

## Ecocritical Study of the Post-Colonial Novels of Indian English Literature with an Emphasis on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions"

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### ABSTRACT:

Ecology, characterized as the systematic investigation of the relationships between organisms and their surrounding atmosphere, highlights the interdependence between mankind and the mother nature. Recognizing that literary works engages with various aspects of life, including the environment, it becomes crucial for literary scholars to deliberate on ecological issues, offering novel perspectives and alternative solutions. Ecocriticism, which examines the representation of nature in literature, plays a vital role in shaping a global ecological vision. This investigation endeavors to examine Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary works through the lens of ecocriticism. Divakaruni's works showcase a heightened sensitivity to environmental issues, adeptly utilizing nature-themed motifs and metaphors to express compassion for marginalized entities, including nature, women, and the oppressed. Her ecologically sensitive fiction transcends cultural boundaries, providing insights into the cultural dynamics of diasporic communities, where the plight of nature appears particularly poignant. The research intends to draw an interconnectedness between the human kind and their living world within the fable, delving into the idea of eco-spirituality. Through the narration of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's approach, the novel condemns individuals whose ego and unquenchable pride led to the demolition of both humanity and habitation during Kurukshetra. The narrative serves as a critique of war and its adverse impact on the environment. Divakaruni's mythic tale reflects deep concerns for nature, challenging humanity's anthropocentric viewpoint. Her writings emerge as environmentally conscious narratives, adeptly incorporating themes and metaphors of nature to express compassion for marginalized groups, particularly nature, women, and the oppressed. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted ecological dimensions present in Indian myths through the lens of eco-sensibility evident in Divakaruni's fiction

**KEYWORDS:** Ecocriticism, anthropocentric, ecological sensibility, ecofeminist perspective, nature, culture.

### Introduction

The enduring connection between nature and literature has been a consistent theme found in the creative expressions of poets and writers across diverse cultures throughout history. Presently, the complex interconnection between the realms of nature and society is being closely examined and emphasized across various fields of knowledge and development. Literary critics are delving into the examination of how writers have depicted this close interconnection between nature and society within their works. In the contemporary context, two pivotal terms have gained prominence – ecology and ecocriticism. Literature, renowned for its reflection of current issues, has not escaped the influence of this theme. While works celebrating the beauty and power of nature have long populated the literary landscape, the ecological concerns and the imminent threats posed by the ongoing environmental degradation have only recently become significant topics for writers. The increasing



awareness of this concern and its representation in literature has led to the emergence of a burgeoning field of literary theory called Ecocriticism.

According to the Environmental Quality Council in the United States, "Ecology entails the scientific exploration of the intricate network of connections between living organisms and their inanimate surroundings." Being a social creature, humans, as demonstrated by Darwin through the process of evolution, are intricately woven into the ecological balance. The interdependence between human life and nature is undeniable; however, humans have consistently sought to exert control over nature for their own benefit. Exploiting the resources of Mother Nature to the fullest extent, humans have left behind a legacy of landscapes marred by degradation and irreparable harm to the ecology. The marvel and complexity of existence on the globe are profound, yet the pursuit of so-called progress has introduced a looming threat of extensive deterioration across all aspects of the natural environment.

### Evolution of Ecocriticism

The contemporary writings of numerous authors effectively capture the gravity of the environmental crisis. In response to this imminent concern, ecocriticism has arisen as a unique sector within literary criticism. This interdisciplinary field investigates the intricate relationships between the literary works and the environment, offering insights into the distinctions amidst nature and the cultural construals it elicits. Positioned as a response within literary theory to the compelling environmental challenges, ecocriticism has gained prominence. These writings inspired by environment were explored in late 1960s, coinciding with the onset of the movements supporting the environmental safety and "Silent Spring" published by Rachel Carson in 1962. The concerted endeavours in the field began with the works "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" and "The Environmental Imagination" released in 1990s.

Cheryll Glotfelty, acknowledged in 1996 as a trailblazer in the field of 'ecocriticism' or 'green studies,' played a pivotal role in establishing the academic movement of American Criticism during the early 1990s. Additionally, Glotfelty co-founded The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) in 1993, underscoring the emergence of a robust scholarly community dedicated to the intersection of literature and the environment.

The term 'Ecocriticism,' first coined by William Rueckert in 1978, signifies the pioneering work of an individual who laid the groundwork for the field. Rueckert's definition describes ecocriticism as 'The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.' This discipline acknowledges and explores the intricate and reciprocal relationship between human culture and the physical environment.

Ecocriticism plays a vital role in cultivating a worldwide environmental outlook by serving as a connection between nature, literature, and humanity. Addressing environmental challenges requires thoughtful and earnest discussions, and ecocriticism facilitates this discourse. In its contemporary expression within the United States, ecocriticism draws literary inspiration from three prominent nineteenth-century American authors: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau. These literary figures celebrated nature, the vital life force, and the expansive American wilderness in their writings. A comprehensive understanding of ecocriticism necessitates the discernment of distinctions between the tangible and spiritual realms, as well as the practical and theoretical dimensions. The cultural and religious origins of ecocriticism can be attributed to the earliest stages of human civilization. The thriving of human societies along riverbanks, from the Indus Valley to Egypt, underscores nature's sustaining power in economic, social, cultural, and material realms. However, in contemporary society, there is a noticeable trend of human oppression over nature, a theme frequently explored in the works of writers and poets.

Estok contends that ecocriticism goes beyond "simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment,



or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds” (1996:16-17)

The dynamic interaction between science and literature persists, as these two domains run parallel to each other. Both disciplines require a creative precision to grasp existence through diverse means of semiotics, demanding an ability to infer beyond the surface. William Howarth expresses uncertainties when it comes to arriving at precise details. He expresses “Connecting science and literature is difficult for their cultures have grown widely apart ...in fact texts do reflect how a civilization regards its natural heritage. We know nature through images and words, a process that makes the question of truth in science or literature inescapable, and whether we find validity through data or metaphor, the two modes of analysis are parallel. Ecocriticism observes in nature and culture the ubiquity of signs, indicators of value that shape form and meaning. Ecology leads us to recognize that life speaks, communing through encoded streams of information that have direction and purpose, if we learn to translate the messages with fidelity.” (1996:76-77)

### **Ecocritical Study of The Post-Colonial Novels in Indian English Literature**

When exploring history, Raja Rao stands out as one of the foremost authors in Indian English novels. His portrayal of South Indian village culture and the surrounding environment authentically captures the intricate relationship between humanity and nature. Another significant writer of the same era is R. K. Narayan, who brought to life the fictional place of Malgudi. It can be argued that Narayan endowed this setting with a character of its own, a characteristic found in nearly all his prose fictions. In essence, he utilized the landscape as a pivotal theme, aligning with the key considerations of ecocriticism.

The supremacy of nature over humanity has been evident throughout history, often asserting its dominance through natural disasters such as famine, drought, flood, and earthquakes. The intricate connection between human life and nature is so profound that individuals cannot extricate themselves from its influence. Consequently, people must accept both the benefits and challenges posed by nature. Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel, 'So Many Hungers,' vividly depicts the consequences of a specific natural disaster on humanity, exemplified by the Bengal famine of 1943, during which at least 3,000,000 Indians succumbed to starvation. The novel is a tapestry woven with elements of sorrow and tears, destitution and squalor, hunger and poverty, as well as the acts of valiant endurance and selfless acts of devotion.

The famine that occurred in Bengal in the year 1943, with its devastating severity that crushed millions, forms the core element of the novel's narrative. The characters in the story are portrayed with qualities reminiscent of certain animals, illustrating the author's commentary on human behaviour. The character of Laxmi Kanth, for instance, serves as an embodiment of both the jackal and the vulture, showcasing how a person can exhibit predatory tendencies, preying on those already weakened by hunger. Laxmi Kanth is portrayed as the epitome of the black market, devoid of any social conscience. As Fisher aptly notes, "In 'So Many Hungers' (1947), the Bengal famine is more than just a background; it is the very heart of the book."

In Kamala Markandya's novel 'Nectar in a Sieve,' which also makes allusions to the Bengal famine, 'The Flood' effectively illustrates the supremacy of nature over humanity. She writes “Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless and forgetful, and it has you by the throat.” The narrative portrays nature as having a dual role, functioning as both a destructive force and a preserver. The detrimental aspect of nature is evident in the distressing state of the villagers caused by heavy rain and storms, “the water pitilessly found every hole of the thatched roof to come in.....I saw that our coconut plant had been struck. That, too, the storm had claimed for its own..... they did not show much sign of surviving.”

Ruskin Bond is a writer whose works not only prominently feature ecology but also express concern for the depletion of nature. The picturesque hills of Dehradun and Mussorie consistently serve as the



backdrop for his writings, reflecting his profound belief in the rejuvenating capabilities of nature. Bond expresses apprehension about humanity's thoughtless actions toward the environment. Through his children's short stories, he aims to convey a crucial message about the significance of nature in our lives. In "An Island of Trees," Bond portrays the deep connection that can develop between humans and the natural world through love and compassion, as revealed by a grandmother to her granddaughter, Koki. "No Room for a Leopard" addresses deforestation and its dire consequences on animals, depicting the distressing condition they face post-deforestation. "Copperfield in the Jungle" criticizes hunting for pleasure, emphasizing its unjustifiability. Works like "The Tree Lover," "The Cherry Tree," and "All Creatures Great and Small" explore the interconnectedness and interdependence in the chain of ecosystems, illustrating the bond between humans and nature. Throughout his writings, Bond consistently highlights the significance of a balanced connection between humans and the natural world, emphasizing our mutual need for each other. His narratives reflect his compassion for the unsympathetic and cruel actions of humans toward the natural world.

Rachel Azima's ecocritical theory may have provoked curiosity among many writers, but it has undeniably expanded the scope of this branch by incorporating numerous novels. Her effort focuses on closing the divide between post colonialism and ecocriticism through the analysis of texts that portray diverse engagements with the environment, complicating and expanding the concept of being intimately linked to a specific location. This analysis not only stretches postcolonial theory beyond its typical cosmopolitan framework but also diversifies ecocriticism beyond its predominantly American orientation.

Azima has reimagined foundational metaphors related to literary texts, questioning fixed associations with specific places. to establish more adaptable and comprehensive models of place-connectedness. These models aim to account for phenomena such as displacement, hybridity, and transnationalism, moving beyond the conventional American-centric perspective. One such model, termed 'self-transplantation,' emphasizes the power of actively claiming a place one can belong to, as opposed to inheriting or receiving this connection through historical accidents. Authors such as V. S. Naipaul establish connections with their selected places of residence through self-transplantation, actively engaging with and writing about the environment. This underscores the intentional effort and involvement required in establishing a sense of belonging.

In her literary work, "The Inheritance of Loss," Kiran Desai skillfully explores the intricate tapestry of ethno-racial and historical connections that bind individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds across different continents. The narrative seamlessly weaves through a backdrop of an uprising in India and the experiences of immigrants, embodying Azima Rachel's concept of self-transplantation. With adept storytelling, Desai navigates international borders, notably between India and the USA, offering readers a nuanced portrayal of her characters through an intercultural ecocritical lens.

Amitav Ghosh's novel 'The Hungry Tide' has garnered unanimous acceptance from ecocritics, with no objections to categorizing it as fiction with an ecocritical approach. The book incorporates elements from the preceding concept of ecocriticism, exploring the intricate interrelationships among the human, natural, and animal realms. Essentially, it immerses itself in the domain of nature writing, presenting a depiction of one of the world's most vibrant environmental systems, the Sunderbans, along with its numerous islands that have surfaced and vanished within a short span. The narrative revolves around the challenges faced by settlers striving to find purpose in their lives amidst the adversities presented by the environment. 'The Hungry Tide' vividly depicts nature in all its splendour and harshness, revealing the beauty of the natural world alongside its more brutal aspects. Ghosh skillfully presents the fury of nature and the vulnerability of humanity subjected to its whims. The novel's unique blend of political and social realities, coupled with its profound concern for nature, has prompted discussions in seminars on ecocriticism within the realm of Indian English Literature.

Contemporary authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are actively advocating for change by envisioning the potential future consequences if we don't alter our current relationship with nature. Divakaruni, being of Indian origin residing abroad, provides a unique perspective on ecocentric subjects. When writing about her homeland, she offers an outsider's perspective to the indigenous







viewpoint, contributing to a broader understanding. The diasporic community, having experienced both worlds, is well-positioned to compare and convey apprehensions regarding the depletion of ecological resources and the ensuing social difficulties in their homeland. The aim of this research is to examine the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni from an ecocritical perspective, recognizing that, as Glotfelty points out, "For a long time, ecocriticism has remained a white movement. To make it a multi ethnic movement stronger connections need to be made between the environment and issues of social justice." (1996: xxv) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's works surface as environmentally aware literature adept at incorporating themes and metaphors of nature to effectively convey her messages. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings stand out as environmentally conscious narratives due to their ecologically sensitive content, rich in nature-related imagery and metaphors that effectively illustrate her themes. Nature consistently holds a position of dominance over humanity in her works, asserting its superiority through physical force and by influencing human lives through natural disasters such as famine, drought, flood, and earthquakes. The inextricable link between human existence and nature is undeniable, as individuals cannot detach themselves from its positive or negative impacts.

One striking example of the impact of such calamities on humanity is evident in "One Amazing Thing." In this novel, the earthquake is not just a symbol or isolated event; it constitutes the fundamental core that upholds the narrative. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni adeptly turns some of the most devastating natural calamities into poignant tales of human connection, demonstrating how suffering transcends cultural barriers and serves as a universal language. The literary oeuvre of writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni play a crucial role in unraveling the sociocultural phenomena of marginalized communities, where the suffering of nature resonates more profoundly than in other settings.

In her fiction, Divakaruni acknowledges and portrays the intricate connection between culture and nature. Her depiction of female characters aligning themselves with nature and the exploitation of the environment as symbolic expressions of male dominance unmistakably reflects an ecofeminist perspective. Specifically, Divakaruni explores women's concerns in her writings, with male characters frequently occupying peripheral roles. The transmission of legacies and skills occurs from mothers to daughters, fostering a strong bond and camaraderie among women. Their narratives explore the trajectories of immigrant dreams.

### **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions"**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni holds a prominent position in the realm of Indian English literature. Her novel, "The Palace of Illusions" is a reinterpretation of the revered Indian epic, The Mahabharata. Through her adept re-narration, Divakaruni manages to uphold both originality and uniqueness. The novel explores subjects such as gender discrimination, women's identity crises, male dominance, and the conservation of ancient culture and tradition.

In a departure from the conventional approach of selecting a male character as the protagonist, Divakaruni introduces a female character, offering readers a fresh perspective on the well-known story of the great Hindu epic. The re-narration likely explores Draupadi's struggle for identity in a patriarchal society. The protagonist's determination and courage are intricately woven throughout the novel. Divakaruni employs myth as a tool to illuminate the struggles faced by the protagonist. According to contemporary women writers like Divakaruni, whether in ancient or modern times, the lives of women have not undergone significant changes.

As a woman, Divakaruni delves deep into the world of women and consistently chooses women-centric subjects for her novels. She portrays her female characters as iconoclasts and warriors, challenging societal dogmas. The majority of her novels advocate for a robust identity for women, seeking to rewrite the history of women in society. In portraying Panchaali as a modern woman in particular, Divakaruni emphasizes her intent to communicate thoughts and ideas to the present-day world. Panchaali's struggle begins from her birth, emerging from the holy fire alongside her twin brother. Panchaali has treated as unwelcomed guest to world from the fire. Even the domination starts from names, her father named her brother "Dhristadyumna, 'Destroyer of Enemies' and Draupadi,





Daughter of Drupad”(2009: 5). She demands more heroic name “who was supposed to change the history” (2009: 5). Desiring to distance herself from her father's egotism and dominance, Draupadi chooses to identify herself as Panchaali, the Queen of Panchal.

Panchaali's journey to discover her identity commences unconsciously in her early years. Isolated during her childhood due to her father's dominance, she navigates this period alone. “I could not forgive him for that initial rejection” (2009: 6). He isolates her from everyone, and additionally, he restricts Panchaali from venturing outside the confines of the palace. Her father's residence appears to be a gilded cage for Panchaali. “I hated the thick gray slabs of the walls” (2009: 6). The depiction of Drupad's palace unveils significant aspects of patriarchal dominance in the storyline. To evade her father's control, she frequently envisions having her own palace, finding solace in these dreams. Divakaruni attempts to challenge traditional norms that disadvantage women in patriarchal societies through the character of Panchaali. According to the author, ancient epics predominantly highlight the heroic deeds of men, neglecting the role of women. When Panchaali seeks to study war techniques to showcase her prowess, her father rejects her request. Despite her desire to become a skilled warrior like her brother, her father prohibits her from learning martial skills. According to him “A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband, and sons:” (2009: 26). Instead of acquiescing to her father's words, Panchaali resolves to reshape the history of women.

Women find themselves confined in the guise of tradition and culture, be it in ancient or modern times. By portraying this reality, the novelist prompts readers to ponder why such traditional systems persist. Panchaali emerges as a formidable female figure challenging the dogmas that curtail women's freedom. The retelling of the great Indian epic not only facilitates an easier comprehension of cultural and traditional systems but also establishes a connection between the lives of ancient times and the present world.

In patriarchal societies, there is a belief that women are considered communal property, belonging to their fathers and husbands. King Drupad exhibits a similar mindset when it comes to Queen Panchaali. He prioritizes his personal benefits when organizing Panchaali's swayamvar. Upon learning about the competition in the swayamvar, Panchaali expresses her discontent. she sates that “Why even call it swayamvar, then?” I cried, “Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry” (2009: 56). Panchaali views her marriage as a mere political arrangement. Her union is illustrative of the exploitation and dominance prevalent in patriarchal societies, where the subjugation of women is a common practice.

Panchaali's life unfolds in a manner distinct from that of other women she knows. She develops feelings for Karna, who is prohibited from participating in the swayamvar. Following her marriage to the Panchapandava brothers, Panchaali encounters unique challenges. She is compelled to marry all the Pandava brothers without any opportunity to express her opinion, highlighting the patriarchal norms of the society. Similarly, she questions the disgraceful incident in Hastinapur after Yudhistir's loss in a game of dice, where she is treated as an object by her husbands. Panchaali is dismayed that none of her five husbands defends her. Strengthening her resolve, she vows to seek revenge on the Kauravas for the dishonorable act. Without directly engaging in the battlefield, she achieves retribution against her enemies.

In "The Palace of Illusions," Divakaruni provides a novel viewpoint on the ancient epic, presenting a feminist narrative from a woman's viewpoint. The novel delves into the inner lives of women, challenging the belief that Panchaali's fate and actions led to the destruction of her clan. Divakaruni consciously departs from such interpretations to provide a novel outlook on Panchaali's character, emphasizing the societal domination and oppression faced by women. In line with modern feminist writers, the novel sheds light on the sufferings of women, depicting the characteristics of a patriarchal society where women are denied basic human rights, and their roles are predetermined before birth. Divakaruni uses "The Palace of Illusions" to illustrate how societal methods of suppressing women have been employed since ancient times, forcing them to conform to prescribed norms.





One significant departure between Divakaruni's reinterpretation and Vyasa's original lies in Draupadi's admission of her love for Karna. In "The Palace of Illusions" from 2008, Draupadi confronts the injustices imposed upon her, rejecting the expectation for her to endure them silently as customary for a conventional woman. Divakaruni shifts Panchaali from being an object to becoming a subject, establishing an immediate link between mythological and contemporary concepts of feminine identity. Despite the celestial and divine elements in the narrative, Draupadi in "The Palace of Illusions" is depicted as skeptical of ancient myths and rituals. Divakaruni's depiction presents Draupadi as stronger, rebellious, and more grounded in her personality. She refuses the ominous destiny of marrying five men, as prophesied by the renowned sage Vyasa..

Draupadi's enduring resentment stems from her father's initial rejection when she was born from the fire that King Drupad constructed, singing for the sake of his son Dhristadyumna. While Drupad may have been kind, even indulgent in his own severe and obsessive manner, Draupadi cannot fully reconcile with his initial rejection. This lingering sentiment shapes her trust issues and evolution from a girl to a young woman. "The Palace of Illusions" portrays Draupadi as a complex and multifaceted character, challenging traditional expectations and offering a more nuanced perspective on her relationship with her father.

In a society deeply entrenched in patriarchy, Draupadi steadfastly maintained her stature and never allowed herself to succumb to oppression or fragility. Upon learning the actual reason for her father's initial rejection, which deemed a female child as ineffective for securing support for his kingdom, Draupadi underwent a gradual transformation into the resilient individual she eventually became. Her fascination with Dhai Ma's birth story, foretold by the gods with the prophecy that she would alter the course of history, fulfills Draupadi's longing for femininity. Consequently, she consistently seeks to align her experiences with the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Diverging from perspectives on the Mahabharata that attribute blame to Draupadi for the ruinous Kurukshetra war, Divakaruni's narrative intertwines Draupadi's struggles with those faced by women worldwide. The book connects Draupadi's internal battles to the broader concerns of women, providing a perspective that resonates beyond the confines of the Mahabharata's traditional narrative. Despite Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas is predetermined against her will and personal preferences, Divakaruni emphasizes Draupadi's feminine affection for Karna. While Arjun is portrayed as the sole contender capable of succeeding in the Swayamvar challenge and assisting Draupadi in fulfilling her childhood dream of altering history's course, Krishna consistently dominates Draupadi's thoughts with visions of Arjun. However, Draupadi experiences a shift when she sees Karna's image, describing him as the man who captured her attention on to the right of Duryodhan. elder to the prince and possessing a stern countenance, Karna sits upright, his thin frame alert as if aware of the world's peril. Despite appearing isolated during court, adorned only with uniquely patterned gold armor and earrings, Karna's eyes convey a lingering grief. Draupadi is drawn into his gaze, and her irritability dissipates. She loses interest in seeing Arjun's portrait, becoming more intrigued by how Karna's eyes would appear if he were to smile. This passage from "The Palace of Illusions" captures Draupadi's evolving emotions and the unexpected pull towards Karna.

Women in India were historically denied the agency to choose their life partners, as societal norms upheld the idea of virginity as an exclusive and sacred possession of women. This societal construct, exempting men from a similar duty, has led to persistent issues of spousal infidelity in many households. Despite hailing from a royal family, Dhai Ma counseled Draupadi to acknowledge the potentiality that her husband, being a prince from any kingdom, might be obligated to marry multiple women. Nevertheless, Draupadi, a symbol of feminism, yearns for a husband who is dedicated to her and loves only her, as evidenced in Karna's gaze.

In traditional practices, a woman whose physical being is claimed by a sole male is deemed the embodiment of virtue. Due to the prevailing masculinist "dharma," Draupadi is forced to choose between five husbands, with the rare benefit of always being viewed as chaste as she transitions from one brother to another. However, this boon, which appears more beneficial for her husbands than for





Draupadi personally, doesn't excite her. Despite Draupadi's reported lifelong admiration for Karna, especially during moments of disappointment with her spouses, the literature suggests that she believes Karna wouldn't have let her down.

To enhance the effectiveness of the women's movement, an emphasis on reversing the public-private hierarchy is observed. This stems from the argument that the government sector, often perceived as more prominent, logical, enigmatic, and predominantly male, is prioritized over the private sector in traditional sexist households, educational institutions, or workplaces. In challenging this hierarchy, feminists argue that sexuality and emotions hold greater significance and impact, emphasizing the need for a masculinist sexual politics to tightly regulate all public activities. The most challenging aspect to confront in this repressive politics is the institutionalized sex discrimination, which appears as the most stubborn obstacle to overcome. (1996: 89) This perspective is articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni brings attention to the discrimination women face in public spaces, as exemplified by the portrayal of women in a substantial epic. The novel emphasizes Draupadi's desires and passions, aspects that were relatively understated in the original tale. Since her early years, Draupadi's primary goal, driven by Vyasa's prophecy, has been to rule the most beautiful castle in the world.

*"I often thought about the palace I would one day construct. What would be its composition? How would it look like? The arches of Krishna's palace in Dwaraka were made of pink sandstone, resembling the ocean waves that surrounded it. It sounded lovely, but I understood that mine would need to be unique. That would mean it would be entirely mine."* (*The Palace of Illusions* 2015: 113)

Draupadi's yearnings for a grand palace and the coveted position of the queen of queens heighten when she comprehends that Drupad's disapproval of her birth is solely rooted in her gender. In every phase of her life, be it as the spouse of the five greatest warriors or the daughter of the powerful King Drupad, Draupadi wrestles with the ongoing challenge of upholding her position of authority as a woman. This universal experience resonates with every woman who faces unequal treatment from birth in a patriarchal society, leading to significant domestic and societal challenges in their pursuit of Command and acknowledgment.

Even as Draupadi's strength and influence grow, she does not select Karna as her life partner during the Swayamvar to safeguard her brother Dhri. Karna made an attempt to harm Dhri during the Swayamvar, but Draupadi refrained from supporting him, fearing that she might harm her brother, father, and children. Despite her deep love for Karna, Draupadi sacrificed that relationship to safeguard her only companion and supporter, Dhri, who had stood by her since birth, as her father's family had abandoned her. This choice adds a touch of femininity to her character. Draupadi poses a poignant question to Karna, a question that haunts her in silence until her death: "Before you attempt to win my hand, King of Anga, tell me your father's name." This is intended to persuade Karna to withdraw from the competition and prevent a conflict that could endanger Dhri's life. It is evident that a prospective bride, who is anticipated to depart from her family and integrate into her husband's lineage has the entitlement to be informed of this information.

Owing to her hectic life with five husbands and the authoritative mother-in-law Kunti, Draupadi often avoids encounters with Karna, whom she first met at Swayamvar. Fate keeps Draupadi and Karna from forming a close connection due to significant events that fueled Draupadi's anger towards Karna. Consequently, their interactions always leave them feeling dissatisfied. Karna remained silent during Draupadi's humiliation at Hastinapur, contributing to Draupadi's discomfort with her enduring love for Karna. Karna insisted, "Why should Draupadi be treated differently?" enraging Dussasan. "Take her clothes, too" (2015: 192). Upon learning this, Draupadi internalizes a life lesson and starts nurturing resentment towards Karna, affirming to herself, "Karna, I said to myself, you've taught me a lesson; and you've taught it well" (2015: 194). Draupadi's resentment is fleeting. She finds contentment in her life only after learning that Karna was also drawn to and had feelings for Draupadi, as narrated by Karna to Bheeshma. Draupadi expresses the fulfillment of her lifelong desire in her remarks, "Wasn't





this what I'd secretly wanted all my life, to know that he was attracted to me, even against his will?" (2015: 276-277).

Draupadi's life is marked by intense emotional highs and lows that are uncommon in the experiences of most women. Despite being recognized for her resilience and confidence in the face of overwhelming challenges, her concealed love becomes a symbol of self-desire in *The Palace of Illusions*. The author celebrates women as individuals who should embrace life fully and challenges the notion that they should be submissive to men, sacrificing their own desires for the greater good. By highlighting Draupadi's desires, the narrative confronts traditional expectations. Draupadi's resentment is fleeting. She finds contentment in her life only after learning that Karna was also drawn to and had feelings for Draupadi, as narrated by Karna to Bheeshma. In essence, "Divakaruni's narrative in *The Palace of Illusions* reveals her unique empathy for female characters who suffered and were overlooked in the Mahabharata. The narrative transforms the voice of humanity into a feminist consciousness." (2016:67)

### **Ecocritical perspective of "The Palace of Illusions"- A Critical Analysis**

Known for her distinctive narrative style, Divakaruni achieved international acclaim with her second novel, *"The Palace of Illusions"* (2008). This literary work, a reinterpretation of the Indian epic Mahabharata, unfolds through an ecocritical lens, with Draupadi serving as the narrator and protagonist. Blending historical accounts with mythical narratives with a touch of magic realism, the novel serves as an exploration of war and environmental destruction. Divakaruni uses her narrative to reproach men whose egos and insatiable greed led to the extensive devastation of both humanity and nature in the Kurukshetra war. Through her mythical narrative, she explicitly expresses concerns for nature and critiques the anthropocentric perspectives of humanity.

Modern authors like Divakaruni are taking up a proactive role, offering their perspectives on the potential future if corrective measures are not taken toward nature. Being of Indian origin settled abroad, her unique position broadens the scope of her environmentally significant themes. The diasporic community, benefitting from the ability to compare both worlds, conveys apprehensions about the diminishing ecological resources and subsequent social challenges in their respective homelands. Divakaruni's literary works play a crucial role in unraveling the cultural dynamics of marginalized communities, where the anguish of nature resonates more deeply than in other contexts. Her writings distinguish themselves as ecologically mindful documentation, characterized by their rich imagery of nature, contributing to environmental awareness. Throughout her works, environment consistently asserts its dominance over humanity. Divakaruni's subtle portrayal of ecofeminism, a literary and social movement that recognizes the interconnected oppression of women and nature, is evident. In her narratives, women react sensitively to nature and establish a profound correlation between their being and the natural world. Echoing the ecofeminist perspective, which posits that the domination of women and nature is inherently linked, Divakaruni's writings underline the necessity of concerted efforts to preserve the environment.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's adept re-narration in her novel, *"The Palace of Illusions,"* preserves both originality and distinctiveness. The novel delves into themes such as extensive devastation affecting both humanity and its surroundings, coupled with gender-based discrimination and the identity crisis of women, along with male domination, and the exploration of ancient culture and tradition. In her fiction, Divakaruni adeptly acknowledges and illustrates the interplay between culture and nature. Moreover, her representation and alignment of female characters with the natural world, in conjunction with her scrutiny of environmental exploitation as a parallel manifestation of male dominance, distinctly resonates with an ecofeminist standpoint. Divakaruni's literary works critically examine the intricate links between the status of women and the treatment of the non-human environment. Additionally, her fiction skillfully addresses the challenges of displacement by delving into immigrant dreams, employing natural imagery to convey profound meanings.

Draupadi becomes entangled in the pursuit to reclaim the Pandavas' birthright, steadfastly standing by her brothers through years of exile and a brutal civil war. The colossal conflict wreaks havoc on

human civilization, causing widespread suffering and pain, all while neglecting the environmental devastation it inflicts. The narrative revolves around the destructive consequences of human ego and the ensuing war, offering Divakaruni's poignant commentary on nature. Throughout history, war has consistently confounded and exploited nature, with its destructive impact intensifying over time.

"The Palace of Illusions" is a poetic narrative that carries the fragrance of ancient incense while maintaining a connection to contemporary relevance. It serves as an intimate and timeless portrayal, intertwining the tumultuous life of Draupadi with enthralling tales from the epic, her destiny is seamlessly woven into the traditional narratives of the Mahabharata. It emerges as a thread, possessing both the brilliance of gold and the fragility akin to the lotus she encounters.

Navigating through the tumultuous terrain of a brutal civil war, internal power conflicts, and the intricacies of being captivated by mysterious men, Draupadi introduces a distinctly feminine viewpoint to her predominantly male-dominated realm. Divakaruni's dedication to unravelling Draupadi's narrative presents a compelling story that delves into the dynamics between warriors, deities, and the enigmatic dictates of fate, providing insights relevant to the strife-ridden realities of the contemporary world.

Divakaruni's ecological sensibility has spurred a reinterpretation of the historic literary piece of writing with a contemporary and relevant strategy. Vyasa, the storyteller of the Mahabharata, extensively discusses events such as natural disasters leading to ecological imbalances. Through various illustrations, the poet addresses incidents that resonate even with readers of the present era. The epic delineates guidelines for environmental preservation and the upkeep of ecological equilibrium, underscoring the central tenet of dharma, which denotes righteous conduct for the common person. This consciousness safeguards cultural survival and enduring practices.

Currently, the world grapples with ecological and environmental crises stemming from human activities, and maintaining unchanged behaviors could endanger culture and present numerous threats. An in-depth analysis of the ecological aspects within this epic explores the literature's function in educating individuals about ecology, serving as a powerful catalyst for upholding dharma. In Hindu traditions, epics and puranas narrate the cyclical destruction of the world, highlighting the diminishing virtue and conduct at the culmination of each aeon, ultimately resulting in a lamentable state of the world.

Within the Mahabharata, nature is perceived as an extension of the same consciousness, with each human being emerging from the primary elements of nature. The literature underscores the importance of the five great elements and even proposes a prohibition on the hunting of animals, a favored activity among the royalty. The epic depicts a hunting scene where forest inhabitants and animals converge, resembling a gathering of diverse elements of nature in a harmonious setting. The text conveys apprehension for the growth and preservation of flora and fauna and champions for the responsible utilization of natural resources.

The reimagining of the epic initiates a reasoned examination of eco-philosophy, mirroring a struggle over social policies amid ecological crises. The resolution of this struggle necessitates the formulation of a 'dharma' for the contemporary era as a guiding principle. The Mahabharata encompasses numerous verses advocating for the preservation of trees and forests. For instance, Bhishma advises Yudhishtra against cutting down trees bearing edible fruits in his territories. The epic encapsulates Indian ethos, values, and an ethical code, delivering significant lessons on the environment and ethics. Divakaruni critiques the avarice and abusive tendencies in humans that lead to the destruction, subjugation, and exploitation of exploiting nature for self-serving desires and ego gratification. Arjuna's action of igniting the entire forest in Khandava stands as proof of this destructive conduct. The extensive demolition during this event results in the scarce sounds of animals as the Pandavas construct, Indraprastha, in the area. Settlements in the wilderness that are anthropocentric degrade nature as humans exploit natural resources according to their whims.



During their sojourn in the forest, the Pandavas, driven by the imperative of survival, indiscriminately exploited the resources of the wilderness, thereby revealing a distinctly anthropocentric mindset. This perspective is equally evident in the narrative, as Draupadi recounts the incident where Nakul and Sahadev presented her with fawns to caress, displaying a lack of remorse for separating the newborn animals from their mothers. The author accentuates Yudhishthira's despondency following the victory in Kurukshetra, highlighting a deep-seated aversion to the infliction of harm caused by human actions—an sentiment strongly articulated by Vyasa, the esteemed author of the epic.

Nature represents freedom from the constraints of life in Draupadi's perspective. She expresses a desire to escape the confined walls of concrete palaces like Kampilya and Hastinapur, longing for a world filled with flowers, trees, and birds. Nature, for Draupadi, serves as both a reliever of distress and a sanctuary of liberation. Having witnessed the devastating effects of a cruel war and the tragic fates of her loved ones and enemies, Draupadi undergoes a transformation, learning to relinquish her ego. Consequently, she no longer endeavors to govern either men or nature.

The novel also invites a critical examination of Bhishma's relationship with nature. As the son of the river goddess Ganga, Bhishma is inherently connected to nature. During moments of depression and hesitation arising from the court affairs and the hostility between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, Bhishma finds solace and comfort in the embrace of nature.

## Conclusion

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has effectively highlighted environmental concerns in a poignant manner. In "The Palace of Illusions," the diverse aspects and components of nature hold considerable importance in the lives of the characters and within Indian myths. The author conveys a powerful message that individuals have a moral duty to approach nature with a healing attitude rather than one of domination or exploitation. In her book "The Palace of Illusions," Divakaruni provides a new viewpoint on the age-old epic, emphasizing ecological considerations and shedding light on the intricate relationship between nature and culture.

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