

Environment and Epics: An Ecocritical Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Mythological Retellings

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is a cultural and literary theory that focuses on analysing literature through an eco-centric perspective. It critiques the anthropocentric ideology and draws attention to the environment and its non-human inhabitants. Drawing from this theory, this article aims to study Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction highlighting the relationship between nature and women and the ways in which the exploitation of nature is rooted in patriarchy. Divakaruni reimagines ancient mythologies through a feminist ecocritical lens centring the voices of women. The novels under consideration are Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*. Through these novels, Divakaruni challenges the dominant patriarchal and human-centric perspectives by attempting to reveal that the forest and animals are not mere silent backdrops but active participants in the personal journey of the protagonists. They only give shelter and solace to humans but also act as healers.

Keywords: ecocriticism, nature, women, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, feminist

Introduction

As the world faces alarming challenges like climate change, deforestation, and ecological imbalance, Environmental Studies have become the need of the hour. And like all other fields of study, literature too is not untouched by environmental concerns. Writers across the world have increasingly responded to environmental issues, using their works to raise awareness and inspire action. From ancient epics and sacred texts to contemporary novels, Nature and its elements have always been an integral part of literature reflecting the deep and evolving relationship between humans and the natural world.

The growing environmental awareness in literature has given rise to ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between literature and the natural environment. While William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in 1978, it was through the works of scholars like Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm that ecocriticism was established as a formal academic field in the late twentieth century. Ecocriticism started challenging the traditional literary studies governed by anthropocentric views and emphasized ecological concerns. As a result a shift in perspective from perceiving nature as a passive and mute backdrop to acknowledging it as an active element influencing and shaping human lives started happening. As time passed, the field of ecocriticism expanded to include the voices of women, indigenous people and postcolonial subjects. This gave rise to different

branches of ecocriticism such as ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, indigenous ecological thought, animal studies etc. The central objective of the different branches of ecocriticism is to address how environmental degradation intersects with gender, race, and colonial histories. Hence, Ecocriticism not only embraces macro-concerns like geopolitics, gender and bio diversity but it is also about small and intimate things such as our connection with fire, water, air, earth.

In India, the discourse surrounding ecocriticism is not a new phenomenon. Indian cultural practices and ancient texts and mythologies have always highlighted the interconnection between humans and nature as a sacred and harmonious relationship. Thus, Indian ecological studies draws not only from western modal that arises from a sense of crisis and loss but also from indigenous ecological sensibilities that portray nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active force that shapes human experiences. In this context, Indian writers have played an important role in reviving and reinterpreting ecological sensibilities rooted in Indian ancient texts and cultural practices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of these writers who has attempted to reimagine ancient Indian epics like The Ramayana and the Mahabharata from a eco-centric and Feminist point of view. Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments is a retelling of the Ramayana from Sita's point of view while her the Palace of Illusions is a retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view. Both of these works are significant contributions to both ecological as well as feminist voices in literature. This paper is an attempt to analyse these texts from a feminist and ecocritical point of view.

Ecocritical Perspectives in The Palace of Illusions

Narrated from the perspective of Draupadi, the Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a feminist retelling of the Indian epic The Mahabharata. While the novel is mostly read from a feminist lens, one cannot oversee the ecocritical aspects present in its depiction of animals and the natural world. In this novel, Divakaruni reimagines the mythological land and highlights the interconnectedness of human life, animals and nature and thus critiques the anthropocentric and patriarchal fabric of the society that not only oppresses women but also exploits and damages the environment. In the original versions of the epic, Draupadi is often portrayed as a symbolic figure representing dharma and destiny but in Divakaruni's narrative, she has a voice and an identity of her own. From the outset, the novel's narrative is woven within a world where the nature is deeply intertwined with destiny, emotion, and power. The palace itself is a symbol of political power as well as human domination over the natural and supernatural elements. In the original epic, the palace is a marvel of illusion crafted by Maya denoting the power and rise of the Pandavas but in Divakaruni's narrative it also carries within it a subtle critique of the ways in which man-made systems like patriarchy and capitalism often manipulate and control natural resources without any regard for the consequences. The eventual collapse of the palace symbolises the collapse of the ideals it stood for. The fall of this architectural marvel represents the fall down of the ecological balance caused by excessive human greed and ambition.

Among the most significant ecocritical moments in the novel is the burning of the Khandava forest, an event drawn from the original epic. In the epic, the Khandava episode is depicted as a mission that is divine and a conquest that is heroic. This resonates with the anthropocentric ideology that views Nature as territory to be conquered and animals as either obstacles to be eliminated or tools to be exploited to fulfil the goals of patriarchy and materialism. The forest which sheltered numerous human communities as well as animal species is set on fire by

Arjuna and Krishna to make way for the city of Indraprastha. In the Palace of Illusions, the Khandava episode is reimagined through the eyes of Draupadi and is portrayed not as a moment of triumph but as a symbol of violence and loss. The destruction of the forest that is accompanied with the cries of animals, the devastation of trees, and the loss of an entire ecosystem is viewed by Draupadi as a deeply cruel and unjust act of violence against nature but she is politically bound to support it. These conflicted emotions of Draupadi depict her ecofeminist sensibilities and her awareness about the damaging nature of patriarchal expansion and militarism that costs the life and liberty of both humans and the natural world. Divakaruni's forest is not just a silent backdrop for the heroic action to take place but it is also a vibrant, living space that suffers under the burden of human greed and ambition. When the forest is destroyed, it symbolizes a rupture in the relationship between humans and nature. It also highlights the fact that the pursuit of power often comes at the cost of ecological harmony and moral integrity.

When the Pandavas are defeated in the rigged game of dice, they are forced into a thirteen-year exile in the forest along with Draupadi. Divakaruni's narrative represents this exile not merely as deprivation but as an ecofeminist journey of self-discovery.

In the Palace of Illusions, animals too carry symbolic and ecological weight. Even though they are not always at the forefront, they often appear in moments of transformation, prophecy, or crisis and serve as mediators between the humans and the nature.

In Divakaruni's world animals often act as omens. Key events like war and exile are accompanied by signs from animals such as jackals crying, birds flying unusually and Draupadi dreaming of serpents as a warning against danger. Furthermore, animals are sometimes represented as sacred beings associated with gods and goddesses. For example, Krishna, who plays a central role in the novel, is traditionally associated with cows and peacocks. Both of them are revered and ecologically significant animals in Indian culture. The cultural resonance of these animals brings an ecological sensibility to the story even though they might not play an active role in the plot. Moreover, they represent an older, more harmonious relationship with nature.

In the novel, Divakaruni also uses the imagery related to nature and animals to portray Draupadi's emotional state and moral conflicts and they often accompany her moments of introspection, loss, and transformation. The forest represents a space of exile and introspection as it is away from the structures of power and dominance. During their times of exile in the forest, the Pandavas find a temporary refuge in the natural surrounding of the forest since it is a place where human hierarchies do not exist in their robust form. Draupadi finds a reconnection with a more elemental and authentic self. Hence, the forest emerges not as a space for punishment, but as a space of hope and healing. This represents a broader ecocritical theme and the idea that nature when approached with humility and respect offers a moral and spiritual renewal.

The way the novel challenges the binary between nature and civilization is another notable ecocritical aspect of the novel. The glory and grandeur of Indraprastha and the palace of illusions stands in stark contrast to the simplicity and honesty of forest life. While the city represents the ambition, deception, and eventual downfall of the civilised world, the forest emerges as a site of simplicity, truth and hope. By showcasing this contrast between the city and the forest, Divakaruni suggests that the more humans distance themselves from nature, the more they lose touch with humanity and compassion.

The most important ecofeminist symbol in the Palace of Illusions is Draupadi whose birth takes place from the fire. She is the symbol for the natural world which is sacred and powerful but also objectified and exploited by the patriarchal and materialistic world. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage that was forced upon her and her disrobing in the Kaurava's court reflect the collective moral and ethical downfall. This is very similar to the ways in which nature is exploited and looted in the name of politics and progress. Later, Draupadi is sent into exile along with the Pandavas and the forest becomes a place of self discovery and regeneration reflecting the intimate bond between nature and women. Draupadi's life and journey shatters the glorified image of the civilisation and highlights how they are sustained through the exploitation of nature and women.

Thus, The Palace of Illusions offers a nuanced ecocritical reading of the Mahabharata while also highlighting the intertwined lives and existence of women and the natural world. From a feminist point of view, it gives voice to both women and nature who are often silenced under the patriarchal system.

Ecocritical elements in The Forest of Enchantments

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments is another powerful retelling based on the Ramayana and is narrated from Sita's point of view. Sita, who is discovered by king Janak while ploughing a field, is portrayed as the daughter of earth. Thus, she symbolises the unity of women and nature. In the Forest of Enchantments, Divakaruni crafts a rich ecological world wherein female voices and agency are reclaimed and nature is not just a backdrop but also a vital force that provides hope and strength to women against the patriarchal forces. We find a sort of ecofeminist aspect in the relationship between Sita and the ecological world surrounding her.

During her exile period in the forest, nature appears not as separate but as a significant and intrinsic aspect of Sita's journey. The forest is not merely a physical space where Sita spends her exile period but it is also a space where she undergoes a life journey that results in her transformation as a woman. Beyond the palace walls and the rigid hierarchies of Ayodhya, the forest helps her to connect deeply with herself and the natural world. The forest-dwellers help her to learn their eco-centric lifestyle. She finds companionship and emotional refuge in the trees and talks to them as if they were her friends. She listens to the rivers as if they were telling her comforting stories. She interacts with the animals and they often reflect Sita's emotional state. Sita's relationship with the forest and its elements challenges the typical patriarchal narrative that portrays the wilderness as chaotic and dangerous and forces women to be confined to the so-called safe domestic spaces.

One of the most significant ecofeminist symbols in the novel is the medicinal garden that Sita cultivates during her exile in the Dandaka forest. For Sita, looking after this garden is not merely a recreational activity but it is also a space where female wisdom and autonomy flourishes. Sita learns to cure illnesses and aid in childbirth by using herbs. Sita's garden is in sharp contrast with both Ravan's Lanka and Ram's Ayodhya because she does not exploit the land and its resources but rather listens to it and learns from it while tending to it with love and respect. Later, when Sita is abducted by Ravan and is confined to the Ashok Vatika, it is not just a personal violation of Sita but it is also an ecological violation. Similarly, the war between Ram and Ravan is not just a war to rescue Sita from Ravan but it is also a war to

restore the masculine prestige and political power of Ram leading to extreme patriarchal violence with the destruction of landscape, burning of forests and displacement of animals.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita resonates with the theories of Ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant who point out that the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women are interconnected since they both are harmed through same systems of oppression. When Sita gathers herbs to cure people or observes animals and rivers, she is engaged in a practice of care and nurture for the environment that challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal norms. When Hanuman burns the Lanka to save Sita, it leads to widespread destruction. Through Sita's reflective thoughts, Divakaruni highlights the moral as well as the ecological consequences of war. The destruction during the war to rescue Sita reflects Sita's internal suffering.

However, after her rescue, Sita is not treated with love and compassion but is subjected to public trial of purity. Although she proves her purity by walking through the fire, she does not find any restoration of love and dignity. And when Ram finds out that the public suspicion about Sita's purity is still circulating, Sita is exiled to forest even though she is pregnant. She again finds solace in the forest and gives birth to her sons in the company of nature and animals. Sita raises her children not in the polluted politics of Ayodhya but in the organic rhythms of the forest where nature becomes a maternal space that offers dignity and agency denied to her in human society.

Eventually, when Sita's sons, Luv and Kush are reunited with Ram and she is asked to return to Ayodhya, she refuses. She chooses to return to the earth rather than go back to Ayodhya with Ram. This final act has profound ecological symbolism. It is a powerful reclamation of authority and rejection of male domination. The earth embraces what the civilisation has rejected.

Thus, this retelling is a feminist ecocritical intervention into the Ramayana tradition. By focusing on nature and animals in Sita's emotional and philosophical journey, the novel challenges both the anthropocentrism and patriarchal elements of the original epic. It throws light upon the healing and nurturing powers of both women and nature and highlights the ways in which patriarchal dominance has subjugated them both. The novel thus aligns with the insights of ecofeminist critics who argue that it is necessary to challenge the dominant power structures in order to restore the agency of both women and the natural world. Divakaruni not only gives her own voice to Sita but she also gives voice to the forest and its inhabitants and creates an ecofeminist world.

Conclusion

In Divakaruni's mythological retellings, we not only find a space where voices of female characters like Draupadi and Sita are given a centre stage but we also notice a restoration of the silenced ecological consciousness within these narratives. Themes like sacredness of nature, devastation of war and alienation of women from their environment are often sidelined in the mainstream interpretations of myth but Divakaruni explores these themes from a modern and feminist perspective.

Both the Palace of Illusions and the Forest of Enchantments incorporate a type of ecocritical sensibility that is rooted in feminist ideology and it is very well reflected in the way the thematic and narrative structures of these novels are crafted. Both of these novels are narrated

by a female protagonist and they draw parallels between the treatment of women and the treatment of nature. Both women and nature are seen as mere objects that are possessed, controlled and sacrificed for male dominance and power. The depth of the interconnection between feminine agency and ecological awareness is articulated through Draupadi and Sita whose lives are shaped by the natural world around them. The forest, the rivers, the landscapes and the animals are not mere backgrounds but are active participants in their emotional and spiritual journeys. By highlighting the intimate relationship between women and nature, Divakaruni subverts the traditional normative gender roles and constructs a world rooted in compassion and balance that is in sharp contrast with the patriarchal values of conquest and domination. In conclusion, Divakaruni's retellings call for a reappraisal of myth as living and evolving cultural documents that are capable of reflecting contemporary concerns rather than accepting them as fixed and authoritative texts. They not only rekindle a sacred dialogue with nature by serving as an evocative site for ecocritical engagement but also reclaim women's voices that are faded into the background in traditional epics. Through these retellings, Divakaruni compels readers to reflect on the moral and spiritual consequences of ecological alienation and gendered violence, offering instead a vision of coexistence and equality.

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