



ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access

Vol.10 No.3, September 2025

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025

Incestuous Implied: The Royal Siblings in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008)

Sudesh Das

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sister Nivedita University|

New Town, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received- 20/06/2025, Revised-18/07/2025, Accepted-28/07/2025, Published-30/07/2025

Abstract: Modern literary adaptations of the *Mahabharata* have often drawn upon the politics of relationships in the epic. One of the feminist literary adaptations among them is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) that highlights the relationship between Draupadi and the Pandava brothers, Draupadi and Krishna and Draupadi and Karna. The paper, however, will concentrate on a lesser noticed aspect of the female and male dynamics in the *Mahabharata*: that between Draupadi and her brother Dhristadyumna which in Divakaruni's writing has got a different dimension with incestuous implications. In this context, the paper attempts to explore Draupadi's relationship with her father, King Drupad, which contributes to a better understanding of that between her and her brother. In this evaluation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, this paper will draw upon the psychoanalytic observations of Freud, especially his conclusions about incestuous feelings between fraternal twins, which is what the relationship between Dhristadyumna and Draupadi is, according to Divakaruni's depiction of the two figures in her text.

Keywords: Draupadi, Dhristadumnya, *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni, incestuous

Beginning from the late 20th century and continuing into the 21st century, several modern feminist retellings of the *Mahabharata* have been written from the perspective of Draupadi. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a first person point of view narrational rewriting of the epic that probes into the power dynamics between the female protagonist and some of the other male characters featured in the epic. What Divakaruni focuses upon primarily is the sexual politics between Draupadi and her five husbands, especially Arjuna, between herself and Karna, and most importantly between herself and Krishna as she evolves from being the princess of Panchal to emerging as the empress of Indraprastha. Apart from that, Divakaruni has suggested a certain incestuous implication in the relationship between Draupadi and her brother, Dhristadyumna. The history of the relationship of these two characters



remains untold in the *Mahabharata* as the epic does not narrativize the premarital aspects of Draupadi's life. In other words, the power dynamics between Draupadi and her family members in Panchal has been left in the shadows in the Ur-text. Divakaruni's novel does not offer us any explicit exemplar of 'incest' between Draupadi and her brother Dhristadumnya. Yet a psychoanalytical study of the epic-heroine may reveal her subconscious where an incestuous feeling on her part towards her brother is implied which she herself seems to be not much aware of. However, it is important to note at this point that 'incest' was not automatically regarded as a taboo in the classical Indian tradition. The term 'incest' is defined as the sexual activities between people of close relationships. The *Mahabharata* provides us examples of this particular 'tabooed' subject. The greatest example would be the marriage between Arjuna and Subhadra who happened to be cousins by familial relation and out of their union was born Abhimanyu. Arjuna's mother Kunti was the sister of Vasudeva and both Krishna and Subhadra were his children. Though the marriage between Arjuna and Subhadra was but a political alliance designed by Krishna yet the marriage having taken place with the consent of the elders justifies the idea of 'incest' in the Ur-text. Another example is the marriage between Krishna's son Pradyumna and Rukmavati, the daughter of Rukmi who happened to be Pradyumna's maternal uncle (Rukmini being one of the eight wives of Krishna and the sister of Rukmi). This instance takes place in the "Mausala Parva" of the *Mahabharata* entirely dedicated to Krishna and his Yadava clan.

In the *Mahabharata* Draupadi first makes her appearance in the "Adi Parva" or "The Book of the Beginning" and it narrates the story of her birth. The epic reminds us that Draupadi's birth is also the birth of her brother Dhristadyumna as they came out of the same sacrificial altar. According to the popular versions of the epic, King Drupada of Panchal, dissatisfied with his first-born Shikhandini, a daughter who would later become a man and play an instrumental part in killing Bhishma, urged Yaja and Upayaja to conduct a *yajna* for a son. From the *yajna*-fire was born Dhristadyumna who was destined to kill Dronacharya, Drupada's arch-enemy. Dhristadumnya's birth was followed by the birth of an exquisitely beautiful girl-child who was destined to change the course of the history of Aryavarta (contemporary India) by splitting the Kuru dynasty and destroying the unrighteous men. For her luminous, dark complexion she was named Krishnaa and her father's identity gave her the name "Draupadi" (The daughter of King Drupad). Some other versions of the epic record that both Dhristadyumna and Draupadi were born and came out of the sacrificial altar together at the same



time. In Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi hears the story of her birth from her governess whom she calls Dhai Ma. Dhai Ma recounts the tale which she is all ears: "Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. . . Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too –" (Divakarunai 4) Though Draupadi appeared a little later than Dhristadyumna but the intervening time is negligible according to the narrator Dhai Ma.

The novel presents us a detailed picture of their upbringings which neither the epic nor any other rewritings has ever attempted to tell us. Being a patriarchal epic, it omits the period of time between Draupadi's birth and her *swayamvara*, or groom-choosing ceremony, since it has nothing to do with her marriage to the Pandavas and the events leading up to the Kurukshetra war. It appears that the epic thrusts her straight into marriage as soon as she is born. Divakaruni's plot mostly centers on Draupadi's relationships with her brother Dhristadyumna and her friend Krishna during this stage of her life. As a first-person narrative, it delves into the princess's psychology as she openly shares the inner workings of her mind.

Incestuous feelings can occur when members of the same family typically develop lust for one another. Freud's concept of the "Oedipus complex" supports the notion of an incestuous relationship between siblings. Moreover, incestuous feelings are normal for identical or fraternal twins due to their innate sexual desire. Although they are not "identical," the conception of "fraternal twins" can be justified by the birth of Draupadi and Dhristadyumna in Divakaruni's book due to their opposite sexes and contrasting complexion. Dhai Ma narrates to the princess: "You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm." (Divakaruni 4) It is notable that there is no reference to their biological mother, which further complicates the idea of 'fraternal twins' since their birth does not apparently correspond to the natural process of reproduction. Being born directly from fire as five years old children, hence, seems to be biologically impossible in such a text where the author attempts to portray the protagonist and other characters more as humans and less like larger-than-life figures. One such instance would be Krishna, who is often seen to have engaged in casual conversations with Draupadi, has been deliberately demoted by the author from the God to Draupadi's companion and confidant being dissociated from the 'miracle'. Draupadi and Dhristadyumna in the novel seem to grow quite humanly with each other despite the fact that the epic gives an account of their ostensibly unnatural birth

(from fire). They also possess opposite characteristic traits – Draupadi is too talkative and expressive, whereas Dhristadyumna is quiet and reticent. The sister is curious about almost everything in the world, unlike the brother, who is too focused on one singular goal he was born to fulfil. However, the quality of being stubborn and steadfast as a legacy is shared by both. Thus the author’s attempt to identify them as ‘fraternal twins’ is undeniable and well justified even if the siblings do not have a natural birth from a woman (King Drupad’s wife). In some ancient Hindu texts, the sacrificial altar has been compared to a woman’s reproductive organ which has the power to give birth. Bani Basu in her Bengali book *Panchalkanya Krishnaa* which offers modern interpretations of eminent incidents of Draupadi’s life in the *Mahabharata*, has reimagined the birth of Draupadi and Dhristadyumna. She intends to defy the fact that Draupadi and Dhristadyumna had a divine birth from fire and shows that the siblings had a normal, biological birth by a woman which can further strengthen the idea of ‘fraternal twins’. Though Divakaruni has not hinted at the age of Draupadi when she comes out of the sacrificial fire immediately after her brother, yet considering the age of Dhristadyumna, as Dhai Ma confirms, her age can be assumed: “He stood tall and unafraid, though he couldn’t have been more than five years old” (Divakaruni 4). Divakaruni does not deviate from the narrative of their birth, as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, keeping it unchanged. Yet a modern envisioning of the idea of ‘fraternal twins’ has been made quite compelling in Divakaruni’s narrative with the references to their similar biological aspects and the inextricable connection with each other from the moment they stepped out of fire hand in hand. The *Mahabharata* never discusses Draupadi’s kinship with either her father or her brother. However, Divakaruni does it purposefully in her novel. The novel, delving deep into Draupadi’s psychology and exhaustively depicting her mental makeup, clearly unfolds the protagonist’s urge, within her psyche, for connecting with the two closest male figures physically present in her palace – her father and her brother. However, her father’s scarce physical presence in her life is insufficient for her to develop normal attachments with him, and therefore, the lacuna created by him is expected to be fulfilled by her brother. One important thing that Divakrauni draws readers’ attention to is from whom Draupadi gets her first physical touch. It is from none other than her brother Dhristadyumna:

“...Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too – ”



“But we didn’t fall!”

“No. Somehow you managed to hold each other up....” (Divakaruni 4)

According to Freud’s theory, the ‘Oedipus Complex’ (for a girl child it is known as ‘Electra Complex’) plays a significant part in the phallic stage which occurs between three to six years of age. We must note that Draupadi at this age (as she is, too, five years old like her brother) is absolutely distant from her father. King Drupad, in the novel, is portrayed as a person who is always busy with the affairs of his kingdom and the only concern for his children was limited to the prophecies they were born with: one would fulfil his revenge by killing Drona and the other would change the course of history. Draupadi, until her marriage, is seen to have brought much allegations against her father for burdening his son with his own unaccomplished tasks and his indifference towards his daughter. His appellation of his children ‘Dhristadyumna’ (the destroyer of enemies) and ‘Draupadi’ (the daughter of Drupad) gives the evidence of what Draupadi calls his “egotistical temperament”. Draupadi makes clear that it was because of her brother that her father was forced to accept her because they were almost inseparable: “We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together.” (Divakaruni 6) The lack of the physical presence of and the emotional attachment with the father in princess Panchaali’s life was substituted by her intimacy with Dhristadyumna in her adolescence. She lovingly calls her brother ‘Dhri’ as she does not like the name ‘Dhristadyumna’ because it was chosen by her father and she admits that she would have chosen “a more cheerful appellation” for him had she been his parent. It is notable that ‘Dhri’ (from which the word *dhrama* has originated in Sanskrit means ‘to hold’, ‘to bear’ or ‘to possess’. Also significant is that Panchaali never addresses Dhristadyumna as “brother”, hence they appear to be more like companions and less like conventional siblings. Draupadi’s inability to forget the “hesitation” of her father to accept her grew as a life-long resentment for him yet she never fails to acknowledge his over-indulgence, fulfilment of a father’s duty, and his generosity in “his own harsh and obsessive way”. Her adolescent years would have been “unbearable” in Drupad’s palace without Dhri’s company as she admits, “My years in my father’s house would have been unbearable had I not had my brother. I never forgot the feel of his hand clutching mine, his refusal to abandon me.” (Divakaruni 7) The initial rejection she got from her father seemed to be compensated by her brother’s “refusal to abandon” her. Here Divakaruni has made Draupadi’s special affection for Dhri clear. She uses explicit words to describe



Draupadi's first feeling in terms of physicality. "The feel of his hand" is nonetheless a physical sensation because to imagine a mental bond between them is quite impossible when they just come out of the fire clutching their hands. Draupadi seems to be very proud of the "loyalty" which she believes "made them inseparable". This loyalty that Dhristadyumna offered her is very precious in her life as neither her father nor any of her husbands (later) could provide her. This can be looked at from Yungian perspective. The absence of her mother (as the princess is reared up by Dhai Ma) is expected to heighten what Carl Yung calls "Electra complex". Yet the most prominent emotion Draupadi exhibits towards Drupad is antipathy which seems to mitigate the possibility of the mentioned complex. As an alternative, the feeling is therefore directed towards another male figure whom the girl child is closer to both mentally and physically.

Freud in his essay called "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" has argued that the 'Oedipus Complex' of a girl child culminates in a desire to bear her father a child and that is long retained. That remains "strongly cathected in the unconscious" and helps to "prepare the female creature for her later sexual role." (Freud 179) In Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi describes herself as "the girl who wasn't invited" by her father and the distant relationship between them stunts the growth of a normal psychology of a girl child related to Electra Complex as Freud has claimed. Nevertheless, for Draupadi, the father's role has been replaced by that of her brother, Dhristadyumna. In a conversation with Dhri regarding a woman's highest purpose in life, Draupadi tries to contradict him. Where Dhristadyumna "halfheartedly" supports the fact, taught by his home tutor, that a woman should pray for a heroic death on the battlefield of the men in her life, Draupadi tries to assure herself that she would rather teach her sons to survive. In this context she reveals one of her thoughts: "I thought of the husband and sons that everyone assumed I would have someday. The husband I couldn't visualize, but the sons I imagined as miniature versions of Dhri, with the same straight, serious eyebrows." (Divakaruni 26) The inability "to visualize" the husband is acceptable as Draupadi was then an unmarried woman, but imagining her sons as small replicas of her brother clearly indicates that in her unconscious she has an incestuous fancy of Dhri. A woman is generally expected to identify her sons with her husband and it is a wifely decorum that a true Hindu woman should follow. Rabindranath Tagore in his verse-play *Chitra*, despite portraying Chitrangada as a warrior-princess who stands apart from the other female characters of the *Mahabharata*, at last conforms to the image of a true consort who vows to raise her son in her womb to be "a



second Arjun”. Chitra, though identified as one of Arjuna’s wives in the epic, has not been called so in the verse-play. Tagore, very subtly, does not choose to use words like “marriage” and “wife” as he focuses on the love-story between Chitra and Arjuna which he wants to be free from the social institution called marriage. It is clear that Tagore’s Chitra wants to see in her son the image of her male consort. Divakaruni’s Draupadi, on the other hand, visualizes her sons in the image of her brother with the similar “straight, serious eyebrows”. Also, while describing her imaginary sons as Dhri’s “miniature versions” she points to the ‘physical attractiveness’ of her brother with “straight, serious eyebrows” in the first place. In another instance, imagining the woman (courtesan) who had spent the night with Dhristadyumna indicates that Draupadi experiences a psychosexual insecurity that seems to linger till she watches him bathe in the morning. It also reveals her subconscious desire to be identified with the woman she has imagined. Yet, she focuses more on the action done by the imagined woman – putting a garland around Dhristadyumna’s neck – a gesture of mock wedding. This subtle identification with the woman in pseudo-marriage and the subsequent vision of her sons as replicas of Dhri corroborates the complete shift of her psychosexual longing from her father to her brother. The void created by her father in the phallic stage of her psychosexual development and that which prevents her from experiencing what Jung calls ‘Electra Complex’ has resulted in such incestuous feelings towards her brother.

In some ancient Hindu texts, the term “Kautbik Sex” was used for “incest”. *Harivamshapurana* mentions that sage Vashishtha’s daughter Shatrupa had an incestuous relationship with her father, whom she believed to be her husband. Also, Indra had sex with King Janmejaya’s wife Bapusthama, who happened to be his great-great grand daughter-in-law (Given that Indra is the biological father of Arjun). If incest was performed and recorded in the ancient text like the *Mahabharata* then the implicit instances of ‘incestuous feeling’ in a modern retelling of the same epic can be justifiable. Considering the spiritual aspects of a sacred, religious text like the *Mahabharata* it may shock the readers in the first place to look at Draupadi-Dhristadyumna relationship in light of an interdicted subject. Yet, as a rich cultural text like the *Mahabharata*, which is now being investigated for scholarly research, is opening up several new dimensions through modern interpretations as far as the tradition of rewriting the epic is concerned.



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.3, September, 2025

Works cited

- Basu, Bani. *Panchaalkanya Krishnaa*. Dey's Publishing, 2018.
- Buitenen, J. A. B. van. *The Mahabharata: The Dicing, The Sequel to the Dicing and the Temptation of Karna*. Worldview Publicatins, 2016.
- Datta, Bhabatosh. *Rabindranath Tagore on the Ramayana & the Mahabharata*. The Asiatic Society, 1995.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador India, 2008.
- Dutt, Manmatha Nath, *A Prose English Translation of Harivamsa*. Elysium Press (Beadon Street Kolkata), 1897 <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/61937/61937-h/61937-h.htm#chapter-v-indra-ravishes-vapusthama-vishwvasu-pacifies-janamejaya-s-wrath>
Accessed 17Aug. 2025.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex". *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*. Tr. James Strachey and Anna Freud. The Hogarth Press, 1924.
- Pathak, Debashis. *Krishna-Draupadi*. Gangchil, 2019.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Chitra*. Macmillan, 1914.