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Ecological aspects in Indian Epic: An ecocritical study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'the palace of illusions'

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Abstract

Ecology is the scientific study of interactions among organisms and with their physical environment. Man cannot be considered in isolation from his environment. "As Literature engages with life and everything in the world, it must also engage with the environment" (Murali Sivaramkrishnan). Hence it becomes highly imperative that we as literary scholars should deliberate about environment as about other human issues, so that we can provide a new perspective and find alternative solutions. Ecocriticism, a study of relationship of nature with human beings as represented in literature, plays an important role in empowering the world ecological vision. This paper aims at analyzing Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* from an ecological viewpoint. Moreover, it envisions the human relationship with the natural world in the epic through the concept of spiritual ecology. The novel is a retelling of the Indian epic *The Mahabharata*, from the perspective of Draupadi. She censures men whose ego and insatiable greed resulted in the destruction of both his kind and nature in the War of Kurukshetra. An investigation of the narration highlights the novel as a review of war and environmental destruction. The novel gives acute awareness of nature, its relationship to humankind and the human attitude towards it. In her mythic tale, Divakaruni clearly voices her concerns for nature and criticizes man's anthropocentric attitude. Her writings emerge as environmentally aware texts, proficient in themes and metaphors of nature that serve the purpose of illustrating her empathy with subalterns, especially nature, women and downtrodden. The present paper attempts to study multifaceted ecological aspects in the myths of India through recognizing ecosensibility in Divakaruni's fiction.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, myth, anthropocentrism, civilization, nature, culture

Introduction

According to the United States Council on Environmental Quality, "Ecology is the science of the intricate web of relationships between living organisms and their non-living surroundings." Man is a social animal, and as Darwin proved it "a product of a long process called evolution" in which the ecological balance played a decisive role. Human life is directly related to nature but they have always been trying to dominate nature for their own advantage. Man has exploited mother nature to the optimum value leaving behind a trail of degraded and diminished landscape and the incalculable damage to the ecosystem. The existence of life on earth is highly mystifying and incredible, and the so called development has brought about the spectra of an overwhelming degradation of all facets of natural environment.

The environmental crisis has found a fair representation in the works of many contemporary writers. Ecocriticism has emerged as a branch of criticism that brings the environmental issues to the surface. It is the interdisciplinary study of the connections between literature and the environment, and examines the differences between nature and its cultural construction. It has established itself as literary theory's response to environmental catastrophe. Though the origin of environmentally inspired writings can be traced back to late 1960s, with the start of the environmental movement and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, yet integrated efforts started with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell, both published in 1990s.

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The acknowledged founder of 'ecocriticism' or, 'green studies' is Cheryll Glotfelty who was also the co-founder of The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which started in 1993 so American Criticism was already a burgeoning academic movement by the end of the early 1990s.

The word 'Ecocriticism,' coined in 1978 by William Rueckert, the pioneer in the field of Ecocriticism, says ecocriticism is 'The application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature.' Human culture has a reciprocal relationship with the physical world. Ecocriticism plays an important role in empowering the world ecological vision. It serves as a bridge between nature, literature and human beings. Environmental problems can be solved only when a serious deliberation about them takes place. Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary bearings from three major nineteenth century American writers whose work celebrated nature, the life force, and wilderness as manifested in America, these being Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau.

To comprehend the vast multitude of ecocriticism, it is inevitable to bifurcate the physical from spiritual or the practical from theoretical. Its cultural and religious bearings go back to the origin of civilization. The flowering of human race on the banks of rivers speaks volumes about the sustenance power of nature. From the valley of Indus to Egypt, economic, social, cultural and material empires owe their journey to it. But modern day society represents the oppression of nature by man as reflected in the works of writers and poets.

Analysis

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one among the most talented women writers of Indian diaspora. She is an Indian-American author, poet, novelist, short story writer, children's fiction writer, book reviewer and an activist. She often writes about contemporary life in America and India and her works mostly deals with the theme of diaspora, gender discrimination, women's experiences, history, mythology, magic realism, identity and ecofeminism, etc. She is a recipient of many literary awards. Her writings emerged as environmentally aware text, proficient in themes and metaphors of nature that serve the purpose of illustrating her empathy with subalterns like nature, women and downtrodden. She is known for her unique style of narration. Divakaruni's second novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) was an international bestseller, is a retelling of the Indian epic the Mahabharata from an ecocritical perspective which is narrated by Draupadi, the protagonist. It is half-history, half-myth, and wholly magical. An investigation of the narration highlights the novel as a review of war and environmental destruction. She reproaches men whose ego and unquenchable greed resulted in the massive destruction of both his class and nature in the war of Kurukshetra. In her mythic tale, Divakaruni clearly voices her concerns for nature and criticizes man's anthropocentric attitude.

Modern writers like Divakaruni have been leading a crusade of their own by making predictions of what the future might be like if we do not mend our ways towards nature now. Her being a person of Indian origin settled abroad widens the purview of her ecologically relevant themes. The diasporic community is at an advantage to compare both the worlds and this give rise to concerns about the depleting ecological

resources and resultant social struggles in their native land. The works of writers like Divakaruni play a decisive role in helping to decipher the cultural construct of the alienated communities where nature's agony sounds more poignant than other places. Her writings emerge as environmentally viable documentation because of its ecologically cognizant texts abounding in images of nature. Nature in all her writings remains stronger than man is. Ecofeminism, the literary and social movement that regards the oppression of women and nature as interrelated, finds a portrayal in Divakaruni's writings very subtly because it is the women who react more sensitively to nature and associate their existence with nature. Women are regarded as inferior to men; as analogously nature is regarded inferior to culture. Ecofeminists trust that the ascendancy over women and nature is essentially co-related and that efforts to salvage environment are therefore essential.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has an eminent place in Indian English Writing. Through her skillful re-narration in the novel *The Palace of Illusions*, she maintains originality as well as uniqueness. *The Palace of Illusions* deals with widespread destruction of man and his environment, gender discrimination, identity crisis of women, male domination, ancient culture and tradition. Divakaruni recognizes and represents the interconnectedness of culture and nature in her fiction. Her representation and identification of the female characters with nature and mistreatment of the environment as analogous forms of male ascendancy undoubtedly takes an ecofeminist stand. Her writings underscore and scrutinize the interconnections between the status of women and the status of non-human nature. Her fiction deals with the ordeal of displacement through the trajectories of immigrant dream using natural imagery to interpret.

Relevant to today's war-torn world, *The Palace of Illusions* takes us back to the time of the Indian epic the Mahabharata- a time that is half-history, half-myth, and wholly magical. Through her narrator Draupadi (Panchaali), daughter of King Drupad and wife of the legendary five Pandava brothers, Divakaruni gives us a rare feminist interpretation of this epic story. The novel traces Draupadi's life, beginning with her magical birth in fire to the path of the great departure and presents the entire chain of events that led to the war of Kurukshetra resulting in death of millions and wide spread destruction of man and his environment. Draupadi is swept into the quest to reclaim their birthright remaining at the brothers' side through years of exile and a terrible civil war. The great war causes enormous havoc to human civilization leaving behind extreme suffering and pain, and also overlooks the destruction it caused to nature. The entire story revolves around man's ego and its subsequent war, through which Divakaruni brings in the attention to nature. War from prehistoric times has confounded nature and by time its devastation has increased manifold.

The Palace of Illusions is a lyrical tale imbued with the scent of ancient incense yet rooted in modern day relevancy. It is an intimate, feminine portrait that is both contemporary and timeless. Through the tumultuous life of Draupadi, Divakaruni gives voice to a bold and sensuous retelling of captivating stories from the epic, woven into the fabric of traditional tales from the Mahabharata, Draupadi's destiny is a thread as golden and as fragile as the lotus she discovers. As she endures a fierce civil war, domestic power struggles,

and the perils of the attraction to elusive men, Draupadi brings a feminine sensibility to her male-dominated world. With devotion to Draupadi's tale, Divakaruni also presents a stirring account of the interplay of warriors, gods, and the inscrutable laws of destiny, offering wisdom for today's war-torn world.

The ecosensibility of Divakaruni has given rise to speculative retelling of the ancient literary text with a new approach which is current and relevant. Vyasa, the story teller of the great epic the Mahabharata has discussed multitudes of events like natural disasters which resulted in ecological imbalance, also through various illustrations, the poet has discussed incidents which make sense even to the present day readers. The policies for the protection of the environment and sustenance of ecological balance as discussed in the epic had in themselves the core of element of *dharma*, the righteous behavior by a common man. The awareness insured cultural survival and sustained practices. The world is ridden with ecological and environmental catastrophe due to the actions of humanity and unchanged practices would definitely lead to culture endanger and pose multiple threats. An ecological study of the epic, simply examines the role of literature in educating people on ecology which is a strong catalyst for sustenance of *dharma*. In the Hindu traditions, the epics and puranas have given a detailed description of periodic and cyclic destruction of the world. The decline of virtue and behavior at the end of each aeon would bring the world to a deplorable condition. Sometimes man is ignorant of how he would make a difference in nature. In the Mahabharata, nature is viewed as an extension of the same consciousness. Every human being is a product of the main elements of nature. River Ganga was the mother of Bhishma. All the sons of Pandu were born of the main elements of nature while Draupadi was the product of the sacrificial fire. While describing Gandhamadana, Vyasa has mentioned multitudes of trees which constitutes a healthy environment. The literature in the Mahabharata has also described in the Gita certain positive responses to ecology. Several passages of the epic remind us of universal pantheism. The overlord identifies himself with elements of nature like the sun, moon, ocean, wind and river. It offers a spirituality which is profound and awe-inspiring. The epic has given paramount importance to the five great elements and almost reached to the point of conclusion that these elements create environmental consciousness. There has been description of multitudes of flora and fauna, also given a hint at prohibiting hunting of animals which of course was a favorite pastime of the royals. There is a beautiful description of the hunting scene in the novel where forest dwellers and beasts are brought together and it appears more like a reunion of various components of nature in an amicable atmosphere. There is a concerned cry for the development and sustenance of flora and fauna and positive exploitation of natural resources. The reinterpretation of the epic leads to a rational inquiry of eco-philosophy. The epic reflects a conflict over social policy in the face of an ecological disaster. The conflict must be resolved by constructing a 'dharma' for the new age that became a point of sustenance. The epic has various verses advising protection of trees and forest. For instance, Bhishma said to Yudhishtra, "let not such trees as yield edible fruits be cut down in thy dominions." The epic embodies the Indian ethos, values and code of conduct. The text certainly teaches us important lessons on environment

and ethics. Divakaruni is also critical of the avarice and abusive vein in man that destroys, subjugates and exploits nature for his selfish needs and to satisfy his ego. Arjuna's act of setting the entire forest on fire in Khandava is an evidence of it. So extensive is the demolition that scarcely any cries of animals are heard when the Pandavas came to build their kingdom, Indraprastha, in it. Any type of settlement in the backwoods is anthropocentric while by using natural resources according to their whims and fancies, man deteriorates nature. This human attitude that regards nature as its subsidiary is strongly condemned by Ecocriticism. During their exile in forest, the Pandavas thoughtlessly used forest resources for their survival. Anthropocentrism is also reflected in the novel, when Draupadi relates how Nakul and Sahadev brought fawns for her to pet, without any regret of separating the new born from its mother. The author recounts how Yudhishthira went into depression after his victory in Kurukshetra. This objection against man-made damage finds its most indisputable tone in Vyasa, the author of the epic itself. Nature brings the ideas of freedom from the constraints of life. Draupadi often dislikes her existence within the concrete palace walls of Kampilya and Hastinapur. She wants to escape to a world of flowers, trees and birds for her company. Nature is a healer of pain as well as a residence of freedom. Draupadi after the witnessing the ravages of cruel war, the horrible ends of her loved ones as well as her foes. She learns to let go of her ego. Thus, this change is obvious in her attitude for she no longer tries to tame either men or nature. Additionally, the relationship of Bhishma with nature justifies a critical investigation in the novel. Bhishma is the son of the river goddess Ganga, so an intimate relationship between him and nature is perfectly suggested. The depressions and hesitations resulting from court affairs and chiefly the enmity between the Kauravas and the Pandavas often led him to find peace and comfort in nature.

Conclusion

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni raised serious concerns about environment very poignantly and clearly. *The Palace of Illusions* is filled with the diverse facets and the elements of nature and its inevitable role in the life of the people and in the Indian myths. The writer beautifully conveyed the message that it should be the moral duty of every individual to have a healing attitude towards nature and not of domination or exploitation. Divakaruni has certainly given a new outlook to the ancient epic in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*, which centres around ecological concerns and brings to light the relationship of nature with culture.

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