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C. B. Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions* (Anchor Books, New York: 2008, ISBN: 9780385525435), 360 pp.

Review by *David R. Blumenthal*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known novelist who writes from the Hindu tradition. Her work sparkles with the strangeness (to the western imagination) of spells, magic, dreams, deep beauty, poetic images, many gods, and a free movement through time. As Divakaruni writes, life in all its complexity unfolds; the epic of existence is disclosed. In addition, Divakaruni writes in the voice of a woman – not to reveal the abuse of women, not to demand feminist rights, but to give voice to the woman, to see the world from the point of view of the woman, and to acknowledge, and use when needed, the power of the woman.

The Palace of Illusions is the most "religious" of Divakaruni's books that I have read. It is her retelling of a part of the great Mahabharat epic, an epic that has been told and retold over the millennia. Her story deals with the fierce rivalry between two branches of the Kuru dynasty, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The story begins *in medias res*: there has been a drought, there have been wars, and there is the memory of very good and fruitful times. The princess, Panchaali / Draupadi, who is the chief character and the narrator of Divakaruni's interpretation, is beautiful and wise. She marries royally to ten brothers and works out an agreeable marital way of living! And she builds her palace, which is the palace of illusions. As fate would have it, the men gamble and the chief brother gambles away the kingdom. The debt must be repaid but the conditions for that are degrading. And, thus, ensues a series of wars between the members of the two families which ends tragically.

Divakaruni tells the story with great art. (Fortunately, she provides a genealogical chart so those of us not already familiar with the characters can follow.) The supernatural palace of beauty is strikingly told as are the wars waged by human and divine powers. The interaction of the personalities is alternately fierce and touching. The tragedy of the characters on both sides of the conflict is deep. The ending is a surprise (at least to western readers).

As a western reader, I find the complexity confusing, but life is like that. I am not offended by the calling upon many gods, nor by the resort to magic, dreams, and spells. That is part of the otherness of Hindu culture, and I accept that.

At the key moment in the drama, the princess is shamed publicly by her lover and her husbands. She responds with a curse: "All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava will be left to offer prayers for the dead." She, then, reflects on her role as a woman: "All this time I'd thought myself better than my father, than all those men who inflicted harm on a thousand innocents in order to punish the one man who had wronged them. I'd thought myself above the cravings that drove him. But I, too, was tainted with them, vengeance encoded into my blood…" (194-95). The rest of the story, including the ending that exculpates the princess, unfolds from this moment with ineluctable force.

For a Jewish reader, this is incomprehensible. Jonah prophesies doom for Nineveh, but the city repents, and the decree is voided. People make vows, but the final chapter of Leviticus provides for the annulling of vows and, in rabbinic tradition, the High Priest is rebuked for not annulling the vow of Jephthah (Judges, chapter 11). No gambling debt, no curse binds human beings so tightly as to make war unavoidable. Repentance is the way out of ineluctable karma. In the book, Krishna who is king and god at the same time says to the princess: "Only a fool meddles in the Great Design. Besides, your destiny is born of lifetimes of karma, too powerful for me to change" (40). In Jewish tradition, this too is incomprehensible. There is no "Great Design" that transcends God. Even God is bound to be fair and just. This is the lesson of Abraham's argument over the destruction of Sodom (Genesis, chapter 18) as well as the thrust of the Book of Job – that God can, and must, be held responsible for evil; fate is not above God. Even the Shoah must be viewed in this light (see *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest*). Finally, in Jewish tradition, the one whose vanity and whose curse has been central to the story cannot simply be cleansed of all responsibility at the end.

A very beautifully told interpretation of a powerful Hindu epic that both captivates and raises serious questions for inter-traditional dialogue.