

Silence as Feminist Resistance: Re-Reading Draupadi in Hindu Mythological Retellings Through Body, Shame, and Narrative Refusal

Maitray Kaushik

Net Qualified, Independent Researcher, Delhi
U220/Shakarpur/ Block U
Delhi – 110092, India
maitraykaushik@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the silence of Draupadi across the Mahābhārata and its contemporary feminist retellings to argue that silence, contrary to dominant critical discourse, can function as a powerful mode of resistance rather than submission. While traditional scholarship often associates empowerment with articulate speech, I believe Draupadi's strategic refusal to speak in certain narrative moments disrupts patriarchal expectations more effectively than verbal protest. By withholding speech, she forces interrogators, institutions, and male authority figures to face moral discomfort without guidance, thereby destabilising the cultural logic of shame. Through a close reading of primary texts and feminist reinterpretations by writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Volga, I analyse how silence moves beyond the courtroom spectacle into the interior spaces of trauma, introspection, and self-construction. I also consider how Western frameworks, which frequently conflate silence with passivity, risk flattening cultural specificity and overlooking embodied forms of dissent. Methodologically, I draw from feminist theory, trauma studies, and comparative mythology, while utilising digital tools such as ChatGPT strictly as language-level support. Ultimately, my findings suggest that Draupadi's silence operates simultaneously as emotional boundaries, psychological survival, and political sabotage. Instead of signalling defeat, her refusal to perform humiliation becomes a radical assertion of agency. This research contributes to an underexplored scholarship gap by repositioning silence not as absence, but as a deliberate presence, an acoustic void that compels patriarchal structures to speak instead. I conclude that silence deserves renewed critical attention as a resistant narrative strategy in Indian mythological discourse.

Keywords: Draupadi; feminist resistance; narrative silence; body politics; mythological retellings.

Introduction

For generations, Hindu mythology has shaped cultural understandings of gender, power, and morality within Indian society. While epics like the *Mahabharata* are revered as

foundational narrative frameworks, they also carry deeply ingrained patriarchal logic that often reduces women to symbolic functions rather than complex individuals. In recent decades, however, feminist writers have begun revisiting these mythic structures, not merely to retell them but to interrogate and subvert them. One of the most compelling strategies they employ is silence, not as absence or submission but as an active form of resistance. I find this shift fascinating because it forces us to rethink what counts as “voice” in a culture that rewards women for speaking only when it suits the patriarchal order. In this research, I explore how silence becomes a political weapon in mythological reinterpretations and why feminists deliberately choose it to challenge narrative authority.

Among the numerous figures who exemplify the politics of silent resistance, Draupadi stands out powerfully. Traditionally, she is framed through male-authored lenses in the *Mahabharata*; her anger is legendary, yet her silences are rarely acknowledged. Feminist retellings, particularly Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*, reorient our gaze. Instead of speech, Devi foregrounds Draupadi’s refusal to be articulated by men. In my view, this shift is significant because it undermines the male narrator’s monopoly over meaning. Silence, in Devi’s hands, becomes a refusal to perform expected femininity. It is an interruption. It is defiance. And most importantly, it is self-definition.

A great deal of feminist criticism on mythological rewriting focuses on vocal reclamation—women speaking, yelling, narrating their trauma. But as I reviewed scholarship published by Routledge and Taylor & Francis, I noticed a blind spot: scholars rarely treat silence itself as an autonomous rhetoric. Silence is usually coded as oppression. I believe this is a conceptual limitation, especially considering Indian cultural norms where silence can signify dignity, mourning, withdrawal of consent, or moral superiority. By focusing on silence, we can access what Judith Butler might call a “performative refusal”, a denial of patriarchal legibility. This, for me, is the intellectual gap driving this paper.

The contemporary boom of mythological retellings by writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Volga reflects a growing hunger to see familiar stories reframed through feminist consciousness. Yet, much of this scholarship emphasises voice reclamation, trauma testimony, and narrative agency through speech. I argue that focusing

solely on spoken articulation adopts a Western feminist lens that risks misreading Indian narrative culture. Silence in Indian aesthetics has often been associated with power (*mauna*), concentrated thought, and punitive withdrawal. On that basis, Draupadi's silence in Devi's retelling can be seen as an arsenal rather than a wound.

While reading widely, I also recognised another overlooked dimension: silence as audience manipulation. In my opinion, a silent woman forces readers to confront violence without narrative comfort. When Draupadi refuses to weep, plead, scream, or explain herself, she denies the patriarchal reader the emotional catharsis they subconsciously expect. This refusal disrupts narrative consumption. Silence becomes a literary slap.

This research, therefore, asks the following question:

How do feminist retellings of Hindu mythology transform women's silence from passive oppression into active resistance, specifically through the figure of Draupadi?

This question matters because Indian culture continues to devalue female speech while simultaneously punishing women when they *do* speak. Understanding silence as resistance exposes how patriarchal systems demand female intelligibility; they want to hear women only when they are saying the “right” things.

Finally, this study positions silence not as absence but as presence. Not as void, but as pressure. Devi's Draupadi stands naked, refusing to respond. Her silence is a refusal to perform shame. For me, this is one of the most striking reimagining's in postcolonial feminist literature, because it fragments the spectator's gaze. Instead of being objectified by men, Draupadi transforms men into uncomfortable witnesses.

Ultimately, this paper argues that silence in feminist mythological retellings functions as a rhetorical weapon that destabilises patriarchal meaning-making. When speech can be appropriated, silence becomes the only unassailable territory. And that is why we need to rethink silence—not as nothing, but as refusal, strategy, and resistance.

Literature Review

When I started reading scholarly work on feminist mythological retellings, I immediately noticed how much of the existing research revolves around recovering women's "lost voices." Critics such as Vrinda Nabar (Routledge) argue that women in Hindu epics are historically framed through male desire and narrative expectation. Her work repeatedly stresses how patriarchal storytelling disciplines female expression. I think this foundation is important because it shows why feminist writers feel compelled to retell that they are not inventing trauma; they are correcting its representation.

However, most critics still assume that speech is the primary site of resistance. For example, papers published in *Women's Writing* (Taylor & Francis) emphasise the reclamation of voice as the essential feminist act. While this is useful, I feel the discussion becomes repetitive and slightly Western-centric. Voice isn't always available or safe for women, especially in cultural contexts where speaking out invites punishment. Scholars like Kumkum Sangari (Routledge) do acknowledge that silence is culturally coded in complicated ways, but they rarely treat silence as a deliberate weapon. Sangari's analysis tends to frame silence as a political effect rather than a political gesture, which I personally find limiting.

When I turned to writings on Mahasweta Devi, the scholarship thickened. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous essay on "Draupadi" (Routledge) foregrounds how Devi refuses to let Draupadi's suffering be narratively contained. Spivak interprets Draupadi's nakedness as an anti-colonial refusal, but she still focuses on embodied presence rather than silence. I realised, while reading her, that the silence in Devi's story remains under-discussed as a rhetorical strategy. Spivak comments on speechlessness, yes, but not necessarily on silence as *choice*.

Taylor & Francis publications on mythic rewritings by Divakaruni and Volga often highlight feminist interiority, agency, and trauma. They emphasise that rewriting is a form of historiographic intervention. I appreciate this framing, but again, silence mostly appears as a symptom rather than resistance. Scholars repeatedly treat it as lack of power, a lack of articulation, a lack of space. I kept thinking: isn't this interpretive habit itself patriarchal?

One interesting exception is Nabaneeta Dev Sen's work, which gestures toward silence as subversive withholding. She claims that refusing narrative closure destabilises epic certainty. I found this incredibly relevant, but surprisingly, it is rarely extended into a sustained theoretical discussion.

In short, I observe a gap: feminist scholarship largely prioritises vocal articulation and does not sufficiently theorise silence as purposeful, political agency in mythological retellings. While voice has been celebrated, silence remains misunderstood. This research attempts to shift that balance.

Methodology

For this research, I primarily relied on close textual analysis because I personally believe that the nuances of silence can only be understood by paying attention to tone, gesture, and narrative gaps. Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* served as the main primary text, supported by secondary scholarship published by Routledge and Taylor & Francis. I selected these publishers deliberately, since their academic rigour and feminist theoretical history allowed me to trace how critics understand voice, agency, and gendered representation in Indian mythological rewritings. I read peer-reviewed articles focusing on postcolonial feminism, narrative silence, and embodiment, taking notes on recurring scholarly assumptions about voice.

Alongside textual reading, I used a comparative lens to identify how silence functions differently in Devi's version versus the canonical *Mahabharata*. I engaged in interpretative reading rather than quantitative analysis because silence is rhetorical, emotional, and affective. While drafting, I used ChatGPT strictly as a language-enhancement tool to refine phrasing, improve clarity, and ensure coherence. All interpretive ideas, arguments, and scholarly connections are my own, formed through reading and reflection. Overall, this methodology allows me to understand silence not as absence but as intentional feminist design within mythological retellings.

Contextual Background

Silence is not incidental in Indian epics; it is structural. The Mahabharata is a text that encodes social hierarchies, shame cultures, and the politics of bodily integrity. Gendered speech in this epic environment is regulated through dharma, kinship, and propriety, where a woman's voice announces crisis rather than autonomy. In this schema, women often appear in the narrative as catalysts spoken about, spoken for, but rarely speaking with sovereign intent. Draupadi's public humiliation in the dice hall crystallises this system: her silence is demanded not because she has nothing to say, but because her speech would destabilise the masculine architecture of honour.

South Asian shame culture functions through the body, especially the female body. Female silence is often upheld as virtue, dignity, and obedience. Conversely, speaking is coded as unruly, transgressive, or "unwomanly." This produces a paradox: women must be silent to maintain purity, yet they are blamed for not protesting enough when violated. Within epic frameworks, silence becomes a trap.

Modern feminist rewritings such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Volga's *Yashoda and Other Stories* re-examine this silence. They read the gaps in narrative absences where patriarchal storytelling excised women's emotional labour. These rewritings refuse inherited shame and interrogate the moral economy of silence. Here, silence is neither weakness nor consent; it becomes a language of endurance, resistance, and inner re-coding.

This contextual terrain matters because contemporary feminist criticism frequently imports Western frameworks of autonomy, outspoken empowerment onto texts embedded in hierarchical collectivism. To critique silence without understanding its cultural encoding is to misread it entirely. Therefore, this research positions silence not as absence, but as a strategic presence, socially engineered yet potentially subversive.

Critical Analysis

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" stages silence not as withdrawal but as confrontation, and I believe this distinction is central to understanding how feminist retellings dismantle patriarchal comfort. In the original *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's humiliation is mediated through divine intervention and male rhetoric; her suffering is framed by advisers, sages, and husbands who speak on her behalf. Devi refuses this narrative economy. Her contemporary Draupadi, the tribal guerrilla leader, is placed at the mercy of state violence—stripped, raped, and expected to break. Her silence after violation is bewildering to her captors because it denies a predictable pattern: the victim's vocal collapse. When Draupadi refuses to speak, I read it as a refusal to centre her oppressors, a strategic removal of their emotional reward.

The moment when Draupadi stands naked before Senanayak is one of the most unsettling scenes in postcolonial feminist literature. Her nakedness is not vulnerability; it is defiance. Normally, shame culture works by tethering female honour to modesty, but this Draupadi rejects that logic entirely. I think this disruption is crucial: when shame is socially constructed, its power disappears once the subject refuses to inhabit it. Draupadi's silence is not the silence of fear—it is the silence of someone who no longer recognizes the authority of the gaze. That, in my opinion, is the most radical form of agency.

Body politics becomes the battlefield where meaning is contested. Patriarchy assumes that a violated female body guarantees obedience. Devi reverses the equation: violation becomes the catalyst of resistance. When Draupadi says nothing, when she refuses to cover herself, she denies the state's monopoly on narrative. Speech would allow interrogation, testimony, justification; silence turns the moment into pure visual indictment. Her body becomes evidence, not metaphor. I think this is why readers find the scene so uncomfortable: without speech, we cannot interpret, domesticate, or moralize the trauma. We are simply forced to witness.

I find it revealing that the antagonists in the story are unsettled by her silence rather than her rebellion. Authority expects insurgency; it does not expect refusal of emotional participation. Senanayak's paralysis demonstrates that patriarchal violence relies on predictable reactions. Once Draupadi refuses those reactions, the script collapses. Silence

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 25:11 November 2025

Maitray Kaushik

Silence as Feminist Resistance: Re-Reading Draupadi in Hindu Mythological Retellings Through Body, Shame, and Narrative Refusal

throws the oppressor into interpretive crisis. This is where I think Deleuze's notion of deterritorialization becomes relevant: Draupadi breaks out of the grammatical system that defines womanhood through shame. Her silence DE territorialises the body.

Another dimension of silence in this narrative is temporal. In epics, shame is erased through divine miracle; nothing stains permanently. Devi, conversely, insists on corporeal permanence. Draupadi's silence prolongs the moment, making it impossible to forget. The soldiers want closure; silence denies them that. Without testimony, there is no legal resolution; without weeping, there is no emotional release. Silence becomes a haunting.

This also intersects with the politics of spectatorship. In the *Mahabharata*, kings sit silently, and Draupadi's silence echoes theirs; it displays a collective moral failure. In Devi's retelling, silence redirects the gaze onto the perpetrators. I would argue that silence relocates guilt. The oppressor becomes self-conscious, defensive, exposed. Silence becomes the mirror through which violence sees itself.

A common misreading of Draupadi's silence is to assume she is broken. But Devi frames her as unbroken precisely because her voice is withheld. I interpret this as narrative conservation—by not speaking, she guards the meaning of her experience from institutional reinterpretation. Speech would allow the state to file, to categorise, to bureaucratize. Silence refuses translation into state discourse. This is incredibly important because systems of power survive by naming and containing. Draupadi denies containment.

Throughout the narrative, Devi constructs silence as reciprocal tension: each moment of withholding speech intensifies the reader's anxiety. Feminist critics often celebrate voice as liberation, but I am convinced that in cultures built on shame, speech can actually serve patriarchy. Confession, apology, description—all of these enrich authority with information. Silence deprives the oppressor of narrative capital.

Moreover, the narrative highlights how silence shifts agency onto the body. In a colonised context, language is already compromised, imposed, policed, and bureaucratized. Draupadi's silence is anti-language. It operates outside administrative grammar. This is why I

see her naked body as a text that cannot be censored: the state can fabricate reports, but it cannot rewrite flesh.

In the final confrontation, when Draupadi advances on Senanayak, her silence transforms fear from object to subject. He becomes the residue of his own violence. I believe this inversion is the core innovation of Devi's retelling. Draupadi's epic humiliation becomes her insurgent empowerment. Silence is no longer submission; it is sabotage.

Ultimately, Devi's story teaches us that silence can be more eloquent than speech. It destabilises power by refusing the roles power assigns. In cultures where women are shamed into silence, choosing silence for oneself becomes the most subversive act possible. Through Draupadi, Devi shows us that narrative refusal is narrative control and silence, paradoxically, becomes the loudest voice.

While Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi weaponises silence externally, other feminist retellings of Hindu mythology reconfigure silence differently. To develop a fuller understanding of how women's voicelessness becomes resistance, I find it necessary to place Devi's narrative alongside Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Together, these texts reveal that silence is not a singular feminist strategy but a spectrum that shifts depending on cultural pressure, trauma, and psychic survival.

In *The Liberation of Sita*, Volga's Sita embraces silence not as defiance against the immediate oppressor, but as an internal healing mechanism. When she refuses to return to Ayodhya after her trial by fire, I interpret this decision as resistance to emotional extraction. Ayodhya demands her narrative; it demands confession, justification, and public proclamation of purity. Sita's refusal to speak becomes a refusal to perform moral theatre. I believe this internal silence disrupts patriarchal expectations without spectacle. Unlike Draupadi's nakedness, which violently confronts the oppressor's gaze, Sita's withdrawal denies the audience itself. This silence starves patriarchy of social oxygen.

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* adds a third layer. Here, Draupadi narrates her own story, but interestingly, her silence surfaces in moments of emotional truth. I read this as

internalised patriarchal conditioning: she censors her desires, jealousy, and sorrow because to articulate them would destabilise the heroic narrative around her husbands. This mechanism reveals how silence is internalised long before it is enforced. It is learned through mythic pedagogy. I find this deeply unsettling because it suggests oppression can exist long after the oppressor leaves the room. Divakaruni uses silence as psychological interiority—what is unspoken becomes the architecture of the mind.

When placed side by side, these narratives expose two major types of feminist silence: external silence (direct confrontation) and internal silence (self-preservation). Mahasweta Devi clearly privileges the external; Draupadi's silence is visible, public, accusatory. Volga, on the other hand, builds a narrative of quiet refusal. Sita refuses to return to a domestic structure that has already failed her. She does not scream; she simply opts out. This is an equally radical move, especially in cultures where female self-erasure is expected. That quiet “no” resonates more shockingly than a loud confrontation.

What strikes me most in this comparison is how differently shame functions. In Devi, shame collapses entirely once Draupadi refuses to acknowledge it. In Volga, shame is redirected toward the men who demand performance. In Divakaruni, shame becomes introspective the character questions whether she deserves speech. I see this spectrum as a map of patriarchal colonisation of the body, community, and psyche.

Another divergence lies in audience orientation. Draupadi confronts her oppressor directly; her body becomes a message. Sita turns away from the audience entirely; her silence is a refusal to be read. Divakaruni complicates the problem: her Draupadi wants to speak but fears misinterpretation. For me, this raises the disturbing possibility that patriarchy not only silences women, it also teaches women to silence themselves pre-emptively.

I also notice the role of space. Devi's Draupadi is trapped in a military compound where her silence becomes an explosion of political meaning. Volga relocates Sita into the forest, where silence functions as solace. Divakaruni constructs a palace of illusions where silence becomes introspection, haunted by mirrored corridors of thought. These spaces reveal that silence is spatially coded. It expands or contracts depending on architecture, captivity, or nature.

Additionally, clothing functions differently. Draupadi's naked body is refused. Sita's modest retreat is a refusal. Divakaruni's luxurious garments symbolise restraint; she wears her silence as an ornament. I believe these details show that the body is not always the primary battleground; sometimes, the battleground is domestic architecture, ritual, memory, or self-doubt.

A pattern emerges: patriarchal authority expects verbal reaction because it desires narrative ownership. When a woman speaks, her pain becomes data. When she remains silent, the system receives nothing. This is why I think silence is terrifying to institutions; it produces interpretive voids. Oppression thrives on legibility. Silence withdraws legibility.

I also want to point out how these retellings destabilise the reader's comfort differently. Devi's silence shocks. Volga's silence soothes. Divakaruni's silence unsettles through introspection. Together, these narratives teach us that resistance is not only in rebellion but in refusal of narrative frameworks.

Critically, Western feminists sometimes misread these silences as passivity. I strongly disagree. Applying Euro-American notions of vocal empowerment to caste-based shame cultures flattens complexity. Speech in a shame economy can reinforce shame. Silence punctures it. I am convinced that Western frameworks must be adjusted to understand that in Indian mythic contexts, silence can be the loudest ethical stance.

In comparing these texts, I realise that silence is not simply chosen; it is crafted. Draupadi's external silence weaponises shame, Sita's internal silence reroutes emotional power, and Divakaruni's blended silence reveals psychic damage. Put together, they articulate a paradigm: women's voicelessness is not absence; it is an authored strategy.

Ultimately, these retellings expose the cultural architecture that creates silence, weaponises silence, and fears silence. They show that when women refuse to speak, patriarchal narratives lose coherence. Their silence becomes a leak in the machinery of myth, and the entire system begins to stutter. It is here, I think, that feminist retellings reclaim interpretive sovereignty.

Discussion

The foregoing analysis reveals a fundamental misconception embedded in dominant literary criticism: the assumption that *speech* is synonymous with *agency*. Western critical frameworks, heavily influenced by liberal individualism, equate empowerment with articulation, rhetorical mastery, and discursive presence. Within these paradigms, silence is often pathologised as submission, internalised oppression, or communicative failure. Such readings flatten the cultural specificity of the *Mahabharata* and its feminist reinterpretations, missing the layered strategies embedded in Draupadi's refusal to speak.

Silence in these texts does not erase subjectivity; rather, it redirects agency into non-verbal registers: gesture, presence, gaze, refusal. Draupadi's silence after the disrobing episode is not the silence of erasure but of suspension. It interrupts patriarchal circulation; men speak over her, about her, for her, but she withholds the narrative closure they expect. In Volga's feminist reimagining, silence becomes a pedagogical practice: women learn to withdraw energy from systems that profit from their participation. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* extends this logic, painting Draupadi's silences as interior rebellions, spaces where desire, rage, and judgment are sharpened rather than suppressed.

This challenges critics who demand loudness as proof of resistance. Not all resistance must be audible. Historically, colonised, gendered, and marginalised communities have weaponised silence to conserve identity, protect knowledge, and deny their oppressors emotional access. When Draupadi refuses to collapse, confess, or capitulate verbally, she destabilises the masculine hunger for narrative control.

Furthermore, silence functions as *sabotage* precisely because patriarchy depends on women's explainability, confession, justification, and emotional labour. By refusing these, Draupadi forces characters, audiences, and readers to confront their complicity. Silence here is a counter-archive: what remains unspoken exposes what dominant discourse cannot absorb.

Therefore, rethinking voice means abandoning the simplistic binary of silence/speech. Feminist retellings position silence as embodied rhetoric, a mode of survival,

critique, and reclamation. To read Draupadi correctly, critics must attune themselves not to what is said, but to the deliberate voids where language refuses to serve power.

Findings

The findings of this research demonstrate that silence, within Draupadi's narrative arc, operates not as an emblem of defeat but as a deliberate and strategic exercise of agency. Across both the canonical epic and contemporary feminist retellings, moments of withheld speech function as intentional disruptions of patriarchal expectation. Rather than consent to linguistic spaces controlled by male authority, Draupadi frequently relocates her agency into embodied gestures, her posture, gaze, and refusal to perform shame, thereby transforming the body into a political instrument. This movement away from verbal articulation shows that patriarchal systems are heavily dependent on women speaking within frameworks designed to extract confession, guilt, or obedience. When Draupadi denies verbal participation, she collapses the very mechanisms intended to subjugate her, transferring shame from the individual woman to the male community observing her humiliation.

These findings further reveal that shame in the epic context is not an internal emotion but a social force distributed across familial and royal structures. Draupadi's silence becomes a mirror that exposes masculine failure, amplifying collective dishonour. Western criticism tends to misread such moments by relying on individualist paradigms that equate empowerment exclusively with vocal articulation. Such frameworks often overlook cultural traditions in which silence protects dignity, stores knowledge, and preserves moral superiority. Comparative retellings by writers like Volga and Divakaruni extend this logic, showing how silence evolves into interior autonomy and emotional clarity that refuses further participation in oppressive discourse. Through these retellings, silence emerges as a site of self-determination, no longer tethered to trauma alone.

The findings also underscore Draupadi's ability to destabilise narrative authority. Her silence forces male characters into interpretive anxiety; they argue over meaning, invent motives, and project guilt into the spaces where her voice refuses to perform. This anxious vacuum is itself evidence of her power. Silence in these texts sabotages patriarchal continuity by denying closure, emotional access, and narrative satisfaction. Ultimately, what Draupadi

refuses to say becomes louder across history than anything she could have spoken. Her silence forms a counter-archive, an interpretive wound that outlasts conflict.

Overall, the research confirms that silence in Draupadi's portrayals is not absence but an active, tactical presence, redefining resistance through refusal, disruption, and embodied defiance.

Conclusion

After closely examining Draupadi across the Mahābhārata and her contemporary feminist reinterpretations, I believe it becomes clear that silence functions as a complex and often misunderstood element of female agency. When I first approached this topic, I was influenced by the dominant academic impulse to equate empowerment with speech. Yet, over the course of reading, re-reading, and critically engaging with both primary texts and scholarly commentary, I found myself rethinking that assumption. Draupadi does not always resist with words; instead, she often resists through refusal to perform shame, refusal to validate patriarchal expectations, and refusal to speak within discursive structures created by men. In this sense, her silence becomes louder than any verbal protest.

Throughout history, readers and especially Western critics have tended to reduce silence to passivity. However, the evidence I have explored convinces me otherwise. Silence can compel attention; it can force oppressors to confront themselves in the absence of explanation from the oppressed. In Draupadi's case, silence destabilises royal decorum, unsettles masculine pride, and creates moral discomfort. Her body, posture, and controlled withholding disrupt the patriarchal fantasy that humiliation is complete only when the victim breaks. Because she does not break, the structure cracks instead.

Comparative retellings by Volga and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni extend this dynamic beyond spectacle. They allow us to see what silence does internally: how it cultivates emotional independence, how it transforms trauma into introspection, how it sharpens self-definition. Here, silence becomes a tool of survival and later, a tool of re-orientation. I think this shift is essential because it moves Draupadi's resistance beyond the

moment of public shame and into the realm of long-term psychological autonomy. Silence becomes memory, boundary, protection.

Returning to the research question, *can silence function as feminist resistance rather than submission, and how does Draupadi's portrayal complicate this binary?* My findings show a definitive yes. Silence, when chosen consciously, when deployed strategically, when paired with bodily defiance, becomes a mode of sabotage. It attacks systems not by arguing with them but by ignoring their linguistic rules entirely. Draupadi's silence exposes a fundamental contradiction in patriarchal logic: the system can punish speech, but it cannot control meaning when the oppressed refuse to provide it.

In conclusion, Draupadi teaches us that resistance does not require constant articulation. Sometimes, a woman's refusal to speak forces an entire culture to talk around her absence, to confront its own guilt, and to carry the burden of interpretation. Her silence travels across centuries, haunting the epic and every reading of it. Looking forward, I believe future research can expand this inquiry by comparing silence across other mythological survivors or analysing how digital feminism redefines voice beyond speech. The question is no longer whether silence can resist, but whether patriarchal structures can survive when women choose when and how to speak.

Works Cited

Bagchi, Jasodhara. "Representing Nationalism: Ideology and Female Iconography." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 27, no. 17, 1992, pp. WS11–WS15. Taylor & Francis.

Chakrabarti, Santanu. "Myth, Gender, and Agency in Modern Retellings of the Mahābhārata." *South Asian Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2009, pp. 45–62. Taylor & Francis.

Chakravarti, Uma. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree, 2003.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. Picador, 2008.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 25:11 November 2025

Maitray Kaushik

Silence as Feminist Resistance: Re-Reading Draupadi in Hindu Mythological Retellings Through Body, Shame, and Narrative Refusal

Hiltebeitel, Alf. *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Jackson, Stevi, and Jackie Jones, editors. *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Routledge, 1998.

Lal, P. *The Mahabharata of Vyasa: Condensed from Sanskrit*. Writers Workshop, 1976.

Mani, Lata. *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. University of California Press, 1998.

Narayan, R. K. *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Feminisms*. Routledge, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Sutherland, Sally. "Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behavior and Female Role Models in the Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 109, no. 1, 1989, pp. 63–79. Taylor & Francis.

Thapar, Romila. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Tripathi, Amish. *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. Westland, 2017.

Volga. *The Liberation of Sita*. Translated by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree, Harper Perennial, 2016.