
Would Dharma Still Triumph? A Kaliyuga Reading of The Palace of Illusions

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Abstract

The Mahabharata is usually seen as a story where Dharma (righteousness) wins over Adharma (wrongdoing) because of divine help, good conduct, and the workings of cosmic justice. But many modern retellings have started to question this simple picture by telling the same old stories from new angles. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is one such retelling. By giving the narration to Draupadi, the novel adds psychological depth, moral grey areas, and a fresh look at what "being righteous" actually means.

This paper looks at *The Palace of Illusions* through what I am calling "Kaliyuga Consciousness" — a way of thinking marked by doubt about absolute truths, a sense that morality is no longer black and white, and a sharper awareness of one's own inner life. Using this idea as a lens, the study explores how the novel reshapes our understanding of Dharma, fate, heroism, and divine intervention, focusing mainly on Draupadi, Karna, Krishna, and the Pandavas.

The argument is that Divakaruni does not throw out the idea of Dharma. Instead, she redefines it for a world where moral certainty is hard to find. In the original epic, Dharma wins through battles won and divine strategies carried out. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Dharma becomes something internal — a process of questioning, reflecting, and coming to terms with oneself. In other words, the novel marks a shift from the moral clarity associated with Dvapara Yuga to the confusion and complexity of Kaliyuga, where right and wrong can no longer simply be accepted — they have to be worked out, again and again.

The paper concludes that Dharma still wins in Kaliyuga — not through war or outside authority, but through awareness, personal responsibility, and the ongoing effort to find what is ethically true even when everything feels uncertain.

Keywords: Dharma, Kaliyuga Consciousness, Draupadi, Mahabharata, Mythological Retelling, Moral Ambiguity, Krishna, Destiny

Introduction

The Mahabharata holds a place in Indian culture that very few texts can match. It is at once a piece of literature, a philosophical text, a mythological account, a study of politics, and a guide to ethics. At its centre is the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, which ends in the terrible war at Kurukshetra. For generations, this epic has been read as proof that Dharma always wins over Adharma in the end — helped along by Krishna's guidance and the basic rightness of the Pandavas' cause.

Most traditional readings draw a sharp line between the "good" and "bad" sides of the story. The Pandavas stand for justice and moral correctness, while the Kauravas represent greed and corruption. Krishna's presence makes this divide even clearer, since his role is often understood as restoring cosmic balance whenever things go wrong. As a result, the Mahabharata has long been treated as a story where moral order wins out, no matter how rough the journey gets.

In recent decades, though, modern retellings have made this simple reading much harder to hold onto. Writers have gone back to old myths to ask new questions — about gender, identity, power, and whose voice gets heard. These retellings often push back against old hierarchies and give space to characters who were pushed to the margins in the original versions, reflecting a wider cultural shift towards valuing multiple viewpoints and a willingness to question what we have inherited.

Among such retellings, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008, stands out. By retelling the Mahabharata through Draupadi's eyes, the novel gives her a voice and an inner life that the original epic rarely allowed. Through her, we move away from grand battles and divine plans and into a world of emotional struggle, unmet desires, and moral uncertainty. This shift unsettles the usual categories of "hero" and "villain" and pushes readers to rethink what they thought they knew about the epic.

This paper argues that *The Palace of Illusions* can be read as a "Kaliyuga" version of the Mahabharata. In Hindu thought, Kaliyuga is the last of the four cosmic ages, generally linked with moral decline, social breakdown, and the weakening of traditional values. Unlike earlier ages, where Dharma is supposed to be clearer and easier to follow, Kaliyuga is described as a time of confusion, doubt, and competing versions of the truth. Interestingly, these features look a lot like the world we live in today.

In modern life, people increasingly question absolute authority, universal moral rules, and single "official" versions of the truth. We live among many different viewpoints and conflicting values, and in this environment, the old lines between heroes and villains start to blur. This way of seeing the world — sceptical, self-aware, and alert to moral complexity — is what I am calling "Kaliyuga Consciousness."

This idea of Kaliyuga Consciousness is the central theoretical contribution of this paper. Rather than treating Kaliyuga only as a religious category, the study treats it as a cultural and philosophical lens through which modern readers approach old myths. *The Palace of Illusions* reflects this consciousness by treating its characters as real, layered human beings rather than simple symbols of good or evil.

Through close readings of Draupadi, Karna, Krishna, and the wider moral world of the novel, this paper explores how Divakaruni reworks the idea of Dharma for present-day readers. It asks whether Dharma can still win in a world where moral certainty feels increasingly out of reach — and, more importantly, whether the very meaning of "winning" changes once we look at it through a Kaliyuga lens.

The central claim of this paper is that Dharma does survive in the novel, but in a changed form. Instead of showing up through military victory or divine action, Dharma now appears through questioning, self-awareness, and the everyday struggle to make decisions that feel ethically sound in a messy world. In this sense, *The Palace of Illusions* does not abandon the spiritual core of the Mahabharata — it simply reinterprets that core for an age built on doubt and introspection.

Literature Review

Most scholarly work on *The Palace of Illusions* has focused on its feminist side. Critics often read the novel as an act of giving Draupadi her voice back — a voice that traditional versions of the Mahabharata tend to limit or silence. By handing the narration to Draupadi, Divakaruni pushes back against the patriarchal patterns built into both the epic itself and the way it has been read over the centuries. A number of scholars have looked closely at how Draupadi resists the gender roles assigned to her — her questioning of marriage, of authority, and of her own "fate" — reading this as a critique of patriarchy that opens up space for women's experiences within a story that has traditionally belonged to men.

Other studies have looked at the psychological side of the novel, pointing out how Divakaruni turns mythological figures, who are often flat symbols in traditional tellings, into rounded individuals driven by desire, insecurity, ambition, and regret. This kind of psychological realism lets modern readers connect with the epic on a much more personal level. Some research has also placed the novel within the broader trend of rewriting myths, where retellings act as a kind of conversation between past and present, allowing old stories to speak to today's concerns. There is also a body of work on identity and agency in the novel — how Draupadi's journey can be read in terms of selfhood, independence, and resistance — showing how Divakaruni turns a mythological figure into someone capable of real self-reflection and self-definition.

All of this work is useful, but it leaves a gap. Most studies look at the novel through feminism, gender politics, narrative technique, or the broader practice of rewriting myths. Very few scholars have approached it through the lens of Yuga theory — the Hindu framework of cosmic ages — and almost none have asked whether the novel reflects a specifically "Kaliyuga" way of thinking, marked by moral ambiguity, scepticism, and the breakdown of fixed ethical categories. This study tries to fill that gap by

introducing the idea of Kaliyuga Consciousness as a framework for reading the novel. Instead of focusing only on gender or narrative voice, it places *The Palace of Illusions* within a larger conversation about how moral understanding itself changes in the modern world — showing that Divakaruni's novel is not just a feminist retelling, but also a serious exploration of how old ideas of righteousness get reimagined in an age defined by uncertainty.

Theoretical Framework: Kaliyuga Consciousness

The Mahabharata has lasted for centuries not simply because it tells a grand story, but because every generation finds something new in it. The epic keeps adapting to new social realities, ethical concerns, and cultural anxieties. As society changes, so do our ideas about Dharma, heroism, fate, and justice. This means modern readers often come to the Mahabharata with very different questions than earlier readers did — instead of looking for confirmation of accepted moral truths, today's readers are more likely to question those truths in the first place.

This change in how we read reflects a broader shift in how people think. The modern world is full of uncertainty, competing stories, ideological conflict, and a growing distrust of absolute authority. Religious institutions, political systems, and traditional social structures no longer command the unquestioned respect they once did. People increasingly rely on their own judgment rather than inherited certainties when deciding what is right. These conditions closely resemble what Hindu thought describes as Kaliyuga — the final age in the cosmic cycle.

In Hindu tradition, Kaliyuga is often described as an age when Dharma loses its footing and moral confusion spreads. Classical texts describe it as a time of greed, hypocrisy, materialism, and weakening spiritual values. But reading Kaliyuga only as a religious prophecy misses something important. It can also be understood as a philosophical condition — a state in which people struggle to find moral truth among competing claims and conflicting loyalties. Seen this way, Kaliyuga is not just a historical period; it is also a state of mind.

This paper proposes the term "Kaliyuga Consciousness" for that state of mind. It does not mean that morality disappears — it means that moral certainty becomes harder to find. People living with this consciousness are not necessarily less ethical than those who came before them. Rather, they face a world where ethical choices have become more tangled, and where old definitions of right and wrong often fall short. Moral problems can no longer be solved just by appealing to authority or tradition; every decision now involves weighing competing values, personal experiences, and social expectations against each other.

This pattern shows up clearly in modern literature, where characters are rarely shown as completely good or completely evil. Modern stories tend to avoid simple black-and-white divisions and instead lean into psychological complexity — heroes have flaws, villains have soft spots, and moral judgments depend a lot on whose perspective you're reading from. This tendency strongly shapes contemporary retellings of myths, including *The Palace of Illusions*.

Unlike the traditional Mahabharata, which generally backs up the moral legitimacy of the Pandavas, Divakaruni's novel invites readers to question those assumptions. Through Draupadi's narration, events that once seemed morally clear-cut take on new shades of ambiguity. We are encouraged to look not just at what happened, but at how different characters experienced it. As a result, the line between Dharma and Adharma becomes much less absolute than in conventional readings — a shift especially visible in how Karna and Draupadi themselves are reimagined, as the following sections explore in detail.

Perhaps the biggest consequence of all this is what happens to the idea of Dharma itself. In traditional frameworks, Dharma usually appears as a stable moral principle, backed by divine authority — characters might struggle to interpret it correctly, but its basic validity is never in doubt. In *The Palace of Illusions*, however, Dharma becomes something that is argued about, again and again. Draupadi keeps running into situations where competing duties make any kind of moral certainty impossible. Should loyalty to family come before personal happiness? Should obedience matter more than justice? Can violence ever really serve a righteous cause? The novel does not give clean answers to these questions — instead, it shows how simple moral formulas fall apart when faced with the messiness of real life.

So Kaliyuga Consciousness becomes a useful way of understanding not just The Palace of Illusions, but the broader shift happening across modern retellings of myths. It explains why modern readers feel for characters who used to be sidelined, why traditional heroes now get questioned, and why Dharma itself is increasingly seen as something we work out through inquiry rather than something handed down as settled truth.

Draupadi and Kaliyuga Consciousness

Of all the changes Divakaruni makes in The Palace of Illusions, the rebuilding of Draupadi's inner world is probably the most important. In the traditional Mahabharata, Draupadi is mostly remembered for things that happen to her or because of her: the woman born from fire, the wife of all five Pandavas, the queen humiliated in the Kaurava court, and one of the major reasons the Kurukshetra war breaks out. These events make her central to the story, but they rarely give us access to what she actually thinks or feels. She exists more as someone things happen to than as someone who reflects on her own life.

Divakaruni changes this completely by putting Draupadi at the centre of the story. We no longer see the epic through the eyes of kings, warriors, sages, or gods — instead, everything is filtered through the mind of a woman living with the consequences of decisions made by other people. This shift turns the Mahabharata from a story about Dharma winning into a story about what that "winning" actually costs in human terms. Even more importantly, it opens up space to question old assumptions about righteousness, fate, and justice. Through Draupadi's voice, the novel introduces a way of seeing the world that fits very naturally with Kaliyuga Consciousness.

One of the most striking things about Draupadi's character is that she refuses to simply accept things as they are. Unlike many traditional portrayals that show her quietly accepting the cosmic order, Divakaruni's Draupadi keeps questioning the structures that control her life. From childhood, she senses that her life has been shaped by expectations she never agreed to. Even before she fully understands what her "destiny" is supposed to be, she feels that she has been created for some larger purpose — but rather than just accepting this role, she wants to understand what it actually means. This urge to question instead of simply obey is a very modern instinct.

Her doubts come through especially clearly in how she deals with the idea of fate. Throughout the novel, Draupadi pushes back against the idea that her life was decided before she was even born. The prophecy around her birth, her father's political ambitions, and the expectations placed on her as a royal woman all seem to point towards a fixed future. Yet she keeps resisting the idea that she is simply a tool of destiny — she wants independence, emotional fulfilment, and the ability to make her own choices. This frustration with a life that feels pre-decided mirrors the wider experience of Kaliyuga Consciousness, where people want to shape their own identities rather than just inherit them.

This tension between fate and free will becomes especially sharp in the episode of her marriage to all five Pandava brothers. Traditional readings often explain this through divine will or karma — it had to happen, so it did. In The Palace of Illusions, though, we experience this moment through Draupadi's own distress: a deep emotional shock rather than a neat cosmic solution. Her confusion, disappointment, and feeling of helplessness show the limits of explanations based purely on "Dharma" or "destiny." What feels acceptable within the logic of the epic becomes deeply troubling once we see it through one person's lived experience — and this is where one of the novel's biggest themes comes in: the clash between what society expects and what an individual actually feels. In modern life too, people often find themselves caught between social obligations and personal desires, where big general principles don't really account for individual suffering. Draupadi's life is shaped by exactly this kind of conflict — she is repeatedly asked to put aside her own feelings for the sake of political stability, family unity, or "the bigger picture," but the novel never lets us forget the human cost of these sacrifices.

The famous scene where Draupadi is publicly disrobed is another key moment. In traditional accounts, this scene mainly works to show how wicked the Kauravas are and how divine protection eventually saves her. Those elements are still present in Divakaruni's version, but the focus shifts towards Draupadi's own experience. Her humiliation is not just a plot device leading to war — it becomes an exploration of what it feels like to be vulnerable, angry, and completely alone. Most importantly,

Draupadi questions the silence of the people who should have protected her — her elders, her husbands, the wider social system that failed to act. She does not treat her suffering as simply "meant to be," nor does she assume that silence from authority means wisdom. Instead, she demands accountability — a modern ethical mindset that does not automatically give tradition the benefit of the doubt. In this sense, Draupadi represents Kaliyuga not because she rejects Dharma, but because she insists on examining what Dharma actually leads to in practice.

Her relationship with Karna adds another layer of complexity. One of the more daring choices Divakaruni makes is to show a real emotional pull between Draupadi and Karna — something traditional versions barely touch on. The novel presents this attraction as a persistent, real feeling, which complicates the usual moral framework by introducing desires that don't fit neatly into socially approved categories. Rather than treating these feelings as some kind of moral failure, Divakaruni presents them as simply part of being human. Draupadi's inner life cannot be fully boxed in by ideas of "duty" and "obligation" — her feelings for Karna represent a path her life might have taken, a different version of herself that never got to exist. This sense of "what could have been" is itself a feature of Kaliyuga Consciousness: the recognition that our moral and emotional lives often spill over the edges of the social structures we're given.

Draupadi's relationship with Krishna offers yet another important angle. Unlike devotional readings that focus on unquestioning faith, the novel shows a relationship built on conversation, uncertainty, and slow understanding. Krishna doesn't simply hand Draupadi answers — instead, he encourages her to think and reflect for herself, pushing her to examine her own assumptions rather than lean on outside certainty. In older models, divine figures often act as sources of unquestionable truth; within Kaliyuga Consciousness, though, spiritual growth comes more from questioning than from obedience, and Krishna's role anticipates this — he behaves less like a commander and more like someone who sparks self-reflection in others.

Perhaps the most important thing about Draupadi's story is how it rejects simple moral categories. Throughout the novel, she meets people whose actions can't easily be sorted into "good" or "bad." Even the Pandavas, her own husbands, are shown to have weaknesses, ambitions, and contradictions, while characters traditionally linked to Adharma show moments of real vulnerability and humanity. This rejection of simple moral categories is one of the defining features of Kaliyuga Consciousness. The real world rarely hands us purely black-and-white choices — people constantly have to balance competing loyalties, conflicting responsibilities, and outcomes they cannot fully predict. Draupadi's journey is not a march towards certainty, but a deepening awareness of how complicated everything actually is.

By the end of the novel, Draupadi has not found a tidy answer to the questions that have haunted her throughout her life. What she gains instead is a deeper understanding of herself, her relationships, and the limits of what anyone can really know — redefining what "wisdom" means: not having the absolute truth, but recognising how complicated truth actually is.

Through Draupadi, then, Divakaruni gives us a protagonist whose mind embodies many of the qualities associated with Kaliyuga: scepticism, self-awareness, resistance to blind authority, emotional complexity, and a refusal to think in absolutes. Because of this, *The Palace of Illusions* can be read not just as a feminist retelling of the Mahabharata, but also as an exploration of how the epic is reimagined through Kaliyuga Consciousness. Draupadi becomes a kind of bridge between the moral certainties of the ancient world and the moral grey areas of the modern one, turning the Mahabharata into a story that speaks directly to today's experiences of doubt, responsibility, and self-discovery.

Karna — The Hero of Kaliyuga

One of the most interesting shifts in how modern audiences read the Mahabharata is the change in Karna's status. In traditional readings, Karna occupies a complicated but secondary place in the epic's moral structure. He is admired for his generosity, loyalty, and skill in battle, but his alliance with Duryodhana puts him on the side that eventually represents Adharma. Readers have always felt sorry for him, but the larger moral framework of the epic generally still favours the Pandavas as the rightful side.

Today's readers, however, often respond to Karna very differently. In modern retellings and adaptations, Karna frequently comes across as one of the most loved characters in the whole epic — many find him more relatable than Yudhishtira, more emotionally compelling than Arjuna, and simply more human than the "ideal" heroes who end up winning. This is not just a shift in taste — it reflects a real change in how society thinks about morality. Through the lens of Kaliyuga Consciousness, Karna becomes something like the symbolic hero of our times.

To understand why, it helps to look at how ethical values have changed. Traditional societies placed huge importance on duty, lineage, and keeping the existing social order intact — heroism was measured by how well someone fulfilled the role they were born into. Modern societies, by contrast, celebrate individual struggle and the ability to overcome obstacles the system itself puts in your way. Success that comes despite exclusion often feels more impressive than success that comes with built-in advantages, and Karna's story takes on enormous significance within this framework.

Unlike the Pandavas, Karna grows up carrying the weight of secrecy and rejection. Though born with royal blood, he is denied the recognition that should come with it, and he grows up facing the humiliation of being seen as socially "lesser." Throughout his life, he runs into barriers that have nothing to do with his actual ability — only with questions about his status and whether he "deserves" to be where he is. For today's readers, this hits close to home. Modern culture is full of stories celebrating people who rise above exclusion, and readers who might struggle to relate to princes and kings often find themselves drawn instead to a character defined by rejection and persistence.

The Palace of Illusions deepens this appeal by showing Karna through Draupadi's eyes. Instead of reducing him to just a political enemy, Divakaruni gives him real emotional depth — someone shaped not only by ambition and loyalty, but also by pain, vulnerability, and longing. Draupadi's attraction to him pushes readers even further towards seeing him with empathy rather than judgment.

This choice matters because it shakes up the moral certainty of the original epic. In traditional readings, the divide between the Pandavas and the Kauravas often stands in for the divide between Dharma and Adharma. Karna's presence makes this divide much harder to maintain — his virtues are obvious, yet his loyalties place him with the Kauravas, and the result is a character who simply doesn't fit into the usual moral boxes. This is one of the defining features of Kaliyuga Consciousness: modern readers tend to resist sorting people neatly into "good" and "evil." They're more interested in understanding why people make the choices they do than in handing out moral labels. Karna's appeal comes precisely from this tension between his personal virtues and the unfair social world he's born into — his flaws don't make him less human, if anything they make him more relatable.

At the same time, Karna's popularity says something about how our ideas of justice have shifted. Traditional stories often celebrate people who uphold the existing moral and social order. Modern audiences, on the other hand, are increasingly aware of exclusion and inequality, and more willing to ask whether the system itself is part of the problem. Karna's life invites exactly these questions — his suffering doesn't just come from his own choices; it also comes from a system that denies him recognition and dignity in the first place. Seen this way, Karna becomes a symbol for everyone who remains marginalised despite real potential, asking how much of anyone's life is shaped by circumstances they never chose — a question very relevant to today's conversations about identity and fairness.

Karna's relationship with fate adds another layer here. Traditional readings often lean on the idea that fate decides everything — Karna's tragic end is simply karma working itself out beyond his control. But modern readers usually want psychological, social, and political reasons instead of purely mystical ones, and Divakaruni's portrayal reflects exactly this shift. Karna isn't shown as a passive victim of destiny, but as someone making hard choices within a world that limits his options — his tragedy grows out of the interaction between his own choices and the social barriers around him, which lines up with how we tend to understand human experience today, as shaped by systems that both enable and constrain us.

The contrast with Yudhishtira is especially telling. Traditionally, Yudhishtira represents Dharma through his commitment to truth and ethical behaviour. Yet many modern readers find Karna more compelling — which says something about a shift in what we value morally. Today's readers often

admire honesty and struggle more than perfection. Karna's flaws make him feel real, while Yudhishtira's devotion to ideal principles can feel distant from everyday life. None of this means people are rejecting Dharma — it suggests instead that the meaning of "moral greatness" is being redefined. Kaliyuga Consciousness tends to value empathy, resilience, and emotional honesty alongside the more traditional virtues, and Karna embodies these qualities in ways that connect with modern readers. His suffering becomes a source of insight rather than just an obstacle in the plot.

That said, the way Karna is celebrated also raises important questions. If modern readers increasingly side with him, what does that say about how we think about heroism today? Does admiring someone's suffering risk letting us overlook the consequences of their choices? The Palace of Illusions doesn't offer easy answers here. While it asks us to sympathise with Karna, it doesn't let him off the hook either — his loyalty to Duryodhana remains morally troubling, and the novel does not hide the destructive consequences of his choices. But Divakaruni also refuses to turn him into a simple villain, presenting him instead as someone whose humanity goes beyond easy moral judgments. This refusal to give a clean verdict is itself very much in line with Kaliyuga Consciousness — modern readers aren't asked to choose between total admiration and total condemnation, but to sit in the uncomfortable space between the two.

In the end, Karna's importance in The Palace of Illusions goes beyond his individual story. He represents a wider shift in how we engage with myths today — a world increasingly concerned with exclusion, identity, and the human cost of social structures. If Draupadi represents the questioning spirit of Kaliyuga, Karna represents its wounded humanity. His story reflects a modern desire to understand people not just through what they do, but through what they struggle with and hope for. In many ways, he is the character most fully shaped by the consciousness of Kaliyuga, and his lasting popularity reflects just how morally complicated our world has become.

Krishna and the Transformation of Dharma

Krishna occupies a complicated place in The Palace of Illusions. He is the figure through whom the novel works out the relationship between divine wisdom and human uncertainty. In the traditional Mahabharata, Krishna is essentially the architect of Dharma's victory — he guides the Pandavas, plans strategy, delivers the Gita, and ensures the Kauravas are eventually defeated. His presence reassures readers that cosmic justice remains intact despite the chaos.

In Divakaruni's novel, though, Krishna goes through a quiet but important change. He keeps his divine aura, but no longer appears mainly as a strategist steering history. Instead, he comes across as a more mysterious presence whose influence works through conversation, reflection, and self-discovery. This reflects a bigger shift in how the novel understands Dharma itself — in a world full of uncertainty, Dharma can no longer simply be imposed from outside; it has to be found from within.

This fits the idea of Kaliyuga Consciousness. In earlier ages, Dharma could be built into social institutions and shared norms — people generally knew their duties because roles were clearly defined. In Kaliyuga, that clarity is harder to hold onto. Social structures lose their moral certainty, traditional authority gets questioned, and people work through ethical dilemmas with little reliable guidance from outside.

Instead of giving Draupadi clear-cut answers, Krishna often pushes her to face her own questions. Their conversations are full of ambiguity rather than instruction — he rarely explains things directly, instead inviting her to think things through and arrive at her own understanding. This is a real departure from the traditional idea of divine authority, and it feels relevant to modern readers, many of whom live in environments where competing values make moral certainty hard to come by. Spiritual growth becomes less about obedience and more about self-examination, and Krishna's role mirrors this — he functions less like an authority figure with all the answers and more like someone who sparks an inner awakening in others.

This shows clearly in Draupadi's relationship with Krishna. She turns to him again and again in moments of confusion, grief, and anger, but he rarely removes her doubts or takes her suffering away. Instead, he helps her build the capacity to live with uncertainty — his guidance changes how she understands her problems rather than solving them outright. This changes what "divine intervention" means. In the

traditional epic, Krishna intervenes directly in events to ensure Dharma wins. Here, his intervention happens mainly at the level of consciousness — he shapes how people perceive things rather than controlling outcomes. This fits a Kaliyuga understanding of spirituality, where transformation starts within the individual rather than out in the world.

This becomes even clearer with the Kurukshetra war itself. In the traditional epic, the war's outcome confirms that the Pandavas' cause was morally right — victory becomes proof that righteousness has won. The Palace of Illusions complicates this. Through Draupadi's eyes, we see the devastating human cost of the war: the deaths of people she loves, destroyed families, and lasting emotional wreckage. The war achieves its political goals, but it does not erase grief, loss, or regret — which raises the question of whether "winning" is really a good measure of righteousness.

This is one of the central concerns of Kaliyuga Consciousness. Modern societies have repeatedly seen political or military victories that don't bring real moral resolution, so the line between "winning" and "being right" becomes harder to draw. Krishna's role takes on new meaning here: instead of guaranteeing outside success, he becomes linked with inner understanding. Establishing Dharma is no longer just about defeating enemies — it's about building wisdom, compassion, and self-awareness.

This matters for how relevant the Mahabharata still feels today. If its events happened now, Dharma probably couldn't be established through the methods that worked in Dvapara Yuga — today's biggest battles are ideological, psychological, and cultural rather than purely military, playing out in institutions, media, and inside our own heads. Krishna's actions hint at what "establishing Dharma" looks like in Kaliyuga: rather than leading armies into battle, he encourages people to face their own attachments, prejudices, and misunderstandings. The battlefield shifts from Kurukshetra to the human mind. Divakaruni's Krishna suggests that the struggle between Dharma and Adharma isn't limited to historical events — it exists inside every person, where greed, anger, jealousy, pride, compassion, and wisdom all live together, and the real challenge is recognising and working through these forces in ourselves rather than just defeating outside enemies.

At the same time, Divakaruni doesn't turn Krishna into a purely psychological symbol. He keeps a sense of mystery that goes beyond rational explanation, but this mystery serves a different purpose than in traditional readings — rather than reinforcing unquestioned authority, it encourages humility. Recognising the limits of human knowledge becomes part of what it means to be wise, and in a world of competing truths, the novel suggests that real spirituality means being willing to live with complexity rather than handing out easy answers.

By the end of the novel, Dharma is no longer a fixed rulebook enforced by divine power or a list of external duties. It becomes an ongoing process of ethical awareness — something people have to keep examining and working towards. Through Krishna, the novel redefines what it means for Dharma to "win": righteousness is measured by people's capacity to grow from within, not by political or military outcomes. Krishna's transformation reflects the central argument of this paper — Dharma survives in Kaliyuga, but its forms and meanings change dramatically, and the deepest battles are fought within the minds of people trying to find truth amid uncertainty.

The Collapse of Moral Absolutes: Reimagining Dharma and Adharma

One of the biggest contributions of *The Palace of Illusions* is how it challenges the moral certainties that have shaped popular readings of the Mahabharata for centuries. The epic is often read through a framework that splits its characters into two clear camps — the Pandavas representing Dharma, and the Kauravas representing Adharma. While the original text does contain moments of moral ambiguity, popular retellings often flatten these complexities into a simple story of righteousness versus wickedness. Divakaruni's novel resists this flattening. Through Draupadi's perspective, we enter a world where moral certainty is hard to maintain. None of the characters are completely good or completely bad — their actions come out of competing desires, obligations, fears, and ambitions. As a result, the traditional split between Dharma and Adharma dissolves into something messier and more interesting. This is central to Kaliyuga Consciousness, which recognises the limits of absolute moral categories.

This breakdown starts with how the novel treats the Pandavas themselves. In conventional readings, they embody righteousness, and their eventual victory confirms their moral superiority. But *The Palace of Illusions* paints a more complicated picture. Take Yudhishtira — celebrated as the guardian of truth and Dharma. Yet his decision to gamble away his kingdom, his brothers, and ultimately Draupadi herself shows the limits of his judgment. A traditional reading might explain this through duty or royal obligation; from Draupadi's point of view, though, these explanations don't hold up — the consequences aren't abstract ethical puzzles for her, they are personal betrayals. The novel doesn't deny Yudhishtira's commitment to Dharma, but it refuses to put that commitment beyond criticism, creating a portrait that feels more human and more morally complicated.

Arjuna goes through a similar shift. Traditionally celebrated as the ideal warrior and Krishna's closest disciple, he often occupies a position of moral and spiritual privilege. In *The Palace of Illusions*, though, he seems less certain and less heroic — his relationships, ambitions, and inner conflicts reveal a vulnerability that complicates his status as an "ideal" figure, and Draupadi's disappointment with him, the man she once imagined as her destined partner, pushes this further. This doesn't make him a bad person, but it does challenge the assumption that being a "hero" automatically means being emotionally or ethically perfect.

The Kauravas go through a similar process of humanisation. Traditional narratives focus on their greed, jealousy, and hostility towards the Pandavas, and these traits are still there, but Divakaruni also explores the emotional and psychological side of their behaviour. Duryodhana, in particular, comes across as far more complex than the usual "villain" stereotype — shaped by insecurity, resentment, and a deep desire for recognition, with a hostility that comes not just from ambition but from a profound sense of being excluded. Even when his actions lead to destructive outcomes, they grow out of motivations readers can understand, even if they can't approve of them. This breaks down the simple "hero versus villain" logic — within Kaliyuga Consciousness, understanding replaces condemnation as the main way of engaging with people. Karna's treatment intensifies this even further: his virtues are obvious, yet his loyalty places him on the side traditionally linked with Adharma, showing that someone's ethical identity can't be reduced to which "side" they're on.

This breakdown of moral absolutes also extends to the idea of justice itself. In traditional readings, the Pandavas' victory functions as a kind of cosmic justice — the defeat of the Kauravas confirms that moral order has been restored. *The Palace of Illusions* complicates this by sitting with the enormous suffering caused by the war. From Draupadi's point of view, victory and loss are tangled up together, and the destruction of families and the emotional devastation that follows raise hard questions about what justice really means. If righteousness demands this much sacrifice, can its victory really be celebrated without reservation? Modern readers often approach stories of "triumph" with some scepticism, wanting to know not just who won, but what was lost along the way — and the novel reflects this by refusing to present victory as a clean resolution, exposing the limits of solutions based purely on power and conquest.

This realisation changes what Dharma means within the novel. Instead of being a fixed moral code that guarantees neat outcomes, Dharma becomes an ongoing negotiation. Characters constantly navigate situations where every available choice involves some compromise or loss. Acting ethically isn't about achieving perfection — it's about facing complexity honestly and taking responsibility for one's choices. Traditional stories often reassure us that moral order wins out in the end; Kaliyuga Consciousness, by contrast, recognises that moral order is fragile, constantly contested, and open to reinterpretation. This is reinforced by how the novel is narrated: because everything is filtered through Draupadi's consciousness, we're constantly reminded that every story has multiple sides, and truth emerges through a kind of dialogue between different experiences rather than as one fixed reality.

In the end, the breakdown of moral absolutes in *The Palace of Illusions* is one of its most important contributions to how we read the Mahabharata today. By making heroes more human, villains more complicated, and being honest about the costs of victory, Divakaruni turns the epic into a story that speaks directly to the ethical uncertainties of modern life. The novel reflects a world where inherited certainties no longer give us enough guidance, and where people have to build meaning for themselves

out of competing truths. Dharma and Adharma stop being rigid categories and become forces that play out within every human being.

The collapse of moral absolutes here isn't a sign of moral decline — it's an invitation to engage more deeply with what moral responsibility actually means. And this sets up the central question of this paper: if certainty has disappeared and moral categories have become unstable, can Dharma still win in Kaliyuga?

Would Dharma Still Triumph? A Kaliyuga Reading of The Palace of Illusions

The question at the heart of this study sounds simple but isn't: would Dharma still triumph if the Mahabharata were read through the consciousness of Kaliyuga? At first, the answer seems uncertain. The Palace of Illusions takes apart many of the assumptions that traditionally support the idea that Dharma's victory is guaranteed. Heroes turn out to be flawed, villains turn out to be human, divine intervention becomes ambiguous, and victory itself seems inseparable from suffering. If the usual markers of righteousness no longer hold up, we need to rethink what it even means for Dharma to "win."

This question matters beyond literary interpretation. People today often live in a world where ethical certainty feels fragile. Political corruption, social inequality, ideological conflict, and competing versions of the truth all create a sense that moral order has weakened, and the old belief that righteousness always wins in the end can feel hard to sustain. In popular imagination, Kaliyuga is often seen as the age where Adharma takes over and evil wins. But this view rests on a particular definition of "winning" — one that equates victory with political success, material gain, or raw power.

The Palace of Illusions challenges this definition by showing that external victories rarely tell us much about ethical truth. Throughout the novel, characters get many of the things they're chasing, but these "wins" don't bring the satisfaction they expected. Political power doesn't erase suffering, military success doesn't erase grief, and revenge doesn't bring back what's been lost. This is especially visible in Draupadi's own journey: at different points she wants recognition, love, justice, and revenge, but getting these things never gives her the satisfaction she's looking for. Even after the Kauravas are defeated, the emotional wounds from years of conflict remain unresolved.

Draupadi's experience points to an important truth: external victories are often temporary and incomplete. They deal with visible conflicts while leaving deeper struggles untouched. If Dharma is defined purely in terms of outside outcomes, its survival looks shaky — modern history is full of examples where injustice thrives and good people suffer, and simply believing that righteousness always wins can start to feel naive.

But The Palace of Illusions suggests Dharma works according to a different logic altogether. Instead of guaranteeing success in the world, Dharma becomes a kind of ethical awareness, showing up through self-reflection, compassion, responsibility, and moral courage. Its importance lies not in controlling what happens out there, but in shaping how people respond to what happens. This connects directly to Krishna's transformation discussed earlier — in Divakaruni's novel his influence works mainly at the level of consciousness, guiding people towards understanding rather than directing historical events. The actual battleground of Dharma has moved: the Kurukshetra of Kaliyuga isn't a physical battlefield, it exists in the human mind. Victory isn't measured by defeating enemies, but by being able to act with integrity even when things are uncertain.

Pulling these threads together, the analysis of Draupadi, Karna, and Krishna all point in the same direction. Draupadi's constant questioning of destiny, authority, marriage, and Dharma reflects a refusal to accept inherited truths without examining them — her journey is a search for meaning, not just a fight for justice. Karna's growing popularity reflects a shift in moral perception, where modern audiences relate to struggle and vulnerability more than to righteousness and victory. And Krishna's shift from strategist to guide suggests that "establishing Dharma" in Kaliyuga happens through consciousness rather than conquest. Together with the collapse of moral absolutes — where the Pandavas show real flaws and the so-called villains reveal real humanity — these readings prepare us to answer the central question of this study. The honest answer depends on how we define "triumph." If Dharma's triumph means political victory or the total defeat of external enemies, then its triumph looks uncertain — the novel repeatedly

shows that these kinds of victories often fail to end suffering or bring lasting peace. But if Dharma's triumph means ethical awareness, self-reflection, compassion, and the ongoing pursuit of truth amid uncertainty, then its triumph remains very much possible, even within the conditions of Kaliyuga.

So, does Dharma still triumph? The answer is neither a simple yes nor a simple no. Dharma still triumphs, but it triumphs differently. Its battlefield is no longer Kurukshetra alone — it's the human conscience. Its weapon is no longer war — it's awareness. And its victory is no longer measured by conquest, but by whether people can stay ethically awake in a world increasingly defined by ambiguity.

Conclusion

This study started with a question rooted in both ancient philosophy and modern experience: would Dharma still triumph if the Mahabharata were read through the consciousness of Kaliyuga? While the traditional epic tends to treat the Pandavas' victory as proof that righteousness ultimately wins, modern retellings like Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* complicate this conclusion by adding psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and a different narrative perspective. The aim of this research wasn't simply to revisit the old conflict between Dharma and Adharma, but to ask how the very meaning of Dharma shifts once we read it through the intellectual and moral conditions of Kaliyuga.

To explore this question, the study introduced the idea of Kaliyuga Consciousness as its central framework — a cultural and philosophical condition marked by scepticism towards absolute truths, heightened self-awareness, moral ambiguity, and a questioning of inherited authority. This framework reflects a lot of the intellectual concerns that shape our world today, and offers a useful lens for examining modern mythological retellings.

Through this framework, *The Palace of Illusions* emerges as far more than a feminist reinterpretation of the Mahabharata. While the novel certainly gives Draupadi back her voice and challenges patriarchal structures, its significance goes beyond questions of gender alone — the text reworks the entire ethical universe of the epic. By giving Draupadi narrative authority, Divakaruni transforms the Mahabharata from a story of cosmic certainty into a story full of doubt, introspection, and competing truths.

Taken together, the readings of Draupadi, Karna, Krishna, and the collapse of moral absolutes all point towards the same conclusion: Dharma does survive in Kaliyuga, but in a transformed shape. It no longer depends on military victories or perfect heroes. Instead, it lives on through questioning, empathy, self-awareness, and the constant effort to act responsibly in a world that rarely offers easy answers. The triumph of Dharma, in this reading, is not a single dramatic event but an ongoing, everyday process — one that happens inside people rather than on a battlefield.

Scope for Further Research

The idea of Kaliyuga Consciousness introduced in this study opens up several possible directions for future work: a comparative study of how other modern retellings of the Mahabharata and Ramayana reflect similar shifts in moral thinking; an examination of how divine intervention and the idea of Dharma-Sthapana get reimagined in other contemporary works; an exploration of why marginalised heroes like Karna have become so culturally popular; using the Mahabharata's dice game as a lens to study manipulation and misinformation in the modern media landscape; an examination of how female-centred retellings reshape ethical discourse more broadly; a look at how the conflicts of the epic get internalised in other modern texts; and an exploration of how modern retellings handle the tension between fate and free will.

Through studies like these, the Mahabharata can keep revealing new layers of meaning — proof of its enduring ability to speak to changing times, while remaining one of humanity's richest explorations of ethics, power, and what it means to be human.

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