

**CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS: A CRITIQUE****Sadananda Kuri, Research Scholar, Dept of English, Rani Channamma University, Belagavi*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born as Chitrlekha Banerjee in 1956 has been an Indian-American writer, poet and professor of creative-writing at the University of Houston at Texas, USA.

Banerjee, like Jhumpa Lahiri, began her literary career as a short story writer with *Arranged Marriage* in 1996. Her two novels *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart* appeared soon. Her other novels are *Oleander Girl*, *Palace of Illusions*, and *One Amazing Thing*. All these novels are made into films. Wikipedia adds, "Divakaruni works are set in India and America, and often focus on the experience of South Asian immigrants." (**Wikipedia 1**) Divakaruni has written numerous books for children as well as adults, including realistic fiction, historical novels, magical realism, myth and fantasy.

**Palace of Illusions as an epic story:**

Epic is a form of literature or genre. M.H. Abrams defines epic as 'a long verse narrative on a serious subject' (Abrams 109) such as Helen's elopement, Kaurava's refusal of a piece of land to the Pandavas, or the abduction of Sita. There is a distinction between traditional and literary (modern) epics. There are folk epics too. We have such epics like *The Iliad*, *The Ramayan*, *The Paradise Lost*, besides, John Keats's *Hyperion*, and William Blake's *Jerusalem*.

Aristotle in his book *Poetics* defines what tragedy is. He defines epic too, comedy too. He thinks epic is only second highest to the tragedy. Aristotle defines the epic as the narrative "with more than one plot." (Aristotle 106)

Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) is published by Doubleday and it has won several awards. *The Place of Illusions* is based on the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. It is as if told by Draupadi, also called Panchali. It is about a heroic woman living with gender setbacks in chivalrous age. Booklist states, "Smart, resilient and courageous Panchali, born of five, marries all five of the famously heroic Pandava brothers, harbours a secret love; endures a long exile in the wilderness, instigates a catastrophic war and slowly learns the truth about Krishna, her mysterious friend." (Booklist 1)

An epic follows the qualities of a loose but elaborate plot sequence, too many characters, reasoning (ideologies), diction and song (all belong to drama too). The plot may have digressions as in the *Mahabharata*, and the characters will be royal people. The happenings are from the remote past.

Critics think an epic is national in character, and it is called a great narrative. All this is applicable to the *Ramayan* story.

Divakaruni's novel *Palace of Illusions* begins with a family history - the Kuru dynasty. The novel has select characters from the *Mahabharata*. They are Draupadi, Dhri, all the Pandavas, Krishna, Karna, and Vyas. Others, though less important, are Aswathama, Drona, Drupad, Keechak, Virat, Sudeshna and Vidur. *The Palace of Illusions* is quite a lengthy novel with 43 chapters.

The first chapter 'Fire' is about fire sermon conducted by the priests at King Drupad's royal court. The two princes Dri and Draupadi are at it. The family servant Dhai Ma throws light on the royalty. The next chapter 'Blue' speaks of Drupadi's fascination for the color of the sky - Krishna's color too, Shiva's color too. 'Milk' speaks of Arjun defeating Drupad, just because of Drona, who wanted to take vengeance on his old friend Drupad. This incident speaks of how the brahmins exploited Kshatriyas. 'Cosmology', is the next chapter, providing the image of the earth.

All this background in *The Palace of Illusions* hints at the Vedic patriarchal society. The next chapter 'Smoke' alludes to woman's subjugation. Draupadi feels that the Vedic society is oppressive to women (and Sudras).

The old world abounded in many evils and witchcrafts. Sikhandi is Draupadi's older brother born before Dristidumna (Dhri). He is a eunuch. He has taken the vow to revenge on Bhishma. Sikhandi visits the royal palace of Drupad. He tells Draupadi his tragic story, encapsulating the vow of revenge.

'Fish' refers to the Swayamvar scene where Draupadi is to be given in marriage to the winner in archery competition. In this regard, Draupadi examines royal portraits. She feels that Arjun might win her. The deviation in the story includes her wishes to love either Krishna or Karna. The swayamvar begins in Krishna's presence, and Duryodhana tries hard to win the competition, and fails ('Scar'). The chapter 'Brinjal' is significant.

Draupadi, after wedding, goes with Arjun to his secluded house in a poor colony. Because the Pandavas are living in exile called Ajnatavas (disguise). The other four Pandavas wonder at Arjun's victory and winning Draupadi. One of them says the happy thing to Kunti, preparing food and she says the following:

The tallest of them if I remembered right, his name was Bheem - winked at Arjun. "Mother's always so serious! Let's play a trick on her." Before the others could stop him, he called out, "Ma, come and see what we've brought home today."

"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." (*Palace* 106)

The Pandavas shift to Khandava forest, and build 'Palaces of illusions.' 'Wives' refers to polygamy of the times, and Draupadi criticises polygamy, and this is what Divakaruni projects as innovation on the old plot. 'After Life' refers to Narada's visit to Yudhishtira. Krishna too visits the Pandavas for guiding to win back their lost kingdom from the Kauravas.

Meanwhile, Draupadi tries to love Karna, who has no interest in her. Duryodhana is beguiled in the palace of illusions. The cruel gambling takes place, victimising Draupadi. Meanwhile, the Pandavas complete their term of exile, and fail to get their lost kingdom from the Kauravas.

There is a deadly Mahabharata war in Kuruksetra. Bhisma, Duryodhana, Drona lead the Kaurava army, while Krishna leads the Pandava army. The titles of chapters like 'Secrets,' 'Avalanche,' 'Owl,' 'Pyre,' 'Ash' speak of the deadly war for 18 days, and all the Kauravas (even the five Pandava princes) are killed.

The Pandavas learn that even Krishna is killed. The last chapter 43 "Fire" speaks of the Pandavas' entering into heaven. Draupadi notices all the Pandavas, Kauravas, and the other kings in heaven. She wonders about the commodity called life.

### References:

1. Abrams, M. H. and G. G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage, 2012.
2. Aristotle. *Poetics*. *Norton Anthology of Criticism*. New York: WW Norton Inc, 2010.
3. Booklist, en, m. wikipedia.org
4. Divakaruni, C. B. *The Palace of Illusions*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2018.
5. Wikipedia, C.B. Divakaruni.