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Kinship of Women with Nature: A Study of Ecosensibility in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Fiction

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Abstract:

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 study is an attempt to explore Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction from the perspective of ecocriticism. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings emerge as environmentally aware texts, proficient in themes and metaphors of nature that serve the purpose of illustrating her empathy with subalterns- nature, women and downtrodden. Her ecologically sensitive fiction has an appeal across the cultural barriers. It plays an important role in helping to decipher the cultural construct of the diasporic communities where nature's agony sounds more distressing than anywhere else does.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Diaspora, women, nature, culture.

Human beings have always been trying to dominate nature for their own advantage. The very existence of human race was dependent on the use of nature to their advantage, but the population explosion, resultant consumption of natural resources and the mechanical era have accelerated the process immensely. Thoughtless escalated development at the cost of nature has been costing us very dear. The anthropocentric status human beings have given to themselves has given us a feeling that nature is subservient to us and exists to serve our needs so it can be exploited as much as we desire. In the last three centuries we caused a lot of devastation. Over population, industrialization, and recently the digital revolution has made extraordinarily excessive demands on Mother Earth and penetrated into its innermost secrets. Nothing is hidden from the all-seeing human satellite eye. This has resulted in giving even more impetus to Homo Sapiens to run the earth according to their own whim and fancy. Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer introduced the term 'Anthropocene' for this new geological epoch in 2000 to refer to the contemporary global environment dominated by human activity. The term refers to the time period beginning with the industrial revolution and is ongoing in this era of increased human environmental interference. It is time period when anthropogenic activities, with human beings in charge, have immensely influenced the ecosphere.

The human footprint, i.e. the human influence on global ecosphere, is escalating at an alarming pace. The consumption and degradation of natural resources is happening at such a fast

rate that natural replenishing is not possible. The carbon footprint, the rate of the greenhouse gas emission, per person is manifold when compared to our ancestors' time. Whereas our forefathers worshipped Mother Earth and used only as much as was required for the survival. The religious tenets were mostly inspired by nature and they ensured that man does not take the natural elements for granted. But anthropocenal generation is essentially a market-driven, consumerist society that has been using up natural resources without giving any thought to the havoc being caused. The constant depletion of resources themselves is a cause of worry but its social implications are worse. The downtrodden have to depend on the richer and the dominant social entities for their very survival and so they have become more vulnerable. The developed nations are exploiting the resources-rich 'underdeveloped' ones and circumstances are created so that they cannot refuse to provide these much needed resources at substantially lower prices. So the disparity at the level of the standard of living is increasing manifold. However the pedestal assigned to nature varies both textually and intellectually, given the human connect it shared with men during the course of literal evolution. Wordsworth was the poet and priest of nature in the strict spiritual term whereas for Keats was a 'thing of beauty (was) joy forever' and it was a mystic entity for Blake. Now that the material and the physical has taken precedence over solace and peace that nature imparted, the ruthless spread of material and industrial entities on mother earth has thrown the cultural and social dimensions into political discourse.

The litterateurs and the philosophers have always been the most sensitive ones to react to the crisis faced by humanity. This crisis has also found a fair representation in the works of the contemporary writers. Ecocriticism has emerged as a branch of criticism that brings the environmental issues to the fore. It researches the association between literature and environment. 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 and 1970s, yet joint, integrated efforts started with the publication of *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell, both published in 1990s and with the unswerving efforts of Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). Rueckert, the pioneer in the field of ecocriticism, says ecocriticism is "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). It is a soil centric move towards to literary studies. Human culture has reciprocal relationship with the material world. Ecocriticism plays an important role in empowering the world ecological vision. Environmental problems can be solved only when a serious deliberation about them takes place.

Literature through the ages has impressed upon common masses to study environment in its totality by bringing together the bifurcations laid down by scientists and the laymen. To comprehend the vast multitude of ecocriticism, it would be naïve, if not foolish, to try separate the physical to spiritual or the practical to theoretical. This is a chain of living beings-humankind with like affinities. 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. An attempt to modify the concept of nature from "mainstream assumption that the natural world be seen primarily as a resource for human beings, whether economically or socially"(Clark, 2) to "the material and cultural bases of modern society" (Clark, 2) is made by the ecocritics. They try to study and represent how this affiliation of nature and society has been represented by the writers in their works.

Ecocritics try to stimulate intelligentsia to deliberate over the issue of interconnection of natural, social and material worlds, we all live in, where issues of race, hierarchy and gender inevitably overlap in multifaceted and versatile ways with issues of natural resource exploitation and conservation. They explore human rejoinder to the environmental exploitative agents as expressed in any literary writing of any genre. Ecocritics are concerned with depiction of nature in a piece of writing or if nature has an effective role in the development of the story line or if it is making any contribution to the universal ecology.

Estok argues that ecocriticism is more than "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" (16-17)

Intellectually eco-criticism tries to create an umbrella genre of ecology related disciplines. It attempts to bring environmental matters not to study but as the study itself. It includes stratification analysis in all relative fields; be it social or economic or ethnic or country wise. Study of all these variants would then include and provide a complete time span that impacted the course of ecocritical studies and then got themselves impacted by cultural, social, religious and natural environment and how in turn social and ecological studies together help answer the questions in the wake of stated conflicts. There is an ever-changing relationship of science and literature, since science and literature are parallel lines, given the imaginative accuracy to understand life through signs, messages, codes, directions, information and symbols or even translations would ask for reading between the lines. The scientists like William Howarth have reservations to arrive at specifics. He states "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." (76-77)

Modern writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have been leading a crusade of their own by making prediction 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. While writing about her motherland she can add a foreigner's perspective to the native's outlook. The diasporic community is at an advantage to compare both the worlds and this gives rise to concerns about the depleting ecological resources and resultant social struggles in their native land. This study is an attempt to study Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fiction from the perspective of ecocriticism. Glotfelty asserts, "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."(xxv) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings emerge as environmentally cognizant texts proficient in themes and metaphors of nature that serve the purpose of illustrating her themes.

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; 'nature' is regarded as inferior to 'culture'. Ecofeminists trust that the ascendancy over women and nature is essentially correlated and that efforts to salvage environment are therefore essential. The endeavours made to evaluate and in turn improve the state of one of these subalterns automatically affect others positively. The works of writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni play a decisive role in helping to decipher the cultural construct of the alienated communities where nature's agony sounds more distressing than anywhere else does.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's writings emerge as environmentally viable documentation because of its ecologically sensitive texts abounding in images/metaphors of nature that serve the purpose of illustrating her themes. Nature in all of her writings remains stronger than man is. It asserts its ascendancy due to physical force and by controlling man through natural calamities like famine, drought, flood, earthquake etc. Man's life and nature goes without saying are so interlinked that it is not possible for human beings to separate themselves from its positive/negative influence. The effect of one such calamity on the humanity can be seen in *One Amazing Thing*. The earth quake is not merely a symbol or incident; it is the very soul that sustains of the book. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni manages to craft some of the worst natural tragedies into memorable, haunting stories of human connection as misery has only are language across cultural barriers.

As a response to constant contact with hegemonic cultures and disillusioned by racism and 'unofficial glass ceiling' and in an attempt to conserve their identities, Indians have constructed phantom- Indian identity. The women are saddled with the responsibility of maintaining cultural purity. The Indian woman is expected to be accountable for maintaining this Indian home faithful to its ancestral customs and traditions in the diaspora by remaining true to her Indian womanhood. In an attempt to resist the immersion in the host community, they have

created ‘cultural islands’. Creolized versions of their native cultural practices come into vogue. As a result, more ruthless patriarchal system is adopted by the diasporic community. “Life for women in diaspora can be doubly painful---struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies.” (Clifford 259)

The works of prolific writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni play a very vital role in deciphering the cultural assemble of the alienated communities where the nature’s agony sounds more poignant than other places. She 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. Divakaruni in particular investigates the women related problems in her writings. The male characters have mostly only a tangential existence. The legacies and skills are passed on from mothers to the daughters and there is a strong affinity and camaraderie amongst women. The trajectories of immigrant dream are explored by them

Divakaruni’s fiction deals with the ordeal of displacement through strategies using natural imagery to interpret, acclimatize and ultimately retrieve the American Dream for the South Asian American community, observed from a gender-informed perspective. Her writings underscore and scrutinize the interconnections between the status of women and the status of non-human nature. Nostalgia for homeland is best expressed by women in the form of memories of homeland’s flora and fauna. Mira in *The Blooming Season for Cacti* is totally caught up in the marshes of memories of the Bombay riots that killed her mother and scarred her soul forever, but it is the image of the budding cactus flower that unties the knot in Mira’s heart. She feels at peace with the present and finds strength to move on when she reads the poem:

In the deserts of my heart

You, cactus flower

blooming without thorn. (Divakaruni, Unknown 205)

Ruchira in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* paints the Kalpa Taru, “the tree with its multicoloured jewel leaves, its branches filled with silky birds...the wish-fulfilling tree” (Divakaruni, *Unknown* 226) as an expression of her desires from life. She is large-hearted enough to add the illegitimate child of her husband in the tree of her family.

Nature mirrors the internal mayhem of the characters in the works of diasporic writers. It plays a very conciliatory role. Nostalgic memory of the native flora and fauna gives the native flavor to their writings. Their acquaintance with the natural elements of both the worlds gives them an extensive range of metaphors to articulate their feelings and ideas. Nature resonate the characters’ conflict and suggests and supports their resolution as well.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's distinctive position as being both an American and an Indian gives her ecocritical outlook a bigger podium. Where the Indian locales and metaphors give a feeling of intimacy and familiarity to the South Asian reader they prove exotically ethnic to the American reader. In the diaspora, the nation of origin incarnates itself as a traditional identity and implicates the individual in a ornamental relationship with 'Indianness', a fossilized national identity that is both a ghost and moral force and it becomes a proxy for relations which seem to have been 'lived'. To some extent, they are more Indian than Indians in India are. As a result, these diasporic writers' vision of the native land's nature is also exoticised, but it synchronizes both the worlds. Divakaruni tries to tread the earth cautiously as she is 'a historian of sorts', intimately to pay heed to its impulse, design, intricacy and give them shape to bring out her themes and issues more effectively.

Problems of human beings synchronize with the ecological problems. When Sudha and Anju are grappling to take reins of their lives in their hands, nature, both native and host is struggling against the destructive forces, "On Año Nuevo beach, a weaner seal turns its face toward Alaska, considering its first ocean journey. In Sunderbans, the last of the cheetahs balance on mangrove branches. Somewhere machines are cutting thousand-year-old trees. Somewhere a leaking pipeline spews crude oil into the sea... The earth's curvature is like a smile. The old man sings, O rain, come, I've been waiting for you so long."(Divakaruni, *Vine* 372-373)

Hierarchy and codification of laws were supposed to endorse the natural phenomenon. Ruether argues "As this system of domination is shaped socially, ideological tools were constructed to ratify it as a reflection of the "nature of things" and the "will of God/the gods". Law codes were developed to define these relations of power of dominant men over women, slaves, animals and land as property. These law codes are depicted as handed down to an inspired lawgiver by God/the gods. Creation stories were spun out to depict this hierarchical social order as itself a reflection of the cosmic order" (23)

In the *The Conch Bearer* Juvenile Fiction Trilogy it is the children and specifically Nisha who can tune to the rhythms of natural/conjurer's instinctively. But Nisha being a girl does not have the same rights and duties even when she proves her worth time and again. Nisha's faith, understanding of the magic and dedication to duty is far greater than the dilly-dallying Anand. She is the one who recognizes mongoose to be Abhaydatta. Anand does not want her to accompany him on the trip to bring the conch back to 'life' i.e. the silver valley because it is "Too dangerous for a girl."(Divakaruni, *Conch* 57) She goes only in the capacity of Anand's travel companion and best friend not as a magician. The elders of the Silver Valley, a completely men's space, have to premeditate for a long time before allowing Nisha to be a part of the 'Brotherhood'. Finally she is given a go ahead to be a part of the brotherhood or "Brother-and Sisterhood" (Divakaruni, *Shadowland* 232) as she calls it but she has to live at the periphery of the valley, a trainee attached to "increasingly strict" (Divakaruni, *Shadowland* 7) Mother Amita. It gives a sense that Nisha is seen more as a temptress than a learner. She is not permitted to "go

anywhere by herself” (Divakaruni, *Shadowland* 7). The patriarchal constraints are very much regnant even in the seraph, unspoiled Silver Valley.

Again, in the story *Clothes*, this stereotypical thinking of society is displayed by the treatment of widow and expectations of the society from her. Nature has very embalming effect on diasporic women riddled with the demands of old and new patriarchies. A recent widow, Sumita, in the story *Clothes*, finds consolation and strength to face the crisis in the reminiscence of the calming water of women’s lake in her village during the worst phase of her life. (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 17) The memory of the village lake and the imagery of doves are integral to her life. The anxiety of bride-viewing for a marriage with a man from abroad is washed away with a bath in the village lake. “The water of the women’s lake laps against my breasts, cool, calming. I can feel it beginning to wash the hot nervousness away from my body.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 17). She gets married in a foreign land where alcohol “is a part of their culture, not considered immoral.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 21). While Sumita is excited about new land and is eager to explore new culture, she is forced to live in a mini-India in a flat with her in-laws “where (she) must cover her head with the edge of Japan nylon sari and serve tea to old women who come to visit Mother Sen...stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 24) The clash between the host and native cultures hits the women hardest. She has the onus of maintaining cultural purity. Her husband’s murder turns her life topsy-turvy. She is expected to play the role of a docile Indian widow but again a memory of near drowning experience in the village lake. She had gone to the lake for a bath and while floating to the middle of lake impulsively she “curled (her) body inward, tight as a fist, and felt it start to sink. The sun grew pale and shapeless; the water, suddenly cold, licked at the insides of my ears in welcome...the desperate flailing of arms and legs as I fought my way upwards; the press of the water on me, heavy as terror; the wild animal trapped inside my chest, clawing at my lungs. The day returning to me as searing air, the way I drew it in, in, in, as though I would never have enough of it” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 32-33) That memory of desperate, successful attempts comes to her rescue and gives her the impetus to face the challenge of immersion in America to survive readies her “arguments of the coming weeks, the remonstrations.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 33) Finally rather than being a “Dove with cut off wings” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 33) she decides to resist ethno-cultural pigeonholing and soar in unknown skies without knowing what future held in store for her. The neon Budweiser emblem winking on-off is a “risky invitation” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 33) to Great America, “the roller coaster” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 25)

Jayanti, in the story *Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs* is very eager to explore America. The ladies of her family had always lived a happy, relaxed sheltered life while they “drink tea and chew on betel leaves and laugh loud enough to scare away the *ghu-ghu* birds sleeping under the eaves.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 37) It is in sharp contrast to “the desperate *whee-whee* of a siren,” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 44) heard in the flat of Uncle Bikram and Aunt Pratima in Chicago. Living in post 9/11 America, they have lost everything to the racial hatred. They are

living in a state of perpetual fear in an apartment with “dingy walls hung with prints of landscapes, cattle standing under droopy weepy willows looking vaguely bored.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 41) representing the state of the mind of its inhabitants. Sequestered in a dingy flat in inhospitable locality Aunt remembers her days in her native village in India. “In the village before marriage I was always walking everywhere-it was so nice, the fresh air, the sky, the ponds with lotus flowers, the dogs and goats and chickens all around. Of course, here we cannot be expecting such country things.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 47) The contrast brings out the poignancy of the circumstances to the fore. “Jayanti Ganguli, daughter of the Bhavanipur Gangulis” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 51) is bad-mouthed as a ‘nigger’ and slush is thrown at her. The racial intolerance mars their personal lives as well as Uncle Bikram seeing their slush splattered faces flies into a rage and takes it out on the Aunt. Having lost everything he is a disillusioned, disgruntled immigrant, who raves, “This damn country, like a dian, a witch- it pretends to give and then snatches everything back.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 54) But despite this unpleasant experience Jyanti does not lose hope. The silver snowflakes fill her with optimism despite adverse circumstances at present. “The snow has covered the dirty cement pavement, the sad warped shingles of the rooftops, has softened forgivingly, the rough noisy edges of things...When I finally look down, I notice that the snow has covered my own hands so they are no longer brown but white, white, white.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 55-56) Snow breaks down the barriers of colour of the skin and other racial differences and brings home the reality that cultural heterogeneity may cause some problems but “beauty and pain should be part of each other.” (Divakaruni, *Arranged* 56) She is ready for immersion in the host country despite all problems she may face.

The recent fiction writers have tried to utilize pragmatist and fictional stratagems to bring to the light the relationship of nature with culture. Susan Strehle asserts, “They form a challenging new fiction that is based on the awareness of interpretation as an interactive process” (5). Divakaruni through her magic realist texts deliberates this relationship highlighting the conflicts and possibility of this confrontation leading to an austere future. As a feminist/ecological exposition, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literature is a statement as to how right the way through the olden times, men has deemed earth and women as their ownership and property. The patriarchal society kept on obliterating natural resources for their own advantage. Likewise, they always undervalue women by reducing them to mere sexual and physical objects. However charming and helpful they maybe, women and Mother Earth, remain an invariably victim of male dominated society.

Biehl argues, “There is no doubt that women's biology has long been seen as inferior to men's and that this alleged inferiority was long used as justification for women's exclusion from full participation in social life.”(10) In the story ‘The Bats’ (*Arranged Marriage*) the author's mother's quandary is parallel to the bats that are exterminated by the grandfather. They keep on returning without realizing that they will be poisoned in the mango orchard. Though away from the claustrophobic “smoke-streaked apartment buildings of Calcutta” (Divakaruni *Arranged*, 4)

the pastoral village of Gopalpur has a palliative effect on the mother and the daughter “where there were fields and fields of green so bright” that when she shut her eyes “the color pushed inside my lids” (Divakaruni *Arranged*, 4). The narrator’s complete amalgamation with nature demonstrates the ecofeminist principle of ‘interconnectedness’

Ecofeminists are mainly interested in structural outcomes of asymmetrical valuation of gender dualism: ‘masculine-reason-light-order-culture’ versus ‘feminine-emotion-dark-chaos-nature’. These patriarchal representations are ensnared in social establishments in a hegemonic way. In view of all these patriarchal dualities they demand a revised appraisal of the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. And further, the dualistic hierarchy of white/non-white forms the next step of this paradigm, a vital stage for diasporic writers. Any of the dualisms in society’s structure validates patriarchy and causes conservation crisis. Therefore, all dualisms and binary antagonistic forms must be disassembled. Domination of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined in totality or neither can be tackled entirely. The voices and mistreatment of women on the cultural islands created by Diasporic community, muffled by the power dynamics of patriarchal systems, find empathetic alliance with nature. Classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism and speciesism are all correlated. By reconceptualising systems of patriarchy in various cultural communities, ecofeminism expands the range of the cultural and environmental critique and integrates apparently incongruent but fundamentally associated elements.

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