



Reweaving the Epic: Ecocritical Perspectives in *The Palace of illusions*

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ABSTRACT

The concern towards the environment and nature is the need of the time. Since ancient times human life and their exploitation towards nature have existed. The literature of contemporary times tries to reiterate the need of conservation of nature through their writings. Our ancient Indian culture and tradition throws light upon Vedic philosophies that ensures balance of human life with the development and economic growth without causing havoc to the environment. The need for world ecological vision is very important to understand the intrinsic values of nature and to preserve them for the future. The retelling of the great Indian epic The Mahabharata, by Chitra Banerjee in her book *The Palace of Illusions* envisions the effects of man's egoistic approach towards both humankind and nature. The book throws insight on the effects of war and the destruction caused by man to nature. The anthropocentric attitude of man has resulted in the subjugation of mankind especially women and nature are highlighted in the novel. The study of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi gives a different approach in understanding man's egocentric attitude towards ecology. The study gives a scope to reread the text from man's egocentric view to ecocentric view of nature.

Key Words

Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Egocentrism, Vedic philosophy, Indian culture.

Analysis:

The term ecocriticism was coined by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". This ecocritical approach in literature has given a new scope of reading and analysing the literary work of writers and poets in the context of environmental issues. The understanding of environment related issues in literature further helps to analyse in inter disciplinary perspectives like "eco poetics", "green studies" and "ecocritical literary criticism".

The paradigm shift of rereading literary work has resulted in reading a text for its inherent values. The focus is now shifted from aesthetics towards the social change and Divakaruni's *The Palace of illusions* serves as a consciousness of nature and man's relationship to nature. Man as a social being is highly dependent on the nature, but his approach towards nature and the woman are highly degrading. The novel throws insight on how man as an egocentric person brings destruction to nature, woman and the downtrodden through his actions. The development of humankind has created more complexities and has resulted in an overwhelming degradation of all facets of natural environment.

The reading of Divakaruni's novel, *The palace of illusions* in ecocritical lens gives scope to understand the importance of every being in the planet and their need for existence. The ecocritical theory helps us to understand the interconnections that exist between humankind and the nature. The novel brings forth the oppression and the degradation faced by both woman and nature throughout ages. It is clearly noted that woman and nature both are dominated by man and are expected to tolerate the oppression imposed on them. The text highlights upon the strong parallel oppressions faced by both the protagonist Draupadi and the nature.

Ecofeminism, as a branch of feminism studies the association between women and nature. The name Ecofeminism was coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. Ecofeminism adds both responsibility of human towards the environment and an awareness of the associations made between women and nature. It further emphasizes the ways both nature and women are treated by the patriarchal society. Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature.

The modern Ecofeminist movements in late 1970's and 1980's gives more importance to the ways in which feminism and environmentalism might be combined to promote respect for women and the natural world.

The long historical precedent of associating women with nature questions the oppressions faced by both the women and the nature. Both are depicted as inferior to man and they are noted as chaotic and they had to be controlled by man for their development. This arrangement is highly hierarchical as it grants more power to man and allows for the exploitation of women and nature.

King's 1987 article titled "What Is Ecofeminism?" that appeared in *The Nation* challenged all Americans to consider the ways in which their belief systems allow for the exploitative use of the earth and the further oppression of women. With the help of King's article, the concept of ecofeminism gained more scope. It is the belief system that plays a major role and the modern Ecofeminists not only raised voice against such oppression but they also tried to claim the right of every being to live their life on earth.

Divakaruni's novel, *The palace of illusions* claims androcentrism (male-centredness) as the true cause for the degradation of both women and nature. Androcentrism is seen from the traditional patriarchal society and this power wielding system is the major reason for the degradation of nature. The conventional patriarchal system that dominated women have now made nature as subservient and bend to the whims of the man-made society. Divakaruni brings in the androcentrism in the text, and highlights on the importance to save both women and nature in the man-centred society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-born American author, poet, and the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program. Her works are set both in India and in the United States. She focuses mainly on the experiences of South Asian immigrants in her works.

Divakaruni's works are largely set in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants, cross cultural problems, issues on identity and transnationalism. Her writings are centred on the voices of the subjugated and the stories are centred on voices of the female protagonist. The voices are not just the voice of the 'self' but they are the collective voice of the oppressed communities. The novel *The Palace of illusions* was published in the year 2008 and was considered a national best-seller for over a year in India. The novel presents to a time that is half history, half myth and wholly magical. The novel is also a re-telling of the great Indian epic *The Mahabharata* from the perspective of the female protagonist Draupadi.

As Divakaruni mentions the reason for bringing the female characters and their interpretations in the story, the early interpretations of the epic portrayed woman as a mere character to accept failures, but they are

given voices in Divakaruni's writings. For instance, Kunti, mother of the Pandavas had to dedicate her entire life to make her sons become the kings. Gandhari, mother of Duryodhana blindfolds herself at marriage as her husband is sightless. She had to abandon her power as a queen and serve all her life as a dutiful wife which was expected over the years as the woman's responsibility.

The most important character Draupadi, is portrayed as a unique female character to marry Pandavas and gets disrespected in the court of Duryodhana. The thoughts and the emotions of these women were not given representation in the epic, but Divakaruni has given voices to these women in her story as she mentions, "I will place a woman in the forefront of the action. I will uncover the story that lies invisible between the lines of the men's exploits". (XV)

The text as a modern re-telling of Mahabharata presents the relevance of the character Draupadi caught in the patriarchal system and this re-telling of stories serves to re frame the mythical past and addresses the contemporary issues of the society. The nomenclature of the chapters in the text namely fire, fish, river, lotus, lake, snow, owl and snake are the symbolic representations of elements of nature. The characters in the text and the nature are inseparable in its form. The study tries to analyse the novel from all such positive aspects namely in ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives.

The first chapter of the novel is titled as 'fire' from which Draupadi is born. Draupadi's birth marks the significance of her relationship with nature. She was not born as an ordinary child, her father king Drupad prayed for thirty days and performed rituals for his child. At first Dhristadyumna (brother of Draupadi) was born. He was welcomed by her father as well as everyone in the court wished that he would fulfil the wishes and vengeance of King Drupad. However, the birth of Draupadi was unexpected and it is mentioned by her Dhai Ma as:

"Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm" (4)

The birth of Draupadi was associated to nature as she was born from fire. Her life was destined to accept the shame and failure even as a new born child. The moment both Draupadi and her brother was raised from fire, her father raised her brother to show to his people in the kingdom. He did not even touch the hands of Draupadi and this shame of neglect is always felt by Draupadi. The first rejection by her father is mentioned by Draupadi as "I couldn't forgive him that initial rejection. Perhaps that was why, as I grew from a girl into a young woman, I didn't trust him completely." (6)

Draupadi as an independent girl always wished to be in association with the nature rather to stay inside the boundaries of the palace. For her the mother earth is the real home and the rest of worldly things were only mere illusions. Her palace of dreams had different elements of nature as she mentions:

“I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of colour and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies fluttering among jasmines, and in the midst of it- but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take. Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel-studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home.” (7)

The text is also the representation of physical war for power and Draupadi's struggle for herself. She endures both the brutal war and the domestic struggles all her life and tries to carve a place for herself in the male dominated world. Even as a daughter of a king, Draupadi was denied to get educated along with her brother. She was not treated equally with her brother. King Drupad criticised her as, “A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal!” (23)

The lessons that a girl had to learn was totally different and that was also framed by men. She was given lessons in singing, dancing and playing music. She was taught to draw, paint, sew and decorate the ground with age old designs during the festival times. These lessons of women did not interest Draupadi as she remarks, “My heart was not in such frivolities. With each lesson I felt the world of women tightening its noose around me. I had a destiny to fulfil.” (29) The destiny of Draupadi was not of an ordinary woman and she was ordained to change the course of history. Her responsibility as a kshatriya woman was imposed upon her by her father and her teacher. The tutor shot a comment at Draupadi imposing the responsibilities of a Kshatriya woman. As he comments,

“A Kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husband and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfil a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield.” (26)

The duty of a woman was thus decided by men and Draupadi could hardly accept such stereotypes and each day she slowly started to think less and less like women around her and moved to a world of solitude. She wanted to learn the lessons that conferred power as she believed that she will definitely create a history or rather change the course of history.

The anguish of neglect was always felt by Draupadi in the palace. Inside the palace she was alone without any friend and care from her mother and the place outside the palace was also desolate without any trees and floral beauty. Her isolation and loneliness were also felt in the land of Panchaal. In her life of isolation, she could get comfort only from her brother, Dhai Ma and the Lord Krishna. Krishna dispensed his kingly jewels and he mostly wore only a peacock feather in his hair. This peacock's feather is symbolic of Krishna's strong bond with nature. He called Draupadi as 'Krishnaa', which had two meanings: the dark one, or the one whose attraction can't be resisted. She was also referred by the sage as, 'Panchaali' (spirit of the land).

The name 'Panchaali' has close association with nature. Every day and night she meditated on her name and insisted everyone to call her by the name Panchaali. Princess Panchaali as she refers, "A name strong like the land, a name that knew how to endure." (42)

Her other companion was Sikhandi, who was born a woman and had transformed as a man. She was referred as a great warrior and Draupadi felt eager to see a woman who has turned into a mighty and dangerous warrior. The massive power that Sikhandi possessed was from the nature and her life of austerity blessed her with the power of a warrior. Her interaction with nature helped her in gaining strength from it. Sikhandi's life is stated as,

"For the last twelve years she's been in a forest somewhere, performing the strictest austerities- eating only leaves of the holy bel tree, standing neck deep in freezing water all winter, the kind of thing – so that now she's been turned into a great and dangerous warrior." (44)

Nature, acted as a mother, a guardian and nurtured Sikhandi to grow as a warrior. He indeed became the blessed child of nature. Sikhandi believed in Draupadi to help him in his revenge on Bheeshma (son of Ganga, Goddess of the sacred river). This happens unknowingly when Draupadi marries Arjuna in the swayamvar. Sikhandi also predicts the destiny of Draupadi, as he remarks, "You'll bring about the Great War where I'll meet Bheeshma and kill him." His face darkened. "But I should have begged your pardon instead for all humiliation you'll suffer before the war, and all the sorrow afterward." (52)

The word 'war' haunted Draupadi again and again and every prediction from Sikhandi to the sage and the sorceress mentioned about war. As Draupadi remarks, "There it was again: the Great War, the words like nails scraping my lungs. Hesitantly I said, "I was told I'd be the cause of the war." (65).

Finally, the wedding with Pandavas was also decided by Kunti. When Draupadi marries Arjun in Swayamvar she never thought her life would become more unpredictable. In her mysterious life it was nature as her only companion. A princess of royal birth had to leave all her worldly pleasures and live a life of an itinerant in the forest. She was further ordered by Kunti to marry all her sons, for she believed that nothing should separate her sons all their life. The only comfort that Draupadi could feel was in the lap of the nature. She looked as beautiful as nature and the agony she underwent was also parallel to nature. She felt agitated like an owl, which is awake the whole night. Her restlessness is similar to owl which is referred as, “plaintive call of owls, watching the moon drag itself across the small window” (109). Life of Draupadi was similar to nature and the misery and melancholy that she experienced was also felt in the cries of the animals in the forest.

Draupadi believed that she would bring a remarkable change in the history and throughout the text Draupadi struggles to bring a feminine sensibility in the male dominated world. She was not happy inside the walls of the palace she wanted to be free like nature and make her own decisions. However, both Draupadi and nature were curbed of their freedom. Even her marriage with Pandava brothers was not decided by Draupadi. She had to accept to the orders that was imposed on her. Veda Vyasa prompted his verdict for Draupadi to marry Pandavas. To maintain the sanctity and harmony of marriage Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct that stated,

“ Draupadi would be wife to each brother for a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively. During that year, the other brothers were to keep their eyes lowered when speaking to me. They were not to touch me, not even the tips of my fingers.” (120)

Vyasa has mentioned in the postscript that he would give Draupadi a boon to balance the marriage with Pandavas. Each year Draupadi would regain her chastity. This unconventional marriage was though mocked by people, Draupadi was convinced to accept it. She was exploited in the hands of men as she mentions,

“My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not.” (120)

Mythology and history are here questioned by Divakaruni as both Kunti and Draupadi were subjected to man’s conventions. Kunti had no opinions when she was impregnated by the Gods, similarly Draupadi could not refuse her marriage with Pandavas. The text gives paramount importance to the elements of nature and creates

eco consciousness to value the women and the nature equally. The importance of flora and fauna is highly emphasised by Draupadi as she renounces the material world and lives her life in the forest in the company of flora and fauna. The entire text extends its empathy to the subalterns including the nature, women and the downtrodden of the society.

The sacrifice of her dignity and the service to her mother-in-law and her husband was futile as she mentions about the ill treatment she received in Duryodhan's court. She believed that her husbands would do anything for her for the sake of love, but all that became a dream. She was shattered to see them love other things more than their love for her. As she mentions, "Their notions of honour, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering" (195) The priorities of Pandavas were many, but for Draupadi, priorities were her husbands. She was not sympathised in the moment of ill treatment, as she mentions, "A woman doesn't think that way. I would have thrown myself forward to save them if it had been in my power that day. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought" (195). The choice made by Pandavas completely crushed her and it changed something in her relationship with them in the future. The battle was not only with the enemies but it was also with oneself,

The loyalty that Pandavas showed towards their nation and towards one another was not shown to Panchaali. She was treated as mere property in the hands of her husbands. As she says,

"I am a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (190)

However, she was not even considered as a mere human. "The wife is the property of the husband, no less than a cow or a slave." (190). Panchaali, the queen of Indraprastha was forcefully turned out to be the winning prize to Duryodhana. Panchali's respect was completely shattered in the court of Duryodhan where he orders Dushasan to bring Panchaali to the court. Every man in the court was witnessing the crime but none fought to help Draupadi except Lord Krishna. Along with the loss of materialistic belongings of Pandavas Draupadi was ill treated by the men of the court. As Duryodhan mentions, "Why should Draupadi be treated any differently? Take her clothes, too." (192). Duryodhan did not stop with this but he further ordered Draupadi to "sit on his lap" and instructed Dushasan to disrobe Draupadi. As Draupadi struggles in the court,

“I clutched my sari in my fists- as though I could save myself with that futile gesture! The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me- I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time! Now they sat frozen as I struggled with Dushasan.” (193)

The miracle of Lord Krishna fetched her a piece of cloth that was extended into endless folds. In that defenceless state she makes a vow not to tie and comb her hair until the day she bathes in the blood of Kaurava brothers. She further curses that,

“All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day’s work. Your mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I’ve wept. This entire kingdom will become a charnel house.” (194)

The destruction that was brought upon did not stop with her, but it resulted in the war. During the life of exile, forest was made as home by Kaurava brothers and it resulted in the destruction of the homeland of birds and animals. Eco-criticism thus condemns this idea of anthropocentric attitude of human and their behaviour towards nature and its habitats. This activity of human thus affects the ecological balance.

The shift from human-centred to nature-centred system of values is the core of radicalism attributed to deep ecology. As Greg Gerrard mentions about Deep Ecology in the book *Ecocriticism* he states that,

“Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere, but even toward all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. Thus this attitude is intended to extend, for example, to such entities as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social systems considered in their own light.” (sessions 1995:270)

During the dreadful battle of Kurukshetra , both nature and life of women were equally destroyed. The battle was fought continuously for eighteen days and this war resulted in the lot of destruction to nature and society as a whole. The war resulted in loss of the lives of endless people and the entire land was bleeding. The war also had its disastrous annihilation on environment and the natural inhabitants. Draupadi mentions about the first day war as,

“ I saw the death throes of the innocent and the guilty, and both were equally terrible. In only a few hours, the ground turned red as though the skies had rained blood.” (266)

The war brought end to life of Bheeshma, Karna, Dhuryodhana and other warriors and the victory of war was the result of destruction of nature and its habitats. The effect was felt as Draupadi refers, “ Indeed, the skies

grew dark. The earth shook.” (202) The war is looked upon by Draupadi as, “ She who sows vengeance must reap its bloody fruit.” (306)

Vyasa thus writes about war:

“As the two flames coursed along the sky, oceans began to dry up and mountains to crumble. Men and beasts screamed their terror, for the fabric of the world was about to be ripped apart.” (307)

The war did not spare anyone and Vyasa felt sorry for the loss of lives in the war. Countless number of people were dying everyday in the war. As Vyasa instructed both Arjuna and Aswatthama to be aware of their responsibilities before using their ashtras, Arjuna obeyed, but Ashwatthama’s ashtras ended up in disaster.

The entire land became barren with the loss of innumerable lives as Eliot calls a wasteland. The war affected both the women of Hastinapur, who became widows with the death of their husbands and lost their family members. Similarly, the ecosystem was also destroyed. The women of Hastinapur were forced to a colourless and barren life which was similar to the land that had become barren and lost its fertility and its exuberance.

The final journey of Draupadi in Himalayas is the reflection of Draupadi’s longing to become one with nature. The journey was not easy and the path was highly dangerous to travel, but she could neither stop her journey nor could she stop appreciating the wild beauty of nature. She could feel nature speaking to her, “Today I couldn’t keep my eye off the peaks, the way the light slid and shimmered along them, turning them into different shades of gold as the day grew older.” (345) She felt as a free soul to leave behind the worldly things and to enter her palace of dreams, her palace of illusions.

The novel has thus portrayed the life of Draupadi parallel to nature around her. Through the novel, she has raised her concern towards nature and the need to preserve nature for the future. The historical story is the representation of anthropocentric attitude of man and through the characters Chitra Banerjee tries to emphasise upon the need of conservation of nature. The ego of man has resulted in the loss of nature and if this condition is not reversed, then mankind has to struggle for their survival. The novel thus emphasises the idea that nature can survive without mankind but it is mankind who cannot live without the nature therefore, it is important to preserve our ecology and preserve every species on earth.

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