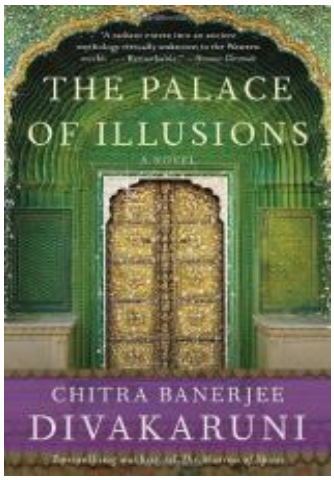
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The Palace of Illusions: A Novel

by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni



About the Book

A reimagining of the world-famous Indian epic, the Mahabharat --- told from the point of view of the wife of an amazing woman.

Relevant to today?s war-torn world, **The Palace of Illusions** takes us back to a time that is half history, half myth, and wholly magical. Narrated by Panchaali, the wife of the legendary Pandavas brothers in the Mahabharat, the novel gives us a new interpretation of this ancient tale.

The novel traces the princess Panchaali'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. Panchaali 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, we never lose 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 husbands' most dangerous enemy. Panchaali is a fiery female redefining for us a world of warriors, gods, and the ever-manipulating hands of fate.

Discussion Guide

1. In the book?s opening pages, Panchaali relates the story of her birth. Dhai Ma says that voices spoke from the fire just before Dhri and Panchaali stepped from it. Given that this narrative is a retelling of the ancient Indian epic, do you read these events as literal or symbolic? How would you describe the reality and the illusions being portrayed in the tale?

2. How does the prediction that Panchaali will change the course of history influence her character as she matures? In what way are her lessons in ?the sixty-four arts that ladies must know? a challenge to her destiny? Were there predictions made by family or friends early in your life about your future? If so, how did they affect your choices as you grew up?

3. When Sikhandi tells Panchaali the story of his past, Panchaali asks Krishna to confirm it. Krishna responds, ?He believes it to be so. Isn?t that what truth is? The force of a person?s believing seeps into those around him?into the very earth and air and water?until there?s nothing else.? How does this description of truth shed light on the ideas of self-determination and destiny throughout the novel?

4. After the predictions made for Panchaali by Vyasa the sage, Panchaali marries the five sons of the widowed queen Kunti. On her wedding night, as she lies on a mat near the brothers? feet, Panchaali thinks of Karna. How does the memory of Karna guide her throughout the narrative? How would you characterize their relationship?

5. Panchaali relates, ?Palaces have always fascinated me, even a gloom-filled structure like my father?s that was a fitting carapace for his vengeful obsession. For isn?t that what our homes are ultimately, our fantasies made corporeal, our secret selves exposed?? How does the Palace of Illusions, built by Maya, reveal the fantasies and longings of Panchaali?s husbands and of Panchaali herself? In what ways does your own home reflect your secret self? If Maya were to build you a palace, what would it be like?

6. After Sisupal?s death, Duryodhan builds himself a grand palace and invites Panchaali and the Pandavas to be his guests in Hastinapur. What mental characteristics cause Yudhisthir to lose everything in a last game of dice? How is this catastrophe a personal turning point for Panchaali? When she is taken to court, what does she learn about her power over her husbands? About the purity of her own heart?

7. During their banishment in the forest, Dhri gently chastises Panchaali, asking her where his sweet sister has gone. She thinks to herself, ?*She?s dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined*.? What emotion does this passage evoke in you toward the characters and their fates? Have events in your own life caused you to be stronger and more determined in achieving your life?s purposes?

8. When Panchaali discovers a golden lotus floating in the river, she lifts it to her face and forgets her vengeance. When the color fades and the petals droop, her sorrows return. What advice from Krishna does she remember? When she goes to her faithful husband Bheem and indicates her desire for another lotus to him, how is Panchaali revealing her true character?

9. Panchaali relates the stories of Arjun?s encounter with Shiva, his visit to Indra?s palace, his refusal of the celestial dancer Urvasi, and the subsequent year he must spend as a eunuch. She says of her husband, ?He had glimpsed the truth of existence that went beyond the world of the senses that lay around us, this oscillating world of pleasure and sorrow.? How does the author use these tales of divine encounters to support and advance the narrative? What effect do Arjun?s experiences have on the restless Panchaali? What do they tell us about the nature of the world.

10. In the city of Virat, Panchaali is pursued by the lustful Keechak. When Bheem kills him, the Pandavas and Kauravas

do battle, and soon preparations for war are underway. When Surya, the sun-god, comes to Karna in a dream, he tells Karna how to achieve his heart?s desire. What do you think is Karna?s deepest longing? How does this desire relate to Panchaali?s own destiny, as originally predicted by Vyasa?

11. Before the war at Kurukshetra, Panchaali sees a falling star and is heartened. She then says, ?I should have remembered how tricky the gods are, how they give with one hand what you want while taking away, with the other, something much more valuable.? How does the author?s foreshadowing through the eyes of Panchaali enhance your experience of the tale? How would you characterize Panchaali?s attitude toward the gods, and toward her own role in the affairs of the Pandavas?

12. With Vyasa?s gift, Panchaali is able to see all that occurs in the war. On the ninth day, she watches Bheeshma, the grandfather, battle Arjun, who had been loved and cared for by Bheeshma as a child. What do you make of Krishna?s conversation with Bheeshma during this battle? How is Yudhisthir?s phrase ?insidious curiosity of womankind? important to understanding Panchaali?s obstacles?

13. When Karna learns he is Kunti?s son, how does he relate this new knowledge to his fate? What has the ?shame of illegitimacy? produced in his life? What does Kunti?s having abandoned her son tell you about the relations of mortals to gods in this tale? Have you ever learned a secret about your family history that has had a profound effect on how you viewed yourself?

14. Karna insists he cannot fight against Duryodhan because he has eaten his salt. What did you discover about salt?s symbolism in ancient India? Discuss the idea of loyalty brought forth in this scene.

15. When Dhri kills Drona, thereby fulfilling his own predicted destiny, what is Panchaali?s reaction? As she narrates the events, what does her tone tell you about her beliefs regarding fate, vengeance, and mortality? Do you admire or sympathize with her beliefs or do you disagree with them?

16. After Karna?s death and Duryodhan?s defeat at the hands of the Pandavas, a messenger brings word that Dwarka, Krishna?s city, has been overtaken. Gandhari?s curse, it seems to Panchaali, has been realized. When Arjun relates what happened, why does Yudhisthir acknowledge that it is time for the Pandava warriors to die?

17. As Panchaali goes with her husbands to the base of the Himalayas, to the path of great departure, how do her thoughts and experiences confirm her destiny? What discovery does she make about love? As Krishna guides her through death, how does she remember her life?

18. How does Panchaali?s description of death and the afterlife compare to your own beliefs? Do you share her skepticism? How is Panchaali?s story ?a slippery thing? throughout the narrative, and perhaps most slippery at the end? If you told the story of your life to date, how would you describe the roles of destiny, free will, and cultural ideals?

19. What themes regarding war and destiny in **The Palace of Illusions** could enlighten world leaders about violent conflicts around the globe? In what way do the other Divakaruni novels you have read blend contemporary relevance with ancient insight?

Author Bio

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning and bestselling author, activist and professor. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines, including *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*, and included in *The Best American Short Stories* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories*. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Bengali, Russian and Japanese. Several have been used for campus-wide reads and made into films and plays. She teaches at the University of Houston.

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