

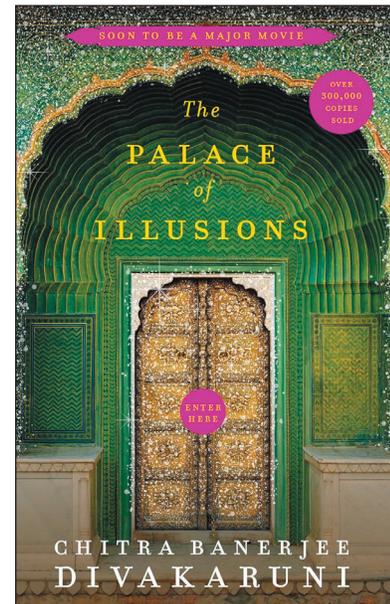
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
The Palace of Illusions
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Review by Ramlal Agarwal

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is a conversion of the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, into a 21st-century novel. The *Mahabharata* expounds the Hindu philosophy of man and his fate. It expounds Hindu beliefs in rebirth and karma. It is a sprawling epic with powerful characters with puffed-up egos, intractable conceit, and magical powers, little knowing that their previous births and deeds hem them in and they are not free to do what they like. The *Mahabharata* deals with the age when women were treated as property and dealt with as such. It deals with a society wrought with feuds and prejudices carried from generation to generation and obsessed with avenging what they believe to be an insult. The *Mahabharata* is directly in opposition to the Western idea of free will. In it, everything is preordained, and one is driven to one's destiny willy-nilly.

Chitra Banerjee spins a riveting novel out of it. She does not change the storyline but imparts a modern touch. She starts it with Draupadi (Panchali) at its center and as the narrator.

The novel begins with the background of Draupadi's birth. Prince Drupad, the prince of Panchaal, and Drona were together at a gurukul. When it was time for them to part, both embraced each other with tearful eyes, and Prince Drupad asked Drona to come to him when he becomes the king, and all he would have would be his, too. Eventually, the prince becomes the King and Drona, leads an austere life, marries, and has a son named Ashwatthama. Once, the young one started crying for milk when there was no milk in the house; Drona's wife mixed a spoonful of flour in water and gave it to her son. This hurt Drona, and he decided to meet Drupad. When Drona called on him, Drupad refused to recognize him and sent him away. Drona feels deeply hurt and vows to seek vengeance. Later, he becomes the teacher of the Kauravas and Pandu's children, completes their education, and demands Drupad's kingdom as his fee. Arjun wins it and presents Drupad before Drona. Instead of insulting him, Drona says that he will take half of his kingdom and return the other half to him and lets him go. Seething with defeat and insult, Drupad simmers with revenge. He understands that he cannot defeat the Pandavas. Hence, he longs for a son who will do it for him and perform a yajna. The god of fire gifts him with a son and a daughter with a prophecy that the son will be the nemesis of Drona and the daughter will change the course of history. Drupad names the son as Dhrishtadyumna and the daughter as Draupadi.



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Draupadi grows up alongside her brother Dhri and her nurse, Dhai Ma, often contemplating the prophecy made at her birth. He also develops a liking for Karna, though Dhri is opposed to him because Karna is the son of a charioteer of low caste. When Draupadi reaches marriageable age, her father, Draupad, arranges a competition and declares that the winner in the competition will get Draupadi's hand. Karna gets impatient to participate in the competition, but Draupadi impulsively asks Karna his father's name. Karna takes it as an insult and withdraws from the competition. Draupadi's impulsive question marks the beginning of her suffering. Ultimately, Arjun wins the competition. The Pandavas become overjoyed and tell their mother, Kunti, that Arjuna has won a prize. Kunti unwittingly tells them to share it equally.

Thus, Draupadi is wedded to all five brothers, despite her longing for Karna. Of her five husbands, Draupadi feels Bheem is very solicitous, but her other husbands are rather too self-engrossed.

Bhishma prevails upon Dhritrashtra to give the Pandavas their share in the kingdom. Dhritrashtra gives them the arid land in Karnavat. However, the Pandavas turn it into a fertile and prosperous land and build a palace for themselves, which they call Indraprastha. Draupadi calls it the Palace of Illusions. It is here that she commits another blunder of her life.

The Pandavas invite the Kauravas to visit the Palace of Illusions. While going around the palace, Duryodhana mistakes a pond for a bridge and falls into it. Draupadi watches Duryodhana wading in it, laughs jeeringly, and says a blind man has to be blind, too.

Duryodhana is stung by the remark and swears revenge. On returning to Hastinapur, he, in collusion with Shakuni, gets ready with a plan to appropriate Indraprastha. They invite the Pandavas for a return visit to Hastinapur. Pandavas demur, but Draupadi begs them to accept the invitation.

A game of dice is arranged between Yudhishtira and Shakuni. Yudhishtira proves no match for Shakuni and goes on suffering humiliating defeat after defeat, losing all his wealth. His brothers advise him to call it a day, but Yudhishtira thinks it demeaning to deny Shakuni's challenge. In a moment of sheer desperation, he stakes not only his brothers but also the honor of Draupadi, plunging them all into the depths of uncertainty. Thus, the Pandavas become destitute and slaves to Duryodhana. The much-talked-about event of stripping Draupadi follows. The incident is seminal in the understanding of the epic and Chitra's novel.

When the incident unfolds, all the heroes of the epic, like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa, Karna, Arjun, Bheem, and others, are present in the court. Karna instigates Dushasan to strip Draupadi naked notwithstanding his secret love and longing for her, as he later confessed before Bhishma lying on the bed of arrows and was overheard by Draupadi. The incident occurred because each one of them felt bound by a code of honor and stuck to it, not realizing that something greater than their code of honor was being violated and shunned from doing what is most expedient at the moment. Only Krishna is free from the bonds that bind other heroes, and he helps Draupadi with his magical powers. He alone among the characters in the epic is what Forster calls a dynamic character.

Pandavas win the war against Duryodhana. They ruled Hastinapur

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for several decades. At long last, they set out to reach heaven physically. On the way, Draupadi falls first. Lying on the rocks of the Himalayas, she recalls her life and the men that mattered most in her life. Here, she confesses her love for Karna, though she and Karna jeered and insulted each other throughout their lives. She regrets the question she asked Karna when he rose to participate in the competition to win her hand.

She feels she did something she did not want to. Karna did something he didn't want to. They and the entire clan in the Mahabharata, except Krishna, did what they did not want to because they were victims of illusions, false pride, and excessive adherence to their beliefs.

Bheema notices that Draupadi has fallen; he wants to rush to support her, but Yudhishtira holds him back and reminds him of the rule that once you are on the path, you cannot retrace your steps, no matter what happens. Draupadi squirms when she hears Yudhishtir. Rules are always more important to Yudhishtira than human pain or human love. In her last moments, Draupadi realizes the meaning of joy, peace, and happiness; she realizes that neither the wild up-and-down of the wheel of passion nor the Palace of Illusions, which she loved and prided herself on, gave her happiness. She realizes that she was happy while playing pranks with Krishna, when she prepared food for him, or when Krishna consoled her and acted as a balm in her suffering and healed her.

She realises that Karna is a singeing fire and Krishna is a balm for her wounds.

Chitra Banerjee avoids the grand style of the epic. She tells a painfully poignant story of a beautiful and sensitive woman of noble birth, senselessly tossed from one extreme to another.