakaruni's women also lies in their ability to forgive, nurture, and love even in the face of betrayal. Their emotional intelligence is their crown. They rise above vengeance and bitterness, opting instead for strength rooted in empathy and truth. This emotional regality differentiates them from traditional male heroes, whose power is often physical and political. Divakaruni's characters, while not devoid of conflict or flaws, exhibit a profound

ethical grace that elevates them to sovereign moral figures.

The regality of women in Divakaruni's works is not an ornamental motif but a central narrative force. Whether in ancient palaces or modern households, her protagonists reign through dignity, resilience, and wisdom. By revisiting epics and rewriting contemporary experiences, Divakaruni not only empowers her characters but also redefines what it means to be regal in a feminist context. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the recurring theme of women's regality across her major works and understand how it contributes to reshaping gender paradigms in literature.

DEFINING REGALITY IN A FEMINIST LITERARY CONTEXT

Regality traditionally connotes royalty or sovereign power. In feminist literary discourse, regality is reimagined as a symbol of inner strength, dignity, and self-rule (Showalter, 1985). In Divakaruni's narratives, this redefinition finds potent expression. Her female characters resist, reframe, and reclaim the roles prescribed to them, thereby asserting their regality in patriarchal settings.

REGALITY IN *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*

In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), a retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni bestows a regal voice upon a historically marginalized figure. Draupadi emerges not just as a queen by birth, but as a sovereign of her narrative.

"I was born with fire in me. I was proud of it. It gave me strength and courage and passion." (*The Palace of Illusions*, p. 12)

This powerful declaration exemplifies her regality. While she is torn between five husbands and political turmoil, Draupadi asserts her identity through intellect, emotion, and revenge. Her dignified endurance of humiliation in the Kaurava court and her subsequent resolve to avenge it portray a queen in spirit, even when stripped of her literal royal status (Sharma, 2012).

REGALITY IN *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*

The Forest of Enchantments (2019) reimagines the Ramayana through Sita's eyes. Sita, often portrayed as submissive in traditional versions, is here depicted with a regal resolve. Her endurance of exile, her

moral high ground during her unjust trial by fire, and her decision to leave Ram rather than accept conditional love mark her as a sovereign woman.

"No one's daughter. No one's wife. I will not return with you, Ram. I will not be bargained again." (*The Forest of Enchantments*, p. 330)

This defiant assertion reclaims Sita's narrative power and challenges conventional ideals of womanhood. Critics have noted that Divakaruni "rescues Sita from mythological victimhood" and instead frames her as "a queen in her own right" (Sundararajan, 2020).

REGALITY IN *SISTER OF MY HEART*

Moving beyond mythology, Divakaruni's contemporary fiction also foregrounds women's regality. In *Sister of My Heart* (1999), the protagonists Anju and Sudha, despite societal constraints, exercise autonomy over love, marriage, and motherhood. Their sisterhood becomes a shared realm of emotional regality, where they support and uplift one another.

Anju's decision to pursue education in the U.S. and Sudha's defiance of marital norms are examples of self-sovereignty. As critics observe, "their regality is built not on lineage, but on courage, independence, and mutual solidarity" (Banerjee, 2005).

CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

Across her works, Divakaruni uses regality to subvert patriarchal authority. Whether it is Draupadi's refusal to be a pawn, Sita's rejection of Ram, or Sudha's choice to raise her daughter alone, each character reclaims her right to rule her destiny. These women do not simply endure they command, influence, and transform.

This aligns with the feminist revisionist mythmaking tradition, where writers reinterpret myths to restore female agency (Daly, 1978). Divakaruni thus joins a lineage of writers who "write back" to androcentric texts and traditions.

CONCLUSION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's female protagonists exhibit a consistent theme of regality. Whether set in ancient palaces or modern cities, her women retain a dignified, sovereign identity. By endowing her characters with agency, resilience, and moral clarity,

Divakaruni not only reclaims female narratives but reshapes the literary landscape to center women as rulers of their own fates. Her portrayal of women as regal is not decorative it is revolutionary.

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