

**Genre: Fiction, History, Ancient
India, Adventure**

**Readership: Upper primary to
lower secondary**

The Princess of Pushkar

Book 1: In the Shadow of the Palace

By Judith Simpson

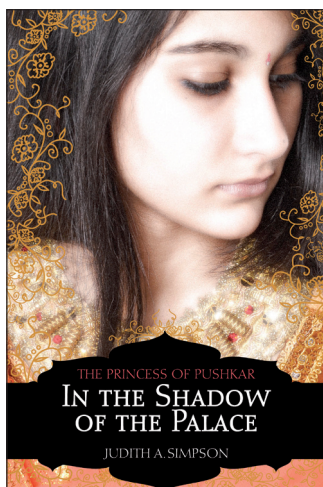
Plot outline

In the middle of a ceremony to choose husbands, Rani, the princess of Pushkar, and her two sisters are kidnapped by the ruthless and desperate Queen Kriti. Queen Kriti intends to marry the three princesses to her own sickly son, Prince Bankim so that he can father children before he dies. Rani defies the Queen and for her rebelliousness is banished to the palace kitchens where she is made to work with lower caste servants and slaves. Queen Kriti leaves her there with a parting comment that Rani's father, the King of Pushkar, has died.

Rani escapes with the aid of a slave girl and her brother, Pradeep, and disguises herself as an army recruit, not ever dreaming that she would actually have to train in Queen Kriti's army. But that is exactly what happens, and she is excited to find that she has a natural skill with a bow, and some skill with a sword. Her captain, Sanjay, who disturbs Rani in a way that she cannot understand, orders her to form part of a special group of talented young boys to train with weapons more intensively. Rani fears that if she obeys, Sanjay will discover that she is a girl, but it seems that she has no choice.

Rani expects her twin brother and his army to come to their rescue, but learns from a wise holy man, that her father's ministers are controlling the boy and that he has no power to act. Rani realises with horror that it is up to her to rescue her sisters and flee from the palace.

But everything goes wrong. Her first attempt fails, Prince Bankim dies before he is expected to, and her sisters, who were married to the prince the night before he died, are destined to share his fate on the funeral pyre. In a last desperate attempt, Rani and Pradeep disrupt the funeral. Rani succeeds in liberating her sisters, but is, herself, recaptured, and along with Pradeep's sister, the slave girl who helped her to escape, she is tied to Prince Bankim's funeral pyre. The fire is lit and just as Rani can feel the heat searing her skin, her own commander, Sanjay, with the help of the slave, Pradeep, rescue the two.

**Example of Writing Style**

Rani glanced across at Jaya, who was beautiful, with the heavy kohl outlining her eyes making them look wider, her head covered with red silk and her eyes cast down as was maidenly and proper. Jasmine was also making an effort to be good and proper. She would copy Jaya for a moment or two, but then she'd wriggle, shift and look around before casting her eyes down again. Rani had trouble remembering to be proper. She gazed around, wanting to enjoy the whole spectacle. Around the fire the Brahmin priests were bringing the chant to an end.

The young princes then stood, left their families, and made their way up the stone steps of the central pavilion. In turn, as each one bowed to her father, Rani tried to read their faces — something she always liked to do. Anila and her father often scolded Rani for being too bold, but neither of them had been able to stop her from doing it. Now Rani watched the proud princes prostrate themselves and wondered what they were really like. It would be helpful to know, she thought, as she was expected to marry one of them.

Author Inspiration

The Princess of Pushkar was inspired by a story within a story. In the Indian epic, The Mahabharata, Bhishma, a good and righteous man (surprisingly) who has vowed never to marry, kidnaps three princesses (neither a good nor righteous action) from their own Swayamvara. A Swayamvara was an ancient ritual where princes performed feats of skill and bravery to win the hand of sought-after princesses. Bhishma kidnapped Amba, Ambika and Ambilika to marry his half-brother.

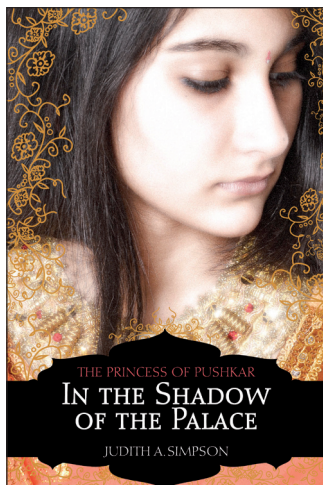
One of the princesses in this epic poem sticks up for herself, and unlike Rani, she is allowed to go back to her family and chosen husband, but all sorts of terrible things befall her. Being a feisty girl, just like Rani, she does not allow fate or stringent social mores to dictate to her and she creates her own destiny.

Rani's story is somewhat different, but it explores some of the conventions that ruled the lives of women, that of arranged marriages to create alliances, the unswerving rule that once married one was married for life and, in many cases, that a wife should follow her husband into the realm of death, hence, the practice of sati.

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Study notes***Educational Applicability******Medieval to modern India***

India is a land of infinite change and a land that is unchanging. When walking through a country village in India one feels that the people are doing things the same way people did them 1000 years ago, while at the same time keeping pace with the modern world. For example a woman will beat her washing on a rock in a stream to clean it and then she will go to her home made of mud and sticks, to watch TV.

*North India and the princely states such as Rajasthan*

For hundreds of years India was not unified as a country. Many Kings (Rajas) ruled smaller states and sometimes they would fight each other to expand their territory. They would also arrange marriages between their children to create alliances.

Role of women

Just as in most countries in the world historically, women have had a subservient role in their society and they were seen more as property than as individuals. Some remarkable women such as Mirabai—a princess born in 1498—were able to break the mold, but most were bound by social conventions and knew no other way of being.

The caste system, and the social divisions that continue to the present day

Historical perspective—The caste system, when first established was much more fluid. People could move between castes in marriage and through other means. There were also arguments between the scholars (Brahmins) and the warrior caste (Kshatriya) about who should be the superior caste. Finally the Brahmins won. Only in the last few years have changes to the caste system been made, but these changes bring with them their own problems.

The dichotomy of India's polytheism which is really monotheism

India has thousands of Gods. Many of the gods represent particular forces in the universe and in our lives. For example, Pushkar, the place where Rani comes from is a famous centre for the worship of Brahma, the god who is said to be the creator. Often, when Brahma is depicted in sculpture or paintings, he is part of a trinity: Brahma the creator, Vishnu, the sustainer of life, and Shiva, the destroyer. Rani feels some affinity with Ganesh, the son of Shiva, who is often worshiped as the remover of obstacles.

Issues:

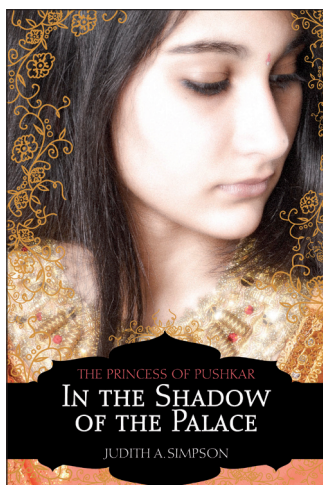
The use and misuse of power

Power over women

Position of women—the conventions that ruled the lives of women in Indian society

Arranged marriages to create alliances

The practice of sati



Themes:

Self-determination and resourcefulness

Honour

Feeling the fear and acting anyway hence maintaining one's self-respect

Commitment

Overcoming prejudice

Loyalty



About the author:

At sixteen years of age Judith A. Simpson discovered a book on the life of the Buddha and consequently became intrigued by India: its myriad philosophies, stories and peoples. Since then she has travelled to India nine times and is hoping for nine times more. Judith and her husband have three daughters, and live in Melbourne's rural outskirts.

Review:

This novel was quite a discovery—exotic location, memorable characters and fast-paced action. With its fantastic setting, adventure and a touch of Bollywood the story will be enjoyed by young girls who enjoy an easy read. The sequels will be highly anticipated.

— Jane Crew, Magpies