

## ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЕНИЕ

UDC 821.111

**Novel “The Palace of Illusions” (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Example of Cross-cultural Hybridization***K. A. Maretina*

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera),  
of the Russian Academy of Sciences,  
3, Universitetskaya nab., St Petersburg, 199034, Russian Federation

**For citation:** Maretina K. A. Novel “The Palace of Illusions” (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Example of Cross-cultural Hybridization. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Asian and African Studies*, 2022, vol. 14, issue 4, pp. 667–678. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2022.406>

In the novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by the popular Indian-American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the ancient Indian epic *Mahābhārata* is narrated from the point of view of its main heroine Draupadi. Thus, the author gives a new reading and interpretation to the text, which is an extremely important and revered part of the Indian cultural heritage. The image of Draupadi in the novel does not correspond to the traditional figure of the epic heroine. Her motives and character are “modernized” and are made easy to connect for a contemporary and reader; her aspirations and her voice belong to a woman of the present day. At the same time, it can be found that on the ideological level the novel follows quite closely the philosophical concepts of the ancient Indian epic. To come to this conclusion, in my study the main ideas of the novel were compared with the philosophical provisions present in the *Bhagavadgītā*, that is part of the sixth book of the epic and is perceived today as the doctrinal, philosophical and moral core of the *Mahābhārata*. In the novel by Ch. B. Divakaruni, the stories of mythical past are reconstructed, reinterpreted from the standpoint of modernity, and used to find answers to questions that are relevant to us today (about an individual quest for purpose, love and happiness, place in the world, etc.). At the same time, *The Palace of Illusions* combines elements of modern Western and traditional Indian worldviews. Thus, the novel is addressed both to orthodox traditionalists and to representatives of the diaspora, who are losing touch with their cultural heritage. It can be viewed as an interesting example of cultural, as well as cross-cultural hybridization.

*Keywords:* *Mahābhārata*, Indian epic, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Indian heritage, revisionism, diaspora literature, cross-cultural hybridization.

## The position of the *Mahābhārata* in the Indian culture

The *Mahābhārata* (hereafter — the Mbh) is an epic that amazes with both its volume and richness of content; it reveals a great variety of characters, stories, ideas and plots. The words are attributed to its legendary author sage Vyāsa: “Whatever is here, may be found elsewhere; what is not cannot be found anywhere else”. With the development and changes taking place in Indian society, the epic has retained its importance not only as a respected part of the cultural heritage, but also as an influential agent in shaping people’s worldview and perception of the world. Both these aspects of the functioning of the epic in modern society manifest themselves in the novels of contemporary authors.

The influence that the Mbh had on the formation of literature and culture not only of India, but also of neighbouring countries, is great and diverse. Mediaeval authors borrowed plots from the Mbh to use in their plays. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Mbh was translated into the South Indian languages, Tamil and Telugu. From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became the national ideological core, to which Indian enlighteners, fighters against colonial power and alien culture, turned to. The epic continued to live on in the many derivative works.

In Indian society the Mbh is surrounded with great respect. But be it works of literature or art, attempts are constantly made to include the Mbh in contemporary culture not as a symbol, but as an organic element. In India of today one can find numerous examples of how novels, plays, films and television series are created based on the Mbh. Stories derived from Indian mythology have always been popular with Indian audiences. Meanwhile, the very topic of revisionism, the revision of one’s own heritage, culture and traditions, attracts more and more attention from scientists worldwide.

The Mbh tells a story of enmity between the sons of Pāṇḍu (Pāṇḍavas) and his brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra (Kauravas) that led to the war. According to the curse of a certain sage, Pāṇḍu could not have children, and therefore his first wife, Kuntī, who possessed a divine spell, called up various gods one after another and conceived from them Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna. She gave the spell on to the second wife of Pāṇḍu, Madrī, who gave birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva from the heavenly Aśvin brothers. Before marriage, Kuntī had birthed a son, Karṇa, from the sun god Sūrya. She sent the basket with Karṇa along the river, the boy was picked up and raised by the charioteer of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. After Pāṇḍu died, his blind brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra became king in Hastinapura. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his wife Gandhari had one daughter and one hundred sons, who were called Kauravas by one of their ancestors; among them the king especially distinguished and loved his first-born Duryodhana. The Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas were brought up together in the court of Dhṛtarāṣṭra. However, Duryodhana wanted to reign country himself and tried destroying the Pāṇḍavas, though unsuccessfully. Brothers took part in the *svayaṃvara* of princess Draupadī, Arjuna emerged victorious, and following the instruction of Kuntī, Draupadī became the common wife of all five brothers. Along with the growth of power and glory of the Pāṇḍavas, Duryodhana’s envy and hatred towards them grew, too. He challenged Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice, and the latter lost everything to the Kauravas. Dhṛtarāṣṭra returned everything back to the Pāṇḍavas, but the invitation and the game were repeated, and the Pāṇḍavas, having lost, according to the rules, had to spend many years in exile. Upon their return, Duryodhana did not give the kingdom back to them. The battle between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas became inevitable. Arjuna, not ready to kill his

teachers, relatives and former friends, refused to fight against them, until Krishna with his speech convinced Arjuna to take up arms. On the Kurukṣetra, one by one died all the leaders of the Kauravas. Yudhiṣṭhira was crowned in Hastinapura and wisely ruled the country, before, having appointed Arjuna's grandson Parikṣit as his successor on the throne, with his brothers and Draupadī went as an ascetic to the Himalayas. All his companions died on the way, and alone Yudhiṣṭhira reached heaven. After the final test, Yudhiṣṭhira together with his wife, brothers and other noble and brave warriors enjoyed eternal stay among the gods.

In my article I analyse the novel by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) in which the author retells the Mbh from the POV of its main heroine Draupadī. Divakaruni was born in Kolkata (Calcutta), left to study in the USA, where she received her PhD in English classical literature. She is an author of numerous novels and short stories, in which she mostly turns to Indian culture and traditions; many of them are devoted to the fate of immigrants from South Asia in the United States.

### The figure of the Indian epic heroine

The image of the epic heroine occupies a very important place among the characters of the Indian epic. In the society of the epic her figure is closely related to the central figure of the king, in fact, being the female embodiment of the epic hero-king. Same as the king, the heroine also has a royal origin and is characterised by the motive of “miraculous (or divine) birth” [1, p. 29]. Thus, Sītā, the main female character of the Indian epic *Rāmāyana*, is perceived by tradition as one of the incarnations of the goddess Lakṣmī, wife of the god Viṣṇu, while the main hero of the *Rāmāyana*, Sītā's husband Rāma is an *avatar* (an earthly incarnation) of Viṣṇu himself. According to the epic, she was adopted by a king who found her in the furrow, and all her names indicate her origin from the earth and her connection to it. Draupadī of the Mbh is daughter of the Panchala king Drupada, and she is born in a miraculous way, too: together with her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna, she emerges from the fire lit on the altar by the *brahmin* priests. One of her names is Yājñasenī, which means born as a result of *yajña* sacrifice, which indicates her birth from the ritual fire. She incarnates on earth as the goddess Śrī, while her husbands the Pāṇḍavas all are the incarnations of various Hindu gods.

A heroine of the ancient Indian epic is described as incomparably beautiful, her beauty is revealed in numerous epithets and comparisons with natural phenomena: lightning, fire, moon, vine among many others. Also, an important group is made up of epithets associating her with fertility. Based on the description of the heroine's appearance, a chain of mythological connections “beauty — fertility — royalty” can be distinguished. At the same time, the image of the heroine is three-dimensional and contains, along with the defining features of her external appearance, the peculiarities of her inner spiritual world and behaviour. The heroine is inextricably linked with her royal spouse and is endowed with qualities that she shares with him, such as wisdom, adherence to dharma and truth [1, p. 32]. However the main quality of the epic heroine is *pativrata* — virtuous wife, committed to the marriage vow; her main task in the epic is *Śuśrūṣā* (service): having rejected her pride and anger, a wife should honour and please her husband as the highest of the gods. A woman should not contradict her husband, not only in her actions but also in her thoughts she is to completely devote herself to him. This is the harsh dharma of an epic

wife and heroine, to follow the path of worship according to the rules of Hindu puja to her spouse and protector [1, p. 33–34].

The figure of the perfect queen and wife is balanced in the epic by a set of corresponding characteristics of the hero-king. The importance of the image of the epic heroine and her inextricable connection with the image of the king-husband is also manifested in the fact that the hierarchically organising element of the epic composition is the motive of the abduction or its attempt on the hero's wife [2, p. 246]. In the *Rāmāyana* such a compositional core is the abduction of Sītā by the Dānava king Rāvaṇa. The same motive of the abduction of the hero's wife is present in its defining compositional function in the Mbh, although to some extent it was distorted by later layers [2, p. 195]. In addition, this motive appears in the Mbh in so to say “softened” version, when abduction is replaced by an insult. The insult is directly related to the claims of the Kauravas for Draupadī: they compete with the Pāṇḍavas at her svayaṃvara and, even when Arjuna becomes the victor, they try to take her away from the Pāṇḍavas by force. After the game of dice the Kauravas immediately offer Draupadī to choose a new spouse among them, Duryodhana even suggesting her to become his concubine. Among the main reasons that led to the war between the cousin brothers Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, the insult to Draupadī appears invariably; moreover, this reason clearly stands out among others as the most important, and its primacy is constantly emphasised by the epic itself.

Thus, the figure of Draupadī is one of the key ones for the Mbh for several reasons. On the one hand, this is the image of an epic wife, which is obligatory for the epic, inextricably linked with the central figure of the king and the hero (heroes in this case). On the other hand, the scene of the insult of Draupadī is the organising element of the entire epic.

### **The *Mahābhārata* retold from the feminine perspective**

According to Divakaruni, like many Indian children, she grew up on “vast, varied and fascinating” tales of the Mbh [3, p. XIII]. But with all her admiration for the ancient epic, she was not satisfied with the images of women in the Mbh and thus decided to create her own version, placing in the centre of the narrative the image of a strong woman, an epic heroine Draupadi, so that she herself could tell the story of her joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, convey her unique feminine view of the world and her place in it through the prism of her emotions and thoughts [3, p. XV].

Divakaruni portrays her Draupadi as a strong and complex personality, full of passions, ambitions and aspirations. She actualizes the image of the epic heroine, filling it with self-awareness and motives that are relatable to the modern and, especially, female reader. The author compliments her loose retelling of the Mbh with additional plots and characters which function is to help explore the inner workings of the main heroine. Draupadi of the book is not an unfortunate victim of the circumstances, as she is often presented in the other works centred on this particular character; she is portrayed as a strong (even head-strong) and independent person, and it is based on these qualities that her relationships with her husbands are built. In her marriage she feels her, in a way, dominant position: “If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were strung. Alone, they would have scattered, each to his dusty corner” [3, p. 151]. She does not change for the sake of her husbands, yet she herself seeks to change them; all her five husbands listen to her opinion and follow her suggestions. Even the son of Dharma (Hindu god of the

moral law *dharma*), Yudhishtir, turns to her for advice. Her voice is decisive (and in this case, also fateful) when the Pandavas debate whether they should accept Duryodhan's invitation to visit his palace.

The novel can be seen following one of the trends in the rethinking of the Mbh, that is feminization, which can be distinguished as a specific form of subjectivization and a gendered description of the epic. The objective (impersonal) narration turns into an extremely subjective and deeply personal narration. The lyricism and emotional colouring of the text associates it with a female rendering; given these features, the novel is perceived as a female revision of the epic [4, p. 127]. In this regard, French scholar H el ene Cixous, the author of the concept of * criture f eminine*, states in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* that a woman "should create a space for her in the text which simultaneously would create a place for her in the real world" [5, p. 333]. According to Divakaruni herself, "I think myth (misspelling fixed by K. Maretina) and epic are very powerful forms. They reach deep inside us, and change our preconceptions about ourselves. Therefore, I believe that a woman centered text like Palace of Illusions, based on the epic Mahabharat, can change our views as to the importance and power of women in our society" [6].

Draupadi of the *The Palace of Illusions* is not only an intelligent adviser in political matters, but also a hot-tempered, jealous woman. When her husbands take other wives for themselves it infuriates her. Her outbursts of irritation "became almost as famous as Yudhishtir's righteousness, and over the years not a few songs were composed about Panchaali's jealousy" [3, p. 151]. Such temper and tantrums are contrary to the concept of *pativrata*; an ideal Indian wife, according to her harsh *dharma*, should honour her husband as a god, and not complicate his life with her quirks.

Interestingly, Karna plays an important role in the life of the heroine. In fact, according to the novel, she falls in love with him at the first sight. Draupadi is imbued with deep sympathy towards him, especially after she hears the whole story of his life. There is a certain analogy shown between these characters, which the heroine herself draws attention to, both of them grow up deprived of parental care. Their relationship is extremely complex and is one of the main focuses of the novel.

Nothing of the kind was implied in the ancient Indian epic: all the aspirations and concerns of *pativrata* Draupadi could be directed only to her husbands. The attention to Karna in the contemporary Indian novels can be explained by the unusual and contradictory nature of this character as compared to others of the Indian epic, which has already drawn attention of many scholars (Grintser; McGrath). P. A. Grintser saw the special interest of this character in his resemblance to the main heroes of other epics. The article by Grintser *Karna in the Mahabharata and Achilles in the Iliad* [7] is devoted to the comparison of Karna with the main character of the Greek epic.

There is also a special relationship between Draupadi and Krishna; from her childhood, Krishna was the best and closest friend of the princess. A connection between these two characters is emphasised not only in this book, but also in another novel that retells Mbh from the POV of Draupadi, *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* [8], 1984, by Pratibha Ray.

The first and the last chapters of the novel by Divakaruni bear the same title "Fire": the first telling about the birth of Draupadi from the fire and the last about her transformation into fire and light after her death. This detail can be viewed as an element of circularity that is inherent to Hindu traditional worldview and is embedded in the novel at the compositional level.

One of the important formative elements of the novel is the stories that the characters tell each other. It is through that vehicle that the reader learns about many plotlines and events. Thus, we find out about the miraculous birth of Draupadi from the story told to the princess by her nanny and about friendship turned enmity between King Drupad and brahmin warrior Drona from the story that young siblings Draupadi and Drishtadyuman tell each other alternately. These numerous tales that permeate the novel and include re-tellings of the dreams, visions and even song lyrics, make the structure of the text fragmentary and mosaic-like, complicate the fabric of the narrative, giving it story-within-story quality and endowing *The Palace of Illusions* with a resemblance to a framed story, that is also one of the key characteristics of the traditional Indian Sanskrit narrative, including the Mbh (“the whole Mahabharata all together represents... kind of “conversation” [9, p. 279–280]). The Mbh originally existed only orally and was recited, so the idea of being retold is inherent to the epic itself. According to the tradition, it was first recited by the sage Vaiśampāyana, a disciple of Vyāsa (the mythical author of the Mbh), to the king Janamejaya. So in *The Palace of Illusions* it is in one way, adherence to the tradition, because the story is recited by a mythical character and, from the other side, it is a challenge to the tradition, as it is recited by a woman.

The style of Divakaruni’s novel is characterised by a certain sense of the illusory nature of the world. In the very fabric of the narrative, as mentioned above, stories, legends, dreams and songs are included and intertwined, the lyric hero turns to the events of the past and the future. The feeling of illusion is enhanced by various complex figures of speech, for example, detailed comparisons. Thus, time in the novel is compared to a flower, which “outer petals fall away to reveal the inner ones. An inner petal would never know the older, outer ones, even though it was shaped by them, and only the one who plucked the flower can see how each petal was connected to the others” [3, p. 25].

An important place in the novel is occupied by the yearning of the heroine to find her true place in the world and her true home, a place she really belongs to. She sees her home in the magical palace in Indraprastha. At her suggestion, the work of Maya Dānava is given a telling name the “Palace of Illusions”. Draupadi identifies with her new home greatly: “For isn’t that what our homes are ultimately, our fantasies made corporeal, our secret selves exposed?” [3, p. 113]. It is in the palace that she learns to be happy and becomes a real queen. And it is in this palace that Duryodhan experiences his greatest humiliation when he falls into the lake, mistaking the surface of the water for a transparent bridge. As a result, Duryodhana harbours a grudge against the Pandavas, and his revenge on them becomes inevitable. Thus his desire to deal with the Pandavas is explained in the novel by his envy and desire to seize their luxurious abode. Krishna warns the queen about the danger of too much attachment to the palace: “All things in this world change and pass away — some after many years, some overnight”; “...if you identify so deeply with it, you set yourself up for sorrow” [3, p. 149]. Krishna’s words come true when the Pandavas, thanks to the machinations of Duryodhana, go into exile. They lose the palace, but neither does Duryodhana get it — after the Pandavas leave, before Duryodhana’s eyes, the magical palace dissolves into thin air [3, p. 198]. But, basically, what Draupadi saw as her true home and what Duryodhan was seeking so much to have was but an illusion.

## Correspondence of the philosophical ideas of the novel to the precepts of the *Mahābhārata* (as they are presented in the *Bhagavadgītā*)

All the major conflicts of the book are resolved in the last chapter. Draupadi, abandoned by her husbands, lies alone on the slope of the Himalayas. Gradually, she stops feeling her body; on the verge of death, Draupadi realises her body as another home, which she is destined to lose just like all the other ones: "...like every home where I've resided, this body, — my final, crumbling palace — is beginning to fail me" [3, p. 350]. The theme of the fleetingness of life, the illusory nature of the world is reflected here as fully as possible.

She tries to remember those she loved in her life, but all these memories slip away; perhaps, because she "betrayed them all in some way" [3, p. 351]. Glory, respect, fear, even admiration — she had everything in her life except for love which she dreamed of since childhood. Like home, love in Draupadi's life turns out to be another illusion, an unfulfilled dream. Her whole world turns out to be nothing more than one grand "palace of illusions".

Having left her illusions on the verge of death, she tries to think of anything good and suddenly understands that all the best moments of her life are associated with Krishna, who was always there and supported her [3, p. 356]. Realising this, Draupadi remembers too that he was with her even before she was born from the sacrificial fire. Then the heroine had neither a body nor a name. And it is Krishna who sends her to fulfil her task on earth. Such a plot move is consistent with the original Mbh philosophy and ideas. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (hereinafter — the BhG) Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna: "Remember that the living entities are all from this womb. I am the origin and dissolution of the whole world" [10, VI.29.6]. Draupadi recalls how, frightened by the magnitude and enormity of the task she had to accomplish on earth (to make the Kurukshetra battle inevitable), she asked Krishna: "What should I do with the sins that I will incur due to the destruction, whose will I be the reason?" [3, p. 357]. Krishna resolves her doubts: "Try to remember that you are the instrument and I the doer. If you can hold on to this, no sin can touch you" [3, p. 357]. This dialogue in the novel echoes the one in the Mbh between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

In the BhG Arjuna addresses Kṛṣṇa with similar words before the decisive battle on Kurukshetra: "Alas, we are about to commit a great sin, out of thirst for the joys of kingship we are about to kill our relatives!" [10, VI.23.45]. Arjuna views his participation in the battle as a great sin that he is not ready to accept. To which Kṛṣṇa answers Arjuna: "He who acts by surrendering his actions to Brahman, renouncing attachment, is not stained by sin, just as a lotus leaf is not stained by water" [10, VI.27.10]. According to philosopher S. Radhakrishnan, in the BhG "the poet imagines Krishna speaking of himself as Brahman" [11, p. 463]. The deeds of an individual do not belong to this individual. One who realises this and trusts Kṛṣṇa in his actions is freed from sin.

The BhG, that is included into the sixth book of the Mbh, is in terms of revealing its cosmogony and philosophical ideas the key part of the epic. Kṛṣṇa instructs Arjuna in the right action, explains to him the essence of the universe and reveals his divine nature. The BhG is specially revered in the Hindu tradition. According to Radhakrishnan, "if we judge the significance of the book by the influence it has on human minds, then the Gita will be the most significant work in the history of the development of Indian thought" [11, p. 442].

After her death, Draupadi enters a new world, where she has no gender, no name, no personal interests — and yet despite this she feels for the first time truly happy and realises that her palace awaits her up there: the only one that was truly hers. “Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere” [3, p. 360]. It is to this palace that she goes along with Karna, with whom she can now and forever be together. Thus, only after death, Draupadi finds both her home and her love. Meanwhile everything that happened on earth was subordinated to the grandiose supreme plan, which was directed by Krishna.

Draupadi feared that, once in the human world, she would forget what Krishna has revealed to her. Krishna did not argue, “This’s the beguiling trick the world plays on you. You’ll suffer for it — or dream that you are suffering” [3, p. 357]. As we have already explored above, Divakaruni’s novel affirms the idea of the illusory nature of the world. In the BhG Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna: “Contact with objects, son of Kunti, gives [the sensation of] cold and heat, pleasant and unpleasant. Impermanent, they come and go, bear them, Bharata!” [10, VI.24.14].

In the BhG, Kṛṣṇa explains the structure of the universe to Arjuna: “Earth, water, fire, wind, space, consciousness, intelligence, and also self — this is my eightfold divided nature. That is the lowest; learn about my other, higher nature, mighty-armed one, which is a spiritual being, that also supports this world” [10, VI.29.4–5]; “There is nothing higher than I am, conqueror of wealth, this whole universe is strung on me like pearls on a string” [10, VI.29.7]. So, according to the BhG, human reality is of lower nature. The supreme nature is Kṛṣṇa himself. The cosmogony of *The Palace of Illusions*, as we can see below, corresponds very well to these provisions of ancient Hindu philosophy. According to Radhakrishnan, the lower nature is Prakṛti: “Prakṛti is the source of delusion, since it hides the true nature of reality from the sight of mortals” [11, p. 460]; the highest nature is Puruṣottama (Brahman is the same, but in a state of eternal rest). Kṛṣṇa is probably the same as Puruṣottama [11, p. 464]. Prakṛti is created by the supreme god with the help of Maya [11, p. 466].

All these philosophical ideas of the BhG are more or less directly present in the *The Palace of Illusions*. Draupadi suffered a lot on earth because she lost memories of her divine origin and her supreme task. However, when she thinks of Krishna before dying, she remembers everything else, too. In the BhG it is said: “This my divine Maya, made of threads-qualities, is difficult to overcome, but those who come to me will overcome this Maya” [10, VI.29.14].

Draupadi recalls how she reached the world, and in the process of this movement she acquired a body, which now, on the slopes of the Himalayas, begins to let her down for the first time. Then Krishna addresses her: “You did what you were supposed to. Played your part perfectly” [3, p. 358]. Draupadi’s actions led to the great Kurukshetra war — this was her task, her duty, her dharma. In the BhG Kṛṣṇa remarks: “Better is your duty, untalentedly performed, than someone else’s, excellently observed; it is better to die in the performance of one’s duty; another’s duty is fraught with danger” [10, VI.25.35]. It can be concluded that it is not important what a person’s duty (dharma) is, but if this duty is completely fulfilled by him. Thus, in the novel, as in the Mbh, the moral consequences of fulfilling the divine plan — the bloody battle on the Kuru field — are removed, since in the case of Arjuna, his dharma of a kṣatriya is to fight and kill enemies, and Draupadi’s dharma is to cause this war. In both cases, it is seen as their highest duty that leaves no room for doubt.

However, Draupadi does not believe how she could play her part excellently if she made so many mistakes in her life and harmed so many people. “You didn’t harm them that much. Look!” [3, p. 358], Krishna replies, and Draupadi sees the effulgent figures of the dead: their weightless bodies are freed from the wounds that brought them death on Kurukshetra, their faces shine with the satisfaction of the actors who successfully performed roles in the great drama [3, p. 358]. To Draupadi’s question whether she is dying, Krishna replies: “You could call it that” [3, p. 359] and adds: “You could also call it waking... Or intermission, as when one scene in a play ends and the next hasn’t yet begun” [3, p. 359].

This discourse is, again, consistent with the Mbh philosophy. For example, in the BhG Kṛṣṇa says: “You grieve for those for whom there is no need to grieve, and [moreover] you make wise speeches, and yet the sages grieve neither for the dead nor for the survivors. It has never happened that I did not exist, like you and these rulers of peoples, and after that we all will not cease to exist” [10, VI.24.11–12]; further: “Whoever thinks about him, what he is killing, and who thinks about him killed — both of them do not know [the truth]; he does not kill, and he is not killed. He is never born and never dies; without becoming, he does not become in the future; unborn, permanent, eternal, ancient, he is not mortified when the body is mortified” [10, VI.24.1920]. Thus, the world in which people live and act, according to the philosophy of the BhG, is an illusion, just like the bodies of people are only temporary shells for the eternal spirit. After death, no one ceases to exist, since it is not an individual himself who dies, but only a short-living body.

It is also worth noting that among the “effulgent figures” of the dead, Draupadi sees the Pandavas, Kauravas, Sikhandi, Bheeshma, Duryodhan — and all of them enjoy their posthumous state [3, p. 358]. This description corresponds to the logic of the epic: “All *without exception* (italics S. L. Neveleva) epic heroes eventually find their place in heaven” [12, p. 274]: the Kauravas, like the Pāṇḍavas, fell, having fought bravely and to the end having fulfilled their kṣatriya dharma, and therefore heaven awaits both of them.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, the last question that Draupadi asks before dying is: “Are you truly divine?” [3, p. 359]. To which Krishna replies, “Yes, I am. You are, too, you know!” [3, p. 359]. During the conversation between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna before the battle, the latter learns for the first time about the divine nature of his friend. In *The Palace of Illusions* Draupadi for the first time fully accepts this and is convinced of the divinity of Krishna in this last perimortem dialogue with him. After death, Draupadi feels as if she is less than nothing [3, p. 360]. “I am buoyant and expensive and uncontainable — but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I am truly Panchali” [3, p. 360], — Draupadi describes her feelings.

It seems important that before the death of Draupadi, Krishna asks her to remember the happiest moments of her life [3, p. 353]. Thinking about this, she calms down and soon turns her thoughts to Krishna himself, suddenly realising that it was he who had always been the source of happiness for her. Thus, she dies in a peaceful and balanced state, having received answers from Krishna to all the questions that tormented her during her lifetime, and having learned even more than she had expected. Secondly, she dies with all her thoughts and feelings aimed towards Krishna. In the BhG, Kṛṣṇa says: “He who finds happiness within, joy within [himself], in whom the inner light is conjugated, merged with Brahman, achieves extinction in Brahman. The sages who have destroyed sins, cut duality,

subjugated themselves, find joy in the welfare of all beings, achieve extinction in Brahman. For ascetics who have subdued thoughts, rejected desire and anger, who have cognized themselves, — extinction in Brahman is near” [10, VI.27.24–26]; “This is the brahmic state, Partha. The one who reaches it is not mistaken. Even if at the moment of death he abides in him, he will come to extinction in Brahman” [10, VI.24.72]; “Those who have renounced passion, fear and anger, permeated by me, many who have come running to me, having purified themselves by the feat of [that] knowledge, have entered my existence. As someone comes running to me, so I accept them; my path, Partha, will be followed by people in everything” [10, VI.26.10–11]. Thus, those who have humbled their passions and turned to Kṛṣṇa (albeit on the verge of death), will become one with Brahman.

Draupadi before she dies formally meets both these two conditions, and following the logic of the BhG, she should enter the existence of Krishna and become one with Brahman, and that, as far as it can be judged, is what happens to the heroine.

Thus, what we can see is that cosmogony, religious and philosophical concepts of the novel correspond to the provisions of the BhG. Both the idea of traditional Indian philosophy about the illusory nature of the surrounding world (*Prakṛti*), created with the help of the force capable of making any changes (*Māyā*), as well as the idea of Brahman, which is the basis of everything, are reflected in the novel.

According to V. Vanitha, “the fusion of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world here presented through the retellings, which is a conventional message for those who are rooted to the orthodox traditionalism and also for those who are uprooted from the moral ethics of their own culture” [5, p. 335], thus the book is targeted both at the Indian traditional and Indian diasporic audience. With regard to the novel by Ch. B. Divakaruni, we can speak of the synthesis of the Indian and Western worldviews. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the psychology of the heroine corresponds to the psychology and worldview of a modern Western person, and at the same time the author adheres to the cosmogony of the Mbh and uses elements of the traditional Hindu worldview. The novel can be viewed as an example of cultural (tradition and modernity) or cross-cultural (Western thinking and the values of Indian culture) hybridization.

## References

1. Neveleva S.L. Heroic wives in the ancient Indian epic, *Indian wife: research, essay*. Moscow, Vostochnaia literatura Publ., 1996. 247 p. (In Russian)
2. Grintser P.A. *Ancient Indian epic. Genesis and typology*. Moscow, Nauka Publ., 1974. 418 p. (In Russian)
3. Divakaruni, Ch. B. *The Palace of Illusions*. New Delhi, Picador Publ., 2008. 360 p.
4. Singh S. Revisiting the Mahabharata: Draupadi’s voice in Divakaruni’s Palace of Illusions. *Cultural Intertexts*, 2015, no. 2.3, pp. 123–132. Available at: [https://cultural-intertexts.webnode.com/\\_files/200000262-890ac890ae/123-132%20Singh%20-%20Revisiting%20The%20Mahabharata%20%E2%80%93%20Draupadi%E2%80%99s%20voice%20in%20Divakaruni%E2%80%99s%20The%20Palace%20of%20Illusions.pdf](https://cultural-intertexts.webnode.com/_files/200000262-890ac890ae/123-132%20Singh%20-%20Revisiting%20The%20Mahabharata%20%E2%80%93%20Draupadi%E2%80%99s%20voice%20in%20Divakaruni%E2%80%99s%20The%20Palace%20of%20Illusions.pdf) (accessed: 07.04.2022).
5. Vanitha V. Draupadi: An Epitome of Feminine Assertion in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Palace of Illusions. — SVS College of Engineering, Coimbatore, 2017. *International journal of English language, literature in Humanities*. Vol. V, iss. I, January. Available at: <https://ijellh.com/OJS/index.php/OJS/article/view/1857> (accessed: 07.04.2022).
6. Ask the Author: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. *Goodreads.com*. Available at: [http://www.goodreads.com/author/51589.Chitra\\_Banerjee\\_Divakaruni/questions](http://www.goodreads.com/author/51589.Chitra_Banerjee_Divakaruni/questions) (accessed: 08.04.2022).

7. Grintser P. A. Karna in the Mahabharata and Achilles in the Iliad. *Historical and Philological Studies*. Moscow, Nauka Publ., 1974. P. 141–151. (In Russian)
8. Rāy P. *Draupadī*. Naī Dillī, Deepika Enterprises Publ., 2012. 263 p. (In Hindi)
9. Neveleva S. L. Sage-narrator in the Mahabharata (on the problem of the epic text composition), *Colloquia classica et indogermanica* IV. Ed. by N. N. Kazansky. St Petersburg, Nauka Publ., 2008. P. 277–294. (In Russian)
10. *Mahabharata. Book Six: Bhishmaparva*. Transl. from Sanskrit, forew., article and comment. by V. G. Erman. Moscow, Ladomir Publ., 2009. 480 p. (In Russian)
11. Radhakrishnan S. *Indian Philosophy*. Moscow, Izdatel'stvo inostrannoi literatury Publ., 1956. 760 p. (In Russian)
12. Neveleva S. L. *Mahabharata: the artistic language of the ancient Indian epic*. St Petersburg, Nestor-Istoriia Publ., 2010. 332 p. (In Russian)

Received: March 4, 2022  
Accepted: September 15, 2022

Author's information:

Ksenya A. Maretina — ksenya.maretina@gmail.com

## Роман «Дворец иллюзий» Читры Банерджи Дивакаруни как пример кросс-культурной гибридизации

К. А. Маретина

Музей антропологии и этнографии им. Петра Великого (Кунсткамера) РАН, Российская Федерация, 199034, Санкт-Петербург, Университетская наб., 3

**Для цитирования:** Maretina K. A. Novel “The Palace of Illusions” (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an Example of Cross-cultural Hybridization // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Востоковедение и африканистика. 2022. Т. 14. Вып. 4. С. 667–678.  
<https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2022.406>

В романе «Дворец иллюзий» (2008) популярной американской писательницы индийского происхождения Читры Банерджи Дивакаруни древнеиндийский эпос «Махабхарата» излагается от лица его главной героини Драупади. Тем самым автор дает новое прочтение и интерпретацию тексту, представляющему собой крайне важную и почитаемую часть индийского культурного наследия. Образ Драупади в романе не соответствует традиционному образу эпической героини. Ее мотивы и характер осовременены и понятны современному читателю, ее чаяния и голос принадлежат женщине нашего времени. В то же время можно обнаружить, что в идейном плане роман достаточно близко следует философским концепциям древнеиндийского эпоса. Чтобы обосновать такой вывод, в исследовании основные идеи романа сопоставлены с философскими положениями, представленными в «Бхагавадгите», которая является частью шестой книги эпоса и воспринимается в наши дни как доктринальное и философско-нравственное ядро «Махабхараты». В романе Ч. Б. Дивакаруни истории мифического прошлого реконструируются, интерпретируются с позиций современности и используются для поиска ответов на актуальные сегодня вопросы (о предназначении человека, поиске любви и счастья, его месте в мире и т. д.). При этом во «Дворце иллюзий» сочетаются элементы современного западного и традиционного индийского мировоззрений. Таким образом, роман обращен как к ортодоксальным традиционалистам, так и к представителям диаспоры, теряющим связь со своим культурным наследием. Его

можно рассматривать как интересный пример культурной и межкультурной гибридации.

*Ключевые слова:* Махабхарата, индийский эпос, Дворец иллюзий, Читра Банерджи Дивакарони, индийское наследие, ревизионизм, литература диаспоры, межкультурная гибридация.

Статья поступила в редакцию 4 марта 2022 г.,  
рекомендована к печати 15 сентября 2022 г.

Контактная информация:

*Маретина Ксения Александровна* — [ksenya.maretina@gmail.com](mailto:ksenya.maretina@gmail.com)