

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

**VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

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**Feminist Enterprise Entwined with the Ecological Perspectives: A Critical Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Mythological Fiction with Special Reference to *The Forest of Enchantments***

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15316038>

**Article History:** Submitted-30/03/2025, Revised-12/04/2025, Accepted-17/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

**Abstract:**

Women and Nature are perceived as entwined entities within the ambit of mythology, literature, and religion owing to their association with fertility, creation and values of nurturing and caring. It is pertinent that the world will go bereft of human existence in the absence of the duo. Man has still adopted an unvaried attitude of oppression and subjugation towards both. Countless creative writers and critics of literature have brought this issue of exploitation explicitly to the forefront while depicting the nexus existing between these two. Contemporary Indian writer, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, too, depicts women's profound connection with the natural world in her fictional endeavor *The Forest of Enchantments*. In this work, she portrays the protagonist Sita's affinity with the natural world. Divakaruni weaves together quite beautifully the themes of feminism and ecology in this work as nature mirrors women's

exploitation, prowess, and resilience emphatically. The research work seeks to explore Divakaruni's mythological fiction, specifically, *The Forest of Enchantments*, using the eco-feminist lens to unveil the oppression of women as well as the exploitation of the natural environment while highlighting the portrayal of Sita and the representation of nature as depicted by Divakaruni in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

**Keywords: Women, Nature, Exploitation, Mythology, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.**

### **Introduction:**

Nature has always been an important aspect of man's life. The reading of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and their retellings testifies to the fact that nature has sustained humanity on the Earth. Nature has provided inhabitation and shelter to humans. Draupadi and the Pandavas dwelt in the forests at diverse stages of their lives and again traversed the forest towards the end of their lives to attain salvation. Ram, Sita and Lakshmana, the trio from the *Ramayana*, lived in many forests during their period of exile. They made the soothing lap of mother-nature their abode during this period. Despite providing for all the needs of man, nature has been exploited and devastated by man just like the woman has been oppressed. Eco-feminism has emerged as a theoretical movement against this oppression and exploitation of women and nature by the patriarchal society. It perceives environmental issues using the lens of gender (Foss et al. 11).

### **Eco-feminism:**

Mary Mellor opines that the Eco-feminist movement perceives a connection between the exploitation of the natural world and women while bringing together the elements of the feminist movement and the green movements (8). It sees connections between how women, the

underclass, and people of colour are treated on the one hand and how the non-human environment is dealt with on the other hand (Warren xi). The term eco-feminism, coined in 1974, may appear a novel one, yet the underlying pulse inherent in it, has always driven women to save their communities and their livelihoods (Salleh x).

The Chipko movement of the 1970's, that ostensibly stressed on saving trees and indigenous forests, is an example of the women-nature associations. In this movement, some women of northern India stepped forward to hug trees in order to stop the loggers attempting to fell trees down. (Warrens 11). It was a nonviolent movement, led and initiated by women complaining about the commercial felling of the trees and the replacement of the indigenous forests by the monoculture plantation of the teak and eucalyptus trees. The movement saved a watershed of approximately 12,000 square kilometers (Warren 11). Since, the treatment met out by the objects of nature, trees, water, and animals helps one understand the plight and status of women cross-culturally, all these are considered feminist issues according to the eco-feminists. They believe that anything that helps understand the subordination or oppression of women is a feminist issue (Warren 10).

### **Objectives:**

The present research aims to provide a brief overview of *The Palace of Illusions* while intensely scrutinizing the work *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The research work aims to highlight the nexus existing between women and nature. The research emphasizes on the critical analysis of Sita's portrayal and her vital bond with nature. The research aims to highlight man's subjugation of women and his stoicism towards nature as depicted in the novel

*The Forest of Enchantments*. To achieve this objective, the work is analyzed by applying the eco-feminist lens.

### **Literature Review:**

Karen J. Warren's pioneering work *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* renders a critical scrutiny of eco-feminism from diverse cross-cultural as well as multidisciplinary point of views. It exhibits the highlights and challenges of this movement. The work discusses real-life concerns motivating the event as a grassroots movement initiated by women. The work presents various scholastic works from diverse academic and vocational fields.

Mary Mellor asserts in *Feminism and Ecology* (1997) that eco-feminism has developed a distinctive perspective on human society's association with the natural world (11). It accentuates on women's exceptional appreciation of the natural surroundings.

Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies's collaborative work *Ecofeminism* evinces the masses' energy of this movement around the world. It exposes the ideology of catch-up growth of twentieth century and underlines women's expertise in safeguarding sustainable local economies.

Andree Collard and Joyce Contrucci have foregrounded man's exploitation of women, animals and the natural world in the work *Rape of the Wild* (1989).

Geeta Chandran and others assert in their research paper "Re-imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment*" that Sita, a woman, draws her strength from nature while she is in the solitude of the forest. The paper highlights Sita's relationship with nature and the natural environment. Nature emerges as a source of empowerment to this woman.

### **The Nexus between Women and Nature in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, a feminist retelling of Mahabharata, depicting the grand story from Draupadi's viewpoint, resonates with an eco-feminist worldview since it upholds the rights of women and appears as a critique of war and environmental destruction. Nature plays quite a pivotal role in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, as Draupadi, along with her husbands, stayed mostly in the forests during the exile. Draupadi's association with nature is a clear reflection of women's association with natural environment.

Draupadi had a fascination for the natural environment since childhood. She used to feel trapped in her father's house that had narrow windows, walls with thick grey slabs and no trees or flowers at all (Divakaruni, *Palace* 6). Draupadi always wished for a place that would beam with the natural exuberance, echoing with the birds' songs (7). However, when this longed-for home got constructed, it reflected the Pandava brothers' masculine desire of subduing and substituting nature with culture. The Pandavas set the entire forest on fire to build a magnificent palace for them. While performing this callous act, they paid no heed to the well-being of the wildlife. The entire flora and fauna of the jungle had to suffer as a consequence of this inhuman deed of the humans. Countless animals were either burnt alive or were forced to displace concomitant to this act.

The entire Khandav forest resounded with the cries of wild animals (141) yet, the Pandava brothers were deaf to their pathetic cries. They were also blinded by their masculine ego to notice or see the sufferings of these creatures. Only women such as Draupadi were concerned about the well-being of these creatures and were anguished over this ruthless slaughter. Andree

Collard asserts in *Rape of the Wild* that women recognize the plight of animals because women also fathom variety of oppressions like them (96).

Draupadi's humiliation by the men of the Kaurava clan exemplifies the destruction wrought by the misogynist acts of the male-dominated society that exploits not only women but also the environment. The entire race of warriors was destroyed in Kurukshetra, and devastation lingered on the natural world as it got transformed into a desolated place. The destruction was a result of the humiliation done to a woman in the court full of men. The novel *The Palace of Illusions*, thus, highlights the strong bond existing between women and nature. It points to the analogies existing between women's oppression and the exploitation of the non-human environment.

#### **The Nexus between Women and Nature in Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*:**

Nature exemplified by the forest mentioned in the title provides refuge as well as opportunity for the personal growth to Divakaruni's protagonist in this novel. Forest, the place of exile, becomes the metaphorical place of the female protagonist's liberation, transformation and self-discovery as she is away from the constraints of the patriarchal structures of society. While in the forest, she confronts her doubts, her fears and redefines her worth and identity. Nature, hence, provides not only the backdrop to the novel, but shapes the narrative also.

Sita's voice in this work represents the 'muted' female characters along with the voiceless green environment. The novel explores her ability to surmount various challenges with resilience by dint of her special bond with nature. Sita's erudite outlook on events and her ethereal bond with nature "raises the question of stoicism in men" while investigating "their lack

of humility towards their natural environment” (Rajbongshi 66). She emerges as a towering female character who is an eco-centric torchbearer of marginalized humans and non-human environment. Her relationship with the natural environment infuses the spirit of empowerment that enables her to speak for all other women and undermined non-human environment around her. Divakaruni has, thus, championed in creating a more liberal and modern version of the Indian mythological women (Chandran et al. 62).

There is a pertinent connection between women and nature in Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*. The stoic male characters, on the other hand, fail readily to form a flourishing association with their green environment. Their masculine stoicism eventually leads to a formidable war that further devastates the serene natural environment (Rajbongshi 66). The ethereal bond existing between women and nature can explicitly be represented through Sita, the daughter of Earth, who strove for the conservation of nature as well as for the betterment of women.

The eloquent concern for deep ecology is reflected explicitly in Sita’s character. Sita maintains the grand biophilic tradition of life in her life. When circumstances force her to choose between palace and forest, she decides to forsake her materialistic life of the palace in favor of a sustainable life in forest. Vayu Naidu asserts in *Sita’s Ascent* that Sita triumphs in the wilderness and is rarely seen in the safe interiors of palaces (174). She holds deep reverence towards nature, and her lifelong bond with nature reaches its pinnacle during her stay in the forest. She feels more content with her life in the forest than in the conforming life of the palace. Her “deep ecological” consideration of the world around lets nature voice its sorrow distinctly, whereas the



“shallow ecological” outlook of the male characters creates a colossal fissure between nature and man.

*The Forest of Enchantments* chronicles Sita's life unfolding from Earth and integrating back to it. It showcases Sita's sincere love and understanding about nature and also depicts how nature reciprocates to her affection. Merry Mellor argues in *Feminism and Ecology* that women have a greater understanding and appreciation of their relationship to the natural world (9). Sita, too, possesses special affinity with nature and this association supplies a strange earthly appeal to her character. Her innate disposition to be in constant proximity of nature, her passion towards plants, her exigency to heal, protect and nurture depict her biophilic persona and renders space for ecological discussion.

Sita's empathetic nature becomes apparent by her actions. She is deemed as “the earth-goddess herself, appeared straight out of the ground just to bless” (Divakaruni Forest 5). She treats humans and non-humans alike. The way she examines and treats the sick people in the healing house, she treats the ailing plants, too. Although a princess, Sita is the overseer of the arbours in the palace. She strokes leaves soothingly, digs around the plant roots and breathes prayers for plants (5). Sita feels compassionate about the non-human environment, and her bond with nature is quite ethereal. She compares the damage done to the flora and fauna as similar to committing murder. Here, Sita's views resonate Mellor's views. Mellor believes that humanity relies on the natural world and because these two are interconnected (9) we should never damage the natural environment.

Sita was conscious of the adverse impact of human actions on the Mother Nature. Consequently, she championed the causes of environmental protection. While on her way to

Ayodhya after marriage to Rama, Sita was infuriated at the callous acts of the king's soldiers who were frightening the wildlife and "flanked both sides of the road, stomping and shouting, slashing back the undergrowth and lopping off branches and vines, even those that didn't intrude" (55). In extreme wrath at the soldiers' ruthless acts, Sita remarked that the forest was the home of the wildlife, and the humans were merely the visitors who should not cause them the needless pain (56). Sita, thus, vocalizes the misery of the non-human environment and caters to an eco-centric view of the world while criticizing anthropogenic human activities.

Ram seemed baffled at Sita's deep ecological concern for non-human nature and considered this a typical womanly trait to be so compassionate. He told Sita that she was very tender-hearted. Being a woman it was pretty expected from her (56). Immensely appalled by Ram's notions about nature, Sita wanted to ask him if it was not important for a king to empathize with his subjects as women feel the pain of others and whether it was not the duty of the king to protect the birds, animals and trees of his realm (56)?

The fact that women not only empathize with other humans but also with nature and all its objects, is evidently noted in the novel. On the contrary, the stoic side of masculinity that is inherent in most of the male characters is visible in Ram and Lakshman's apathetic behaviour and shallow relationship with the natural environment. The misogynist undertone of the male characters finds full expression in *The Forest of Enchantment* as the female characters suffer severely due to the patriarchal structure. In addition to women, the natural world including the forest and the tribes dwelling in it were also the victims of this patriarchal structure. In the forest, Ram and Lakshman are seen constantly planning with the Rishis to rid the forest of the asuras- the tribal people living in the forest. Surpanakha, an asura, is humiliated by the brothers. The

face of this forest dweller is disfigured by the men of the civilized society. Her humiliation holds a metaphorical stamp of the reality faced by women and nature at the hands of humans.

Sita, too, falls a victim, like Surpanakha, to an unjust society that pays no heed to women's longings. Sita's yearning to be a mother and nurture her child was reflected in her desire to nurture the captivating deer she saw in the forest. The apathetic male, Ravana, takes advantage of Sita's motherly instincts, abducts her and carries her to Lanka on the pretext of asking for alms in the disguise of a holy sage. However, Sita, despite her captivity in Lanka, maintained a deep ecological concern. She felt empathetic for the world around her and it reciprocated her feelings. Sita developed a pleasant cordiality between her and the Ashoka tree, under which she slept. She used to clear the piled up dead leaves around it. She used to sleep by placing her "palms against its trunk to draw in comfort" (187). However, Sita did all this very secretly. She was afraid that if the guards came to know how much she cared about the tree, then they would harm the tree just to cause her pain (187).

Pertaining to her actions and beliefs, Sita appears as the proponent of the biophilic relationship with nature. The tenets of ecology are explicitly visible in her gestures as she transmits knowledge of the plants to her sons in an anticipation of maintaining a positive equipoise between nature and humans. Owing to Sita's teachings, her sons Luv and Kush evince deep reverence for nature and the environment. Such actions propagate the idea that any fundamental change is possible only when humans acknowledge their responsibilities of ushering in change for better. The goal of maintaining earth a sustainable place can only be attained if humans move out of their human-centric viewpoints and adhere to the biophilic tendencies.

## Conclusion:

Divakaruni provides ample space for the ecological and feminist interpretations of the text through her fictional works and highlights the strong bond women share with nature. Her female protagonists lend a voice to the voiceless communities and the nonhuman environment. Draupadi had a strong bond with nature and nature emerges as a savior during her distress. Sita, too, emerges as the persona of people possessing profound affection towards nature and appears to be in the direct antithesis of stoicism evinced by men around her. Sita's proximity to nature promotes an eco-centric worldview that advocates forming a better rapport with nature and the surrounding environment to attain a better and sustainable life. She resonates the deep ecological ideology and advocates the need for a sustainable future through her actions and her teachings to her sons.

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