

The Cycle of Karma and Rebirth in *The Palace of Illusions* – A BhagwadGita Perspective

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The Palace of Illusions, a historic fiction, is a reinterpretation of great and timeless Indian epic, *TheMahabharata*, with a modern twist. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given a new outlook to this tale by presenting it through the perspective of Draupadi(Panchali). This re-telling of the epic offers a completely new narrative, sometimes deviating from the original epic. While the original epic primarily focuses on dharma (duty) and war, *The Palace of Illusions* explores the internal struggles, emotions, and karmic entanglements of its main protagonist, Draupadi and other important characters. The novel presents a nuanced understanding of the Bhagavad Gita's philosophy, as seen through the lives of **Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhishma, and Shikhandi**, as all these characters are deeply bound by karma and their past-life debts.

The **Bhagwad Gita**, most revered Hindu scripture, has been illuminating the path of human beings as it speaks about the fundamental questions about life, duty, and the soul's journey. Among its core teachings, it explains the concepts of karma (action), birth, and rebirth, which are essential for understanding the cycle of existence (samsara) and the path to liberation (moksha). According to the Gita, individuals are bound by their karma and the law of cause and effect, which determines their present circumstances and future destiny. This principle governs the cycle of birth and rebirth, where the soul (Atman) transcends

from its physical body and proceeds to its eternal journey. However, the ultimate goal of a human life is not to entangle in this vicious cycle of birth but to be free from this cycle, which can be attained through righteous living, devotion, knowledge, and selfless action.

The word "Karma" originates from Sanskrit language, which means "to do" or "to act". The concept of karma has evolved over time, influencing various eastern as well as western philosophies. According to Bhagwad Gita, Karma is not just about the physical actions we do but it also includes our thoughts and intentions. Daily doing duty is simple karma that we do it for our livelihood, but some thoughts are deeply rooted within us and eventually these thoughts turn into our deep desires that give shape to our life situations, sometimes good and sometimes bad also. In other words, we can say that Karma is the seed and it is certain that human beings eat its fruit either in current life or lives to come. Positive actions typically lead to favourable outcomes, while negative actions bring adverse results. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* with its compelling narrative incorporate the philosophy of karma to emphasize moral lessons, illustrating how characters evolve and face the repercussions of their past deeds that lead them to personal growth or downfall. In this research paper, we are trying to bring out the role of karma in determining human destiny, the purpose of

human existence comprising of duty of action, self-realization, equanimity, detachment, and unclenching oneself from the cycle of birth and rebirth. This study encapsulates this idea and throws light on some of the instances from the lives of these four characters, Draupadi, the main protagonist of the novel, Arjuna, the seasoned archer, Bhishma, the mighty warrior and Princess Amba reincarnated as Shikhandi. Draupadi's birth from the holy fire has a purpose, but her desire to be queen of queens leads her life to the tragic end. Her pride, her quest for revenge, especially against the Kauravas, fuels the war, demonstrating how attachment to emotions binds one to the cycle of suffering. Similarly, Arjuna's dilemma on the battlefield mirrors his struggle with duty and free will, embodying Krishna's teachings in the Bhagwad Gita. Bhishma, the self-imposed guardian of the Kuru dynasty, represents the burden of past-life karma, as his oath of celibacy and unwavering loyalty lead to his downfall. Shikhandi, on the other hand, is the reincarnation of Amba, returning to fulfill a karmic cycle of revenge against Bhishma.

Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions* presents Draupadi as a powerful, strong-headed, and self-regulating woman, equal to the men around her rather than being merely submissive to the social conventional values of that time. This novel narrates the life of Draupadi, her journey to become the wife of Pandavas and the magnificent queen of a magical palace, her sufferings and her understanding the purpose of her life. It shows that how her desires lead her towards pain and ultimately liberation in the Himalayas. Divakaruni has beautifully weaved words to describe the temperament of Draupadi, her eagerness to learn, to acquire education like her brother, to know world politics from Krishna, how to be a queen, how to be ordinary from the sorceress

lessons and all related learning's which will bind her with her destiny. Draupadi's assertive and demanding nature that works as a symbol of her strength and defiance in a patriarchal world, also becomes a key factor in shaping her tragic destiny. Divakaruni shows her as a fiery, intelligent, and outspoken woman who challenges societal norms. However, her assertiveness often leads to conflicts that escalate into disaster. She always tries to assert her will and autonomy whether its choosing her husband, questioning dharma or seeking revenge. She wants to control her destiny and that is why she goes to Sage Vyas to know her future. There magical voices tell her –

You will marry the five greatest heroes of your time. You will be queen of queens, envied even by Goddesses. You will be a servant maid. You will be mistress of the most magical of palaces and then lose it.

You will be remembered for causing the greatest war of your time. You will bring about the death of evil kings- and your children's, and your brother's. A million women will become widow because of you. Yes, indeed, you will leave a mark on history..

You will be loved, though you will not always recognize who loves you. Despite your five husbands, you will die alone, abandoned at the end- and yet not so. (p.39)...

Draupadi stood stunned after hearing this and says that she will not marry. Sage smiled and said “Destiny is strong and swift...” (p.39), and “only a fool meddles in the Great Design” (p.40).

This is also explained in Bhagavad Gita (18.61)

ईश्वरः सर्वभूतानां हृद्देशेऽर्जुन तिष्ठति

भ्रामयन् सर्वभूतानि यन्त्रारूढानि मायया ॥ 61 ॥

*īśvaraḥ sarva-bhūtānāṃ hṛd-deśhe 'rjunatiṣṭhati
bhrāmayansarva-bhūtāni yantrārūḍhānīmāyayā*

BG 18.61: The Supreme Lord dwells in the hearts of all living beings, O Arjun. According to their karmas, He directs the wanderings of the souls, who are seated on a machine made of material energy.

Draupadi asks Sage Vyas how does she confront her past karma and resolve it. He advises her to keep control on her question before her wedding, hold back her laughter when her husbands' are at the height of their power and hold back her curse when she will be ashamed badly. But she forgets these words when time comes. At the time of her Swayamvara Draupadi, in her pride questions Karna about her family lineage and publicly rejects him by saying, "I will not marry a sutaputra". This insult fosters lifelong resentment in Karna, who later plays a crucial role in her humiliation in the Kaurava court; If she had not spoken so harshly, perhaps Karna would not insult Dushasana to disrobe her. Then at the height of glory Pandava invite Duryodhan to their magical palace and when the latter falls accidentally she makes fun of him by saying –“.. It seems the blind king's son is also blind!..” Duryodhan's ego deeply hurt at her words and he decided to take revenge, ultimately in the fateful dice game he satisfied his ego by humiliating her in assembly. At that unfortunate day when Draupadi was disrobed in the Kuru assembly, she in her anger and pain, demands justice and takes a vow to keep her hair untied until she washes it with Dushasana's blood. She curses kuru sons that they all will be die in the battlefield. She repeatedly criticizes Yudhishtira's dharma-driven passivity, accusing him of cowardice for gambling her away. Her anger fuels the flames of war which destroy not just the Kauravas but also the countless lives, including her own dear sons. She forgets the advice of Sage Vyas, her harsh words and pride contributed to the suffering of

many, including her own sons. Though she was a righteous woman, her inability to control her pride brought destruction.

Bhagavad Gita lights the path by following verses:

ध्यायतोविषयान्पुंसःसङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।

सङ्गात्संजायतेकामःकामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ॥ 62 ॥

क्रोधादभवतिसम्मोहःसम्मोहात्स्मृतिविभ्रमः ।

स्मृतिभ्रंशाद्बुद्धिनाशोबुद्धिनाशात्प्रणश्यति ॥ 63 ॥

*Dhyāyatoviṣhayānpuṁsaḥsaṅgastēṣūpajāyate
Saṅgātsañjāyatekāmaḥkāmaatkrodho 'bhijāyate*

*Krodhādbhavatisammohaḥsammohātsmṛti-
vibhramah*

*Smṛti-bhramāśhād buddhi-nāśho buddhi-
nāśhātpṛaṇaśhyati*

BG 2.62: While contemplating on the objects of the senses, one develops attachment to them. Attachment leads to desire, and from desire arises anger.

BG 2.63: Anger leads to clouding of judgment, which results in bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, the intellect gets destroyed; and when the intellect is destroyed, one is ruined.

The *Bhagavad Gita* teaches that anger, pride, and attachment lead to suffering, while surrender, humility, and duty bring liberation. If she had followed these teachings, her life might have been less painful. The fire of vengeance led her to remain in negative thoughts but the happenings during the war shattered Draupadi and she considered her a major cause of all this destruction. The war that she once demanded brings her no joy—only emptiness.

Draupadi's journey in *The Palace of Illusions* is one of profound transformation—from a fiery,

assertive queen demanding justice to a weary soul who ultimately surrenders to fate. Her unwavering pride and desire for vengeance shape the war, but in the aftermath, she realizes the futility of power, revenge, and even love. The loss of her children, kingdom, and dreams humbles her, leading her to embrace forgiveness and detachment. She repents and to lessen this deep grief she takes care of women from both Kaurava and Pandava sides which are left as widows. She understands their pain from her own loss, ensures they are not abandoned or dishonoured. She works besides Yudhishtra to construct a new state and provides shelter, food, and security to every woman within the palace. In her final moments, as she falls in the Himalayas, she sheds her earthly burdens, embodying the wisdom of the *Bhagavad Gita*—that true liberation comes not through dominance, but through surrender. Her life remains a powerful testament to resilience, passion, and the inevitable transcendence of the human soul.

Arjuna faces a moral crisis on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, torn between his duty as a warrior and his personal relationships with family. Life has thrown a challenge on him and it is very difficult for him to make choice. Arjuna, son of Kunti, who is the most skilled and disciplined warrior of his time, renowned for his unmatched archery, he embodies courage, loyalty, and honour. His calm demeanor and unwavering focus set him apart as a true hero among the Pandavas. But he, too when stands on the battlefield, feeling overwhelmed with grief, doubt, and moral conflict. He loses his tract and refuses to fight against his dear ones. At this point Krishna helps him to be out from the state of immobility, and advice him to perform actions without worrying about the results.

...Krishna advise Arjun, consoling him, teaching him how to be successful

not only on this battlefield but beyond it... (p.263)

Krishna discourse clearly states that anger and desire are our true enemies and we should act with the good intentions, because action performed has consequences too. Gita says that one should keep doing his own karma i.e. duty of action without getting attached to the result and playing their own roles on the stage of the life. Arjuna doesn't want to fight against his own relatives but he was bound to duty of action as this war happens to set right over wrong. Hence, verse forty-seven in the second chapter of Gita elaborates the way to act without attachment to its fruit.

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्तेमाफलेषुकदाचन ।

माकर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मातेसङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 47 ॥

*karmany-evādhikāraṣṭemāphaleṣhukadāchana
mā karma-phala-heturbhūrmātesaṅgo 'stvākarmaṇi*

BG2.47: You have a right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities, nor be attached to inaction.

Bhagwad Gita speaks about the journey of soul in second chapter. It says that soul changes its body and comes to next life to continue its journey. It also says that whatever karma we do – good and bad, its fruit will come with due course of time either in this life or in some other lives. The soul continues its journey through many lives and reaches its goal after fulfilling its purpose and it carries its samskaras in next life also. Likewise, the stories of Shikhandi and Bhishma, highlight how past karmas shape destiny. Shikhandi, Amba's reincarnation, fulfills her revenge. Bhishma, bound by vows and past actions, accepts his fate. Their connection reveals how unresolved karmic ties reveal the deep,

cosmic justice of karma. Also, Indian scriptures talk about the eternal nature of the soul beyond the cycle of birth and death. They say that the soul is as old as existence itself, connected deeply with the spirit of this universe. Therefore, it is devoid of the six types of transformations: Existence in the womb, birth, growth, procreation, diminution and death. All these six transformations are related to the body. The immortal self, remains unaffected by all bodily changes. Death is merely destruction of the body as states in Bhagwad Gita:

नजायतेम्रियतेवाकदाचि
नायंभूत्वाभवितावानभूयः ।
अजोनित्यः शाश्वतोऽयंपुराणो
नहन्यतेहन्यमानेशरीरे ।। 20 ।।

najāyatemriyatevākādāchin
nāyambhūtvābhavitāvanabhūyah
ajonityaśhāśhvato 'yampurāṇo
nahanyatehanyamāneśharīre

BG 2.20: “The soul is neither born, nor does it ever die; nor having once existed, does it ever cease to be. The soul is without birth, eternal, immortal, and ageless. It is not destroyed when the body is destroyed.”

वासांसिजीर्णानियथाविहाय
नवानिगृह्णातिनरोऽपराणि ।
तथाशरीराणिविहायजीर्णा
न्यन्यानिसंयातिनवानिदेही ।। 22 ।।

vāsānsijīrṇāniyathāvihāya
navānigrihṇātinaro 'parāṇi
tathāśharīrāṇivihāyājīrṇānya
nyānisanyātinavānidehī

BG 2.22: As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one.

In *The Palace of Ilusions*, Krishna speaks “We all have past lives,” and “Highly evolved beings remember them, while lesser souls forget.” (p,49)

Some noble souls remember their motive to take birth again in this world. The characters of Shikhandi and Bheesma in this work are perfect examples in this regard. Draupadi is surprised to know about her hidden elder sister, Shikhandi. She is also curious to meet Shikhandi. As soon as Shikhandi arrives in the palace Draupadi notices the unusualness of his gesture and his manly touch on her cheeks. Shikhandi shares her experience of life with Draupadi including her previous birth as Amba. Shikhandi tells about her previous life as Amba and how she faced many troubles because of Bheesma. She wanted to kill Bheesma but it was not possible for her to kill Bheesma, the great invincible warrior. To fulfill her desire, she intensely worshiped Lord Shiva and received a white lotus garland as a boon; whosoever wears this garland will defeat Bheesma. But nobody was able to stand against Bheesma even after the boon, not the king Drupad at that time. So, disappointed Amba hangs the garland at the gate of Drupad's palace and sacrificed her life by self-immolation, and later took re-birth as daughter of Drupad to fulfill her task which was left in the previous karma. Though Shikhandi takes birth again as a girl but she was unaware of her past life but on one fine day she finds that white flower garland hanged on the gate of palace and as she wears it, she recalled everything about her past life. Again, she did hard penance she transforms herself as a male to fulfill her purpose. In this way, the character of Shikhandi is shown on two levels. As a female and a male too. Finally, her wish to take revenge from Bheesma fulfilled in the great war of Mahabharata. Bheesma was also the reincarnation of one of eight Vasu known as Prabhasa but his past karma becomes the reason

of his birth on earth. His blind love for his wife led him to steal the holy cow of Maharishi Vashisth. In return, sage cursed him to take birth as a mortal being. Vasu takes birth as Ganga's son, Devvarta and pays back for his karma of past life. The verse thirty eight from Bhagavad Gita describes the consequence of karma influenced by desires, as,

धूमेनाव्रियते वह्निर्यथादर्शो मलेन च ।

यथोल्बेनावृतो गर्भस्तथा तेनेदमावृतम् ॥ 38 ॥

*dhūmenāvriyate vahnir yathādarśhomalena cha
yatholbenāvritogarb hastathātenedamāvṛitam*

BG 3.38: Just as a fire is covered by smoke, a mirror is masked by dust, and an embryo is concealed by the womb, similarly one's knowledge gets shrouded by desire.

Hence, in the life stories of Bhishma and Shikhandi (formerly Amba), this verse reveals the subtle yet in a powerful way how desire can shape destinies across lifetimes. Bhishma, in a past life, committed the act of stealing a cow from a sage's ashram—a seemingly simple but deeply karmic act driven by desire. Though noble in his later life as the son of Ganga, this past karma lingered and defines his next life. His earthly birth in the Kuru dynasty was not just divine purpose—it was a chance for karmic cleansing. His vow of celibacy, his lifelong commitment to duty, and ultimately, his tragic fall at the hands of Shikhandi all events bound to that chain of cause and effect.

इन्द्रियाणि मनो बुद्धिरस्याधिष्ठानमुच्यते ।

एतैर्विमोहयत्येष ज्ञानमावृत्य देहिनम् ॥ 40 ॥

*indriyāṇi mano buddhirasyādhishṭhānamuchyate
etairvimohayatyeshajñānamāvṛityadehinam*

BG 3.40: The senses, mind, and intellect are said to be breeding grounds of desire. Through them, it clouds one's knowledge and deludes the embodied soul.

This reflects the Gita's message of above verse that when desire enters through the senses and clouds the mind and intellect, it misguides even the wise. Bhishma's refusal to marry Amba was not rooted in cruelty, but in his attachment to his vow—a decision shaped by intellect but possibly clouded by pride in his righteousness. Yet the pain he caused Amba had lasting karmic implications.

Amba, in turn, became consumed by the desire for vengeance. Her entire being was overtaken by a singular, burning purpose—so intense that it defied death and carried her into another life as Shikhandi. Here again, we see how overpowering desire—this time for justice or revenge—can obscure higher wisdom and lead the soul into a new cycle of action and reaction.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, through Draupadi's reflective narration, offers a deeply human portrayal of how such emotions—desire, pride, anger, longing—guide the characters more than divine will alone. The Gita's verse, when viewed through this lens, teaches that unchecked desires not only distort knowledge but also redirect the soul's journey, often far from peace, toward karmic entanglements and difficult rebirths. Lives after lives we have to clear our account of karma. An individual have to bear the fruit of what one has done. It does not matter under which situation beings go through this cycle of suffering to cleanse it. The journey of souls in connection to karma and rebirth profoundly explores the cycle of life, actions, and consequences, shedding light on the spiritual and ethical dimensions of human existence. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni intricately weaves the philosophy of karma and the soul's journey across lifetimes into the fabric of an epic retelling. By reimagining *The Mahabharata* through Draupadi's voice, the novel challenges traditional narratives and offers a humanized and emotionally nuanced perspective on destiny,

duty, and spiritual awakening. Through the lives of Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhishma, and Shikhandi, Divakaruni demonstrates how past actions and inner desires create ripples across time—shaping not only individual lives but the course of history itself. Each character's journey reveals the complex interplay of free will and fate, reinforcing the Bhagavad Gita's central message that liberation lies not in controlling outcomes but in fulfilling one's duties with detachment, wisdom, and self-awareness.

This study underscores how Divakaruni's novel, infused with timeless Vedic philosophy, becomes a powerful modern exploration of human emotion, karmic debt, and spiritual growth. Draupadi's evolution from a proud queen to a soul seeking detachment mirrors the Gita's teachings on surrender and transcendence. Arjuna's moral dilemma, Bhishma's burdened loyalty, and Shikhandi's karmic fulfillment—all point to the inescapable but ultimately enlightening cycle of karma. Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* reaffirms that liberation—*moksha*—is not achieved by power or vengeance, but by self-realization, humility, and living in accordance with higher dharma. Through this lens, Divakaruni not only reimagines a mythic

past but also offers a spiritual compass for the present, making the ancient wisdom of the Gita profoundly relevant to contemporary readers.

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