RECLAIMING FEMININE VOICES IN MYTH AND MEDIA: AN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM ORIENTED STUDY OF *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS* AND *CAPTAIN MARVEL*

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SUPERVISOR

Dr. Palvi Mangotra

Assistant Professor

INVESTIGATOR

Arzoo Sharma

Roll No. 2210001

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This is to certify that **Ms. Arzoo Sharma** student of **Bachelor of Arts (Honours with Research) in English Semester VIII, Session 2022-2026**, bearing **Roll No 2210001,** has worked under my supervision on her dissertation entitled**:**

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Her dissertation is fit for submission, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree in **Bachelor of Arts (Honours with Research) in English.**

DATE:

(Dr. Palvi Mangotra)
SUPERVISOR

Head,
School of Social Sciences
and Humanities

श्रेष्ठ
B.C. Road Jammu
180 001
Ph.: 0191-2546078,2565098
Fax:0191-2548239
Email:principal@miercollege.in
Website: www.miercollege.in

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that the work presented in the dissertation entitled:

"RECLAIMING FEMININE VOICES IN MYTH AND MEDIA: AN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM ORIENTED STUDY OF *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS AND CAPTAIN MARVEL*"

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours with Research) in English, to MIER College of Education (Autonomous), is an authentic record of my own research work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Palvi Mangotra, Assistant Professor.

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary narratives have increasingly centered women as protagonists and positioned their stories as acts of empowerment. Yet the widening presence of women in literary and cinematic representation does not, by itself, constitute a transformation of the terms on which power is recognized. This study argues that empowerment, as it is currently constructed across dominant narrative forms, frequently operates as alignment with pre-existing masculine standards of strength rather than as a genuine reconfiguration of what strength means. The study examines how feminine agency is constructed, constrained, and potentially reclaimed in two primary texts: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and the film *Captain Marvel* (2019), directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. Through close textual and visual analysis, it interrogates the conditions under which empowerment is granted, the qualities it requires women to suppress, and the standards against which it is measured. The analytical framework draws on two bodies of thought used in productive dialogue. Western feminist theory, specifically the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous provides the vocabulary for identifying how phallocentric structures silence, constrain, and misrecognise feminine agency. Indian Knowledge System concepts, particularly *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara*, extend this framework by proposing an alternative model of power understood as internally grounded, morally generative, and integrative rather than dominative. The two primary texts are read in dialogue rather than as equivalents, their differences in form, tradition, and medium making the shared structural problem more visible than either text could make it alone. The study concludes that the dominant model of feminine empowerment, as enacted across both texts, tends toward imitation of masculine norms rather than transformation of them. Meaningful empowerment, the study argues, requires not a revision of who holds power but a rethinking of how power itself is defined.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, women have assumed increasingly visible roles across almost every sphere of public life. In governance, education, science, the arts, and professional institutions, women now participate with a presence that earlier generations could not have anticipated. This shift is the result of sustained feminist movements, legal reforms, and structural changes in educational and economic policy that have accumulated across more than a century. The landscape of women's participation has, by almost every measurable indicator, changed.

The 2019 report *Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World*, published by UN Women, the UN agency in charge of advancing gender equality and women's empowerment, documents this transformation in precise terms. The report records women's growing engagement in governance, formal employment, and educational access as among the most significant developments in contemporary social history (UN Women 23). Sylvia Walby, the British sociologist and gender theorist, reinforces this reading in *The Future of Feminism* (2011), arguing that improvements in women's education and employment rates reflect not isolated individual achievement but a structural reorganisation of social and economic institutions that had historically excluded women from authority and decision-making (Walby 42). The change, in Walby's analysis, is systemic rather than merely biographical.

Yet a growing body of scholarship insists that this account is incomplete. Wider participation in public life does not, by itself, constitute empowerment and the equation of the two has come to represent one of the most persistent problems in contemporary feminist discourse. Oriane Georgeac and Aneeta Rattan in their study "Progress in Women's Representation in Top Leadership Weakens People's Disturbance with Gender Inequality in Other Domains," published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, find that apparent advances in women's representation frequently generate what they describe as a 'delusion of equality' - a perception that gender inequality has been resolved that actually diminishes awareness of its persistence in other domains (Georgeac and Rattan 1435). The appearance of progress, their research suggests, can function as an ideological barrier to the recognition of ongoing inequality.

Naila Kabeer, the feminist development economist, addresses this problem directly in her widely cited article “Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment” (1999). Kabeer argues that empowerment cannot be reduced to access or participation alone. It must be understood through the capacity to make meaningful decisions within the preexisting constraints of one’s social world (Kabeer 6-8). This distinction between presence and genuine agency is the conceptual foundation of this study. The central question the study pursues is not whether women are more visible, but whether the terms on which their power is recognised, represented, and evaluated have changed.

Nancy Fraser, feminist theorist and political philosopher, in the essay “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age” in her seminal work *Justice Interruptus* (1997), provides the theoretical language most useful for this distinction. Fraser differentiates between the redistribution of access, the inclusion of women in institutions from which they were previously excluded and the transformation of the evaluative standards those institutions employ. She argues that inclusion without transformation produces what she calls ‘misrecognition’: a condition in which people are present but assessed by standards that distort or deny their identity (Fraser 11-39). The widespread representation of women in popular media, including the superhero films and feminist literary retellings examined in this study, offers a particularly instructive case of this problem. Representation is real; but representation is not liberation if the standards by which strength, agency, and heroism are measured remain unchanged.

Early feminist thought was concerned primarily with the intellectual and existential freedom of women and with the right to reason, to self-define, and to resist the ideological conditioning that passed for natural order. Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first feminist thinkers, writing in her political treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), one of the foundational texts of feminist philosophy, directed her argument explicitly against the notion that women’s subordination was natural or inevitable. Her position was unambiguous: “I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves” (Wollstonecraft 49). Wollstonecraft located women’s subjugation in the systematic denial of education and rational development, and her prescription was autonomy rather than imitation, the cultivation of women’s own capacity for reason, not the adoption of masculine models of authority.

Simone de Beauvoir, a twentieth-century French philosopher, novelist, and existentialist thinker, expands on these issues in her seminal two-volume philosophical book *The Second Sex* (1949) writing more than a century and a half later, extended this analysis in a direction that would prove decisive for twentieth-century feminism. In *The Second Sex* (1949), de Beauvoir argued that femininity was not a biological given but a historical and social construction. Her foundational claim - "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 295) identified the source of women's subordination not in nature but in the accumulated weight of social institutions, philosophical traditions, and ideological conditioning. For de Beauvoir, the problem was not simply exclusion from power but the way in which women had been constituted as 'the Other' - defined always in relation to man, always as the negative space around masculine selfhood, never as subjects in their own right.

Both Wollstonecraft and de Beauvoir articulated a feminism of autonomy: a demand that women be recognised as self-defining subjects rather than as variations or supplements to a masculine norm. The foundation of their arguments was not equality as sameness but equality as the right to a different and genuinely recognised form of being. This is the tradition from which this study draws its central argument.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have, however, produced a significant transformation in how empowerment is understood; a transformation that has moved progressively away from this tradition. As women entered professional, economic, and institutional life in greater numbers, the standards by which their success came to be measured were largely those already in place: aggressiveness, competition, emotional restraint, control. Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (2009), identifies this shift with precision. She argues that contemporary frameworks have redefined empowerment in terms of 'visibility, performance, and competition,' aligning women's advancement with neoliberal and institutional ideals rather than questioning the underlying power structures that generate inequality (McRobbie 42-63). Empowerment, under this model, means not the transformation of the standards of strength but the individual woman's ability to meet them.

The consequences of this redefinition are far-reaching. Characteristics associated with femininity such as emotional intelligence, empathy, relational responsiveness have been progressively devalued as secondary or soft. Women in positions of authority are evaluated, as N. Tabassum and B. N. Nayak demonstrated in their 2021 study "Gender Stereotypes and their Impact on Women's Career Progressions From a Managerial Perspective," against standards that continue to privilege the behavioural norms associated with masculinity even after formal inclusion has been achieved (Tabassum and Nayak 192-208). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its 2021 report *Man Enough? Measuring Masculine Norms to Promote Women's Empowerment*, confirms this pattern at a structural level, observing that empowerment is consistently 'measured against standards of achievement that reflect masculine ideals of independence, control and dominance' (OECD 17).

This study names this problem imitative empowerment: the condition in which women are offered power on condition that they suppress, conceal, or abandon the qualities most associated with feminine difference, and succeed by becoming adequate imitations of a masculine norm rather than by establishing a different and equally recognised standard of strength. The problem is not merely academic. It is visible in the narratives through which a society defines what a powerful woman looks like and it is precisely in narrative, in literature and film, that this study locates its primary evidence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature review, as Lawrence A. Machi and Brenda T. McEvoy explain in their book *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*, synthesises existing scholarship while identifying the trends, disputes and gaps that define a field (Machi and McEvoy 12). Its purpose is not to list prior work but to locate the present study within a living conversation to show where the scholarship has been, where it has accumulated insight, and where it has left space that a new study might responsibly occupy. The following review is organised into three subsections corresponding to the three primary areas this study brings into dialogue: feminist reinterpretations of myth

and Draupadi, feminism and media representation, and Indian Knowledge System as a framework for feminine power.

a) Feminist Reinterpretations of Myth and Draupadi

Pulane Elizabeth Motswapong, in her 2017 paper "Understanding Draupadi as a Paragon of Gender and Resistance", published in the *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, applies subversion theory to Draupadi's role in the *Mahabharata*. Motswapong argues that Draupadi's responses to the injustices visited upon her like her public shaming, her treatment as property, her moral confrontation of those who claimed authority over her constitute not passive endurance but active resistance. She reads Draupadi's righteous anger as an early instance of feminist consciousness operating within a tradition that never named it as such (Motswapong 2-3). This reading is productive for the present study because it establishes Draupadi as a figure of agency rather than victimhood, a positioning this study develops further through the lens of Divakaruni's retelling.

Akanksha Singh and Satyam Kumar, in their 2024 paper "Panchali: Victim of Patriarchal Society in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*", published in the *African Journal of Biomedical Research*, examine Draupadi's suffering under patriarchal constraint in Divakaruni's novel. Their study situates Draupadi alongside figures such as Kunti and Gandhari, reading the novel as a mapping of the broader structures of patriarchal society through the experiences of its female characters (Singh and Kumar 752-57). Their work contributes to the present study's understanding of how Divakaruni's text functions as a feminist intervention, though the study extends their analysis by asking not merely how patriarchy constrains Draupadi but how she reclaims power within and despite those constraints.

Angela Teresa Kalloli and Sarika Tyagi, in their 2024 paper "More Than Just an Oriental Goddess or an Occidental Sorceress", published in *The International Journal of Critical Studies*, read *The Palace of Illusions* in conjunction with Madeline Miller's *Circe*, tracing the parallel reclamation of voice and agency across two feminist retellings of ancient narratives. Their cross-cultural reading is relevant to the present study's dialogic methodology, though the present study replaces the literary

analysis with a literary-cinematic one and grounds the analysis in IKS rather than solely in Western feminist theory (Kalloli and Tyagi 1).

Sangita Maity, in her 2025 paper "Negotiating Myth and Modernity: A Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*", published in *Integral Research*, examines Divakaruni's use of *écriture féminine* as a mode of reclaiming narrative autonomy from the patriarchal framework of the canonical *Mahabharata* (Maity 3-4).

Seema Sinha and Kumar Sankar Bhattacharya's in their co-authored book *An Alternative Reading of the Other in The Mahabharata: Celebrating the Marginal*, published by Routledge India in 2025, apply feminist and postmodern frameworks to read the *Mahabharata*'*s* marginalised figures, with Draupadi positioned as a site of resistance to patriarchal authority (Sinha and Bhattacharya 1). Their work supports the present study's reading of Draupadi while providing additional textual grounding for the claim that the *Mahabharata*, read against its own grain, encodes a feminist critique of the structures it appears to endorse.

Mousumi Basfore's 2025 essay "From Archetypes to Individuals: Humanizing the Divine in Modern Retellings of Sita and Draupadi" examines how contemporary retellings restore interiority and human complexity to female figures frozen in mythological archetypes. Basfore argues that the first-person narrative strategies employed in these retellings including Divakaruni's, do not merely retell old stories but insist on accountability, questioning the traditions that masked patriarchal violence as divine destiny (Basfore 1-2). This argument directly supports the present study's reading of *The Palace of Illusions* as a work of feminist reclamation.

Sagarika U. K., in her 2025 paper "Unveiling the Feminine Psyche: A Karen Horneyan Analysis of Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*," applies Karen Horney's framework of feminine psychology to read Draupadi's psychological development through the novel. While the present study employs different theoretical frameworks, Sagarika's attention to Draupadi's internal resistance to imposed norms is complementary to the present study's reading of how Draupadi's inner life constitutes a form of empowerment (Sagarika 2).

b) Feminism and Media Representation

Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", published in *Screen* in 1975, is the foundational text for feminist film theory and is indispensable to this study's analysis of *Captain Marvel*. Mulvey argues that Hollywood cinema's dominant visual structures are organised around a masculine viewing perspective, positioning women as objects of vision rather than subjects of narrative (Mulvey 6-18). While the present study does not apply Mulvey's framework to the sexual objectification of the female body, *Captain Marvel* does not reproduce this pattern in its most explicit form. Mulvey's broader argument about the organization of vision and narrative agency is directly relevant to the analysis of Carol Danvers as a character who begins the film as the object of institutional surveillance and must become the subject of her own story.

Teresa de Lauretis, in her foundational book *Technologies of Gender* (1987), argues that gender is produced and reproduced through social technologies, cinema, literature, institutional practice that shape individuals into gendered subjects by repeatedly encoding certain behaviors and values as natural (Lauretis 1-30). Her framework is employed in the present study to argue that *Captain Marvel*, despite its representational ambitions, functions partly as a technology of gender reproduction, encoding the masculine standard of heroic power as the norm against which Carol's empowerment is measured.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), a book that shifted how people talk about identity, provides a further theoretical resource for this analysis. Butler's argument that gender is "performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler 25) frames the superhero film as a site of gender performance one that can either reproduce or, potentially, disrupt the gendered norms it represents. The present study draws on Butler's framework to examine the performative dimensions of Carol Danvers's heroism and the extent to which the film's climactic representations reinforce or challenge the masculine coding of power.

Folukemi Olufidipe and Yunex Echezabal, in their 2021 study "Superheroines and Sexism: Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," examine

female representation across fourteen MCU films, finding that even when heroines are positioned as powerful, their empowerment is frequently "staged yet fleeting, more about image than real shift" (Olufidipe and Echezabal 3-4). Their study provides the most directly relevant empirical grounding for the present study's argument about the limits of *Captain Marvel's* model of empowerment.

c) Indian Knowledge System and Feminine Power

Frank Morales's 2000 paper "The Concept of *Shakti*: Hinduism as a Liberating Force for Women" establishes the philosophical basis for this study's engagement with *shakti* as a model of feminine power. Morales argues that the Hindu philosophical tradition offers a conception of strength rooted in creative and generative energy rather than domination, and that this conception has historically supported women's spiritual and intellectual authority (Morales 3-4). His argument provides the foundational IKS reference for this study's claim that Indian philosophical traditions offer a genuinely alternative model of empowerment.

Phanindra Kalita's 2024 study "Reclaiming Hindu Philosophy for Women's Empowerment in Indian Knowledge System" extends Morales's argument by tracing the historical trajectory of women's authority within Vedic and post-Vedic traditions, arguing that the narrowing of women's roles in Indian society was a historical departure from earlier philosophical traditions rather than their natural expression (Kalita 3). Kalita's argument supports the present study's use of IKS as a living philosophical resource rather than a historical artefact.

The scholarship surveyed above reveals a clear and consistent pattern: existing studies address the three areas this study brings into dialogue, but they address them separately. Studies of feminist retellings of the *Mahabharata* attend to Draupadi's position within patriarchal structures and to Divakaruni's strategies of reclamation, but they do not read these in conjunction with contemporary media representations of female power or with IKS frameworks for understanding feminine agency. Studies of female representation in superhero cinema examine the ideological dimensions of characters like Carol Danvers through Western feminist theory, but they do not bring IKS into the analysis. Studies of *shakti* and IKS frameworks discuss their relevance to

women's empowerment in the abstract, but they do not apply these frameworks to specific literary or cinematic texts through an integrated analytical framework.

This study steps into that space. By reading *The Palace of Illusions* and *Captain Marvel* together and not as opposites but as two representations of the same problem approached from different narrative and philosophical traditions, the study makes possible an analysis that none of the individual bodies of scholarship can produce alone. The IKS framework, applied alongside Western feminist theory, generates an alternative for empowerment that is not derived from the masculine norm: a standard rooted in integration, balance, and generative power rather than in domination, imitation, or the suppression of feminine difference. This is the contribution the study makes to the existing conversation.

METHODOLOGY

Nature of Study

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research methodology grounded in close textual and visual analysis. The study does not aim to measure social behaviour empirically but to interpret the meanings, structures, and ideological implications of narrative representation. Qualitative methods are therefore the most appropriate for its purposes.

The analysis of *The Palace of Illusions* employs close textual reading, attending to narrative voice, characterisation, imagery, and the structural relationship between Divakaruni's retelling and the canonical *Mahabharata* it revises. The analysis of *Captain Marvel* employs visual-narrative analysis, examining the film's cinematographic choices, narrative structure, dialogue, and the ideological implications of its representational strategies. Both analyses are conducted through the combined interpretive lens of feminist theory and IKS: Irigaray and Cixous as the feminist theoretical apparatus; *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* as the IKS framework.

Feminist Theoretical Foundations

This study draws upon two feminist thinkers whose work provides the analytical vocabulary for examining how empowerment is constructed, constrained,

and potentially reclaimed in the primary texts. Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous are not used here as a catalogue of feminist positions. They are selected because each addresses a specific and distinct dimension of the problem this study investigates: phallocentric standards of subjectivity that govern definitions of equality and the silencing of feminine voices. Together, these two frameworks constitute the feminist theoretical apparatus of the study.

Luce Irigaray and the Critique of Phallocentrism

Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One*, first published in French in 1977, is the primary feminist theoretical framework of this study. Irigaray is a French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst whose work examines the organisation of western philosophical systems from the perspective of sexual difference. Her central argument is that these systems are phallocentric: organised around a masculine norm that treats masculinity as universal and femininity as a deviation, a variation, or a lack.

Three essays from *This Sex Which Is Not One* are of direct relevance to this study. The title essay, "This Sex Which Is Not One," argues that feminine sexuality and subjectivity are irreducibly multiple and fluid, and cannot be contained within the singular, unified model that phallocentric systems impose (Irigaray 23). Where masculine identity is organised around the logic of the One - coherent, bounded, self-identical, feminine identity resists this organisation. It is not one thing. It is plural, self-touching, and open-ended. Irigaray challenges unity, singular identity, and the fixed subject as the invisible standards against which feminine experience is measured and found inadequate. This essay provides the theoretical ground for understanding why both Draupadi and Carol Danvers are pressed, within their respective narratives, toward forms of selfhood that are more singular and more contained than their experience actually is.

The second essay, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," argues that language and systems of representation are themselves structured through phallocentric discourse, which means that women cannot fully express themselves within the available frameworks of meaning (Irigaray 78). The subordination of the feminine is not only institutional; it is embedded in the very

structures through which identity is articulated and recognised. This argument is directly relevant to both primary texts: Draupadi's exclusion from the *Mahabharata*'s narrative in the canonical telling, and Carol Danvers's erasure from her own story by the Kree system, are both instances of this structural foreclosure of feminine self-expression. Irigaray writes: " The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal" (Irigaray 78).

This passage names the ambition of this study precisely. The study does not argue that women should be recognised as equal to men by the existing standard of power. It argues that the standard itself requires examination, and that jamming the theoretical machinery of how power is defined is the precondition for any genuine transformation.

The third essay, "Women on the Market," extends this analysis into the domain of social and symbolic exchange. Irigaray argues that within phallocentric systems, women do not participate as subjects but circulate as objects, as commodities whose value is constructed within systems of exchange that prioritise male desire and recognition (Irigaray 27). Women's worth, within these systems, is not self-generated. It is assigned by the structures through which men recognise and trade them. Irigaray writes: "Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (Irigaray 25).

This framework illuminates with particular force the swayamvar in *The Palace of Illusions* and the Kree military system in *Captain Marvel*, in both of which the female protagonist's value is determined by systems she did not design and whose terms she cannot revise.

Hélène Cixous and the Reclamation of Voice

Hélène Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", published in *Signs* in 1976, introduces the second feminist framework this study employs. Cixous is a

French feminist writer and theorist whose work is concerned with the relationship between women, language, and the body. Her argument in this essay is that women have been systematically excluded from the domain of writing and self-expression, not by individual prejudice but by the structural organisation of patriarchal discourse, which codes masculine experience as the norm and renders feminine experience as marginal or illegible. Cixous's central claim is: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875).

The equation of exclusion from writing with exclusion from the body is philosophically precise. For Cixous, the self is not something that pre-exists its expression, it is constituted through language, through the act of narrating one's own experience. A woman who cannot speak, who cannot name herself, who cannot tell her own story is not simply quieter than she might otherwise have been. She is diminished in her capacity to be. This framework is directly applicable to both primary texts. Draupadi, in the classical *Mahabharata*, is a character whose inner life is almost entirely suppressed by a tradition that treats her as an occasion for the drama of male heroes. Divakaruni's novel is a reclamation of Draupadi's voice and interiority from the silence to which the tradition consigned her. Carol Danvers, in *Captain Marvel*, has had her memories erased and her story replaced by a narrative constructed by the Kree system. Her journey toward empowerment is simultaneously a journey toward recovering her own voice.

Cixous further argues that *écriture féminine* - a mode of writing rooted in feminine experience, bodily knowledge, and emotional truth is not merely a literary category but a form of resistance. She writes: "To write. An act which will not only 'realise' the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, but will give her access to her native strength" (Cixous 880). This argument positions the act of self-narration as the foundational gesture of empowerment, not the acquisition of force, but the recovery of voice. It is the tension between these two models of empowerment that this study examines across both its primary texts.

While feminist theory provides this study with the analytical vocabulary for identifying how feminine power is suppressed and constrained, it does not, by itself,

provide a positive vision of what a different model of power might look like. That positive vision is supplied by the IKS examined in the following section.

Indian Knowledge System and Feminine Power

In addition to feminist theory, this study draws upon selected concepts from Indian Knowledge System (IKS) as an alternative epistemological framework for understanding power, agency, and balance. Indian Knowledge System is employed here not as a religious doctrine and not as a prescriptive cultural tradition, but as a philosophical system that offers a non-dominant and non-masculine model of strength and subjectivity. Rather than equating power with domination, Indian philosophical traditions conceptualise strength through balance, complementarity, and generative energy, a fundamentally different account of what it means to be powerful, and one that this study argues is directly relevant to the reclamation of feminine agency in both primary texts.

Frank Morales, in his paper "The Concept of *Shakti*: Hinduism as a Liberating Force for Women" (2000), establishes the philosophical grounding for this study's use of IKS. Morales argues that the Hindu philosophical tradition, unlike many Western systems, does not locate the source of power in masculine domination. The concept of *shakti* - divine, dynamic, creative energy is inherently feminine in its philosophical character, and it is positioned within the tradition not as secondary to masculine authority but as the animating force of existence itself (Morales 3-4). Phanindra Kalita, in his 2024 study "Reclaiming Hindu Philosophy for Women's Empowerment in Indian Knowledge System," extends this argument by demonstrating that Vedic traditions offered women including the philosopher Gargi and the thinker Maitreyi positions of intellectual and spiritual authority that were later foreclosed by more restrictive legal and social codes. The IKS framework this study employs is therefore not an appeal to mythology but a recovery of a philosophical tradition that has consistently offered an alternative to masculine-coded models of power (Kalita 3).

Shakti

The concept of *shakti* is the foundational IKS framework of this study. In Indian philosophical traditions, shakti represents power as creative, generative, and

sustaining, an energy that enables creation, transformation, and continuity rather than domination and conquest. Unlike the masculine-coded models of strength that privilege physical force and hierarchical control, *shakti* defines power through resilience, endurance, moral force, and the capacity to sustain life rather than merely overpower opposition. This conception of power is directly relevant to this study's analysis of Draupadi's empowerment in *The Palace of Illusions*, where her strength is consistently expressed not through physical dominance but through moral clarity, emotional endurance, and spiritual depth.

Ardhanarishvara

Ardhanarishvara is the composite deity of the *Shaiva* philosophical tradition, the form of Shiva that is half Shiva, half Parvati, representing the integration of masculine and feminine principles within a single unified being. The *Shiva Purana* describes this figure as the source of creation's harmony: "The Lord is half woman and half man; from this union arises the harmony of creation" (*Shiva Purana*, Rudra Samhita).

Ardhanarishvara is not a statement about biological gender. It is a philosophical claim about the structure of wholeness and power. Genuine strength, the image asserts, does not arise from the dominance of one principle over another. It arises from integration, the synthesis of force and nurturing, of action and receptivity, of courage and compassion. This is the most direct philosophical counterpoint to the model of imitative empowerment that this study critiques. Where imitative empowerment asks women to suppress feminine differences in order to qualify for a masculine standard of strength, *ardhanarishvara* proposes that strength is incomplete without both principles. This framework provides the positive philosophical vision that shapes the study's final analysis.

The IKS framework, taken as a whole, provides this study with what western feminist theory does not fully supply: a positive, philosophically grounded vision of what integrated, non-imitative feminine power looks like. Together, feminist theory and IKS constitute the study's interpretive apparatus, the former identifying the structures that suppress and distort feminine agency, the latter proposing an

alternative epistemology through which genuine empowerment can be recognised and evaluated.

The two primary texts are read in dialogue rather than in isolation. This reading is not premised on equivalence between a literary text and a film, or between an ancient Indian epic retelling and a contemporary Hollywood superhero production. It is premised on the shared problem both texts engage: how feminine power is constructed, constrained, and potentially reclaimed within narrative. The methodological value of reading these text together lies precisely in the distance between the texts, the fact that the same problem is addressed from within very different traditions makes the structures of that problem more visible than either text could make them alone.

PRIMARY TEXTS

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

The Palace of Illusions was published by Doubleday in 2008. It is a retelling of the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* narrated entirely from the perspective of Panchaali - the name used for Draupadi throughout the novel. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in Calcutta in 1956, is an Indian-American novelist, poet, and professor currently holding the Betty and Gene McDavid Professorship of Writing at the University of Houston. Her fiction has been translated into twenty-nine languages and has received major awards including the American Book Award and the PEN Josephine Miles Literary Award.

The novel follows Panchaali from her mysterious birth, she emerges from fire, a woman born without a mother, through her royal childhood, her marriage to the five Pandava brothers, her friendship with Krishna, her exile, her public humiliation, and the catastrophic war of Kurukshetra. The text has been praised by *The Hindu* for giving Draupadi "a voice of her own, transforming a marginal figure into the centre of moral and emotional gravity," (Mukherjee) and by *Publishers Weekly* as "a powerful feminist retelling that brings emotional depth and psychological complexity to an ancient epic" (*The Palace of Illusion*). The novel is selected for this study because it represents a sustained and sophisticated act of feminine narrative reclamation, a first-

person rewriting of a canonical text that has historically organised its meaning around male heroism.

Captain Marvel (2019), Directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck

Captain Marvel was released in March 2019, produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. It is the twenty-first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the franchise's first solo film centred on a female superhero. The film stars Brie Larson as Carol Danvers, Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury, Annette Bening as the Supreme Intelligence and Dr. Wendy Lawson, and Jude Law as Yon-Rogg. It grossed over one billion US dollars worldwide and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects.

The film is selected for this study not simply because it features a female protagonist but because of the nature of the critical debate it generated. Its representational significance was widely acknowledged; its model of empowerment was equally widely questioned. The film is, in this sense, a particularly instructive site for analysing the problem of imitative empowerment: it offers the image of a powerful woman while, this study argues, defining that power through the masculine-coded standards it appears to critique.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the construction of feminine agency in mythic retelling and contemporary superhero cinema.

2. To examine how patriarchal norms shape modern definitions of empowerment in both literary and cinematic narrative.

3. To investigate how feminine strength is reclaimed through emotion, inner voice, and narrative self-authorship in the primary texts.

4. To apply Indian Knowledge System as an interpretive lens that proposes an alternative, balance-based model of empowerment.

5. To bring Western feminist theory into productive dialogue with IKS..

6. To demonstrate how the reclamation of narrative agency whether textual or visual, functions as a form of resistance to the suppression of feminine subjectivity.

CHAPTERIZATION

hapter One: Voices of Fire - Draupadi and the Power of *Shakti*

This chapter offers a close reading of *The Palace of Illusions* through the combined lens of feminist theory and IKS. It examines how Divakaruni's first-person narration repositions Draupadi from the margins of the *Mahabharata* to its centre of moral and emotional consciousness. Irigaray's critique of sameness illuminates the pressure Draupadi faces to conform to the expectations of husbands, fathers, and the dharmic order. Cixous's framework of *écriture féminine* informs the reading of Draupadi's first-person voice as a form of self-constitution against silence. The IKS concepts of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* are applied to read Draupadi's resilience, emotional endurance, and moral courage as forms of power that the Western feminist tradition does not fully capture. The chapter's aim is to demonstrate how *The Palace of Illusions* redefines empowerment through feminine voice, emotional intelligence, and spiritual strength.

Chapter Two: Carol Danvers under Patriarchal Conditioning: The Illusion of Empowerment

This chapter examines *Captain Marvel* as a cinematic representation of empowerment shaped by militarised discipline, emotional suppression, and institutional control. It analyses the Kree military system as a structure that positions Carol as the perpetual Other whose legitimacy is conditionally granted and permanently revocable. The chapter traces how the film's treatment of emotion as excess reproduces the phallocentric logic Irigaray identifies in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. It reads Carol's memory erasure through Cixous's framework of narrative dispossession and the recovery of voice. The chapter's climactic analysis examines the film's central moment of self-assertion - "I have nothing to prove to you" and argues that, while the refusal of male validation is genuine, the mode of Carol's final empowerment reproduces the masculine-coded standard of strength it appears to reject. The chapter further extends this reading through selected IKS concepts such as *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* to examine how the film's model of empowerment

remains externally regulated rather than internally grounded or integrative. Through this framework, the analysis argues that the film privileges control and discipline over balance, relationality, and self-sustaining forms of power. The chapter's aim is to examine how the film constructs an illusion of empowerment, liberation from a specific institution without the acquisition of a genuinely different model of strength.

Conclusion: Lessons From Myth and Media

The concluding chapter synthesises the analyses of both primary texts to address the study's central argument: that genuine empowerment cannot be achieved through imitation of masculine models but requires the recognition and integration of a different standard of power altogether. Drawing on the IKS frameworks of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara*, the conclusion proposes that the contrast between Draupadi's journey and Carol Danvers's trajectory reveals the difference between empowerment as integration, the synthesis of force and compassion, courage and emotional depth and empowerment as substitution, where a woman acquires the masculine standard's rewards without that standard being revised. The chapter draws together the feminist and IKS frameworks to articulate an alternative model of feminine power grounded in balance, wholeness, and the refusal to suppress difference as the price of recognition.

CHAPTER I

Chapter I

VOICES OF FIRE: DRAUPADI, FEMININE DIFFERENCE, AND THE ETHICS OF *SHAKTI*

The *Mahabharata* is among the longest and most complex literary works in the world. Composed and transmitted across centuries, it encompasses not only the narrative of a dynastic war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas but an entire philosophical universe: its eighteen books contain reflections on dharma, on the nature of duty, on the relationship between human action and divine will, and on the moral conditions under which war can be justified or condemned. Vyasa, the legendary poet-sage to whom the epic is attributed, is not simply a storyteller. He is a moral architect, and the *Mahabharata* is his most sustained construction. Within this vast and intricate structure, generations of readers, scholars, and devotees have found answers to some of the most difficult questions a human life can pose.

It is precisely because the epic is so morally serious, so philosophically ambitious, and so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the Indian literary tradition, that the treatment of its female figures demands careful attention. The *Mahabharata* is not indifferent to women. Queens, sages, mothers, and wives move through its narrative with considerable weight. Their suffering matters and their choices carry consequences. And yet the epic consistently affords its female figures something less than full subjectivity. They are present at the centre of the story, but the story is rarely told from within them. Their inner lives surface when the plot requires it and recede again as soon as that narrative function has been served.

Draupadi occupies a position that makes this pattern especially visible. She is the figure around whom the epic's most significant moral crises turn: her swayamvar sets the political action in motion, her humiliation in the Kuru sabha makes the war at Kurukshetra morally inevitable, and her suffering becomes the measure against which masculine honour is perpetually tested and found wanting. Yet despite this structural centrality, the epic affords Draupadi almost no sustained interiority. Events unfold

around her, through her, and because of her, but rarely from within her. Her thoughts, her desires, her emotional responses, and her private judgements remain largely inaccessible in the canonical telling. The *Mahabharata* is not silent about Draupadi. It is, in a more precise and troubling sense, silent to her.

It is this silence that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni set out to answer. In her author's note to *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni reflects on how the women of the *Mahabharata*, however powerful and however consequential, remained shadowy figures whose thoughts and motives were mysterious, whose emotions were rendered visible only when they affected the lives of the male heroes. Her response was a promise to herself: to place a woman at the forefront of the action, to uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits, and to allow that woman to narrate the entire story in her own voice, colouring it with her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks and achievements (Divakaruni xv). The woman she chose was Panchaali. The result is a novel that does not reject or discard the *Mahabharata* but slips beneath its surface, into the interiority the epic never sustained, and constructs Draupadi as a speaking, remembering, judging subject. This act of narrative reclamation is the starting point of the present chapter's analysis.

Wendy Doniger, in her book *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*, observes that female figures in the classical Indian mythological tradition frequently function not as fully articulated subjects but as 'symbols of honour, lineage and moral order' figures whose significance is determined by what they represent within masculine systems of kinship and power rather than by who they are as individuals (O'Flaherty 16-19). This observation applies with particular force to Draupadi's treatment in the canonical *Mahabharata*. Her body, her suffering, her public humiliation all carry enormous symbolic weight within the epic's moral economy. Her inner life is another matter entirely. It surfaces only when the plot requires it and recedes again as soon as its narrative function is discharged.

Alf Hiltebeitel in his scholarly book *The Cult of Draupadi. Volume 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukshetra*, makes a related and equally significant observation. He notes that Draupadi's speech in the *Mahabharata* is characteristically 'strategic and situational rather than introspective', shaped by the requirements of

dharmic obligation and public order rather than by the movement of personal consciousness (Hiltebeitel 52). She speaks when circumstances demand speech; she falls silent when silence is required. The epic does not consistently permit her, the kind of sustained, reflective self-expression that would constitute genuine narrative subjectivity and the capacity to exist on the page as a consciousness rather than as a catalyst.

Simone de Beauvoir's framework illuminates the structural logic behind this pattern. Her argument in *The Second Sex* that "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 16) describes precisely the position Draupadi inhabits within the *Mahabharata's* narrative economy. Her identity is consistently relational and derivative: she is daughter of Drupada, wife of the Pandavas, queen of Indraprastha. Each designation defines her in reference to a male identity rather than on her own terms. What she wants, what she thinks, what she judges, all these matters are absorbed into the fate of the men around her. She is vital to the epic's movement and yet not its subject. Her presence is indispensable; her perspective is dispensable.

Elaine Showalter in her critical essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", argues that the task of feminist criticism is to 'uncover and interpret the lost or muted voices of women' embedded within canonical traditions (Showalter 184). It is precisely this task that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni undertakes in *The Palace of Illusions*. The novel does not reject or discard the *Mahabharata*; it slips beneath its surface, into the interiority the epic never sustained, and constructs Draupadi as a speaking, remembering, judging subject. This act of narrative reclamation is the starting point of the present chapter's analysis.

The most fundamental intervention in *The Palace of Illusions* is neither its plot nor its revisionary sympathy for Draupadi's position. It is the decision to give her a first-person voice. In the canonical *Mahabharata*, the epic's narrator is Vyasa and his proxies, and Draupadi exists as an object of their telling. In Divakaruni's novel, Draupadi narrates. She remembers, reflects, judges, desires, and regrets in her own words and on her own terms. This is not a cosmetic revision, it is a structural transformation of the relationship between the female subject and the narrative in which she appears.

Hélène Cixous in "The Laugh of the Medusa", published in *Signs* in 1976, provides the theoretical framework most directly relevant to this transformation. Cixous's central argument is that women have been systematically excluded from the domain of writing and self-expression, not by accident but by the organised workings of patriarchal discourse, which codes masculine experience as universal and renders feminine experience marginal or illegible. The consequence is not merely literary but existential: the self is constituted through the act of narrating one's own experience, and a woman who cannot write herself, who cannot name and tell her own story, is diminished in her capacity to be fully herself. Cixous states: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875).

The violence Cixous names here is not only physical. It is the violence of having one's experience rendered unspeakable, one's inner life treated as irrelevant, one's consciousness reduced to an instrument of someone else's narrative. This is the condition Draupadi inhabits in the canonical *Mahabharata*, and it is the condition that *The Palace of Illusions* sets out to reverse.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her author's note to *The Palace of Illusions*, articulates the precise intention behind her narrative choice. Reflecting on how women in the *Mahabharata*, however powerful, however consequential remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes,she records the promise that gave rise to the novel:

> I made a promise to myself all those years ago. If I ever become a writer, I thought, I will recreate the story of the *Mahabharat*. But in my *Mahabharat*, I will place a woman in the forefront of the action. I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits. She will narrate the entire story, coloring it with her joys and doubts, her struggles and triumphs, her heartbreaks and achievements, her strengths and her faults, and the unique, timeless way in which she understands her world and her place in it. From the beginning, I knew who this woman would be. Panchaali. (Divakaruni xv)

This authorial declaration is not merely a statement of creative intent, it is a feminist manifesto embedded within the novel's own framing. The story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits is precisely the story that Hélène Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa", identifies as the story patriarchal discourse has consistently suppressed. Cixous argues that "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous 875). Divakaruni's promise to Panchaali is the enactment of this claim in novelistic form, the decision to recover a feminine interiority that the canonical *Mahabharata* registered only when it served the purposes of the male-centred narrative.

In the world of *The Palace of Illusions*, royal women are educated in the arts appropriate to their station such as music, dance, the management of domestic spaces but not in the arts of governance, military strategy, or philosophical inquiry. These latter domains belong to men. Divakaruni's Draupadi refuses this boundary from an early age. She listens through walls to political discussions she has not been invited to join. She seeks out texts on governance and legal reasoning that have not been prescribed for her. She cultivates a knowledge of strategy and philosophy that the world around her treats as unsuitable for a woman of her position.

This intellectual self-cultivation is not a minor detail. It is foundational to everything that follows. The Draupadi who will later stand in the Kuru sabha and challenge the legality of Yudhishthira's wager with a precise argument drawn from legal precedent is the same Draupadi who, as a girl, sought out texts she was not supposed to read. Her moral authority in the moment of crisis is inseparable from the intellectual independence she cultivated long before that crisis arrived. Divakaruni frames this clearly: Draupadi's curiosity is not presented as charming eccentricity but as the early expression of a mind that refuses to accept the limits placed upon it by the expectations of her sex and station.

Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, argues that phallocentric systems maintain their coherence partly through the systematic exclusion of women from the structures of knowledge and philosophical discourse. Within such systems, women are not simply absent from positions of power, they are absent from the formation of the concepts through which power is legitimated and exercised. Draupadi's

intellectual awakening constitutes a refusal of this exclusion. By educating herself in the domains reserved for men, she acquires the analytical resources she will later need to expose the contradictions within the dharmic order that claims authority over her life.

Through first-person narration, memory, and the sustained representation of interiority, *The Palace of Illusions* performs what Cixous describes: it writes Draupadi into history as a subject rather than as a symbol. This act of narrative reclamation is not simply a literary strategy - it is the formal embodiment of the feminist argument the novel advances. Draupadi's power to narrate is inseparable from her power to be.

If the preceding section establishes how *The Palace of Illusions* gives Draupadi a voice, this section examines what that voice reveals about the structures of identity imposed on her by the world she inhabits. The conditions of Draupadi's existence such as her swayamvar, her polyandrous marriage, her position within the Kuru court are not simply personal misfortunes. They are structural mechanisms through which a patriarchal order defines, manages, and constrains feminine identity. Read through three essays in Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* "This Sex Which Is Not One", "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," and "Women on the Market", these conditions reveal with precision the violence that the demand for feminine conformity to masculine structures enacts upon a woman who possesses a genuine and irreducible difference.

Irigaray's central argument across these essays is that phallocentric systems do not merely exclude women, they define femininity as the negative or supplementary term in a binary whose positive pole is always masculine. Woman is not granted a positive identity of her own. She is defined as what man is not: as the space around masculine selfhood, as a function within systems of meaning and exchange that she did not design and whose rules she cannot revise. In "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," Irigaray argues that this exclusion is not only institutional but is embedded in the very structures of language and representation through which identity is articulated and recognised. Women cannot fully express themselves within available frameworks of meaning because those frameworks were not built to accommodate feminine experience as a positive term. This argument applies directly to Draupadi's position in the world Divakaruni reconstructs: she

inhabits a system of dharmic obligations and social arrangements whose language was authored entirely by and for men, and whose definitions of duty, honour, and womanhood leave no space for what she actually thinks, wants, or judges.

The swayamvar is the first and perhaps clearest instance in *The Palace of Illusions* of this structure made visible. The ceremony presents itself as an institution designed to honour female agency, its very name promises autonomy, the bride chooses. Draupadi sees through this performance almost immediately. Confronted with the spectacle of hundreds of kings competing in an archery contest she had no role in designing, for a prize that is herself, she articulates the contradiction at the ceremony's heart: "Why even call it a swayamvar, then? Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry" (Divakaruni 56). The language of choice is deployed to give the spectacle a legitimacy it does not possess. Draupadi is the occasion of the event rather than its agent. Her desire is structurally irrelevant to an institution that presents itself as being organized around her preference.

When Krishna clarifies the political calculations behind the ceremony, the pretence collapses entirely. He tells her: "Don't you see? Once he's married to you, Arjun can't fight against your father. He can never be Drona's ally again" (Divakaruni 57). Draupadi's response captures the full weight of what she has understood: "My mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing, but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (Divakaruni 57).

The image she reaches for - a worm on a fishing hook, strips the ceremony of every romantic or honorable framing it has been given. She is not a woman being chosen; she is bait. This is precisely the structure Irigaray identifies in "Women on the Market": the woman as instrument within a system of masculine exchange, her value constructed by the arrangements of men rather than self-generated. Irigaray writes that within such systems, "woman is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies" (Irigaray 25). Draupadi's recognition of this, however painful, marks the beginning of her refusal to be managed by its mystifications.

The polyandrous marriage that follows deepens this analysis. Kunti's command that whatever Arjuna has won must be shared equally among all five brothers is delivered without consultation with Draupadi, issued casually from behind

a kitchen door without full knowledge of the situation. Draupadi records the moment with the flatness of someone absorbing an irreversible shock: “Son,” said a woman’s voice in a patrician accent, “I can’t come right now or the food will burn. But as always, whatever you brought should be shared equally amongst all my sons” (Divakaruni 107). What is striking here is the casualness of the pronouncement. Draupadi’s fate is reorganized by a voice from another room, in the same register as a command about food. Her consent is not sought because, within the structure of the arrangement, her consent is not relevant.

When the reality of Kunti’s pronouncement becomes undeniable, Draupadi’s internal response exposes the full violence of what is being asked of her. She registers two injuries simultaneously, the substance of the imposition and the language in which it is delivered: “I wanted to shout, Five husbands? Are you mad? I recognized, too, the thinly veiled insult in Kunti’s words: This woman, as though I were a nameless servant” (Divakaruni 108). Kunti refers to her not by name but as “this woman”, not as a person whose consent is relevant, but as an unnamed object to be distributed. The double wound reveals that Draupadi’s dehumanization is not incidental to the polyandrous structure but inherent in it. She is being absorbed into the Pandava household on terms set entirely by others, in language that does not grant her even the dignity of a name.

The terms of Draupadi’s marriage expose not only the absence of her consent but the structural indifference to it. Draupadi reflects on what the arrangement means for her body and her will: “Nor was I particularly delighted by the virginity boon, which seemed designed more for my husbands’ benefit than mine. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not” (Divakaruni 120).

The image of the communal drinking cup is one of the most analytically precise formulations in the novel of what Irigaray identifies in “Women on the Market” as the condition of women within phallocentric systems of exchange. Irigaray argues that within such systems, women do not participate as subjects but circulate as objects whose movement is governed entirely by the arrangement rather than by their own will (Irigaray 170-172). Draupadi does not describe herself as unloved or personally mistreated. She describes herself as a thing whose passage

between men follows a logic entirely indifferent to whether she wanted it or not. The virginity boon, presented within the narrative's own logic as a divine privilege, is reread by Draupadi as a mechanism that restores what the men who possess her value in her without consulting what she values in herself.

Irigaray's title essay "This Sex Which Is Not One," provides a further dimension of analysis here. Irigaray argues that feminine identity is irreducibly multiple and fluid and it cannot be contained within the singular, unified model that phallocentric systems impose, which demand a coherent, bounded, self-identical subject. Draupadi's experience of polyandry is the lived enactment of this argument. Her identity is distributed across five relational obligations, none of which constitutes genuine recognition of who she is as an individual. She reflects that after the vows were spoken, she had "become wife to five, claimed by none" (Divakaruni 121). This formulation captures with painful accuracy the condition of a woman whose selfhood has been fragmented across a set of roles without any single one of them acknowledging her as a subject in her own right. She exists within the structure of the marriage as a function rather than as a person. The qualities that make her irreducibly herself - her directness, her moral clarity, her private desires are not the concern of the arrangement. From the arrangement's perspective, they are, at best, irrelevant and, at worst, disruptive.

Taken together, the three essays from *This Sex Which Is Not One* illuminate the conditions of Draupadi's existence with a precision that no single framework could produce alone. "The Power of Discourse" explains why the dharmic language available to Draupadi cannot fully accommodate her experience. "Women on the Market" identifies the structural logic through which her person is treated as an object of exchange in both the swayamvar and the polyandrous marriage. "This Sex Which Is Not One" names what is lost in that process: a feminine selfhood that is genuinely multiple and irreducible, pressed into a singular, manageable function by a system that has no framework for recognising it as anything more. The chapter's subsequent sections trace how Draupadi, despite these conditions, develops a form of strength and self-knowledge that exceeds what the structures around her were designed to permit.

One of the deepest tensions in *The Palace of Illusions* runs between the demands of *dharma* and the claims of Draupadi's inner life. *Dharma,* in the context of

the *Mahabharata*, operates as the governing ethical principle of the universe; a code of duty, obligation, and cosmic order that determines what each person owes to family, caste, station, and divine purpose. In the canonical telling, *dharma* is presented as authoritative and universal. Divakaruni's novel reveals it as something more partial and more troubling: a system whose universality is proclaimed but whose burdens are distributed with conspicuous unevenness.

Draupadi recognises from the earliest stages of her life that the decisions governing her existence are made in spaces from which she is excluded. She recalls knowing that her fate had been "decided in rooms I was not present" (Divakaruni 38). This exclusion is not incidental; it is constitutive. A dharmic order that defines women's highest purpose through their service to men cannot simultaneously accommodate women's participation in the deliberations through which that purpose is defined. Draupadi's questioning of this arrangement is therefore not merely personal dissatisfaction but it is a structural critique, directed at the logic that produces her exclusion.

The novel's most direct articulation of this critique occurs early in the narrative, when Draupadi is instructed in the duties of womanhood: "A woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfil a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield" (Divakaruni 26).

Draupadi's response is immediate and categorical: "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men? A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (Divakaruni 26). The force of this exchange lies in its identification of the authority behind the prescription. Draupadi does not merely reject the content of the instruction but she exposes its origin. A code that defines women's worth through their service to masculine ambition has, by its very nature, been authored by those who benefit from that service. Its claim to universal ethical authority is the claim of a particular interest presenting itself as a general truth. This moment reveals the structural limits placed upon feminine agency within patriarchal dharmic frameworks and Draupadi's refusal to accept those limits as natural or inevitable.

Draupadi's moral questioning represents a form of feminine ethical reasoning that the dharmic framework of the epic does not accommodate but cannot entirely silence. She understands that what is presented as cosmic order is, at its foundation, a social arrangement and that social arrangements can be questioned. When she reflects inwardly that "dharma asked everything of me and so little of them" (Divakaruni 142), she is not abandoning ethics; she is insisting that genuine ethics must apply to everyone. A morality that requires sacrifice from women while exempting men from equivalent demands is not *dharma*, it is the ideological ratification of power. This recognition is the intellectual core of Draupadi's resistance, and it is rendered possible by the first-person interiority that Divakaruni's narrative form provides.

The disrobing episode - the cheer haran; is the moral and structural centre of the *Mahabharata*, and it is the scene that most powerfully concentrates the arguments this chapter has been developing. In Divakaruni's handling, the scene is not framed primarily as an act of physical violation, though it is that. It is framed as the moment at which the patriarchal dharmic order reveals its own ethical bankruptcy when the masculine codes of honour, duty, and protection that the epic has been elaborating collapse entirely under the weight of their own contradictions, and Draupadi, the person those codes have most comprehensively failed, becomes the only figure in the sabha in possession of genuine moral authority.

The scene in the sabha opens with Draupadi absorbing a reality she cannot immediately process. When Dhai Ma tells her what has happened, Draupadi's first response is not grief but the instinctive assertion of identity, a reaching for the titles and dignities that should have made this impossible:

> My mouth went dry. Denials collided with each other inside me. I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhrishtadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave. (Divakaruni 190)

The movement of this passage is the chapter's argument in miniature. Draupadi begins with the titles that patriarchal structures have granted her such as queen, daughter, mistress of the greatest palace on earth and discovers in the same breath that those structures contain within them a law that nullifies every one of those titles. The very system that elevated her to queenship also classifies her as property no different from livestock. Her titles were never protections; they were decorations placed over a foundation that always regarded her as owned. De Beauvoir's analysis of the Other is nowhere more precisely illustrated: the system that appears to honour women retains, at its core, the authority to dispose of them.

The legal dimension of Draupadi's defiance is rendered with precision in the novel. She steadies herself and demands that the court address a fundamental question: "My head reeled, but I steadied myself. I tried to remember other words from the Nyaya Shastra. If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife. "Go back to the court," I ordered, "and ask the elders this: Is it not true that once Yudhishthir was Duryodhan's property, he had no right to wager me?" (Divakaruni 190).

This is not the speech of a woman in despair. It is the speech of a woman who has studied the law more carefully than the men who claim to administer it. Draupadi's question is legally precise and morally devastating: if Yudhishthir had already gambled himself away and lost his freedom before staking her, then he possessed no authority over her person at the moment of the wager. The elders have no answer, because there is no answer that preserves both the legality of the wager and the dignity of the dharmic system they represent. Their silence is not the silence of deliberation. it is the silence of a system caught in its own contradiction.

As the disrobing proceeds, Draupadi looks to the assembled kings, elders, and her own husbands for the intervention that does not come. Divakaruni renders her interiority during this moment with devastating precision: "The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me. I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time. The sorceress had said, When in great trouble, rest your mind on someone who loves you. I tried to call up Dhri's face. But all I could imagine was how enraged and helpless he'd feel when he heard of what had been done to me." (Divakaruni 193)

What makes this passage analytically significant is not only the fact of Draupadi's suffering but the specific shape of her consciousness within it. Even in the moment of violation, she thinks of Dhri's helplessness rather than her own, she anticipates how the men who love her will feel about what is being done to her, which is itself a form of the conditioning the novel has been tracing from the beginning. Her instinct is still to locate herself in relation to male emotion. The passage also marks the precise moment at which the masculine structures of protection, the greatest kings of our time are revealed as entirely inadequate to the reality she is facing.

When Draupadi finally speaks in the sabha, she speaks not as a supplicant but as a moral authority issuing a verdict. Her words carry the force of a judgment that the assembled court has abdicated:

> All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will become far more piteously than I've wept. Not one Kaurava heir will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the shameful memory of today. Of one thing I was glad. What happened today had stripped away all ambiguities from my heart. Never again would I long for his attention. Behind me I heard Bheem and Arjun pronouncing oaths of revenge, and the blind king's anxious entreaties as he called my name, begging me to retract my curse. (Divakaruni 194)

This passage marks the transformation that the cheer haran produces in Draupadi. Her words are not the words of a woman asking for justice, they are the words of a woman pronouncing sentence. The moral authority that the patriarchal order denied her throughout the sabha, she seizes in this moment through the only instrument it could not take from her: her voice. Significantly, Divakaruni notes that Draupadi registers not only her curse but the stripping away of ambiguity, the final severing of her attachment to Karna, whose refusal to speak for her in the sabha resolves the private longing she had carried throughout the narrative. The vow is therefore not only political but deeply personal: a woman releasing what she had hoped for and accepting the full weight of what she now knows.

In the aftermath of the sabha, Draupadi arrives at the recognition that redefines her relationship to every man in her life:

> But now I saw that though they did love me as much perhaps as any man can love there were other things they loved more. Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way. I would have shown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that made in the moment of my need changed something in our relationship. I no longer depended on them so completely in the future. And when I took care to guard myself from hurt, it was as much from them as from our enemies. (Divakaruni 195)

This is the most analytically important passage in the novel for this chapter's argument. Draupadi does not conclude that masculine love is false, she acknowledges it as real. What she concludes is that it is structured differently from her own. Her husbands' love is filtered through honour, reputation, and the calculation of heroic opportunity. Hers is not. The distinction she draws, a woman doesn't think that way, is not a claim of female superiority but an observation about the structural difference between the two ethical orientations the novel has been placing in tension throughout. The masculine code of honour, even when accompanied by genuine affection, consistently places the woman's suffering below the requirements of masculine reputation. This is de Beauvoir's analysis of the Other rendered in the most intimate and personal register possible and Draupadi's response, the withdrawal of complete dependence, is the beginning of the self-sufficiency that the novel's later sections will develop into *shakti*. After the sabha, something fundamental shifts in Draupadi's relationship to the structure around her:

The cheer haran does not destroy Draupadi. It clarifies her. What the sabha produces is not collapse but a fundamental reorientation, a movement away from dependence on masculine protection toward a form of strength rooted entirely within herself. This transition is the point at which the IKS concept of *shakti* becomes the most analytically precise framework available for understanding what Draupadi's empowerment actually consists of.

In Indian philosophical tradition, *shakti* represents power as creative, generative, and sustaining energy - the force that enables transformation and

continuity rather than domination and conquest. Unlike masculine-coded models of strength that privilege physical force and hierarchical control, *shakti* defines power through resilience, moral clarity, emotional endurance, and the capacity to sustain life rather than merely overpower opposition. Frank Morales, in "The Concept of *Shakti*: Hinduism as a Liberating Force for Women," establishes that this conception does not position feminine power as secondary to masculine authority but as the animating force of existence itself (Morales 3-4). It is this model of strength and not the imitative model that asks women to suppress their difference that Draupadi's journey enacts in the novel's later sections.

One of the most meaningful relationships in *The Palace of Illusions* is the one between Draupadi and Krishna, because it quietly teaches what real strength looks like. Unlike the masculine figures of authority in the epic like husbands, fathers, kings, Krishna does not function as a source of command or institutional protection. His relationship with Draupadi is built not on obligation or hierarchy but on moral clarity and mutual recognition, and it is through this relationship that the novel's model of *shakti* finds its most direct human expression. Their bond is not built on authority or obligation. It grows through conversation, thought, and moral clarity. Krishna does not step in to fix Draupadi's suffering. Instead, he stays with her while she understands it herself. That difference matters, because it shows that empowerment is not about being rescued, but about being supported without being controlled.

Whenever Draupadi turns to Krishna, she does not go to him asking for instructions. She goes to him trying to understand herself. She wants clarity, not commands. At one point, she reflects that Krishna never told her what choice to make; instead, he made her look inward, toward her own heart. This moment reveals something important: Krishna does not replace Draupadi's judgement. He sharpens it. He acts like a mirror, helping her see what is already there, rather than a master telling her what to do.

This relationship becomes even more important when placed next to the failure of masculine protection in the sabha. In the court, Draupadi's husbands remain silent, trapped by ideas of honour, loyalty, and reputation. Their strength disappears when it is most needed. Krishna, on the other hand, does not turn away from her pain.

He listens to her anger and grief without trying to quiet it or explain it away. That listening itself becomes powerful, because it treats her emotions as meaningful, not excessive. It tells her that her suffering does not need to be justified to be real.

The novel is careful not to turn Krishna into a figure who takes over Draupadi's agency. Even when he is present, her pain does not magically vanish. Draupadi understands that having Krishna beside her does not free her from the need to endure, think, and choose for herself. She realises that the path ahead still has to be walked by her own feet. This understanding reinforces the idea that empowerment comes from within, not from leaning on someone else's power.

This relationship finally offers a different model of strength. Krishna does not demand obedience, nor does he tell Draupadi to accept her suffering as destiny. He respects her moral insight and emotional intelligence, allowing her to arrive at her own understanding of what strength means. This kind of support reflects *shakti* not as force or domination, but as sustaining, reflective energy.

Divakaruni is careful not to allow Krishna's presence to substitute for Draupadi's own agency. His role is not to rescue her but to reflect her own moral intelligence back to her and to make visible what she already possesses. This is *shakti* operating not as external force but as inner recognition: the capacity to identify and trust one's own standard of justice, emotional truth, and self-worth without requiring the validation of a masculine authority to make it real.

The novel's most direct statement of Draupadi's achieved inner authority comes in the passage describing her final journey: "The more people dissuaded me, the more determined I became. Perhaps that has always been my problem, to rebel against the boundaries society has prescribed for women. But what was the alternative? To sit among bent grandmothers, gossiping and complaining?" (Divakaruni 343)

The self-awareness in this passage is characteristic of Divakaruni's Draupadi. She knows her determination is seen as a problem by those around her. She also knows that the alternative, passive acceptance of the boundaries prescribed for her sex is not acceptable. Her refusal of that alternative is not simply stubbornness; it is the expression of a *shakti* that has survived the full weight of what the epic subjected her

to and emerged as something clearer, more purposive, and more ethically grounded than it was at the beginning.

The integration this model of *shakti* demands of courage and compassion, of moral will and emotional depth finds its most direct philosophical expression in the IKS concept of *ardhanarishvara*. It is the composite deity of the *shaiva* philosophical tradition, the form of Shiva that is simultaneously half Shiva and half Parvati, representing the integration of masculine and feminine principles within a single, unified whole. The *Shiva Purana* describes this figure as the source of creation's harmony: "The Lord is half woman and half man; from this union arises the harmony of creation" (*Shiva Purana*, Rudra Samhita).

Ardhanarishvara does not resolve the tension between masculine and feminine by suppressing one in favour of the other. It resolves it through integration through a synthesis in which force and nurturing, action and receptivity, courage and compassion coexist within a single being. The philosophical claim is that genuine wholeness, and with it the highest form of power, requires both principles. A strength that eliminates one principle in favour of the other is not complete strength. It is a powerful limitation.

Draupadi's journey in *The Palace of Illusions* enacts this model. Across the novel's narrative, she possesses and develops both dimensions of the *ardhanarishvara* integration. The qualities culturally coded as masculine are genuinely present in her: she is courageous, she is direct, she has a fierce moral will, she refuses to accept injustice as natural or inevitable. These qualities are not borrowed from the masculine order around her but they are authentically hers, expressed from the beginning of the novel. But she does not allow these qualities to become the whole of her strength. She integrates them with the *prakriti*-coded qualities that the dharmic order around her consistently devalues: emotional depth, relational attentiveness, compassionate responsiveness, the capacity to carry grief without being destroyed by it.

The contrast with the masculine model of strength the novel depicts is instructive. The men who hold power in the *Mahabharata* like Yudhishthir, Duryodhana, Bhishma, Drona embody a one-dimensional model of strength: disciplined, controlled, hierarchically organised, and fundamentally closed to the claims of emotion and relational obligation when those claims conflict with masculine

honour. This observation is not abstract moral commentary as she has watched it come true. The war at Kurukshetra, which destroys virtually everything and everyone she has loved, is the consequence of a world organised entirely around masculine honour and masculine pride, with no counterbalancing principle of compassion, relational care, or willingness to accept loss as an alternative to violence.

The philosophical culmination of Draupadi's journey in *The Palace of Illusions* is rendered in a single passage near the novel's close. In the final stages of the great journey toward death, Draupadi's thoughts dissolve their familiar boundaries, of title, of role, of the gendered identity that the world spent a lifetime assigning and reassigning to her and she arrives at a clarity that the novel has been building toward from its opening line: "And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali. I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego" (Divakaruni 360).

This statement is not a renunciation of identity. It is its fullest achievement. Throughout the novel, Draupadi has been defined by the names and roles the patriarchal world placed upon her: daughter of Drupada, wife of five, queen of Indraprastha, victim of the sabha, instrument of a war. Each of these names was, in its way, an imprisonment a reduction of who she was to what she represented within a system that needed her to stay manageable. Her declaration that she is now beyond name and gender is the declaration that she has finally stepped outside those imprisonments entirely. She is not beyond her femininity in the sense of having transcended or abandoned it. She is beyond the imprisoning patterns through which it was defined for her by others.

The novel's description of Draupadi's final journey reinforces this reading with quiet precision. When she falls on the mountain path during the great departure, the narrative records her as the one consort who dared to accompany the Pandavas on their final, fearsome journey. Divakaruni writes, "She was the only consort that dared accompany the Pandavas on this final, fearsome adventure. When she fell, she did not weep, but only raised her hand in brave farewell" (Divakaruni 344).

This is Draupadi's final characterisation in the novel's narrative present, not as a victim, not as an avenger, not as a queen defined by her husbands' titles, but as the one who dared and who faced the end with courage rather than tears. The raised hand

in farewell is neither submission nor defiance. It is the gesture of a person fully present to her own experience, choosing how she meets her death with the same self-possession she brought to every other moment the epic subjected her to. It is the *ardhanarishvara* ideal made human: the integration of courage and grace, of strength and acceptance, held together in a single gesture.

The three frameworks this chapter has employed each illuminate a distinct dimension of this achievement. Cixous's concept of écriture féminine establishes why the act of first-person narration is itself an act of empowerment and how to write oneself is to constitute oneself as a subject rather than remain an object of someone else's telling. Irigaray's essays from *This Sex Which Is Not One* particularly "Women on the Market" and "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" identify the structural mechanisms through which Draupadi's identity is consistently reduced to a function within masculine systems of exchange and obligation. And the IKS frameworks of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* supply what western feminist theory alone cannot: a positive, philosophically grounded vision of what integrated feminine strength looks like, not the suppression of difference but its fullest expression.

This is the model of empowerment this study holds as its positive standard, not imitative empowerment, which offers women power on condition that they abandon or conceal their feminine difference, but integrated empowerment, which recognises that genuine strength requires both principles the *ardhanarishvara* embodies. Draupadi does not become powerful by becoming more like the men around her. She becomes powerful by becoming more fully herself.

By the novel's close, Draupadi does not triumph in any conventional sense. She has survived the war; she has lost almost everyone she loved; the world she inhabited has been destroyed. What remains is her voice, her memory, and the clarity of her self-understanding. Divakaruni frames this not as defeat but as a form of endurance that exceeds what the masculine system around her could produce. The men who organised their lives around honour and conquest have, most of them, achieved the honourable death on the battlefield that their dharmic code prescribed. Draupadi has achieved something the code did not anticipate and could not contain: a self that has been tested by the full weight of the epic's catastrophe and has emerged knowing who it is.

The contrast between this model of strength and the one constructed in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's first female-led superhero film forms the subject of the following chapter. Where Draupadi's empowerment is rooted in interiority, moral clarity, and the integration of feminine difference, Carol Danvers's empowerment in *Captain Marvel* is shaped by militarised discipline, emotional suppression, and institutional validation. Reading the two alongside each other makes the distinction between genuine and imitative empowerment not only visible but measurable and that is precisely the analytical work Chapter II undertakes.

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

CAROL DANVERS UNDER PATRIARCHAL CONDITIONING: THE ILLUSION OF EMPOWERMENT

The movie *Captain Marvel* arrived in cinemas on International Women's Day, on 8 March 2019, a date that was not accidental. Marvel Studios had chosen the occasion deliberately, positioning the film as a milestone rather than simply another entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). It came as the twenty-first film in the franchise and its first solo production centred entirely on a female superhero. For more than a decade, the MCU had built its universe primarily around male protagonists such as Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Doctor Strange and the absence of a woman at the centre of a standalone narrative had been a point of sustained criticism from audiences and scholars alike. The arrival of Carol Danvers in her own film carried, therefore, a symbolic weight that extended well beyond its narrative.

The film was directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. Their earlier work, including *Half Nelson* (2006) and *Mississippi Grind* (2015), was noted for its attention to identity, marginalisation, and internal conflict. Boden became the first woman to co-direct a Marvel film, a fact widely cited in the film's reception as evidence of the franchise's shifting representational commitments. "We've always had powerful female characters in our movies, but having *Captain Marvel* as the title character for the first time feels like it's overdue," Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, states in an interview on the bonus material on the *Captain Marvel* blue-ray (Feige 00:15-00:21). "Although today's superheroes are multicultural and increasingly progressive in terms of gender representation, the genre has roots as a male-dominated storytelling mode" (Grisanti 190). Grisanti's statement proves to be true considering the Marvel Cinematic Universe already comprises twenty movies and is well into its 'Phase 3' before *Captain Marvel* hits theaters internationally on March 8, 2019.

Brie Larson, Academy Award winner for Best Actress for her performance in *Room* (2015), was cast as Carol Danvers. Samuel L. Jackson appeared as a digitally de-aged Nick Fury. Annette Bening took on the dual role of the Supreme Intelligence,

the governing artificial intelligence of the Kree civilisation and Dr. Wendy Lawson, a scientist whose connection to Carol forms the film's central mystery. Jude Law played Yon-Rogg, Carol's Kree military trainer, who presents himself as mentor and guide but whose true role is revealed slowly across the narrative. Lashana Lynch portrayed Maria Rambeau, Carol's closest friend and fellow pilot, with considerable depth and precision, and Akira Akbar played Monica Rambeau, Maria's young daughter.

The story is set primarily in 1995. At the film's opening, Carol is known by the Kree name Vers. She is a member of Starforce, the Kree empire's elite military unit, and she has no memory of her life before joining it. Fragmented, recurring visions disturb her, a woman she does not recognise, a test flight that ends in an explosion, a world she has no name for. Her commanding officer, Yon-Rogg, has told her that these intrusions are symptoms of emotional instability, evidence that she has not yet achieved the self-mastery that a Kree warrior requires. His instruction, repeated across her years of training, is consistent: feel less, suppress the personal, trust the mission, master herself.

The film's plot is set in motion when a mission against the Skrulls, a shape-shifting alien species whom the Kree have taught Carol to regard as enemies, goes wrong. Carol is captured, and the Skrulls use technology to sift through her memories, searching for information about a light-speed engine developed by Dr. Lawson. The fragments they uncover surprise them. Carol escapes, crashes onto Earth, and begins recovering a truth that dismantles everything she has been told about herself.

The full truth, disclosed in the film's second half, is as follows. Carol Danvers was not a Kree warrior rescued and developed by the empire. She was an American test pilot among the few women permitted to fly experimental aircraft for the United States Air Force in the 1980s. She had been flying an experimental light-speed engine developed by Dr. Wendy Lawson, who was in reality a Kree scientist named Mar-Vell, a defector from the empire who had been working to help the Skrulls find a new home. The Kree empire had been hunting the Skrulls toward extinction. When Yon-Rogg shot Mar-Vell to prevent the engine's destruction, Carol destroyed it herself , a deliberate act of moral clarity. The explosion gave Carol enormous power. The Kree did not rescue her; they abducted her, erased her memory, implanted a device in her

neck to limit her energy output, replaced her name with a fragment of her dog tag - Vers, from what remained of Carol Danvers and trained her to serve a war she had tried to resist. The Skrulls, whom Carol had been trained to fear and fight, were refugees.

This moral reversal is the backbone of the film's narrative. Every belief Carol held about herself, her enemies, and her purpose had been constructed for her by the Kree system. Her sense of her own limitations, her loyalty to Starforce, her distrust of her own emotional responses,all of it had been engineered. The film is, at its foundation, a story about the difference between the power an institution grants and the power a person genuinely possesses once that institution's hold is broken. This distinction is the entry point for this chapter's analysis.

Captain Marvel grossed over one billion US dollars worldwide, placing it among the highest-earning films of 2019. It received an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects and Saturn Award nominations for Best Science Fiction Film and Best Actress. A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* acknowledged the film's significance as the MCU's first female-led solo production while noting that it operated within many of the genre's established conventions. Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* recognised the confidence of its portrayal of a powerful female protagonist but observed that its emotional register was deliberately, perhaps too deliberately restrained.

Bradshaw's observation is the entry point for this chapter's argument. Carol Danvers does not cry on screen. She is not defined through a romantic relationship. She does not seek male approval or display vulnerability in conventionally feminine ways. Many reviewers read this as a feminist achievement, a woman who simply exercises power without performing softness for the audience's comfort. This chapter argues that what appears to be the refusal of feminine stereotype is, on examination, considerably more ambiguous. The question this chapter pursues is not whether Carol Danvers is powerful, but how that power is defined, what it requires her to surrender, and whether the model of empowerment the film ultimately endorses challenges or reproduces the masculine-coded standards it appears to question. This chapter argues that *Captain Marvel* constructs empowerment as the acquisition of force rather than

the reclamation of a genuinely different model of strength, and that this distinction has ideological consequences that extend beyond the film's narrative.

The Kree military system in *Captain Marvel* functions not merely as a setting but as a structure that actively produces Carol's identity, governs her self-perception, and determines what she is permitted to believe about her own capacity. Starforce operates around a clearly articulated ideal of the warrior: physical discipline, strategic intelligence, loyalty and above all, emotional control. Yon-Rogg returns to this quality in every training sequence, in every exchange with Carol throughout the film's first act. A warrior who feels too much, who reacts before reasoning, or who allows personal emotion to influence judgment is not, by Kree standards, a warrior at all.

The film's opening training sequence between Carol and Yon-Rogg establishes this logic with precision. Yon-Rogg is patient in manner and consistent in instruction. His concern is not Carol's courage or intelligence, he acknowledges both. His concern is her instinctive, emotionally driven responses. When she uses her energy blasts with what he considers insufficient deliberation, he does not celebrate the power; he identifies the impulse behind it as the problem. He tells her he wants to see what she can do without her abilities, positioning her most essential weapon as a liability rather than a strength. The argument being made, scene by scene, is that Carol's natural capacity is too unmanaged, too emotionally alive, to be trusted as it is. She must be refined, regulated, and disciplined into a form that the Kree system can use.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) provides the most illuminating framework for understanding this dynamic. De Beauvoir's central argument is that women's subordination is not natural or biological but produced through the accumulated weight of social institutions and historical practice. Her most cited statement encapsulates this directly: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 295). Femininity, she argues, is not an innate essence but a condition imposed on individuals by the world they inhabit.

The philosophical concept most relevant to this chapter is de Beauvoir's theory of the Other. She argues that within patriarchal social organisation, man positions himself as the universal subject, the default human being against whom all else is measured while woman is defined only in relation to him: as his opposite, his

complement, his subordinate. Woman is the Other existing in reference to the subject rather than as a subject in her own right. De Beauvoir states this with the directness that characterises *The Second Sex* throughout: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute: she is the Other" (de Beauvoir 16).

De Beauvoir's framework is not a philosophical abstraction. It has material consequences for how women are evaluated and how they understand themselves. Because a woman is positioned as the Other, her worth is always measured against a standard she did not set. Her legitimacy is permanently conditional. She cannot simply be competent; she must demonstrate competence in the terms the system recognises. She cannot simply be strong; she must display strength in forms the system values. The standard belongs to the subject, to the masculine norm, and the Other has no authority to challenge or revise it. She can conform to it, approximate it, or fall short of it.

Carol occupies this position doubly within the Kree military system. She is a woman in a warrior institution that encodes its ideals of excellence in masculine terms. She is also a human in an empire that regards human beings as a lesser species, a fact the Kree reference with barely concealed contempt throughout the film. Within Starforce, she must prove herself without cease against a standard built around Kree identity and Kree values, a standard from which she is structurally excluded from the beginning. No matter how much she progresses, her legitimacy remains contingent on Yon-Rogg's ongoing assessment. He decides when she has advanced sufficiently. He decides when her emotional responses are adequately managed. He decides when she is ready for greater responsibility. She trains; he evaluates. She performs; he approves or withholds approval. The relationship instantiates exactly the structure de Beauvoir describes: the subject holds the standard, and the Other must submit to it.

For the first half of *Captain Marvel*, she operates as Vers under control of the Kree, unaware of her true identity and reliant on male help from both Fury and her oppressor in disguise, Yon-Rogg. Numerous scenes present Yon-Rogg 'mansplaining' to her all the things she needs to improve about herself as 'there is nothing more dangerous to a warrior than emotion' (*Captain Marvel* 00:02:31– 00:03:38), and to start using her brain instead of her heart (00:04:28–00:04:40). And while the movie tells the narrative how Carol Danvers eventually reclaims her identity and turns

against the patriarchy of the Kree, this can only be achieved because male Skrull captured her and were able to uncover parts of her memory the Kree had previously suppressed, which eventually sends her on her mission (00:14:06–00:18:08). On said mission, Vers/Carol Danvers is repeatedly handled by men who tell her what to do or think, be it Nick Fury criticizing her wardrobe inside the Project Pegasus building (00:43:10–00:43:37), again Yon-Rogg 'mansplaining' Mar-Vell's mission while demonstrating his superiority within the Kree ("There's only so much I'm cleared to tell you, Vers.") (00:48:35–00:49:08), or Talos who eventually needs to explain the true Kree enterprise because she is unable to connect the dots herself (01:11:18–01:13:20). Because of her identity loss depicted in the movie, Carol Danvers needs all these men to piece together the puzzle and understand her story, leaving her with little agency in reclaiming her identity.

The Kree implant makes this reading sharper. A device placed in Carol's neck limits her energy output, but Carol does not know this. She has been told that her limitations are a consequence of her own instability and that she has not yet achieved the internal control necessary to access her full ability. This lie is strategically effective because it redirects Carol's awareness away from the system that constrains her and toward herself. She works harder, suppresses more, attempts greater control, and in doing so becomes a more efficient instrument of the very power that manages her. De Beauvoir's analysis of internalisation is pertinent here. She argues that patriarchal systems are most effective when the subject internalises the standards of the Other as her own. As Toril Moi observes, citing de Beauvoir, patriarchal systems are most effective when the subject internalises their standards as her own (Moi 92). Carol does not need constant external surveillance; she surveils herself, because she has been taught to understand her own emotional life as the source of her insufficiency.

The Supreme Intelligence reinforces this structure through a detail the film presents without fully interrogating. When Carol stands before the Intelligence, it does not appear in a neutral or arbitrary form. It assumes the face of the woman Carol most admires, a projection of Carol's own values and aspirations filtered through the governing authority that controls her. The institution of domination presents itself wearing the face of Carol's deepest trust. This is the most refined form of social control: not the open exercise of force, but the colonisation of the subject's own

desire, so that she trusts her captor because her captor has borrowed her love. Carol obeys the Supreme Intelligence in part because it appears as something she already holds dear, never understanding that the Intelligence's face is not a tribute to her values but an appropriation of them.

The most significant ideological pattern in *Captain Marvel* is not what is done to Carol's body, it is what is done to her emotional life. Across the film's first act, emotion is framed without ambiguity as the primary obstacle to Carol's development. Yon-Rogg states this directly, in multiple scenes, with the calm authority of someone articulating a self-evident principle: Carol's limitation is not a deficiency of courage or intelligence. Her limitation is that she feels too much. The instruction, repeated consistently, is that genuine strength requires the elimination of feeling.

A scene in the film's first act makes this visible with particular clarity. During a training session, Carol becomes visibly frustrated, an understandable response, given that she is performing well and senses the standards being applied to her are shifting arbitrarily. Yon-Rogg does not ask what she is feeling or why. He does not engage with the content of her frustration, which might have revealed that her perception is accurate. His response is instruction: control yourself. Emotions are the problem. Its origin, its legitimacy, and its content are irrelevant. The proper response to feeling, within the Kree framework of strength, is suppression. A warrior who has mastered herself is a warrior whose interior life no longer surfaces visibly. Mastery is defined as absence.

Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977) particularly essays such as "This Sex Which Is Not One," "Women on the Market," and "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," provides the primary theoretical framework of this chapter. Irigaray is a French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst whose work examines the organisation of Western philosophical thought from a feminist perspective. Her central argument is that Western systems of thought are phallocentric in their foundation and they organise knowledge, value, and subjectivity around a masculine norm, treat masculinity as the universal standard of the human, and define femininity as a deviation, a variation, or a lack in relation to that norm. Within this logic, the masculine subject is complete, rational, self-

sufficient, and universal. The feminine, by contrast, is incomplete, emotional, relational, and particular (Irigaray 24).

Irigaray's most productive contribution to this analysis is her argument about the structure of feminine identity under phallocentric systems. She argues that woman, within such systems, is not granted a positive identity of her own. She is not defined on her own terms. She is defined as what man is not as the absence of what man possesses, as the reflective surface against which masculine selfhood becomes legible to itself. Irigaray writes: "Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of man's fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man" (Irigaray 25).

This is a precise diagnosis of the condition Carol inhabits within the Kree system. She is not a subject within Starforce, she is a function. She exists to serve the mission of the empire, the authority of her commander, the ideological coherence of a war she did not choose. Her desires, her history, her sense of who she is are not the foundation of her identity within the system, they are obstacles to her usefulness. The pleasure the Kree model offers her including belonging, purpose, the satisfaction of achievement within a hierarchy is pleasure that comes at the price of her own perspective. She finds meaning in the system, but the meaning belongs to the system, not to her.

Irigaray's argument extends beyond the diagnosis of exclusion to a critique of the solutions most commonly proposed. She argues that the dominant response to women's subordination; the argument that women should be treated as equal to men, measured by the same standards, granted access to the same positions, does not resolve the underlying problem. It reproduces it in a more sophisticated form. She states: "Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. For in what she says, too, at least when she dares, the woman is constantly touching herself." (Irigaray 29)

The point Irigaray makes here is that the standard of reason, of what counts as coherent, valid, and acceptable speech is itself masculinely coded. When women are

admitted to institutions of power on condition that they adopt this standard, the standard has not been questioned; only the list of people permitted to meet it has been extended. Equality, under this model, means sameness. And sameness, Irigaray argues, is erasure. She makes this explicit: “The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal” (Irigaray 78).

Captain Marvel offers Carol exactly this kind of equality; admission to the category of the powerful on condition that she adopt the masculine-coded terms through which power is defined within the Kree system. Emotion must be eliminated. Instinct must be regulated. Relational attentiveness, her attachment to Maria, her tenderness toward Monica, her moral responsiveness to the suffering of the Skrulls must be managed so that it does not interfere with her function. The qualities that are trained out of her are, without exception, the qualities Irigaray identifies as marked feminine and therefore devalued within phallocentric systems. She is offered access to power in exchange for her difference. The Kree system does not suppress Carol because it fears her; it suppresses her because it needs her to be useful on its terms (Irigaray 78).

The film is partially aware of this problem. The Kree are positioned as antagonists, and the suppression they impose on Carol is what the narrative frames as the obstacle she must overcome. Yon-Rogg is eventually revealed as a manipulator who kept Carol limited by convincing her that she was the source of her own limitations. The film critiques the mechanism. The difficulty is that recognising a problem and resolving it are distinct operations. The resolution the film offers Carol is not a model of strength in which her emotional depth, her relational intelligence, and her moral responsiveness are themselves sources of power. The resolution is unlimited physical force. Carol becomes, by the film’s end, a being of such overwhelming energy that she can no longer be constrained by any system. Irigaray’s critique anticipates this outcome precisely: replacing the standard of strength with a woman who meets the masculine standard more completely than any man is not a transformation of the framework but it is its most complete instantiation.

Angela McRobbie in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), identifies this as a broader pattern in contemporary representations of female power, arguing that empowerment is redefined as 'visibility, performance, and competition,' aligning women's advancement with martial ideals rather than challenging the structures that generate inequality (Mc Robbie 42-63). Carol becomes spectacularly visible. The logic that required her to suppress her difference in order to merit recognition, however, is never dismantled.

The scene with Maria Rambeau admits briefly a different possibility. Maria does not remind Carol of missions completed or enemies defeated. She tells Carol what she was like as a person: her stubborn refusal to stay fallen, the specific character of her courage before any institution had shaped it, the qualities that were hers before the Kree ever found her. In this scene, Carol's strength is not expressed through combat but recognised through relationship - one woman seeing another clearly and telling her the truth she has been denied. Irigaray's framework is germane here: this is the relational, emotionally grounded form of knowing and being known that phallocentric structures code as secondary and the film, ultimately, treats them as secondary too (Irigaray 76). The scene exists; it does not govern the climax.

Among the most significant choices in *Captain Marvel*'s construction is the fact that Carol Danvers begins the film without access to her own story. She does not know her name, her origin, the people she loved, the choices she made, or the things she was willing to sacrifice. The Kree erased her memories following the explosion and replaced them with a fabricated identity - Vers, a Kree warrior in training, constructed to serve the empire's purposes rather than Carol's own. Throughout the film's entire first act, Carol inhabits a narrative built for her by the institution that governs her. She has been given a false past, a name that is a fragment of her real one, and a sense of purpose that belongs to someone else. The most precise aspect of this condition is that she does not know any of it is false.

Hélène Cixous, in her foundational essay "The Laugh of the Medusa", published in *Signs* in 1976, argues that women have been systematically excluded from the domain of self-expression, narrative, and authorship, not by accident but by the organised workings of patriarchal discourse. Her central argument is that when women are denied the power to narrate, to name, to define, to interpret their own

experience, they are denied something more fundamental than literary access. They are denied the constitutive act of selfhood. The self, for Cixous, is not something that pre-exists its expression. It is formed through the act of telling. She argues: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies.”(Cixous 875)

The force of the word “violently” here is important. Cixous is not describing a passive absence or a gentle social discouragement. She is describing a forcible removal - an active, sustained exclusion from the means of self-constitution. The woman who cannot write herself, who cannot speak herself into full existence, is not simply quieter than she might otherwise have been. She is diminished in her capacity to be. This is the condition Carol inhabits at the film’s opening. She has been removed, with force, from her own story. Every suppressed dream, every dismissed fragment of recovered memory, is another instance of Carol participating, unknowingly in her own dispossession.

The Kree have not merely limited Carol’s power output. They have taken her narrative from her and replaced it with their own. She is living inside a story whose author is Yon-Rogg and whose purpose is the Kree empire. Her training, her identity, her understanding of who the enemy is and what her strength is for; all of it has been authored by the institution that abducted her. Cixous’s further observation is relevant here: she argues that women’s exclusion from writing and self-expression is always connected to an exclusion from their own bodies, from their own experience, their own desires, their own history. Carol’s exclusion from her story is precisely this: her body, her capacity, her power have been taken from her and reassigned to a purpose she never chose.

The black box recorder scene is, under this reading, the film’s most emotionally significant moment. Carol and Nick Fury discover the crashed Quadjet that transported Mar-Vell’s laboratory. Inside, they find the flight recording equipment. Carol plays back the audio. She hears her own voice from before the Kree took her; confident, precise, entirely present reporting on test flights, making observations, being fully herself. For the brief duration of this scene, Carol is in the presence of her own story. She is listening to herself as a subject: a woman who had chosen her path, who had possessed her own voice, who had not yet had either taken

from her. Cixous writes that the act of writing, of expressing oneself will give her access to her native strength . The film draws precisely this connection: Carol's access to her full power is coincident with her recovery of her story. The implant comes out at the moment her narrative self is restored.

Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", published in *Screen* in 1975, argues that cinema's dominant visual structures position women as objects of vision rather than as subjects of narrative (Mulvey 6-18). *Captain Marvel* does not reproduce this structure in its most familiar form. Carol is not presented as a sexual spectacle. A related structure, however, operates through the film's first act at an institutional level. Carol is the perpetual object of surveillance. Yon-Rogg watches and evaluates her. The Supreme Intelligence monitors and tests her. The Kree Accusers assess her. Every scene in the film's Kree sections involves Carol being seen and measured by figures who hold power over her. She is the object; they are the subjects who judge. The film's central movement from Vers to Carol Danvers, from object to subject; is simultaneously a movement from being narrated to narrating. It is the most structurally meaningful element of the film's design, and the black box scene is its fullest expression.

The film's central moment of self-assertion is carefully constructed and deserves extended and precise attention. After Carol has recovered her memories, understood the truth about the Skrulls, and physically removed the Kree implant from her neck, she faces Yon-Rogg in a final confrontation. He challenges her to combat without powers, hand to hand, on his terms, under his conditions. His reasoning is presented with the surface plausibility of a training principle: fighting without her abilities would demonstrate that she is truly strong, that she has mastered her power rather than merely possessed it. The challenge carries the appearance of fairness. Its function is to invite Carol to seek his validation one final time. Accepting it would mean accepting his authority to define what genuine strength requires, allowing him to set the terms, letting him render the verdict.

Carol's response is the film's defining statement. She uses her powers without hesitation, blasts him off his feet, and says with complete calm: "I have nothing to prove to you". The line is precise. It names the exact logic that has governed their relationship and, by extension, Carol's entire existence within the Kree system. He

has been the judge; she has been perpetually the one being judged. He has held the standard; she has been measured against it. Her refusal is genuine. She does not perform for his assessment or request his validation. The rupture is real, and any honest reading of the film must acknowledge that.

The question this chapter poses is whether the film sustains that refusal in its resolution and whether the resolution enacts what the refusal promises. The scene that follows Carol's declaration is the film's climactic action sequence. The Kree fleet arrives over Earth, and Carol ascends to meet it. She destroys warship after warship with energy blasts of apparently limitless force. She is untouchable and overwhelming. The sequence is visually striking and emotionally effective as a spectacle. Examined analytically, it is the point at which the gap between the film's stated position and its enacted one becomes apparent.

The mode of Carol's victory is destruction. Her power, as expressed in the film's climax, is defined almost entirely through the capacity to overwhelm. She does not expose the contradiction of the Kree cause or appeal to their conscience. She dismantles their weapons and scatters their fleet with superior force. The qualities that have accumulated across the film's quieter passages, her protectiveness of Monica Rambeau, her moral clarity about what the Kree have done to the Skrulls, her grief over Mar-Vell's death, her loyalty to Maria are not the active constituents of the film's climactic expression of her power. The climax is spectacular. Its vocabulary of heroism is coercive force. That vocabulary has always belonged to the masculine tradition of superhero cinema, and *Captain Marvel* does not revise it.

Returning to Irigaray's framework clarifies why this matters. She argues that the problem with phallocentric definitions of strength is not merely that they exclude women, it is that they establish a single standard of power that marginalises everything not coded as masculine. When the film resolves Carol's empowerment through unlimited destructive force, it does not offer a new model of feminine strength. It offers a woman who has exceeded the masculine standard. As Irigaray argues in *This Sex Which Is Not One*: "Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters"(Irigaray 23). The parameters of the film's climax; force, dominance, the spectacular capacity to destroy are precisely those masculine parameters. Carol wins within them rather than displacing them.

Olufidipe and Echezabal, in their 2021 study "Superheroines and Sexism: Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," observe that moments of female empowerment in the MCU are frequently 'staged yet fleeting, more about image than real shift' (Olufidipe and Echezabal 3-4). The image of Carol ascending through the Kree fleet is genuinely powerful. The structural revision it represents in how feminine strength is defined is considerably more limited.

The film's final exchange with Yon-Rogg makes this limitation concrete. Carol places him in his own ship and sends him back to the Kree empire with a message: she is coming for them. She is composed, even restrained in her handling of him, she could destroy him and does not. The logic of the scene, however, remains the logic of military hierarchy. She was the subordinate; she is now the superior. He was the commander who tested and managed her; he is now the defeated subordinate who has been comprehensively dismissed. The relationship has been reversed. The structure of ranking, dominance, and evaluation that organised it has not been touched. Only the positions within that structure have changed.

The preceding sections have traced a consistent pattern across *Captain Marvel*'s narrative: a genuine and sustained engagement with the systemic suppression of Carol's identity and capacity, followed by a resolution that does not fully enact the transformation it promises. De Beauvoir's concept of the Other illuminates how the Kree system constructs Carol's legitimacy as permanently conditional - she must prove herself without cease, in terms she did not set, against a standard from which she is structurally excluded. Irigaray's framework in *This Sex Which Is Not One* reveals the ideological logic of that construction: Carol is offered power in exchange for the suppression of everything in her that is coded feminine, and the film's climax fulfills that exchange rather than refusing it. Cixous's argument about voice and self-narration shows that Carol's most fundamental dispossession is the theft of her story, and that the black box recorder scene the film's most honest feminist gesture is passed over too quickly in favour of combat spectacle.

These frameworks together identify the precise nature of what this chapter calls the illusion of empowerment. The film presents Carol's trajectory as liberation. In narrative terms, it is liberation as she escapes the Kree, recovers her memories,

learns the truth, and refuses Yon-Rogg's authority. But liberation from a specific institution is not the same as the acquisition of a genuinely different model of strength. The Kree system valued coercive force, emotional suppression, and hierarchical dominance. Carol's final expression of power is coercive force of a higher magnitude, achieved through the removal of the suppression the system imposed. The model has not changed; only the ceiling has been raised.

Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender* (1987), argues that gender is produced and reproduced through social technologies like cinema, literature, institutional practice that shape individuals into gendered subjects by repeatedly encoding certain behaviours as natural and others as deviant (Lauretis 1-30). Every time a superhero film codes emotional restraint as heroic and emotional expressiveness as weakness, it reproduces a hierarchy that disadvantages women regardless of whether the superhero is male or female. *Captain Marvel* places a woman at the centre of the superhero film without revising the emotional economy that has always governed the genre. The gender of the protagonist changes; the evaluative framework does not.

Alice Eagly and Steven Karau in their paper "Role Congruity Theory of Prejudice toward Female Leaders" (2002), argue that women in positions of authority face what they term 'evaluative mismatch', a double bind in which they are simultaneously expected to display the leadership competence coded as masculine and penalised for abandoning the social behaviours associated with femininity (Eagly 573-75). *Captain Marvel* resolves Carol's evaluative mismatch not by dismantling the double bind but by giving her enough power to override its consequences. She becomes too formidable for the double bind to affect her. The framework that produces the double bind, however the hierarchy of masculine-coded strength over feminine-coded responsiveness remains intact.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), argues that gender is "performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler 25) meaning that gender is not a pre-existing essence expressed in behaviour but a category produced through repetition, through acts and performances that accrue into the appearance of a natural identity. Under Butler's framework, the superhero film is a technology of gender production: it performs, repeatedly and on a massive scale, a

particular version of what heroism looks like, what strength looks like, and what a powerful woman looks like. *Captain Marvel*'s performance of female heroism through unlimited destructive force contributes to the reproduction of a gendered standard of power, even as its narrative explicitly questions that standard.

The film is not a dishonest film, and these observations are not a dismissal of its achievements. Its structural intelligence about the mechanism of Carol's suppression like the way the Kree have constructed not just her limitations but her identity, her story, and her self-understanding is genuine and sophisticated. Carol Danvers is a compelling and well-realised character. The film's engagement with women's representation in the MCU was meaningful in its context, and the conversations it generated were substantive. What this chapter has argued is not that the film fails, but that it reaches the limit of what is possible within its genre's existing vocabulary of power and that identifying this limit is the precondition for imagining something beyond it.

While *Captain Marvel* presents itself as a story of female empowerment, this chapter has looked closely at how that empowerment actually works within the film. By reading key scenes through the frameworks of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, the analysis has shown that the film's idea of strength is not simply about a woman becoming powerful. It is shaped by specific conditions; conditions that consistently limit how Carol's identity, emotions, and self-expression are allowed to develop.

When these conditions are examined through Irigaray and Cixous, a clear pattern begins to emerge. Across the film, what looks like the making of a strong female subject is actually a process of narrowing. Carol is repeatedly brought toward control, stability, and a single, defined sense of self. The kind of fluid, expressive, open-ended subjectivity that both theorists associate with genuine feminine identity is present in the film only in glimpses, and each time it surfaces, it is redirected into something more contained and manageable.

This is the central problem the chapter has identified. The film gives us a female protagonist, but the kind of person she is allowed to become remains within very particular boundaries. Instead of a self that grows through multiplicity and free expression, the film gives us a self that is increasingly shaped by discipline and

regulation. Empowerment, in this reading, is real but it operates within a framework that has not fundamentally changed.

In this sense, *Captain Marvel* does not fully realise what Irigaray and Cixous imagine for feminine subjectivity. More than anything, the film shows how difficult it is for a mainstream narrative to allow a woman to exist outside the demands of unity, control, and containment.

The preceding sections have traced a consistent pattern across Captain Marvel's narrative: a genuine and sustained engagement with the systemic suppression of Carol's identity and capacity, followed by a resolution that does not fully enact the transformation it promises. De Beauvoir's concept of the Other illuminates how the Kree system constructs Carol's legitimacy as permanently conditional. Irigaray's framework reveals the ideological logic of that construction, Carol is offered power in exchange for the suppression of everything in her that is coded feminine, and the film's climax fulfills that exchange rather than refusing it. Cixous's argument about voice and self-narration shows that Carol's most fundamental dispossession is the theft of her story, and that the recovery of that story, while genuine, is passed over too quickly in favour of combat spectacle.

These frameworks together identify the precise nature of what this chapter has called the illusion of empowerment. Yet the diagnosis raises a question that feminist theory alone does not fully answer: what kind of power is actually being recognised here, and what alternative models might make these limits more visible? To identify that empowerment is constrained is one operation; to name what a genuinely different model would look like requires a different analytical vocabulary. It is at this point that the study turns to the Indian Knowledge System concepts introduced in the previous chapter, not to correct or supplement the feminist reading, but to clarify the nature of the limitation it has identified. The concepts of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* provide precisely this clarification. They do not import a foreign standard into the analysis; they make explicit what the film's own logic consistently forecloses.

In Indian philosophical tradition, *shakti* represents power as internally grounded, generative, and self-sustaining energy, a force that arises from within the self rather than being conferred upon it from without. As Frank Morales establishes in "The Concept of *Shakti*: Hinduism as a Liberating Force for Women," this conception

of strength is defined not by domination or conquest but by resilience, moral clarity, and the capacity to sustain the self through conditions designed to dissolve it (Morales 3-4). What matters, within this framework, is not only the magnitude of power but its source. Power that originates from within a person's own being, from her endurance, her moral intelligence, her capacity for self-knowledge is qualitatively different from power that is granted, regulated, and revocable. It is the distinction between strength as a property of the self and strength as a permission extended by an institution.

When Carol's empowerment in *Captain Marvel* is read through this framework, a pattern that has already been identified through feminist analysis becomes analytically sharper. The film consistently locates power not in Carol's interior life but in her relationship to structures that authorise and regulate her. She does not arrive at strength through a process of self-knowledge or inner development; she arrives at it through the removal of a device placed in her neck without her consent, and through the recovery of a narrative authored for her by others. Her most spectacular expression of power - the ascent through the Kree fleet is not the culmination of a journey inward but the unleashing of an energy whose existence she was never permitted to know. The power was always there; but its availability to her was managed entirely from outside.

Read through the concept of *shakti*, power in the film appears not as internally generated energy but as something regulated, authorised, and stabilised by external structures. Even in liberation, what Carol recovers is the capacity to operate at a higher level within a framework she did not design. The Kree limited her output; removing their device restores what was hers. But the terms in which that power is expressed - destructive force, military dominance, the ability to overwhelm remain the terms the Kree system itself would have recognised as legitimate. The source has been restored, but the vocabulary through which it finds expression has not changed. *Shakti*, understood philosophically, is not simply the possession of great energy; it is the integration of that energy with moral clarity, relational awareness, and the self's own understanding of its purpose. The film supplies the first without the others. What Carol recovers is force without the interior orientation that would constitute *shakti* in the fuller sense. This limits empowerment to what external systems are capable of recognising, rather than to what the self is capable of generating on its own terms.

The concept of *ardhanarishvara* deepens this analysis by making visible a specific structural choice the film makes, one that feminist theory identifies but does not fully name. *Ardhanarishvara*, the composite form of *Shiva* and *Parvati* in the Shaiva philosophical tradition, represents not the dominance of one principle over another but their integration within a single, unified being. The *Shiva Purana* describes this figure as the source of creation's harmony: "The Lord is half woman and half man; from this union arises the harmony of creation" (Shiva Purana, Rudra Samhita). The philosophical claim this image makes is not about gender in the biological sense. It is about the structure of wholeness. Genuine strength, the image proposes, requires both the principle of force and the principle of relational attentiveness, both the capacity for decisive action and the capacity for emotional depth. These are not opposites to be resolved by eliminating one; they are complementary dimensions whose integration constitutes the fullest expression of power.

Captain Marvel's construction of Carol's empowerment consistently makes the opposite structural choice. Across the film's first act, emotion is framed without ambiguity as the primary obstacle to Carol's development. Yon-Rogg's instruction is not that Carol should integrate her emotional responsiveness with her capacity for action; it is that she should suppress the former entirely in the service of the latter. The training sequences do not ask Carol to bring feeling and force into balance but they ask her to eliminate feeling as a precondition of becoming a warrior. Anger, grief, relational attachment, moral responsiveness: within the Kree framework, each of these is a liability rather than a resource. The Kree system does not present a warrior who controls her emotion alongside a warrior who acts without it and ask Carol to find a synthesis; it presents emotional control as the definition of legitimate strength, and emotional expression as evidence of inadequacy. Power and feeling are placed in a hierarchy, not in dialogue.

Rather than integrating the emotional and rational dimensions of the self, the film stabilises power by subordinating one to the other, producing control instead of balance. Even in the film's most emotionally generous moments; the Maria Rambeau scene, the recovery of the flight recording, what Carol's emotional life provides is not strength in itself but the confirmation needed to unlock a capacity that is expressed, finally, through force. The scene where Carol hears her own voice in the black box

recording is moving precisely because it gives her interiority back; but the narrative uses that interiority as a key to her powers rather than as an expression of power in its own right. Feeling unlocks force; it does not become force. The hierarchy remains intact even in the film's most apparently feminist gesture.

The *ardhanarishvara* framework makes the consequence of this choice explicit. A model of empowerment that resolves the tension between emotion and action by declaring one of them an obstacle does not produce wholeness; it produces a version of strength from which a significant dimension of the self has been excised. Carol does not become more fully herself by the film's end; she becomes more fully capable of functioning within a particular standard of heroic power. The integration the ardhanarishvara ideal calls for, the synthesis in which force and compassion, courage and emotional depth, coexist without either negating the other is not achieved. One principle displaces the other rather than completing it. The film offers substitution where the philosophical ideal proposes synthesis.

Taken together, the frameworks of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* clarify what the feminist analysis identifies but cannot fully name. The feminist reading shows that Carol's empowerment is constrained, that it is shaped by external validation, institutional standards, and the suppression of feminine difference as the price of access to power. The IKS reading clarifies why that constraint operates as it does. It is not simply that the film reproduces patriarchal standards of heroism, though it does; it is that the model of power the film endorses lacks two specific qualities that the Indian philosophical tradition identifies as constitutive of genuine strength. It is not internally grounded, power is not self-originating in Carol's case but recovered through narrative and physical restoration; it is not integrative, strength is achieved through the elimination of emotional depth rather than through its synthesis with force. The absence of shakti and the absence of *ardhanarishvara* are not separate problems; they are two dimensions of the same structural limitation. A power that is externally regulated cannot be shakti, because shakti is by definition self-generating. A power that suppresses one principle in order to enact another cannot reflect the *ardhanarishvara* ideal, because that ideal insists on the necessity of both.

The film's model of empowerment therefore remains structured by external validation and internal regulation rather than by the self-grounded and integrative

forms of power articulated within IKS. This does not render Carol Danvers's journey invalid or its emotional register dishonest. What it shows is that the film's ambitions to tell a story about a woman reclaiming her agency are pursued within a vocabulary of power that was never designed to accommodate what genuine reclamation would require. The film asks Carol to recover herself, but offers her a version of strength that still operates on the system's terms.

This analysis does not conclude that *Captain Marvel* fails to represent empowerment. It concludes that the empowerment it represents remains dependent on the structures it appears to contest, and that its model of strength, however spectacular, does not constitute a transformation of the terms on which power is recognised and expressed. The contrast with Draupadi's journey, examined in the preceding chapter, makes this distinction measurable rather than merely asserted. Where Draupadi develops a strength that is rooted in interiority, moral clarity, and the integration of courage with emotional endurance, a model that reflects both the self-grounding of shakti and the synthesis of the ardhanarishvara ideal, Carol's empowerment remains an achievement within a framework that has not itself been revised. The difference between these two models of strength is the difference this study has been working to articulate: the difference between empowerment as adaptation and empowerment as transformation. It is a distinction that the conclusion will draw out in its full implications.

CONCLUSION

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LESSONS FROM MYTH AND MEDIA

The purpose of this study is to investigate the representation of feminine agency in two very different types of narrative: a modern Hollywood superhero film and a feminist literary reworking of an ancient Indian epic. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and the film *Captain Marvel* (2019) are closely examined. The central concern is that modern ideas of empowerment often equate strength with control, emotional restraint, and conformity to dominant models of power. In order to investigate whether feminine agency can be understood outside of these restrictive frameworks, this study employs the interpretive lens of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), particularly the ideas of *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara*, in conversation with western feminist theory.

Two schools of thought serve as the foundation for the theoretical framework. The study draws from Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) as examples of western feminist philosophy. These frameworks offer a vocabulary for recognising the ways in which patriarchal systems stifle, silence, and limit feminine identity. From IKS, the study draws upon *ardhanarishvara* and the philosophical idea of *shakti* as power understood as generative, sustaining, and morally grounded energy. Together, these two schools of thought enable this study to move beyond a strictly diagnostic approach. Rather than only identifying the shortcomings of prevailing empowerment models, the study works toward articulating a more comprehensive understanding of feminine strength, one that does not require the suppression of feminine difference as a condition of acceptance.

The two primary texts are selected not because they are equivalent. A novel and a film, an ancient epic retelling and a franchise superhero production, are very different kinds of narrative forms. They are selected because they engage the same underlying problem from markedly different positions. That difference becomes the basis of the study's analytical insight when the texts are read in dialogue rather than as direct equivalents. When the same problem appears in two such distinct contexts, its underlying structures become more visible than either text could make them alone.

Chapter I examines *The Palace of Illusions* and considered how Divakaruni's first-person account of the *Mahabharata* uses voice, interiority, and emotional depth to construct feminine agency. The analysis is grounded in the silence that the canonical epic places on Draupadi. Despite being structurally crucial to the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is granted virtually no sustained interior life in the traditional narrative. Divakaruni's novel addresses this silence by centering Draupadi as its speaking, remembering, and judging subject. This first-person narrative is interpreted through Cixous's notion of ecriture feminine.

Irigaray's essays from *This Sex Which Is Not One*, specifically "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine" and "Women on the Market," are examined in this chapter to show how Draupadi's identity is continuously reduced to a function within masculine systems of exchange and obligation. Draupadi reveals that the swayamvar, which presents itself as a ceremonial honouring of feminine agency, is in fact a political arrangement in which she is the occasion rather than the agent. The polyandrous marriage takes place without her consent, framed in language that does not even accord her a name. The cheer haran, also known as the disrobing episode, marks the moment at which the ethical failure of the patriarchal dharmic order becomes fully apparent. Every masculine code of honour and protection breaks down. Draupadi, the person who has been most thoroughly failed by these codes, becomes the only member of the sabha who possesses genuine moral authority. Her response is one of condemnation rather than despair. She issues judgements rather than seeking justice.

The chapter's key finding is that Draupadi's empowerment is not achieved through the adoption of masculine models of strength. It is achieved through what the IKS framework identifies as *shakti*: a mode of power rooted in moral clarity, emotional endurance, relational intelligence, and the capacity to sustain the self through conditions designed to dissolve it. By the novel's close, Draupadi has not triumphed in any conventional sense. She has lost the war and almost everyone she loved. What she has achieved is something the masculine system around her could not produce and did not anticipate: a self that has been tested by the full weight of the epic's catastrophe and has emerged with a clear and settled sense of its own identity. This is the *ardhanarishvara* model of integrated strength, courage held together with

compassion, and moral will held together with emotional depth, enacted across a single character's lifetime.

Chapter II examines *Captain Marvel* and the representation of feminine agency through the character of Carol Danvers. Where Chapter I is concerned with the recovery of a suppressed interiority, Chapter II is concerned with the construction of a regulated one. Carol's development across the film is shaped by the Kree military system, an institution that defines strength through discipline, emotional control, and hierarchical loyalty. The system positions Carol's emotional responsiveness as the primary obstacle to her becoming a legitimate warrior. The analysis demonstrates that the Kree system does not merely restrain Carol from the outside. It provides her with a vocabulary in which her own inner life cannot be named as anything other than failure. She monitors herself, suppresses herself, and works to become the kind of warrior the Kree can use, without ever questioning whether the Kree's definition of a warrior is one she would choose for herself.

De Beauvoir's theory of the Other illuminates how the Kree system constructs Carol's legitimacy as permanently conditional. From the moment she joins Starforce, she is positioned as the Other: her value is contingent, her authority is revocable, and her competence must be perpetually demonstrated in terms she did not set and cannot revise. The Kree implant, a device placed in Carol's neck without her knowledge to limit her energy output, sharpens this into its most insidious form. Carol believes that her limitations come from within herself, from her own emotional instability, when they have in fact been engineered by the institution that abducted her. The reading of Irigaray's "The Power of Discourse" showed that this is not simply physical containment. It is the foreclosure of a language in which Carol's experience could be understood as legitimate. The film's Kree sequences give Carol no framework in which frustration, grief, or relational attachment can register as meaningful rather than as malfunction.

The chapter found that the film's most honest feminist gesture is the black box recorder scene, in which Carol hears her own voice from before the Kree took her, confident, precise, and fully present. Read through Cixous's framework, this scene enacts the connection between narrative recovery and self-recovery: the implant comes out at the moment Carol's story comes back. The self is constituted through the

act of telling, and when her story is restored, her power is restored with it. The chapter also identified the Maria Rambeau scene as the film's closest approach to a *shakti*-based model of strength. In that scene, Carol's identity is recognised not through combat but through relationship, through one woman telling another the truth she has been denied.

The chapter's key finding is that *Captain Marvel* constructs feminine agency within a framework shaped by discipline, control, and a regulated sense of identity. Carol Danvers's development is guided through training, emotional restraint, and the gradual stabilisation of the self, in which strength is associated less with expression than with mastery over internal impulses.

While the narrative gestures toward alternative possibilities, particularly in moments of memory recovery and relational recognition, these possibilities are not consistently carried through into the film's resolution. Scenes such as the black box recording and Carol's exchange with Maria Rambeau briefly foreground voice, interiority, and relational grounding as sources of strength. However, the climax ultimately returns to a model of power defined through the expansion of force within an already established framework.

As a result, agency is presented as something achieved within existing structures rather than through a reconfiguration of them. In this sense, the film's model of empowerment may be understood as limited, not because it is inauthentic, but because it does not fully depart from the terms through which power is already recognised.

The two chapters do not reveal opposing models of feminine agency when read together. They reveal differing conditions under which the same underlying problem is articulated. Both texts engage the question of what a powerful woman looks like and what she must surrender in order to be recognised as powerful. The difference lies in their answers. *The Palace of Illusions* allows Draupadi to develop an agency grounded in interiority, emotional expression, and continuity of self. *Captain Marvel* presents Carol's agency as something achieved through regulation, discipline, and the progressive containment of everything within her that cannot be made useful to the system she inhabits. One text asks what a woman becomes when she is finally

permitted to speak for herself. The other asks what she must give up in order to be admitted to the category of the powerful.

A key pattern that emerges from this contrast is the distinction between inward and externally structured forms of agency. In *The Palace of Illusions*, agency is rooted in inner voice and self-reflection. Draupadi's power is not granted by any institution. It is developed, slowly and at great cost, from within a self that the structures around her consistently attempt to dissolve. Her moral authority in the sabha is not the product of training or institutional sanction. It is the product of a lifetime's accumulated self-knowledge. In *Captain Marvel*, by contrast, agency is mediated through systems of external validation. Carol's identity is constructed within the Kree system, recovered through the help of others who piece her story back together, and expressed, finally, through destructive force, a mode of power that the system itself would have recognised as legitimate. Her empowerment is real, but it arrives within a framework she did not design and does not, by the film's end, fundamentally revise.

This distinction does not mean that Draupadi is simply the better model and Carol the failed one. The contrast is more productive than that. What it reveals is that the representation of feminine strength is shaped by the frameworks within which it is constructed, and that those frameworks carry ideological commitments that persist even when the surface narrative appears to challenge them. *Captain Marvel* explicitly positions the Kree as antagonists and Carol's suppression as the obstacle she must overcome. It identifies the problem clearly. What the analysis has shown is that identifying a problem and resolving it are distinct operations, and that the vocabulary of resolution available to a mainstream superhero film is more limited than its vocabulary of critique.

It is at this point that Indian Knowledge System offers its most precise evaluative lens. The concept of *shakti*, understood as power that is creative, sustaining, and morally generative, provides a framework through which what is visible in *The Palace of Illusions* can be named with precision. It also allows the analysis to identify what is missing from *Captain Marvel* without resorting to an external standard borrowed exclusively from western feminist theory. Both texts contain the raw materials for a *shakti*-based model of strength. Draupadi's endurance, her moral clarity, her refusal to allow the sabha's violence to be absorbed into the

general account of dharmic inevitability: these are expressions of *shakti* in the precise sense the philosophical tradition defines it. *Captain Marvel* contains these materials too, visible in Carol's moral responsiveness to the Skrulls, in her loyalty to Maria, and in her grief over Mar-Vell. However, the film subordinates these qualities to the spectacle of coercive force in its climax.

The *ardhanarishvara* framework makes the difference concrete. The composite form of Shiva and Parvati, representing the integration of masculine and feminine principles within a single whole, proposes that genuine strength requires both dimensions held together: force and compassion, action and relational care, moral will and emotional depth. Draupadi's journey enacts this integration across the novel's full arc. Her courage is genuinely present; she is direct, fierce, and morally uncompromising. At the same time, this courage is held together with emotional depth, relational attentiveness, and the capacity to carry grief without being destroyed by it. *Captain Marvel*'s resolution moves decisively toward one principle, that of force, dominance, and the capacity to overwhelm, while leaving the other in a supporting role. The integration is not achieved. One principle displaces the other rather than completing it. The *ardhanarishvara* ideal calls for synthesis. The film offers substitution instead.

This study set out to question a persistent assumption: that women's empowerment is most fully realised when strength is expressed through control, emotional restraint, and a form of invulnerability historically coded as masculine. While this assumption is rarely stated directly, it continues to shape the narratives that are produced, the heroines that are celebrated, and the qualities women are encouraged to suppress. The study finds that this framework remains influential, and that its effects are especially visible in texts that position themselves as feminist, texts that centre women while leaving largely intact the standards by which their strength is recognised.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that attributes often associated with femininity, including emotional intelligence, intuition, relational awareness, and what IKS conceptualises as inner Shakti, operate not as limitations but as forms of agency in their own right. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's authority in the Kuru sabha does not arise from force or institutional power. It arises from a clarity of self

shaped through interiority, suffering, and moral conviction. This suggests that strength need not be understood only in terms of dominance or control. It may also emerge through forms of awareness and resilience that function differently from dominant models of power.

The study further finds that empowerment becomes constrained when it is tied to the abandonment of these forms of selfhood. A model that privileges emotional restraint, aggression, and self-sufficiency as primary markers of strength risks reproducing existing standards rather than expanding them. In contrast, the readings developed here suggest that feminine agency becomes more fully visible when strength is not defined in opposition to, or in imitation of, masculine norms, but through the recognition of alternative ways of being. Within this framework, *shakti* offers a philosophical articulation of power as internally grounded and generative, while *ardhanarishvara* suggests a model of balance rather than substitution.

Finally, the study indicates that IKS functions not merely as a supplementary lens but as a productive extension of the analytical framework. Western feminist theory remains essential in identifying structures that constrain feminine agency, whether through discourse, representation, or systems of recognition. However, when read alongside IKS, the analysis is able to move beyond critique toward a more articulated understanding of what alternative models of strength might look like. Concepts such as *shakti* and *ardhanarishvara* allow for a reading of power that is integrative rather than exclusionary, and that accommodates emotion, relationality, and inner coherence as constitutive elements of agency. In this sense, bringing these frameworks into dialogue does not replace one with the other. It expands the possibilities through which feminine strength can be understood.

This study makes several contributions to the existing scholarly conversation. Its most distinctive contribution is methodological: it brings Indian Knowledge System into sustained dialogue with western feminist theory as a co-equal interpretive framework, rather than treating it as a supplementary philosophical reference. Much of the existing scholarship on feminist retellings of the *Mahabharata* or on female representation in the MCU relies primarily on western feminist frameworks. While such approaches are analytically rigorous, they can remain limited in the range of conceptual possibilities they foreground. By engaging concepts such as *shakti* and

ardhanarishvara as active philosophical frameworks rather than illustrative additions, this study demonstrates how IKS can extend the analytical scope of feminist inquiry. In doing so, it opens up a way of thinking about feminine strength that is integrative rather than exclusively critical or oppositional.

The study also proposes an interpretive methodology that places a literary text and a film in dialogue without collapsing one into the other. *The Palace of Illusions* and *Captain Marvel* are not treated as equivalent or hierarchically arranged. Instead, they are read as distinct narrative forms that engage a shared structural concern from within their own narrative and conceptual frameworks. This approach allows patterns to emerge across difference rather than forcing alignment. As such, it offers a flexible model that may be useful for scholars working across texts that differ in form, genre, or medium.

In addition, the study contributes to ongoing discussions around what may be described as imitative empowerment, the condition in which women are offered access to power on the condition that they align with, or approximate, established masculine norms. By tracing this pattern across both a mythological retelling and a contemporary film, the study suggests that such representations are not isolated instances but part of a broader tendency within modern narratives of empowerment. While these narratives often position themselves as progressive, the analysis indicates that the terms through which strength is recognised frequently remain unchanged.

This study remains limited in scope to two primary texts and a focused set of theoretical frameworks. While this limitation allowed for a detailed and sustained analysis, it also opens several avenues for further inquiry that can extend and refine the arguments developed here.

One possible direction lies in extending this framework to a wider range of narrative texts that engage with mythological or reinterpreted female figures. Such work would help determine whether the model of feminine agency identified in this study, particularly one grounded in interiority, relational awareness, and balance, remains consistent across different retellings, or whether it shifts in response to narrative form, authorial intent, or audience expectations. Expanding the textual field

would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how feminine strength is articulated across contemporary narrative practices.

A second direction involves applying this analytical approach to a broader range of visual and media texts. Since this study has shown that cinematic representations often structure empowerment differently from literary narratives, further research could examine whether similar patterns of regulation, containment, or transformation appear across other forms of visual storytelling. Such work would help clarify how the medium itself shapes the possibilities available for representing feminine agency.

At the level of theory, there is considerable scope to deepen the dialogue between Indian Knowledge System and feminist thought. This study has engaged selectively with concepts such as shakti and integrative models of selfhood. However, IKS offers a much wider philosophical field that remains underexplored in relation to gender and agency. Future research could develop this dialogue further, not as a replacement of existing frameworks, but as a way of expanding the conceptual vocabulary through which feminine strength is understood.

Finally, this study has focused primarily on representation, on how feminine agency is constructed within texts. A related line of inquiry would shift attention toward reception: how such representations are read, interpreted, and internalised by different audiences. Exploring how readers and viewers respond to models of empowerment, whether they recognise, resist, or reinterpret them, would extend the present analysis beyond the text and into its lived significance.

This study began with a question that is, at its core, a simple one: what does it actually mean for a woman to be powerful? The answer that contemporary narratives most frequently offer holds that a powerful woman looks like a certain kind of strength, controlled, invulnerable, and driven by force rather than feeling. It suggests, in other words, that a powerful woman looks like a powerful man. The analysis conducted here does not offer a definitive answer, but it does suggest that the answers currently available in mainstream narrative are narrower than they need to be.

Draupadi does not become powerful by suppressing what she is. She becomes powerful by refusing to allow the world’s definition of power to replace her own. Her

intuition, her emotional intelligence, her refusal to let grief become silence, her refusal to let injustice become acceptance: none of these are things she overcomes on the way to strength. They are the strength itself. This study has argued that recognising this is not a matter of preferring one narrative over another. It is a matter of understanding what empowerment actually requires, and of being willing to acknowledge that a model which demands women abandon their difference in order to be taken seriously is not liberation. It is a differently shaped constraint. True empowerment does not ask women to become something else. It begins where Draupadi begins: with a self that knows its own value and refuses to be told otherwise. A model that requires women to leave themselves behind in order to be recognised as strong is worth questioning. The act of questioning it, carefully and with attention to the texts that carry it, is where this study has sought to make its contribution.

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