

A Comparative Study of *The Mahabharata* and *The Palace of Illusion*.

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Abstract

Mahabharata is an ancient Indian epic, a vast narrative that explores various themes including duty, righteousness, and the consequences of war. It's a foundational text in Hindu philosophy and mythology. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a modern retelling of the *Mahabharata*, focusing on Draupadi's perspective. The novel delves into Draupadi's emotions, struggles, and the complex relationships within the epic. While the *Mahabharata* is a traditional epic, *The Palace of Illusions* is a contemporary reinterpretation, offering a fresh narrative lens and emotional depth to the characters, particularly Draupadi.

Keywords: Epic, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas, Kurukshetra war, Hastinapura, Swayamvara, Draupadi, Krishna, Kaurava, Pandavas.

In *Mahabharata*, the concept of karma is central to its philosophy. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a part of the *Mahabharata*, extensively discusses the idea of duty and righteous action. The principle is that one should perform their duties without attachment to the results, focusing on the action itself. Lord Krishna, who serves as Arjuna's charioteer and guide in the *Gita*, emphasizes the importance of performing one's duties in accordance with dharma (righteousness) while maintaining a detached attitude toward the outcomes. This teaching is often referred to as Nishkama Karma emphasizing selfless action. Lord Krishna plays a pivotal role in the *Mahabharata*, particularly in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a sacred text within the epic. Krishna serves as Arjuna's charioteer and guide during the Kurukshetra War. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna imparts spiritual wisdom and guidance to Arjuna, addressing concepts such as duty (dharma), righteousness, and the nature of existence. Krishna emphasizes the importance of performing one's duties without attachment to the results, advocating selfless action. The *Gita* also introduces various paths of spiritual practice, including devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jnana), and disciplined action (karma yoga). Beyond the *Gita*, Krishna is involved in other aspects of the *Mahabharata*'s narrative, such as negotiating peace, helping the Pandavas in various ways, and revealing his divine cosmic form (Vishvarupa) to Arjuna. Overall, Krishna's teachings in the *Mahabharata* carry profound philosophical and ethical insights.

Vyasa, also known as Vedavyasa or Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, is a central and revered figure in Hindu tradition. He is credited with composing the *Mahabharata*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. Vyasa is also considered the author of other important texts, including the Puranas and the Brahma Sutras. Vedavyasa, also known as Krishna Dvaipayana Vyasa, is a revered sage and a central figure in Hindu tradition. He is credited with composing the *Mahabharata*, one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India. Vyasa is often referred to as Veda Vyasa because he is believed to have divided the Vedas into four

parts – Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda, compiled them for easier understanding. Apart from the Mahabharata, Vyasa is also traditionally considered the author of other important texts, including the Puranas and the Brahma Sutras. His contributions to Hindu scripture and philosophy are significant and he is respected as a key figure in preserving and disseminating the knowledge of the Vedas

Draupadi is a central character in the Mahabharata and plays a significant role in the epic. She is the daughter of King Drupada and the wife of the Pandavas. Draupadi is known for her strength, intelligence, and resilience. One of the notable incidents involving Draupadi is the infamous dice game, where the Pandavas lose their kingdom and even themselves in a gamble. Draupadi faces humiliation in the royal court as the Kauravas attempt to disrobe her. In this distressing moment, Draupadi prays to Lord Krishna, and through divine intervention, her sari becomes endless, saving her from public shame. Draupadi's character highlights themes of injustice, resilience and the importance of dharma (righteousness). She is a symbol of strength and determination in the face of adversity, and her story serves as a powerful narrative thread in the Mahabharata.

Draupadi, also known as Panchali, is a key character in the Mahabharata, the ancient Indian epic. Born from the fire, she is the daughter of King Drupada and becomes the wife of the Pandavas – Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva. Draupadi's life is marked by both glory and suffering. She marries all five Pandavas due to a misunderstanding during her swayamvara. The infamous dice game in the Mahabharata leads to the Pandavas losing their kingdom and later Draupadi herself in the gamble. This event results in her public humiliation when the Kauravas attempt to disrobe her in the royal court. Draupadi is a strong and determined character who seeks justice and righteousness. Her devotion to Lord Krishna is evident, especially during critical moments when she turns to him for help. The divine intervention during the attempt to disrobe her is one of the notable instances illustrating the

significance of her character in the epic. Draupadi's story in the Mahabharata is a complex and poignant portrayal of a woman navigating the challenges of a tumultuous time.

In Mahabharata, the relationship between Draupadi and Krishna is characterized by a deep bond of trust, devotion, and divine intervention. Krishna plays a significant role in Draupadi's life, especially during critical moments. One notable instance is during the dice game where the Pandavas lose their kingdom and even themselves. Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava, orders Draupadi's disrobing in the royal court, causing immense distress. In this dire situation, Draupadi turns to Krishna for help, and he miraculously saves her by ensuring her sari becomes endless, preventing her from being fully disrobed. This event underscores Krishna's protective and supportive role in Draupadi's life. Draupadi, in turn, holds a deep devotion for Krishna, seeking solace and guidance from him in moments of despair. Their relationship in the Mahabharata is a testament to the intertwining of the divine with mortal lives, illustrating the theme of divine intervention in the face of injustice and adversity.

The Palace of Illusions is a novel written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. It is a reimagining of the Indian epic Mahabharata, narrated from the perspective of Draupadi (Panchaali), the wife of the Pandavas. The novel explores Draupadi's emotions, experiences, and the complexities of her relationships within the epic's framework. Through Draupadi's eyes, the novel delves into the political intrigues, personal conflicts, and the grandeur of the Mahabharata. *The Palace of Illusions* provides a unique and feminist perspective on the familiar story, offering readers a deeper understanding of the characters and events within the epic.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed Indian-American author, poet, and professor. She was born on July 29, 1956, in Kolkata, India. Divakaruni's works often explore themes of identity, immigration, women's issues and the blending of Indian and American cultures.

Some notable works by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are as follows, *The Mistress of Spices* is a novel that weaves together themes of magic, love, and the immigrant experience, telling the story of an Indian woman with mystical powers. *Sister of My Heart*, this novel explores the complex relationship between two cousins growing up in Kolkata, India, and their experiences as they navigate love, family, and secrets. *The Palace of Illusion* is a reimagining of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, offering a feminist take on the epic. *One Amazing Thing* is a novel that unfolds in the aftermath of an earthquake as a diverse group of characters trapped in a visa office share stories of one amazing thing from their lives. *Before We Visit the Goddess*, this novel spans generations, exploring the lives of women in a family and the complexities of mother-daughter relationships.

Apart from her novels, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has also published poetry collections, short stories, and essays. She is known for her ability to blend rich storytelling with cultural insights, providing readers with a deep understanding of the human experience. In addition to her literary contributions, Divakaruni has been involved in teaching and promoting literature.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has received both praise and criticism. Positive aspects include the narrative Perspective is the choice of Draupadi as the narrator provides a fresh and often feminist perspective on the Mahabharata. It gives a voice to a character who, in the original epic, might be seen more as a pawn in the larger political game. Character Exploration of this novel delves into the emotional and psychological depths of characters, providing a more nuanced understanding of their motivations and struggles.

Writing Style of Divakaruni's prose is often praised for its lyrical and evocative qualities. The novel weaves a captivating narrative that draws readers into the world of ancient India.

Critics say that deviation from the epic is that the novel takes creative liberties with the original Mahabharata, altering events and character dynamics to suit the author's narrative objectives. Purists might find this a point of contention. While some appreciate the nuanced

characterizations, others feel that certain characters may be overly romanticized or simplified, potentially losing the complexity of the original epic's characters. While many appreciate the feminist perspective, others argue that it might sometimes feel anachronistic, imposing modern values on characters and societies of ancient times.

Ultimately, opinions on *The Palace of Illusions* may vary based on individual preferences and interpretations of the Mahabharata. The novel has been celebrated for bringing a fresh voice to a familiar tale, but it also sparks discussions about the balance between creative reinterpretation and faithfulness to the source material.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is not primarily known as a critic of the Mahabharata rather she is renowned for her creative reinterpretation of the epic in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. In this work, Divakaruni offers a unique perspective by narrating the story from Draupadi's point of view, exploring the emotional complexities and adding a feminist lens to the traditional narrative. While her novel engages with the Mahabharata, it's important to note that Divakaruni is more recognized as a fiction writer and storyteller than a traditional literary critic. Her contribution lies in providing a fresh, imaginative and often feminist interpretation of the epic through her literary works rather than through critical analysis in a scholarly sense.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a reimagining of the Indian epic Mahabharata and the best retelling novel is a fictional take on the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* through the eyes of the female protagonist Panchaali narrated from the perspective of Draupadi, also known as Panchali. The novel begins with Draupadi's birth from the sacrificial fire and follows her life from childhood to her marriage with the Pandavas. Draupadi's complex relationship with each Pandava, her struggles in the patriarchal society of ancient India, and her role in the political machinations leading to the great Kurukshetra War are

vividly portrayed. Central to the story is Draupadi's love for Karna, a character often portrayed as her unrequited love in various versions of the Mahabharata. The novel explores the emotional turmoil of Draupadi as she navigates political intrigues, familial conflicts and her desires.

The dramatic events of the Mahabharata, including the dice game where the Pandavas lose their kingdom, Draupadi's public humiliation and the war itself, are retold through Draupadi's eyes. The narrative emphasizes her strength, resilience and the illusions that surround her life, symbolized by the palace of illusions. The novel captures the essence of Draupadi's character, offering a feminist perspective on the epic while delving into the human aspects of love, sacrifice, and the quest for identity. *The Palace of Illusions* is a compelling and imaginative retelling that brings Draupadi's voice to the forefront, providing a fresh interpretation of the Mahabharata.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has garnered both acclaim and critique. Draupadi's first-person narration provides a unique and fresh perspective on the Mahabharata. It humanizes the characters and adds emotional depth to the epic tale. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi is often seen as a feminist take, giving agency to a character who, in the original Mahabharata, is sometimes viewed more as a victim of circumstance. The novel delves into the emotional intricacies of Draupadi's relationships, particularly her complex feelings for Karna. This adds a layer of psychological depth to the characters. Some critics argue that the novel takes substantial creative liberties with the original Mahabharata, altering events and characters. Traditionalists might find this challenging. While the novel offers nuanced characterizations, some critics contend that certain characters may be oversimplified or romanticized, potentially losing the complexity inherent in the original epic. The feminist perspective, while appreciated by many, has also faced criticism for potentially imposing modern values on characters and situations that

existed in ancient times. While *The Palace of Illusions* is widely praised for its innovative storytelling and feminist lens, critics have raised concerns about departures from the original epic and the potential modernization of characters. Ultimately, individual preferences and perspectives on the reinterpretation of ancient myths play a significant role in how readers perceive the novel.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni primarily focuses on Draupadi's perspective, providing a unique and nuanced portrayal of her life, emotions, and experiences. The novel does touch upon Draupadi's relationship with Karna, adding depth to their interactions and exploring the complexities of their connection within the Mahabharata. In the retelling, the author delves into the emotions, conflicts, and choices faced by Draupadi and Karna, offering a more intimate and personal exploration of their characters and the dynamics between them. The novel provides a fresh perspective on the Mahabharata, emphasizing Draupadi's role and her relationships, including the one with Karna. In *The Palace of Illusions*, a retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, the relationship between Draupadi and Karna is complex. Karna harbors unrequited love for Draupadi, but due to circumstances and social norms, their connection remains mostly unexplored. The story unfolds with moments of tension and unspoken emotions between them, adding depth to their characters within the epic narrative.

It traces Princess Panchali's life, beginning with her birth in fire and following her spirited balancing act as a woman with five husbands who have been cheated out of their father's kingdom. Panchali is swept into their quest to reclaim their birthright, remaining at their side through years of exile and a terrible civil war involving all the important kings of India. Meanwhile, it never loses sight of her strategic duels with her mother-in-law, her complicated friendship with the enigmatic Krishna, or her secret attraction to the mysterious man who is

her husband's most dangerous enemy. Panchali is a fiery female redefining the world of warriors, gods, and the ever-manipulating hands of fate.

Panchaali is the narrator and protagonist of *The Palace of Illusions*. She and her brother, Dhri are born from the fire into the kingdom of King Drupad, their father. From a very early age, her central struggle is the strict gender conventions of her community, in which men are warriors and statesmen while women are beautiful objects who must remain at home and practice the domestic arts. She notes, "I hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world that extended past what I could imagine, the world of the senses and that which lay beyond them" (Divakaruni, 2009, p.24). To develop her mind and spirit beyond the confines of her gender, she sits in on her brother's lessons, learning about government and the world. She also consults the sage Vyasa, who reveals that she will be a great and powerful queen who marries five husbands but also causes great destruction and sadness in her kingdom. Though Panchaali fulfills Vyasa's prophesy by marrying the five Pandava brothers, she pines after Karna, a warrior who competed at her swayamvar. The Pandavas live in the Palace of Illusions, and Panchaali notes that the palace "had transformed me in ways I hadn't realized" (Divakaruni, 2009, p.180). Draupadi always longed for the love of Karna, which is not by compulsion, but by pure love. She had admonished him in the Swayamvar proceedings of his lower birth, not knowing Karna's true birth. Almost in every chapter, Draupadi's love for Karna is described very passionately.

From the study, it is evident that in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions* questions the authority of power that is applied to women through masculine literature by framing it as truth and reality. By exposing the power structures and constructing a new reality and truth in which women are given the opportunity to express themselves via ongoing interrogation or dialogism, this work attempts to alter the way that power is executed.

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