

“Eco-Mythology and Environmental Justice in “*The Palace of Illusions*”: Draupadi’s Voice of Resistance”

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Abstract:

This paper explores Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) through the lens of eco-mythology and environmental justice. By retelling the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, the novel intertwines mythology, nature, and resistance to explore ecological degradation and social marginalization. Nature functions not merely as a setting but as a reflection of the struggles of the oppressed. The magical palace symbolizes human greed and the desire to dominate the natural world, while its destruction highlights the consequences of environmental exploitation and unequal power structures. Draupadi's close relationship with nature and her exile in the forest represent resilience, displacement, and the experiences of marginalized communities. The novel also critiques patriarchy and war by demonstrating the interconnected exploitation of women and the environment. Through an eco-critical perspective, this study argues that Divakaruni transforms Draupadi's story into a powerful metaphor for ecological resilience, contributing to postcolonial eco-critical discussions on environmental and social justice.

Keywords: *Eco-Mythology, environmental justice, marginalized, feminist eco-criticism, displacement.*

Introduction

Eco-mythology, as a cultural and literary paradigm, examines the relationship between mythology and ecological ideas, demonstrating how myths have reflected and addressed environmental issues. Traditionally used as providers of common wisdom, myths modify the human community's relationship with nature. These stories commonly shorten ecological knowledge, environmental degradation, and the weak relationship between humankind and nature, providing insights into how ancient cultures understood and transformed their environment. In literature, Eco-mythology serves as a filter by which we examine how mythological tales approach urgent ecological and social problems, especially in recent reinterpretations that retell these myths for current audiences.

Eco-mythology, as a literary and cultural framework, explores the connections between mythology and ecological themes, illustrating how ancient narratives reflect and respond to environmental concerns. Myths, which have historically served as sources of collective wisdom, adapt the relationship between human societies and the natural world. These narratives often compress ecological wisdom, environmental destruction, and the delicate balance between humanity and nature, offering insights into how ancient civilizations understood and interacted with their environment. In literature, eco-mythology functions as a lens through which we can analyze how mythological stories engage with pressing ecological and social issues, particularly in contemporary retellings that reinterpret these myths for modern audiences.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *"The Palace of Illusions"* (2008) provides a compelling case study for eco-mythological analysis, as it reimagines the Mahabharata through the voice of Draupadi, the enigmatic and influential queen of the Pandavas. By centering Draupadi's perspective, the novel not only challenges traditional patriarchal narratives but also engages deeply with themes of environmental justice, highlighting the exploitation of both women and nature under patriarchal and imperialistic structures. Draupadi's experiences, her interactions with the natural world, and the consequences of human ambition serve as powerful allegories for ecological and social struggles.

Environmental justice, a crucial concept in ecological discourse, has been extensively explored by scholars such as Rob Nixon (2011), who emphasizes the significance of fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of identity, in environmental policies and practices. This concept is not limited to contemporary discourse but extends into the realm of mythology and literature, where stories often serve as critiques of human exploitation of both nature and marginalized communities. In *"The Palace of Illusions"*, Divakaruni reinterprets ancient mythological themes to critique the consequences of human avarice, environmental degradation, and displacement, making Draupadi a poignant voice for resistance against both ecological and social injustices.

One of the most striking eco-mythological symbols in the novel is the grand palace built for the Pandavas. This palace, a masterpiece of illusion and magnificence, represents human ambition, control over nature, and the desire to manipulate the environment for power and prestige. Its eventual downfall, following the infamous game of dice, serves as a metaphor for the repercussions of unchecked greed, highlighting the impermanence of human domination

over nature. The destruction of the palace underscores the idea that attempts to overpower nature through artificial means ultimately lead to ruin a concept deeply resonant with contemporary environmental crises, where unsustainable exploitation of natural resources results in ecological disasters.

Draupadi’s exile in the forest further reinforces the novel’s engagement with environmental justice. Her displacement mirrors the forced displacement of marginalized communities who are often the first to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation. Vandana Shiva (1988) argues that “the marginalization of nature and women is rooted in the same patriarchal and colonial logic,” a notion that Divakaruni integrates into her retelling. Draupadi’s experiences in exile parallel the struggles of original and rural communities displaced due to deforestation, industrial expansion, and environmental exploitation. Through this parallel, the novel critiques the ways in which both nature and vulnerable populations are co modified and overlooked in the pursuit of power and wealth.

Feminist eco-criticism provides an essential framework for analyzing *The Palace of Illusions*, as it underscores the interconnectedness of gender oppression and ecological destruction. Scholars such as Greta Gaard (1993) argue that the degradation of nature is essentially linked to the suppression of women, both of which are consequences of patriarchal systems that prioritize domination and exploitation. Draupadi’s struggles—her humiliation, her forced exile, and her resilience serve as allegories for the exploitation of nature and the resilience of both women and the environment in the face of systemic oppression. Her voice, emerging as a symbol of disobedience, challenges both patriarchal overthrow and ecological destruction, reinforcing the idea that resistance against one form of oppression is inherently linked to resistance against the other.

Furthermore, Divakaruni’s retelling expands the eco-mythological discourse by portraying Draupadi as a figure deeply connected to nature. Throughout the novel, nature reflects her emotions and struggles, reinforcing the idea that the fates of women and the environment are intertwined. The lush gardens of Indraprastha, once vibrant under the Pandavas’ reign, become weak and lose their intensity following Draupadi’s humiliation, mirroring the way ecological degradation follows social injustice. Additionally, the forest during her exile serves as both a place of hardship and enlightenment, illustrating the dual role of nature as both a site of suffering and resistance. By emphasizing these connections, Divakaruni brings to light the deeply embedded ecological consciousness within mythological narratives.

By critically examining *The Palace of Illusions* through the dual lenses of eco-mythology and environmental justice, this study highlights how ancient myths continue to shape contemporary understandings of ecological crises and social struggles. Divakaruni’s retelling not only brings to light the ways in which mythology can be reinterpreted to address present-day concerns but also demonstrates literature’s role in fostering environmental consciousness and social awareness. The novel invites readers to reflect on the ways in which mythological narratives can serve as tools for critiquing environmental and gender injustices, ultimately advocating for a more harmonious and equitable relationship between humanity and the natural world.

“*The Palace of Illusions*” serves as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of eco-mythology. Through Draupadi’s journey, Divakaruni critiques the exploitation of nature and marginalized communities while simultaneously offering a vision of resilience and resistance. By drawing on eco-mythological themes, the novel bridges the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary ecological concerns, demonstrating that mythology can serve not only as a reflection of past values but also as a call to action for a more just and sustainable future. As environmental and social crises continue to escalate, such literary reinterpretations become

increasingly vital in fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between human society and the natural world.

Literature Review:

Eco-mythology, as a critical approach, examines the ecological dimensions within myths and their impact on human interactions with the natural world. Scholars such as William Rueckert and Cheryll Glotfelty have emphasized the importance of ecocriticism in understanding literature's engagement with nature. According to Glotfelty, literature does not simply reflect environmental concerns; it actively shapes cultural perceptions of the natural world" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xxi). This perspective is crucial in analyzing *The Palace of Illusions*, where Divakaruni reconfigures the *Mahabharata* to reflect ecological themes interwoven with Draupadi's experiences. Feminist eco-criticism expands upon this analysis by linking the subjugation of women with environmental degradation. Greta Gaard argues that "the oppression of women and nature stems from the same patriarchal structures that seek to dominate and exploit" (Gaard, 1993, p. 2). Draupadi's suffering in *The Palace of Illusions* aligns with this notion, as her voice resists both personal and environmental injustices. Vandana Shiva's concept of ecofeminism further strengthens this argument, stating that "women, as the primary nurturers of life, are closely connected to ecological sustainability, and their marginalization often coincides with environmental destruction" (Shiva, 1988, p. 4).

Environmental justice, another key framework for this study, highlights the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits among different social groups. Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is particularly relevant in understanding Draupadi's exile and displacement. Nixon defines slow violence as "a form of environmental degradation that occurs gradually and out of sight, disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalized" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Draupadi's forced exile mirrors this notion, as she becomes a symbol of both environmental and gendered displacement. While existing scholars have extensively analyzed *The Palace of Illusions* from feminist and mythological perspectives, there is limited research on its engagement with eco-mythology and environmental justice. Most studies focus on Draupadi's agency and the novel's feminist themes, overlooking its ecological dimensions. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how Divakaruni's reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata* critiques both patriarchal and ecological exploitation, positioning Draupadi as a voice of resistance.

Divakaruni imbues Draupadi with a deep connection to nature, often using the natural world as a mirror for her emotions and struggles. When describing her time in the Khandava forest, Draupadi remarks, "The trees seemed to whisper secrets to me, their gnarled fingers reaching out as though to offer comfort. I felt as if I belonged among them, a wanderer with no true home." (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 145). This passage underscores how Draupadi's exile parallels environmental displacement, with nature becoming both a refuge and a silent witness to human injustice. The palace at Indraprastha, built by the architect Maya, also embodies ecological themes. Its splendor, an illusion of permanence, represents humanity's attempt to control and dominate nature. Draupadi reflects on its ethereal beauty: "The walls shimmered like water, the floors seemed to float, and yet, beneath the illusion lay the weight of human greed." (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 98). The ultimate destruction of the palace serves as a cautionary metaphor for environmental degradation caused by unchecked ambition. Draupadi's humiliation in the Kauravas court further ties into ecofeminist discourse. As she is dragged into the assembly, she likens her fate to a dying forest: "Like a tree felled in its prime, I was stripped of dignity, my cries unheard in a world ruled by men." (Divakaruni, 2008, p.

210). This metaphor reinforces the parallel oppression of women and nature, suggesting that patriarchal violence against women is akin to ecological destruction.

Overall, Divakaruni's novel presents Draupadi as a voice of resistance, intertwining mythology, nature, and justice to challenge traditional narratives. By incorporating eco-mythology and environmental justice into the retelling of the *Mahabharata*, *The Palace of Illusions* provides a powerful critique of both human exploitation of the natural world and the marginalization of women.

Findings and Results:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* serves as a compelling example of eco-mythology, intertwining gender oppression with ecological exploitation. Through the character of Draupadi, the novel illustrates the deep connections between nature and femininity, drawing attention to the ways in which both are subjected to control, violence, and marginalization. The novel's environmental justice discourse is rooted in its depiction of nature as both a source of solace and a site of destruction, mirroring the protagonist's journey through oppression, resilience, and transformation. Throughout the novel, Divakaruni employs natural imagery to parallel Draupadi's emotions, using the environment as a living entity that interacts with and reflects her inner turmoil. This can be seen during her exile, where the forest becomes both a sanctuary and a symbol of displacement. Draupadi describes her surroundings with poignant detail. *“The trees seemed to whisper secrets to me, their gnarled fingers reaching out as though to offer comfort. I felt as if I belonged among them, a wanderer with no true home”* (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 145). Here, the trees embody both companionship and exile, reinforcing the connection between Draupadi's forced removal from her rightful place and the displacement of marginalized communities, particularly those affected by environmental destruction. The forest serves as a metaphor for nature's dual role in human lives both nurturing and indifferent, protective yet isolating.

The Pandavas' palace, a marvel of illusion and architectural grandeur, represents humanity's attempt to dominate and manipulate nature. However, its ultimate destruction serves as an allegory for the consequences of environmental exploitation. Draupadi's reflection on its beauty highlights this theme. *“The walls shimmered like water, the floors seemed to float, and yet, beneath the illusion lay the weight of human greed”* (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 98). The palace's downfall, fueled by envy and materialistic ambition, mirrors real-world environmental crises where unchecked greed and exploitation lead to ecological collapse. The novel suggests that human arrogance in controlling nature is ultimately self-destructive, aligning with contemporary environmental justice movements that critique unsustainable development and deforestation.

Draupadi's humiliation in the Kauravas court is one of the most powerful moments in the novel, and its metaphorical connection to environmental destruction is striking. She compares her suffering to the ravaging of nature *“Like a tree felled in its prime, I was stripped of dignity, my cries unheard in a world ruled by men”* (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 210). This passage aligns with feminist eco-criticism, which argues that the violence inflicted upon women and nature stems from the same patriarchal structures. Just as the earth is exploited without consent, Draupadi's body and dignity are subjected to brutal violation. The novel's portrayal of these parallel serves as a critique of systemic oppression, emphasizing the need for resistance and reclamation.

Despite her suffering, Draupadi emerges as a symbol of resilience, challenging both patriarchal norms and environmental degradation. Her assertion of strength reflects the regenerative power of nature. *“I would not let them break me, for I was the daughter of fire, and fire cannot be destroyed”* (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 175). This declaration underscores the

broad message of resistance against socio-environmental injustice. Like fire, which can destroy but also purify and regenerate, Draupadi represents the cyclical nature of resilience in both human and ecological terms. Her character embodies the hope that, despite destruction, renewal is always possible.

Divakaruni's retelling of the Mahabharata through Draupadi's eyes reinterprets mythological elements to emphasize environmental themes. The novel warns against the overexploitation of resources and the dire consequences of human greed. This is evident in Draupadi's reflection on the war's devastation: "*In our thirst for power, we had forgotten the earth that bore us, and now she would reclaim her due*" (Divakaruni, 2008, p. 320). Here, the novel equates the destruction wrought by war with environmental collapse, suggesting that unchecked ambition leads not only to human suffering but also to ecological ruin. The war's aftermath serves as an allegory for the present-day consequences of climate change, deforestation, and industrial expansion, reinforcing the necessity of sustainability and ethical stewardship of nature.

The Palace of Illusions contributes significantly to the discourse on eco-mythology and environmental justice by weaving together themes of gender, nature, and resistance. Through Draupadi's narrative, Divakaruni highlights the deep interconnections between the exploitation of women and the destruction of the environment, advocating for a more harmonious and equitable relationship with nature. The novel's reinterpretation of ancient myths serves as a powerful reminder that the struggles of the past continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of ecological and feminist concerns. Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* not only reimagines Draupadi's story but also offers a broader meditation on the pressing environmental and social issues of our time.

Comparative Analysis:

Divakaruni's narrative style in *The Palace of Illusions* is characterized by its lyrical prose and mythological richness. Her use of first-person narration allows readers to connect deeply with Draupadi's inner world, creating an intimate and empathetic portrayal of her struggles. Divakaruni's writing is imbued with poetic imagery and symbolism, particularly in her depiction of nature and elemental forces. Roy's narrative style, particularly in *The God of Small Things*, is marked by its experimental structure and nonlinear storytelling. Her use of fragmented timelines and stream-of-consciousness techniques reflects the complexity of her characters' experiences and the interconnectedness of past and present. Roy's prose is often described as lush and evocative, with a strong emphasis on sensory details and emotional depth. While Divakaruni's writing is more structured and mythologically grounded, Roy's is more fluid and politically charged.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Arundhati Roy are both powerful voices in contemporary literature, addressing themes of feminism, environmental justice, and social critique. While Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* uses eco-mythology to bridge ancient myths and contemporary concerns, Roy's works, such as "*The God of Small Things*" and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, are more rooted in the socio-political realities of modern India. Divakaruni's focus on mythological reinterpretation allows her to explore universal themes of justice and resistance, whereas Roy's engagement with real-world issues reflects her activism and commitment to social and environmental justice. Together, their works offer complementary perspectives on the interconnectedness of gender, ecology, and justice, highlighting the diverse ways in which literature can address pressing global issues.

Conclusion:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* stands as a profound reimagining of the Mahabharata, intertwining eco-mythology, feminist resistance, and environmental justice to create a narrative that is both timeless and urgently contemporary. By centering Draupadi’s voice, Divakaruni reclaims a marginalized figure from mythology, transforming her into a symbol of resilience and ecological harmony. The novel’s eco-mythological framework highlights the interconnectedness of human and environmental well-being, using Draupadi’s fiery birth and her role as a witness to the Kurukshetra war to critique patriarchal and ecological exploitation. This approach not only challenges traditional power structures but also advocates for a more equitable relationship between humans and nature.

In comparison to other feminist reinterpretations of mythology, such as Madeline Miller’s *Circe*, and contemporary eco-fiction, like Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, *The Palace of Illusions* distinguishes itself through its unique blend of mythological storytelling and eco-feminist critique. While Miller focuses on reclaiming the agency of mythological women and Ghosh addresses real-world environmental issues, Divakaruni bridges the ancient and the modern, using the Mahabharata mythological framework to address contemporary ecological crises. Similarly, when compared to Arundhati Roy’s works, which are deeply rooted in the socio-political realities of modern India, Divakaruni’s novel offers a more universal and symbolic exploration of justice and resistance.

Ultimately, *The Palace of Illusions* serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring relevance of mythology in addressing contemporary issues. Through Draupadi’s voice of resistance, Divakaruni not only critiques the exploitation of women and nature but also calls for a collective reimagining of our relationship with the environment. The novel’s engagement with eco-mythology and environmental justice underscores the importance of listening to marginalized voices and recognizing the intrinsic value of all beings, human and non-human alike. In doing so, Divakaruni’s work contributes to the broader discourse on feminism, ecology, and social justice, offering a compelling vision of a more sustainable and equitable world.

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