

EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF WAR AND PATRIARCHY IN DIVAKARUNI'S *THE PALACE OF ILLUSIONS*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to analyse and discuss strands of ecofeminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's widely acclaimed novel, *The Palace of Illusions*. My analysis will show that in the novel, the link between women's oppression and the degradation of our natural environment is strikingly evident. *The Palace of Illusions* is a sumptuously bold and a fascinatingly subversive retelling of our timeless epic, the *Mahabharata*. The novel is narrated by Panchaali, the epic's most vilified and denigrated female character. By offering a splendidly fresh perspective on the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni successfully subverts and topples the traditional patriarchal discourse, enabling women to question the conventional notions of gendered behavior. Despite its strong feminist message, the issue of ecofeminism and ecological justice is retained and resonated in Divakaruni's retelling of the great Indian epic.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Mahabharata, Ecology, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Indian Epics, Nature, Feminism, War, Patriarchy.

This paper will analyse and discuss Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's widely acclaimed novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, published in 2008. My analysis will show that in the novel, the link between women's oppression and the degradation of our natural environment is strikingly evident. *The Palace of Illusions* is a sumptuously bold and a fascinatingly subversive retelling of our timeless epic, the *Mahabharata*. The novel is narrated by Panchaali, the epic's most vilified and denigrated female character. Divakaruni traces her story from her extraordinary birth and lonely childhood, where her brother is her sole confidant and companion; through her unconventional friendship with the mysterious Krishna; to her unusual marriage, motherhood and her covert desire for her husbands' arch-rival. Above all, the novel is an astonishing tale of an invincible woman born into a man's world. Divakaruni's novel is a luxuriant fusion of feminism and ecology. Having emerged from the matrix of a celebrated writer's consciousness, the novel illustrates that a better future is possible for all of us, the seeds of which are deeply rooted in the haunting dramas of our past.

The novel garnered immense popularity for giving a woman's take on the eminently revered epic, the *Mahabharata*. Virginia Woolf has rightly said that though we see the same world, we see it through remarkably different eyes. And we have seen the world from the eyes of patriarchy for far too long. Women have been taught an androcentric version of our past, and have been indoctrinated with men's opinions, values, and thinking throughout ages (Collard and

Contrucci, 40). By offering a splendidly fresh perspective on the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni successfully subverts and topples the traditional patriarchal discourse, enabling women to question the conventional notions of gendered behavior. Despite its strong feminist message, the issue of ecofeminism and ecological justice is retained and resonated in Divakaruni's retelling of the great Indian epic. In the novel, the degradation of women provides a crucial link to the degradation of nature and its resources. In the novel, Panchaali's reprehensible humiliation at the sabha (Divakaruni, *Palace* 191) and the Great War that ensues in its aftermath (245) to avenge her honour are cataclysmic events that disrupt the web of life. They further furnish proof that in the novel, both women and nature, are targets of male rage and destructive behavior. However, this resplendent retelling of the *Mahabharata* demonstrates that a legacy of loving, biophilic relationships can still be curated in this divisive world if we refuse to subscribe to the toxic and pernicious ideology of male hegemony over women and nature. As Collard says in *Rape of the Wild*, "the responsibility lies with individuals to seek a wholesome way of life and liberate themselves from fears, prejudices, and misconceptions" (98).

The novel encompasses Divakaruni's ecofeminist vision. It illustrates that dominating and damaging relations to the earth are intertwined with gender domination and devaluation of women. By using the views espoused by ecofeminist thinkers such as Andrée Collard, Carolyn Merchant, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Susan Griffin, and Riane Eisler as a theoretical framework and contributing rhetoric, I have tried to incorporate Divakaruni's stellar retelling of the famous Indian epic into the larger corpus of ecofeminist fiction. This paper shows how Divakaruni's novel strives to imbue women with social agency and power.

Carolyn Merchant, a secular historian of science at the University of California, Berkeley, has been a formative influence for many ecofeminist thinkers. Her book, *Reinventing Eden*, begins by asserting that Western culture has been shaped by two conflicting narratives, both aimed at the recovery of "Eden", the primordial paradise of the biblical narrative where humans, male and female, nature and God lived in perfect harmony. One narrative, which has dominated Western thought since the seventeenth century, secularizes the Christian narrative of redemption by reinventing the entire earth in the image of Eden. In this progressive version of the Recovery story, paradise is reestablished on earth through male ingenuity and impetus (Ruether, *Integrating* 121). This narrative has played a key role in shaping Western consciousness vis-à-vis the human-nature relationship. It is characterised by an upward, secular plotline that traces the utopian quest of recreating Eden on earth. In Merchant's view, the secular creation of an earthly Eden is achieved at the cost of our planet's cultural and biotic diversity. In other words, the mainstream Recovery Narrative depicts the movement from wild, chaotic nature to civilized society. The goal is to domesticate and improve nature.

Merchant suggests that the North American shopping mall is the ultimate incarnation of this reinvented Eden. She asserts that the shopping mall stands for an artificially constructed haven of commercialized pleasure. Surrounded by a concrete jungle of parking lots, hotels, amusement parks, and child care centers, a typical American shopping mall caters to the needs of the entire family by acting as an idyllic sojourn. Shops and swanky restaurants line its glitzy walkways that replicate the enchanting and enticing facets of the lost Eden. More often than not,

the malls are set in artificial gardens with the entire paraphernalia of waterfalls, flowers, and trees, artificial animals and birds. Banks are often present in these malls, and sometimes churches, medical facilities, and counseling centers (Ruether, *Integrating* 121).

A similar masculine zeal can be easily discerned in Divakaruni's retelling of the *Mahabharata*. In the novel, the Palace of Illusions, built by Maya (the famed demon architect) for the Pandava brothers, is the symbol of man's ruthless ambition to tame and subdue nature. It bears a striking parallel to the masculine quest of substituting "natural nature with artificial nature" as promulgated by Merchant in her pivotal text *Reinventing Eden* (169). The palace is an architectural marvel in itself. The palace is strategically constructed in the midst of the prosperous city of Indra Prastha to showcase the peerless grandeur and opulence of the Pandava court. In Panchaali's words:

Maya outdid himself as he built. He magnified everything my husbands wanted a hundredfold, and over it all he laid a patina of magic so things shifted strangely, making the palace new each day even for us who lived there. There were corridors lighted only by the glow of gems, and assembly halls so filled with flowering trees that even after hours at council one felt as though one had been relaxing in a garden. Almost every room had a pool with scented water. Not all his magic was benign, though. But it all added to the allure of this palace that was truly like no other.

[My husbands had] waited so long for a place they could call home, a setting that proclaimed their worth. They yearned to show it off—to friends and enemies both. (Divakaruni, *Palace* 146-47)

As can be seen from the lines quoted above, the fantastical palace of the Pandava brothers is the acme of man's determined efforts to transform nature into civilization. It is a palace built by a male and for males, in order to show off their masculine prowess and supremacy over wild, untamed nature. The palace with its brilliant, illusory features encompasses the quintessentially pernicious traits of patriarchal hegemony, i.e., competition, aggression, and sexual hierarchy. It symbolizes the ferocious masculine endeavor to redeem and reinvent the disorderly world of nature. It can be seen as the replication of the masculine quest to attain mastery over nature. The palace is a magnificent feat of architecture, built to inspire both awe and admiration in the eye of the beholder. It is a glaring proof that even nature falls under man's dominion and he can tinker with it to glorify himself and his masculine ego. The palace creates an impression of limitless abundance in the mind of the spectator. The people who view the palace envy the good fortune of the Pandava brothers to be able to live in such exceptionally magnificent palace. Everything inside the palace exists to eulogize the Pandava brothers. It has floors that look like rivers, waterfalls that look like walls and doorsteps that glitter like melted ice (Divakaruni, *Palace* 145). Like the American shopping mall, the palace is an artificially constructed retreat comprising psychedelic pleasures.

It is evident from the above discussion that Divakaruni's retelling of the Indian epic offers a novel perspective on the issue of ecofeminism. Divakaruni's novel illustrates ecofeminism's

concerns about man's rapacious manipulation of the natural world. Divakaruni subtly interweaves an ecofeminist critique of the masculine ambition of subduing nature in her stupendous retelling of the *Mahabharata*.

Merchant says that the city represents a significant stage of the recovery narrative. It symbolizes the transmutation of female Nature into female Civilization. She explicates:

The city is the locus of power that operates in the natural world, sweeping everything towards its center. It is the bridge between civilized female form and the raw matter of the surrounding hinterlands, drawing that matter towards it, as natural resources are transformed into . . . commodities.

The city transforms the matter of nature in the very act of pulling it inward. Like Plato's female soul of the world, turning herself within herself, the city provides the source of motion that permeates and energizes the world around it, the bridge between raw changing matter and final civilized form. (*Earthcare* 47-49)

Merchant firmly believes that human manipulation of the natural world will be our undoing. She asserts that since the seventeenth century, Western Culture has aggressively pursued the path to Recovery of Eden using the invincible framework of Christianity, science, technology, and capitalism. However, this sinister human ambition of transforming nature into a fruitful garden has costs in terms of the depletion of the planet's natural resources.

A similar dimension of this critique is taken up by Divakaruni in her assiduous description of the city of Indra Prastha. In order to build the city of Indra Prastha, Arjun burns down the Khandav forest with impunity. The rampage ails Panchaali, yet she is unable to bring it to a halt. In her own words:

The forest was still burning around us when my husbands called me to the makeshift canopy that had served as our home since we arrived in Khandav. I considered ignoring them. Besides, I was uneasy.

Wind swirled ash along the ground. Smoke stung my eyes and coated my tongue. I looked for Krishna, then remembered that he'd ridden off in search of something. (Divakaruni, *Palace* 141)

The carnage at Khandav does not seem to torment the Pandava brothers in the least. Later, when Panchaali asks Arjun why he had destroyed the forest, he tells her that he merely carried out the orders of Agni. He says that the fire-god wanted him to set the forest ablaze for him (Divakaruni, *Palace* 144). Thus in Divakaruni's novel, men seem to annihilate nature and its resources on their whims and fancies. They seem to subscribe to the patriarchal world view which claims that "nature has been designed to benefit man" (Griffin 24).

The above discussion shows that Divakaruni's beliefs seem to harmonize with Merchant's ideas. The sprawling city of Indra Prastha comes into existence by decimating the Khandav forest. This shows how patriarchy compounds the environmental crisis by exploiting nature.

The city is stately and "impressive" (Divakaruni, *Palace* 147) which serves to highlight man's mastery over nature. The city seems to be modelled to ensure the comfort of its residents

with minimum disruption from the natural world. It is created to rehumanize and rescue nature from its own disorderliness. Regardless of the massacre unleashed upon the natural world to construct the imperial city, bards compose songs about its unparalleled splendor and magnificence (147). Moreover, the enclosed world of the city contrasts sharply with the wilderness lurking outside its boundaries. It seems that the city of Indra Prastha was conceived to discipline and control nature through technology and human labour. The city symbolizes man's ultimate victory over nature.

Last but not the least, even the wildlife of Khandav is obliterated when Arjun sets the forest on fire. As Panchaali exclaims, the lucky ones make their escape and the rest are annihilated (Divakaruni, *Palace* 141). Panchaali's anguish over this ruthless slaughter of animals is not shared by her husbands. As renowned ecofeminist Andrée Collard observes in her seminal book *Rape of the Wild*, women can easily identify with the plight of animals. This happens not only because they “are so closely of nature” but also and mainly because they can fathom the varied forms of oppression. They react to them with every fibre of their being. They are moved to outrage without feeling a need to defend their emotions (96). Divakaruni's views resonate with those of Collard. Panchaali's outrage over the mindless killing of animals is both lucid and profound. It is rooted in her acute sensitivity for the well-being of all living creatures. It is important to mention here that Collard is of the view that what is done to animals always precedes what is done to women. That is why, she is of the view that women must do some serious thinking and try to reclaim their gynocentric roots (98).

In Divakaruni's novel, both women and nature, fall prey to masculine violence and aggression. Divakaruni's analogy between the exploitation of nature, in the wake of the Great War, and the debasement of women, as evidenced in the public humiliation of Panchaali in the sabha, is remarkable and thought-provoking. It is indeed hard to remain unshaken by the stunning implications of her analysis. The novel contains many enlightening examples of callous brutality toward women and nature. Through her brilliant retelling of the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni seems to be running an exposé of patriarchal hegemony which leads to a reckless oppression of both women and nature. Nevertheless, Divakaruni believes in the indomitable power of women as much as she believes in the power of nature.

Panchaali learns an important lesson from her humiliation in the sabha. She learns that to her husbands “their notions of honor” were more important than her pain and unconceivable suffering (Divakaruni, *Palace* 195). She says:

But now I saw that though they did love me—as much perhaps as any man can love—there were other things they loved more.

For men, the softer emotions are always intertwined with power and pride. That was why Karna waited for me to plead with him though he could have stopped my suffering with a single word. That was why he turned on me when I refused to ask for his pity. That was why he incited Dussasan to an action that was against the code of honor by which he lived his life. (Divakaruni, *Palace* 195)

The reason why feminism is a lost cause is because gender stereotypes are deeply

entrenched in our society. As we can infer from the lines quoted above, men are told to abstain from unguarded display of emotion as it is not considered appropriate masculine behavior. Eisler states in *Sacred Pleasure* that in order to ensure that men learn to be properly “masculine,” they are “taught contempt and disgust” for the “feminine” emotions (228). This unhealthy conditioning is what leads to the ruthless oppression of the female gender and the natural world.

As Rosemary Radford Ruether states in her book, *Gaia & God*, human mass obliteration of fellow humans, along with their towns, animals, and crops, through warfare has a long history (102). In her opinion, it poses a major threat to the ecology of our planet. Similar views are espoused by Divakaruni in her novel. She describes the extensive damage done to the environment in the course of the Great War in quite vociferous terms. On the eve of the battle, Panchaali exclaims that the Great War required that the warriors “harden their hearts” against people they'd loved all their lives. It made the warriors wipe out every vestige of guilt from their conscience in order to avoid feeling any major moral dilemma prior to the fateful event (Divakaruni, *Palace* 244). Panchaali's first view of the battlefield of Kurukshetra is quiet perturbing. In fact, what she first mistook for the site of the battle was actually Lake Samantapanchaka. In the evening light, the water of the lake looked like blood. The distressing sight triggered the feeling of disquiet within Panchaali (248). On the other hand, the men seemed to be filled with excitement and boundless zest over the prospect of fighting the most significant and instrumental war in human history.

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