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City as Ideology: A City Study on Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

Chet Bahadur Pokhrel
Lecturer, Department of English,
Janapriya Multiple Campus, Pokhara, Nepal
pokhrelcb@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5757-6899

Abstract

Background: Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) revolves around the position of women in an ancient patriarchal society. The novel critiques the relationship between the various states and the political power of the ancient period, providing some insights into how a state operates properly.

Methods: This paper explores the city ideology and consciousness, legends, the legacy of ancient places, and the aesthetics of ancient states. It employs the perspectives of New Historicism to interpret *The Palace of Illusions*, utilizing the conceptual framework of eminent scholars who shed light on general concepts of city representation in literary texts, the religious aspects of a city, and broader perspectives on the connectivity of a city.

Results: The study focuses on how ancient places, palaces, and people serve as guiding principles. Written against such a backdrop and narrated by Draupadi, the daughter of King Draupada, it presents the time's political, economic, cultural, and architectural realities. The political relations among the several states, the emergence of the states, and the aesthetics of city life are subtly reflected in the novel.

Novelty: The writer depicts a city as a formidable combination of people and places, myths and legends, economy and culture, and art and architecture, which must be handled with subtlety for its existence.

Keywords: city, myth, power relations, ideology, critical self

Introduction

Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) portrays the city ideology, its consciousness, the relationships among the various states, and the political power of the ancient period, offering insights into how a state operates effectively. The story, narrated by Draupadi, depicts the fierce civil war, domestic power, politics, and perils of the great states of the time.

Through this ancient story, Divakaruni presents a stirring account of the central states of the period: Hastinapur, Khandavaprastha, and Panchal. Draupadi's palace of illusion is more captivating among them. The writer, through this Indian mythology, projects the aesthetics of the city and its psychological, social, cultural, political, and intellectual dimensions. The key driving forces mentioned in the novel are the physicality and complexity of architecture, the economy, the characters' struggles and crises, and the human quest for power and politics. It gives the readers the idea that ancient cities and states were formed and functioned in a philosophical and religious context.

Critical Receptions of *The Palace of Illusions*

Since the publication, scholars and critics have interpreted Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* from various perspectives. They have explored the novel's issues, including magic realism, dystopian vision, the exploitation and domination of women, myth, and modernity. Reviewing *The Palace of Illusions,* Prudon writes, "A little jejune at times, Divakaruni's languid and elegant prose remains seductive as it reimagines the women at the heart of the story and weaves myth into modern idiom" (as cited in Variyar and Prajapati, 2018, p. 305). The novel did not gain much importance in the literary circle for the few years following its publication. However, it later became very popular due to its elegant style and storytelling manner.

The novel subverts the traditional notion of storytelling. The author rewrites the myth of Draupadi. In this connection, Daschaudhuri (2020) states, "Pratibha Ray's *Yajnseni* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* are both rewritings of Draupadi, the enigmatic and powerful female protagonist of the epic *Mahabharat*" (2020, p. 171). The authors have portrayed Draupadi as a new, courageous, and modern woman who faces the challenges posed by society and institutions. Moreover, she comes as a transformed woman. Thus, the value, importance, and position of *The Palace of Illusions* among the literary debut is very high. Mistry (2020) writes, "Here the novelist removes gender bias and the importance of the novel's heroines, reflecting that she must have an individual identity" (2020, p. 33). The traditional notions that the narrator and the central character must be male have been subverted by the writer in this novel.

Although several scholarly studies have been conducted by applying feminist theory, feminist criticism, myth and modernity, dystopian vision, and ecocritical reading to the novel, it raises several issues related to city studies. However, the critics have not discussed the novel from the perspective of a city. It provides deeper insights, issues, and visions related to a city's emergence, requirement, development, and disappearance. This paper explores the concepts of city consciousness, legends, the legacy of ancient places, and the aesthetics of ancient states. By examining the ancient states of Hastinapur, Panchaal, and Indraprastha, along with their distinctive features, this research offers contemporary principles that can be applied in urban planning.

City as Critical Lens to Literary Works

Cities and literature are closely intertwined. On the one hand, they have been the subject of literary texts. On the other hand, literature develops, sustains, and diversifies in the cities. Through the real and fictional representations of cities, literary texts explore various insights and visions of the cities. Regarding cities, literary texts explore urban spaces, physical landscapes, and the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic realities that shape them. Lee (2005) comments thus, "By exploring the alternative world of the city through an insignificant experience of a woman, fictional history has deviated from the universal nationalist narratives that characterize the historical fiction (or fiction in general) of modern China" (2005, p. 140). Literary writings, fiction particularly, depict the city experiences of men and women in modern and ancient cities. Cities have a complex interplay of transformations, causes, and effects. The modern cities are densely populated and architecturally complex. They have modern complex buildings, houses, shopping malls, and auditoriums that fulfill every kind of human need. Veblen (1934) remarks, "In the modern community, there is also a more frequent attendance at large gatherings of people in such places as churches, theatres, ballrooms, hotels, parks, shops, and the like" (1934, p. 54). Cities have several features, ranging from large gatherings to different service centers. These features become iconic. The fundamentals of a city, including human desires and wants, a market economy, settlements, housing organization, and service centers, should be studied in detail.

The study of city representation in literary texts can have another important insight when city studies are based on fictional and ancient cities. As Mumford (1964) notes, "The ancient city was primarily a sanctuary and a stronghold, a protective enclosure that can be seen as a complex extension of the neolithic "container" (1964, p.16). Rather, today, the ancient cities mean so many things to scholars. They can have symbolic and metaphorical meanings. The art, architecture, houses, places, and palaces of ancient times reveal many aspects, including politics, economy, and culture. Furthermore, city studies can reveal institutional suppression, rejection, and decentering, as well as their consequences at both personal and institutional levels. As Foucault argues, "the notions of institutions of repression, rejection, exclusion, marginalization, are not adequate to describe, at the very center of the carceral city, … calculated methods, techniques, 'sciences' that permit the fabrication of the disciplinary individual" (as cited in Alexander, 2007, p. 308). Foucault highlights the complex and straightforward fabrications of a society, as well as those of a city. The lives of individuals cannot be controlled solely by the development of scientific and technological methods. However, it requires some faiths and ideologies to govern and control them.

As the sites of study in literary texts, cities reflect physical landscapes, make symbolic representations, and reveal historical and cultural contexts. There is a very close association between the cities and literature. Literary texts represent physical and fictional cities. Studying such cities and states mentioned in literary texts provides insight into humanitarian visions. Koch and Latham (2013) describe cities as "centers of innovation, cities generate tremendous wealth and opportunity, markets and factories, skyscrapers, shopping malls and

stadiums…(2013, p.1). Thus, cities have multifaceted roles and relations. Simmel (1950) envisions cities as "Cities are, first of all, seats of the highest economic division of labor…It is decisive that city life has transformed the struggle with nature for livelihood into an interhuman struggle for gain, which is not granted by nature but by other men" (1950, p. 420). Economic disparity, human struggles, and conflict over livelihood are inevitable city features. Humans naturally struggle with themselves instead of with nature. To transform their lives, there occurs interhuman transformation in the city.

Ideology in City

Cities are diverse places that encompass a range of problems and opportunities. Cities bear different ideologies. The cities, either described in the literary texts or the real ones, stand on the strong threshold of an ideology. Sometimes, the ideologies of a city are also embedded in its literary texts. The ideologies of a city revolve around the economic, social, institutional, political, infrastructural, and ecological realities that shape it. Even the mythological scriptures and texts deal with such ideologies. Regarding the ancient cities in literature, Ota (2015) discusses the legendary accounts of the city-state's foundation, particularly the foundation of Vijayanagara City, the capital of Vijayanagara state. Ota showcases the ideology that myths and legends play a critical role in the foundation of a city. Moreover, it requires the secular self to understand religious ideologies as well. He writes,

> The myth itself is a remarkable testimony that the Vijayanagara state was a component of the 'Islamicate' political world extending around the Indian Ocean where, although the Muslim regimes enjoyed dominance over non-Muslim ones, religious identities such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' in their strict senses… (2015, p. 40)

A city in its full-fledged state must not extend and support any particular religion. Highly significant religious consciousness and repressive ideology can bring a disastrous end to the city as well.

A city is characterized by complex political, cultural, religious, and economic power dynamics. They are the fundamental foundational ideologies of a city. A city develops and prospers when they are beautifully managed. The central debate in the scholarships and authorships revolves around whether a city is a place of knowledge, a source of creation and innovation. As Dulai (1990) critically evaluates, "The fountainhead of wisdom and final fulfillment lies not in the city but in the wilderness. The cities did not attain highly impressive refinements in the secular culture" (1990, p. 141). Thus, ancient cities valued forest dwellings more for their potential to foster knowledge and innovation than cities. Many literary works written in Sanskrit expose the ancient Hindu civilizations, cities, and capitals of the time. Many classical epics like "the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharat,* Ram's city Ayodhya, in the *Ramayana* and Hastinapur and Indraprastha, the respective capitals of Kurus and the Pandus in the *Mahabharat* are located just outside the Punjab to the east at the entrance to the Gangetic plain…" (Dulai, 1990, p. 142). Ancient cities like Ayodhya, Hastinapur, and Indraprastha were on the verge of urbanism. Ayodhya represents an ideal city where Hastinapur and Indraprastha represent the struggle for identity.

Literary texts encompass the concepts of urban spaces, capitals, and cities from ancient times to the present. Sometimes, they provide insights into future models for cities. The dynamic and plural visions of the spaces, their values, and their importance are articulated by the literary texts. Sometimes, such revelations extend beyond the book and author, becoming important visionary concepts for planning a city. Gurr (2021) highlights the value of the importance of urban studies in literary texts. As he adds on,

> Talking about his magnum opus, *Ulysses,* James Joyce famously told his biographer Frank Budgen, I want … to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book. (2021, p. 2)

Literary texts protect the city, even if they disappear from the physical world. The writers' perspective and the depictions of the city are so powerful that the readers can visualize and reconstruct the city.

Literature on cities reflects the alternative world of the city, encompassing transformations, features, functions, purpose, representation of physical landscapes, wealth, opportunities, innovations, developments, and the public consciousness as essential components of a city. The city also contains different formidable combinations of ideologies. As cities and states emerge, flourish, and disappear, literary texts become powerful tools for providing insights, perspectives, and visions about these urban areas. Thus, this study aims to examine the ancient cities in general, as well as Hastinapur and Indraprastha, their conflicting ideologies, and the social, economic, cultural, and political realities, particularly through the novel *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

Ideological Base of Kampilya, Indraprastha, and Hastinapur

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) illustrates the city ideology, consciousness, and socio-political insights about the ancient cities of Hastinapur, Indraprastha, and Kampilya. City ideology refers to the embedded systems of beliefs, values, and traditions in social systems, politics, religions, and the economy. Such ideologies deeply impact the lives of the characters and people. The novel predates the modern concept of a modern and innovative city. Kampala, the city of King Draupad and Draupadi's home, represents the restrictive ideology. It represents distinct ideologies, including intellectual pursuits, the value of skills, and political strategy. As Draupadi understands the city's consciousness, she also understands the traditions, norms, and values of her father's palace.

Kampilya is based on the ideological beliefs of law, order, social security, and religion. Draupadi narrates the religious convictions thus: "The royal family would go in a procession man in front, the women behind- to a Shiva temple and offer their prayers" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 9). The image of this procession reflects the firm religious conviction of the state. It also reflects the ideological division between men and women on the grounds of patriarchy. A city's leaders, kings, and commoners are supposed to possess all the arts and skills. They must possess the art of "preserving kingdoms and strengthening the of its borders" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 27). Similarly, opportunities are also given to meticulously skillful men. The King

Draupad arranges to test the skills and abilities of the hero to marry his daughter, Draupadi, "for the good of Panchaal and the honor of the house of Draupad: before the wedding, there would be a test of skill" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 55). Draupad organizes a fair competition to marry his daughter to enhance the state's honor and excellence. This act also has a benign political design. Assessing the abilities and competencies of the candidate to marry Draupadi reaffirms the ideology of maintaining social harmony, showing strength and stability, and valuing the meritocracy that this city always aspires for.

Indraprastha, which emerges from the forest of Khandava, was built with the aid of celestial architect Maya. In the novel, Indraprastha is a modern city with a unique architectural design. It is often referred to as The Palace of Illusions. It stands as a new and modern city. It is the manifestation of the power and prestige of the Pandavas. The city is great, grand, and complex, representing a modern city's features. The narrator recalls Indraprastha, "Trade and industry and art prospered in our city. Our reputation spread across kingdoms. Our subjects, flourishing, blessed us in their prayers" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 154). Indraprastha is a modern city with a fully developed trade, industry, services, arts, music, and literature. Owing to economic activities, people have many more opportunities and challenges. Indraprastha's reputation spreads due to its prosperity, good living conditions, and sense of well-being. A modern city aspires to a social hierarchy, urban sociology, and a balance between public and private realms. The city has "fountains and pools, ponds for birds to sport in" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 145). Apart from such services and facilities, the other facilities of the modern city are "floors looking like rivers, waterfalls looking like walls. Door steps all glittery like melted ice" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 145). However, such a modern city faces failure and deterioration due to the lack of conscience. Indraprastha's decline and devastation may lead people to lose their conscience in the pursuit of a city's prosperity.

Metaphorically, the loss of Indraprastha represents the transitory nature of power and fortune. The ideological undercurrents represented by Indraprastha are that hard work, struggle, and prosperity can lead to success. As the people succeed, their ambitions and aspirations increase. This city embodies modernity in every sense. Moreover, Indraprastha reflects the ideology of rugged individualism and a sophisticated way of living, as well as how the built environment, city structure, and heritage can lead to adversity when not handled consciously. Thus, Indraprastha is associated with architectural magnificence, mythological significance, and a desire for power and prosperity in modern times. It serves the ideological supremacy of the Pandavas. The creation of deceptive floors and walls represents the ideological belief that a city is not architecturally designed for function and beauty but also for psychological illusions.

Initially, Draupadi perceived Hastinapur as a modern, great, and grand city. She narrates her impressions thus: "I fantasized about a structure …air and affluent, with windows everywhere and doors opening onto generous balconies" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 126). Draupadi is awe-stricken to see the rooms, gardens, internal artifacts, furniture, and apartments. For Draupadi, "The palace itself was a curiosity, with its bulging gold domes and curlicued

moldings, its doors embossed with beaten metal" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 127). Based on its infrastructure, services, and facilities, Hastinapur stands as a modern state. Draupadi further recalls the beauty of Hastinapur palace: "The domes of the palace gleamed against a purpling sky, made picturesque by distance" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 134). However, the city of Hastinapur is involved in petty politics. It is devoid of justice and humanity. When the Pandavas want their rights, Hastinapur does injustice by providing the most barren, desolate portion of the kingdom with the gifts of "The cobras or the hyenas" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 138). The nature and ideology of Hastinapur are further reflected in Draupadi's narration when she says, "Hastinapur is more conservative than our city" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 181). It was not respected in the treatment of men and women, in respecting the opinions of the elders and seniors, or in maintaining conversations among the courtiers. In the game of dice played trickily, the Pandavas lose their garments, jewelry, horses, the palace, and everything else. As Draupadi recalls, "My husbands threw off their upper garments, their gold chains, and armbands before Dussasan could touch them" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 192). The houses, horses, property, and money can be earned and lost quickly. The nature of material luxury is very transitory.

However, Hastinapur robs, cheats, and tricks Indraprastha. It is the feeling of superiority and dominance of Hanstinapur over Indraprastha. Consequently, the Pandavas walk barefoot from the city to the wilderness. Their palace of illusions and all their possessions are confiscated. Thus, Hastinapur embodies an ideology of power, political maneuvering, and lineage. It maintains the tradition and continuity of the old order, as well as political intrigue. It illustrates the ruthless ideological crisis in the face of establishing *dharma,* justice, and injustice. The city's grandeur replicates the corruption, deceit, and moral crisis. Furthermore, Hastinapur represents an old authority, values, and traditions. It carries the assertion of dominance and continuity of the established order. In the name of establishing a carceral city, it has used various notions to repress and exclude the Pandavas. If the city does not transform accordingly with time, it forges the ideology of authority, tradition, and divine order. Conventional social and political ideologies govern the people's lifestyle. They also represent resistance to change and political conspiracy.

Indraprastha and Hastinapur, while endorsing two different ideologies, show an ideological clash. Indraprastha represents justice, virtuosity, honor, modernity, and flexibility. On the other hand, Hastinapur emulates the ideological beliefs of tricks, aggression, lineage, tradition, and dominance. Due to such ideological differences between the two cities, the great war occurred at Kurukshetra, widely known as the War of the Mahabharata. Consequently, the peace and prosperity of the cities are broken, and all suffer losses and regrets. The war is not the driving force behind the city's construction. It is a total devastation. In ancient and modern times, cities stand on the foundation of a divine and fluid social order. Incorporating and assimilating different views, opinions, and flexibility can help the city prosper. Thenceforth, cities turn out to be the proper and sustainable places.

City Consciousness

Understanding the city through one's perspective on its morphology, sociology, technology, and urban spaces falls under city consciousness. In his seminal essay, "On Cosmopolitanism," Derrida proposes that the gates of the city be thrown open. Hospitality, by detaching from self-serving machinations (Alexander, 2007, p. 28), refers to the open-mindedness, hospitality, and selfless notions that city people must possess. Furthermore, it refers to having a secular self rather than an individualized self that can enhance our understanding of the city. A collective consciousness about the city contributes to its prosperity. The cities mentioned in the novels, namely Kampilya and Dwarka, possess a collective consciousness.

However, the main characters of Indraprastha and Hastinapur, namely Draupadi, Dhristharastha, Duryodhana, and Sakuni, lack a collective consciousness and secular self. Consequently, they faced great destruction and damage. Upon her arrival at Hastinapur, Draupadi feels, "The palace makes me uneasy. Too many people there hate my husbands. It'll never be home to me" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 136). She acknowledges that she cannot adapt to the culture of Hastinapur. In Hastinapur, Duryodhan is the one who "welded power" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 181), though several honorable people exist. When his vanity and self manifest, "the elders protected their dignity and withdrew into silence" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 181) because he insulted them if they opposed and contradicted him. So, the whole state goes into a whirlwind of dangerous direction. The obstinate behavior of those characters creates a crisis in the city. Draupadi's desire for revenge, Duryodhan and Karna's antagonism towards the Pandavas, and Sakuni's intention to create havoc in the state of Hastinapur come to fruition when all these individuals demonstrate their sheer irresponsibility in the face of personal interests. Finally, the great and grand city appears as "Hastinapur after the war was largely a city of women, widows…The poor ones used to working…The women became unpaid servants" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 322). The terrible situation is that women and children are found begging on the streets. Women are helpless without any protection. When these characters prioritize their motifs over collective benefits, the states become ashes and dust.

The cities aim to display excessive knowledge, power, and wealth. The central states mentioned in the novel, such as Hastinapur and Indraprastha, showcase their properties and materials for decorating palaces, hosting celebrations, and displaying wealth. The cities also represent a kind of extravagance. In connection with the decoration of the palace Hastinapur, Draupadi recounts, "Its walls would be shimmering red sandstone. Its gardens would be a celebration of color and birdsong" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 126). The general perception of people about the city in ancient times was based on the elaborate artistic decoration of buildings. On the one hand, the palace represents a kind Draupadi's curiosity. On the other hand, weddings, functions, and gatherings serve the significant purpose of showcasing their jewelry and clothes. The role of women in ancient cities can be illustrated by the example of Hastinapur, where Draupadi remarks, "At these gatherings, the women spent much time in casual display of jewelry and clothing, or making discreet references to their husbands' feats" (Divakaruni, 2008,

p. 128). The true nature and purpose of functions have been missing. A sense of pomp and dominance over others often characterizes the culture of a city. Generally, people are more competitive and arrogant in cities than in villages.

The grandeur of Indraprastha spread far and wide. The ornamentation, extravagance, and unparalleled luxury reflect the city's expenditure. The narration reflects, "Soon a prosperous city grew up around Khandav. People called it Indra Prastha…Minstrels began to make up songs about the unparalleled grandeur of the Pandava court" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 147). Thus, cities, even in ancient times, were built at considerable expense. Money means memory for the people of the city. The overall consciousness of the people is shaped by the money, material prosperity, and magnanimity they show. It also gives insights to the people that you are what you have and what you can afford.

The knowledge that becomes insightful for humanity can be obtained from the forest dwellings. For them, living in the magnificent city means conflict. Lives in the cities of Hastinapur and Indraprastha are not devoid of sorrows. They also reveal a consumerist ideology vicariously. The Palace of Illusions, which "no human would be able to harm…no natural disaster lay it low" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 149), provides no comfort for them. The Pandavs have learned about the misery, shortage, and crisis in human lives. While living in the forest, they have learned to overcome adversity. For instance, "On the Indrakila mountain…Arjun meditated and prayed to Shiva" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 218) made him happy. In their last year in the forest, Yudhisthir encounters divine visitations. He learns an important lesson: "Victory-not in the upcoming battle but against the six inner enemies that plague us all: lust, anger, greed, ignorance, arrogance and envy" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 221). The great scholars and intellectuals were enlightened by the forest, nature, and natural setting rather than the magnificent city.

Conclusion

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a reconfiguration of ancient urban landscapes in a modern context, which helps to envision new perspectives on contemporary cities. The novel offers multimodal and multidimensional experiences, demonstrating that a city is not only an urban space to fulfill basic human needs but also to satisfy desires for fantasy, luxury, and exoticism. Instead, it must address social factors and needs. Furthermore, certain faiths, beliefs, traditions, and values are closely tied to the foundation of a city. A city's secular nature protects it from conflict. The ancient cities mentioned in the novel underscore the importance of maintaining one's conscience and humanity and embodying a secular spirit. A state perishes due to humiliation, vengeance, and revenge. The novel shows that forgiveness, open-mindedness, and a secular spirit lead a city toward prosperity and sustainability. Besides, a city must excel in trade, commerce, industry, and technology.

The advancement of a city depends not only on material development, making a city complex and smart, but also on the city possessing an obsession with truth. It should emphasize the act of moralizing and embrace implacable goodness. Balancing between the city's ideologies and natural wonderings can enhance humanity. Human beings gain extensive

knowledge from natural settings but apply it to advance the city. The extreme practice of adhering to rigid and fixed ideology can be disastrous. Similarly, only naturalness and forest dwellings can support human life. Thus, this novel gives an important insight into how cities and states thrive when their fundamental ideologies and principles are duly followed.

Acknowledgments

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