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**A FEMINIST REIMAGINING OF EPIC PROPORTIONS: *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS* BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI: A REVIEW
(A Book Review By)**

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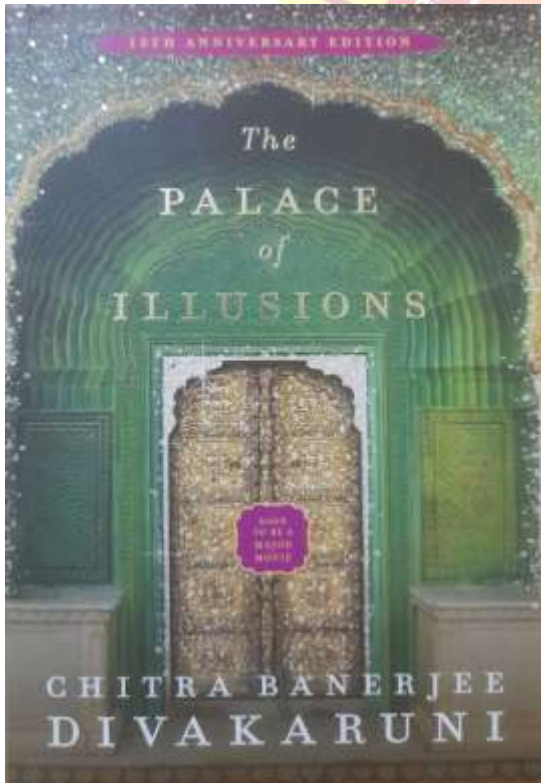
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About Book:



Title:

The Palace of Illusions: 10th Anniversary Edition

Author: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

Publisher: Picador India

Year of Publication: 2019

ISBN: 978-93-86215-96-3

Pages: 360

Price: Rs. 360



Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Indian epic *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi, the enigmatic queen of the Pandavas. The novel reimagines the ancient tale, delving into themes of power, destiny, and gender dynamics through a first-person narrative. Divakaruni, a celebrated author of Indian diaspora literature, is known for her works, which often explore complex female characters and the intersections of tradition and modernity. *The Palace of Illusions*, centers on Panchaali, or Draupadi as she narrates her journey from a princess born out of fire to a queen entangled in the complexities of politics, relationships, and war. Divakaruni vividly portrays Panchaali's inner world, breathing life into a character who has often been overshadowed in traditional narratives. Divakaruni, known for her evocative storytelling and strong female protagonists, reimagines Draupadi as a woman of ambition, intelligence, and vulnerability, giving her a voice that has long been overshadowed in traditional patriarchal narratives.

The novel begins with Panchaali's birth, a miraculous emergence from the sacrificial fire, destined to alter the course of history. From her early years in her father's palace in Panchala, she is portrayed as a fiery, intelligent, and ambitious individual. Her destiny is intertwined with the prophecy of her unusual life—a prophecy that becomes the backbone of her journey. Raised in the shadow of the prophecy that she will change history, Panchaali grows up questioning the roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society. Panchaali's swayamvar (marriage contest) leads to her union with the five Pandava brothers, an event laden with political and emotional complexities; she becomes both a queen and a pawn in a game of alliances and vengeance. As the queen of the Pandavas, she experiences both glory and humiliation, particularly during the infamous dice game where she is disrobed in a court full of men. This incident becomes a turning point, fueling her thirst for vengeance and setting the stage for the great Kurukshetra war. Through her narrative, Panchaali grapples with her roles as a daughter, wife, queen, and most importantly a woman, offering a fresh perspective on events such as the exile of the Pandavas, the war, and its aftermath.

Panchaali emerges as a multi-dimensional character, defying the passive archetype often assigned to women in mythology. She is flawed yet relatable, her strength tempered by her vulnerabilities. Divakaruni portrays her as a woman ahead of her time, yearning for agency in a patriarchal world. The tension between her love for Karna, a forbidden desire, and her loyalty to the Pandavas adds depth to her character, making her struggles and triumphs all the more compelling. Krishna's portrayal as Draupadi's confidant and moral guide adds a spiritual dimension to the narrative. His presence shows the theme of destiny versus free will. The Pandavas, while central to the epic, are seen through Panchaali's critical gaze, highlighting their human flaws. Panchaali's life is a constant negotiation between societal expectations and her aspirations.

Draupadi is primarily referred to as Panchaali—a name that emphasizes her connection to the kingdom of Panchala, where she was born. This name is significant in the novel as it reflects her origins and the complex identity she grapples with throughout the story. However, she is also referred to as Draupadi, especially in certain contexts where her identity is tied to her relationship with the five Pandavas. Both names are used interchangeably, but Panchaali is the more prominent one, particularly when she narrates her own story, as it resonates with her sense of belonging and the challenges she faces in a patriarchal society. Panchaali is a name that carries certain dignity and respect, tied to her royal lineage, while Draupadi becomes more synonymous with her role in the epic—her complex relationships and the events that lead to the *Mahabharata's* pivotal moments.



Both names serve to enrich the character's multifaceted identity, with Panchaali being central to her personal story and evolution.

Divakaruni's prose is lyrical yet accessible, weaving the grandeur of myth with the intimacy of personal reflection. The first-person narrative allows readers to see the world through Draupadi's eyes, imbuing the story with an emotional immediacy. The author's use of vivid imagery and metaphors, such as the palace symbolizing unattainable dreams, enhances the novel's poetic quality. The novel adheres to the episodic structure of the *Mahabharata* while focusing on Draupadi's perspective, offering a fresh lens on familiar events. The pacing is well-maintained, balancing moments of introspection with action-packed scenes. However, some readers may find the novel's faithfulness to the epic's structure somewhat restrictive, as it limits the scope for narrative surprises. Divakaruni's portrayal of ancient India is richly detailed, bringing to life the opulence of palaces, the serenity of hermitages, and the chaos of battlefields. The settings are not mere backdrops but integral to the story, reflecting Draupadi's emotional states and the larger societal dynamics.

At its core, *The Palace of Illusions* explores the intersection of gender and power. Draupadi's narrative highlights the constraints imposed on women, even those in positions of power, and her defiance becomes a testament to resilience. The novel also delves into themes of destiny and free will, questioning whether Draupadi's life was shaped by her choices or preordained by the gods. Another significant theme is the nature of illusion and reality, encapsulated by the palace itself. The grandeur of the Pandavas' palace, which deceives even the wisest of visitors, mirrors the illusory nature of human desires and ambitions.

Reading *The Palace of Illusions* is more than just engaging with a novel; it is an introspective journey into the life of a woman navigating a patriarchal society. Draupadi's voice, bold and unapologetically honest, resonates deeply, compelling readers to reflect on societal norms and individual agency. Her struggles with identity, power, and relationships evoke empathy, while her courage inspires admiration. One of the most striking aspects of the novel is how it redefines heroism through a feminist lens. In traditional retellings of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is often relegated to the sidelines or depicted as the catalyst for chaos. Divakaruni's reimagining reclaims Draupadi's agency, transforming her from a passive character into a protagonist with her ambitions, desires, and flaws. This shift not only enhances Draupadi's character but also prompts readers to question the historical erasure of women's voices in patriarchal narratives. As a reader, I found Draupadi's inner conflicts particularly relatable. Her constant negotiation between societal expectations and personal aspirations mirrors the challenges faced by many women even today. For instance, her yearning for power and respect is counterbalanced by her vulnerability and need for emotional connection. Her complex relationship with Karna—marked by unspoken love and regret—adds a layer of poignancy to her character, highlighting the human tendency to long for what is unattainable. Draupadi's relationship with Krishna stands out as one of the most profound aspects of the novel. His role as her confidant and guide provides her with emotional and spiritual strength. Their conversations are laced with wisdom, humor, and affection, showcasing a bond that transcends societal norms. Krishna's enigmatic presence and subtle interventions remind readers of the interplay between destiny and free will, a recurring theme in the novel.

As someone who has read traditional versions of the *Mahabharata*, this reimagining felt like a revelation. It allowed me to view the epic from an entirely new angle, appreciating its nuances while questioning its limitations. The novel also deepened my appreciation for mythology



as a dynamic and adaptable form of storytelling, capable of addressing contemporary issues. For readers familiar with the *Mahabharata*, the novel provides a fresh perspective, while newcomers will find it an engaging introduction to the epic's complexities. For me, it was not just a retelling of an epic but a reminder of the resilience and complexity of women's voices that have been silenced or overshadowed for centuries.

The Palace of Illusions not only reclaims Draupadi's voice but also redefines her legacy, cementing her place as one of literature's most unforgettable heroines. Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* is a story that lingers long after the last page is turned.

References

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions: 10th Anniversary Edition*. Picador India, 2019. Print.



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To Cite the Book Review: Phatak, Sakshi. "A Feminist Reimagining of Epic Proportions: The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A Review." *Literary Cognizance*, V - 2 (September, 2024): 07-10. Web.

