

## An Analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments from An Ecofeminist Standpoint

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### Abstract

*Eco-feminism primarily concerns itself with the subjugation of nature by the human race, as well as the oppression of women in society. It specifically focuses on the domination of the patriarchal society both on women and nature. Therefore, it examines not only the dominance of men over women, but also the dominance of human beings over nature. This research aims to interpret Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments from an eco-feminist perspective, using Young's five faces of oppression as a framework for analysis.*

**Keywords:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, Ecofeminist Standpoint

### INTRODUCTION

Indian Literature primarily consisted of oral compositions. Indian literature was predominantly characterized by traditional works in the form of chants and prayers. The Tamil and Sanskrit hymns are regarded as the initial compositions of Indian literature. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most notable literary masterpieces in Sanskrit. Tamil, one of the oldest classical languages from India is worth mentioning in the history of Literature from India. The Ramayana is one of the earliest recorded myth originating from India. There have been multiple variations of the work that have been written down and recorded as it was passed on through oral tradition. Notable literary works that defined the golden age of Indian Literature include *Ratnavali* by Sri Harshmand, *Swapna Vasavadattam* by Bhaasa, *Mricchakatika* by Shudraka, *Meghdoot* by Kalidasa, and *Abhijanam Shakuntalam*.

Then with the exposure of Indian Writers to the English language along with the reach of the colonization of the world by European trading companies that lead to the educated writers expressing themselves in English. Some notable examples include Rabindranath Tagore, Amitav Ghosh, and Sarojini Naidu, are renowned pioneers in literature. They began expressing the suppressed emotions and socio-political circumstances that prevailed throughout their time. They wrote Indian culture, tradition and customs to the western world in English. Other notable Indian writers in English are Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand, who were collectively referred to as the trio of Indian literature. Their writings mostly focused on the discord, estranged emotions that individuals had to confront, as well as the aspect of the partition of India. Additional authors who have made significant contributions to India include R. Parthasarathy, Kamala Das, Don Moraes, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, and Nissim Ezekiel are notable figures in the field of literature.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an esteemed and very productive writer. Her works have been published in over forty prestigious magazines, such as Atlantic Monthly and The New Yorker. She has authored numerous full-length works that have been translated into Hebrew, Japanese, Dutch, and twenty-six other languages. Several of Divakaruni's literary works have been transformed into films. She has received numerous prestigious accolades, including the American Book Award, the Pen Josephine Miles Award, the Premier Scanner (also known as the Italian Nobel Award), and the Light of India Award. She has also been honored with the Houston

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Literary Award. For many years, she has been assisting with the education of underprivileged children in India through an organization called the Board of Pratham.

Chitra Banerjee has authored a collection of notable fictional works, including *Arranged Marriage: stories* (1995), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), and *The Last Queen* (2021). Most of her works are remarkably the voices of women who strive hard to remove the shackles of oppression in the name of culture, gender and tradition.

The term Eco-feminism was coined by the French feminist, Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974. The third wave of feminism has expanded its focus beyond immediate concerns to examine the relationship between women and their environment. Encyclopedia of Britannica defines feminism as “Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature” (Miles). The concept was further developed by King Ynestra in the same year. Eco-feminism encompasses both activism and academia, aiming to explore the interconnectedness between nature and women. It seeks to understand the critical connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women, considering the profound relationship women have historically shared with the natural world through their daily lives and tasks. In today's world, the exploitation and destruction of the environment is evident.

Eco-feminism primarily concerns itself with the subjugation of nature by the human race, as well as the oppression of women in society. It specifically focuses on the domination of the patriarchal society both on women and nature. Therefore, it examines not only the dominance of men over women, but also the dominance of human beings over nature. This research aims to interpret Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* from an eco-feminist perspective, using Young's five faces of oppression as a framework for analysis.

*The Forest of Enchantment* is a contemplative novel that reimagines the Ramayana from the viewpoint of Sita. This literary work was published in the United States of America in 2019. It delves into Sita's narrative, expressing her sorrow, strength, and evolving understanding of love throughout her life. The central character, Sita, is married to the “virtuous and righteous” Ram, who is portrayed as a loving and dedicated husband. Sita's abduction by Ravan and subsequent rescue by Ram are significant events in the story.

Chitra Banerjee skillfully depicts the hardships faced by women in order to counterbalance the male-dominated world. Through the character of Sita, she effectively embraces the flaws, emotions, and experiences of living beings. Sita, who endures immense pain, listens to Valmiki's Ramayana but is dissatisfied with its biased narrative. She desires to share her own perspective, which the author affectionately refers to as Sitayan. The book authentically showcases Sita's range of emotions, dilemmas, and inner turmoil throughout different stages of her life. By embracing women as they are, acknowledging their human imperfections, and recognising their unique strengths that enable them to navigate difficult circumstances in their daily lives, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni aimed to honor the various ways in which women endure challenging situations. Unfortunately, these women often go unrewarded for their resilience.

The story begins with Sita marrying Ram. After marrying Ram, Sita traveled to Ayodhya in a palanquin. During her journey, she was heartbroken to the unkind behavior of the soldiers towards the trees.

“This is their home, and we are visitors,’ I added. We should treat them with deference and not cause them needless pain. Ram’s brows drew together in surprise. Clearly, he had never considered that plants feel pain as we do” (Divakaruni 56). Sita had a strong affinity for nature. She desired to cultivate a harmonious relationship with nature and its various resources, including the forest, bird nests, fox lairs, and therapeutic herbs. In addition, she desired to sprint without shoes on the lawn. “But such things were not allowed to princesses, especially those married into the royal family of Ayodhya” (Divakaruni 57).

The forest was inhabited by Yakshas, Rakshasas, Gandharbas, and tribal people. The forest saw a significant loss when humans exerted control over indigenous people and used the forest for activities like gardening and hunting. The Rakshasas were the original inhabitants of the area and had ownership rights over the forest until they were displaced by humans. Lakshman and Ram were unable to place their trust in a Rakshasa due to their tendency to transform into venomous serpents. Rakshasas are even more treacherous than snakes. Lakshman

consistently asserts that Rakshasas are non-human entities and should not be treated with human civility. Sita consistently believes that if Rakshasas were to perish, their family would be left without a companion. But Ram says that, if we want to live without any disturbance, we want to kill Rakshasa's as quickly as possible. "The best thing you can do with a Rakshasa is to kill it as quickly as possible" (Divakaruni 151).

Ram asserts that eliminating the Rakshasas will restore tranquility to the woodlands and significantly improve the quality of life for the Rishis. Sita informed Ram that they were guests in the jungle, which possessed its own set of regulations, patterns, and splendor. The Rakshasas were the true proprietors of the forest. They rejected this notion because they believed that males would be resistant to changing their opinions due to their strong belief in the superiority of their own methods.

Sita had an affection for a golden deer throughout her early years, and one day she became aware of something peculiar about the creature. Sita approached the exquisite deer while holding spinach leaves. The deer initially experienced pleasure upon seeing the leaves, but subsequently retreated due to feelings of fear and discomfort. Sita confesses this reality to Ram, but he remains skeptical as Lakshman suggests that the deer might be a Rakshasa in disguise, spying on us. Sita endeavors to rescue the deer from its injured hide and intends to treat the deer's wounds with a turmeric mixture. However, the deer eluded her before she could make contact.

Lakshman advocates for the deterrence of the deer rather than its rescue. Without warning, he grasps his bow with the intention of slaying the deer. However, Ram suggests that it would be wiser for her to let go of the idea of hunting the creature and instead pursue an alternative prey. Ram and Lakshman were unfamiliar with the art of harmonizing with nature and safeguarding it from peril. They also excluded women's knowledge. In addition, this research examines the selected novel through the lens of Young's five faces of oppression, specifically focusing on the oppression experienced by women and nature.

Iris Marion Young, an American philosopher, has gained worldwide recognition for her perspectives on oppression, democratic theory, and feminist political theory. Published in 1990, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* is a prose text that delves into the realm of political theory. In chapter II of the paper, Young highlights the five manifestations of oppression that are relevant to the current investigation.

The novel portrays the various types of tyranny experienced by female characters like Sita, Mandodari, Keikayi, Ahalya, and Kaushalya. Oppression is the act of inflicting cruelty or injustice upon a subordinate group by an individual or a collective with power and control. Iris Marion Young categorized oppression into five distinct forms: exploitation, powerlessness, violence, marginalization, and cultural imperialism. The five faces of tyranny serve to illustrate the many manifestations of oppression shown in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. This work portrayed the marginalized existence of an Indian woman.

Young defines exploitation as a type of oppression that arises from an individual's exercise of authority in order to gain personal benefit. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, some female characters were not treated fairly and this unfair treatment led to oppression of women. "Yes, because Dasharath took numerous wives-several hundred, if my sources are accurate! He married some people for financial benefit and others for personal enjoyment. There's a great deal of rivalry among his queens, and much vying for his attention" (Divakaruni 48).

The remark above demonstrates the sexual subjugation enacted by King Dasharath against his women. Dasharath seeks gratification in life through his interactions with women. He objectified women, using them just for his own sexual gratification. He advocated for women who use males to fulfill their physical cravings. The wives acted as attendants to the king. He regarded them as amoral entities. This episode in the novel serves as evidence of the existence of women's objectification in the world. Men often exploit women in numerous ways across the globe. Dasharath was a prominent figure in the realm of social capitalism and was known for his womanizing tendencies. He disregarded the emotions of the women.

Young asserts that powerlessness refers to a state in which one lacks control over their decisions and overall existence in life. The female characters in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* also endure feelings of impotence and subjugation in their lives. They experience a sense of powerlessness in the face of the oppression perpetrated by their male counterparts. The paragraph below also addresses Sita's lack of power.

“O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you’ve always placed your role asking ahead of your role as husband. In this court, which has been setup to dispense justice to all citizens, I ask you this, for I’ve been a citizen of Ayodhya too: Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered? Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny?”(Divakaruni 356).

Sita was exiled from the realm without justification. Sita is subjected to severe mistreatment by society. Due to the dissemination of rumors among society, she was sent to the forest. Despite Ram's awareness of Sita's innocence, he succumbed to society's depiction of her. She was pregnant while she was exiled. Despite being a queen with considerable authority, Sita refrained from taking any action that would go against her exile.

Similarly, human people likewise exert dominance over nature. In this tale, an incident occurs where Ram, Sita, and Lakshman see numerous sages during their exile. The sages express their desire for them to reside in Panchabati, which is located near the Godavari River. Ram embraced their thoughts and expressed his desire to establish a permanent residence and make their home till the conclusion of their adventure through the forest. Ram and Lakshman discovered a location adorned with captivating natural beauty, where they intend to construct their leaf home. However, Sita cautioned them against proceeding with their hut-building plans. Due to her awareness of the devastation present in the area.

However, Lakshman refuses to acknowledge it and instead focuses solely on the surrounding landscapes. Sita refrains from arguing with him, but she desires to convey to him the detrimental consequences that nature would face when humans engage in any form of deception or manipulation towards it. Sita possesses extensive knowledge about nature, including the reasons behind birds' vocalizations, such as screaming, shouting, and chirping. However, she possesses the knowledge and ability to effectively treat the illness and cultivate affection for those entities in a remarkably short period of time. Indeed, in this location, all the avian species are constructing their nests atop the trees as a precaution against potential flooding caused by adverse weather conditions. Sita's hut was affected by a flood, but she managed to save Ram and Lakshman from the powerful water caused by natural forces.

Despite nature's formidable force, it still serves as a warning that there is no way to evade its influence. However, we refused to accept it and began altering our views towards nature. We often fail to acknowledge the suffering inflicted upon nature as we strive to conquer it, rather than preserve it. However, in the end, human people consistently fell short in their attempts to overcome nature, while nature consistently emerged victorious. The women characters in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* likewise face marginalization. Sita encountered marginalization when her husband exiled her to the wilderness. Divakaruni asserts:

And then he'd sent me away without even having the courage or the consideration to tell me to my face what he was doing to me and why. Without asking me, his helpmate and queen, what I thought should be done, he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people(Divakaruni 320).

This episode demonstrates that Sita was subjected to marginalization. An individual's existence is inherently unpredictable and illogical. Ram placed his trust in the multitude of those who continued to question Sita's chastity, despite her having been securely immolated in the flames. Sita voluntarily banished herself to uphold the honor of Ayodhya. Ram was cognizant of Sita's innocence, yet, societal pressures compelled him to acquiesce to prevailing norms.

Iris Marion Young argues that oppression is the most conspicuous form of violence. Numerous women experience assault, and their enduring pain appears to be ceaseless due to societal factors. The novel *The Forest of Enchantments* portrays several manifestations of violence, including verbal, physical, and psychological forms. Specifically, the female characters in the novel experience both physical and verbal violence. Physical violence is manifested by direct harm to the victim's body, whereas verbal violence is expressed through discourse that is harsh and hurtful. The novel depicts Gautam's physical abuse towards his wife Ahalya as a manifestation of oppression.

Worse, Gautam was equally angry with Ahalya and cursed her too. For betraying her sacred marital vows for the sake of bodily pleasure, she would be turned into stone. Ahalya declared her innocence, pointing out that she was as much a victim of Indra's trickery as Gautam. But it was too late. The curse was in full force. Already her body was petrifying. All Gautam could do at that point was to promise her that a special being would soon be born, and his pure and powerful touch would rest on her to life. (Divakaruni 130).

The aforementioned episode exemplifies tyranny, as Ahalya, the wife of Gautam, is portrayed as naive. Indra, who should be held accountable for deceiving and sexually assaulting her, escapes guilt, while Ahalya is unjustly punished by her husband for a transgression she did not commit. She is victimized in this situation, having been cursed by her husband, and the curse is irrevocable. This demonstrates the silencing of women due to oppression, notwithstanding their innocence. Indra possessed the ability to establish her innocence, as she held the authority to do so, but she chose not to exercise it.

According to Iris Marion Young, Verbal Violence refers to acts of aggression that might cause psychological harm or emotional distress to the victim. The sentence exhibits evident verbal aggression. She experienced physical violence from Ram, as evidenced by the episode where Ram was eager to watch his wife throw herself into the flames. Upon Sita's arrival in Ayodhya, Ram did not extend a warm welcome to her. She experienced physical abuse from her beloved husband. Ram used extremely harsh comments, publicly condemning Sita in the most vociferous manner possible. Despite knowing that Sita remained faithful to him, Ram compelled her to walk into the fire. Young defines cultural imperialism as the exertion of control by one culture over the beliefs and attitudes of individuals. The occurrence,

And if you were not, shouldn't someone be judging you today? You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? That men would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions, saying King Ram did so. Then why shouldn't I? (Divakaruni 356).

This exemplifies cultural imperialism. Ram was forced to banish Sita to the forest for eternity believing that Sita would come to the home with another man. "Not a week," Lakshman said. "The rest of your life. Ram is banishing you from his kingdom" (Divakaruni 313). This banishment rules can be applied to any Indian sub continents such as Pakistan, Bangladesh anywhere in South Asia. It is customary to disinherit or even harm a daughter who commits a wrongdoing. Honor killing refers to the act of intentionally killing a woman, which is perceived as a way to uphold the family's honor. This practice involves the belief that it is honorable for a husband to kill a wife who is deemed to be cursed.

This demonstrates that human people also exert dominance over nature. Lav and Kush observed a horse that was owned by King Ram, which was intended to be utilized for the Ashwamedha Yagna. Esteemed monarchs fulfill this duty in order to govern a thriving realm. This cultural ceremony, devised by the sages, involves allowing a horse to freely roam and choose its own destination. The castle in that chosen place is then obligated to recognise the horse's owner as its ruler. If a monarch fails to halt the horse, he will be able to engage in combat with the opposing army. If the king emerges victorious, he retains possession of the horse.

When the monarch is defeated in a fight, he will be compelled to become a vassal of the master of the horse. Here, we learn that in order to conquer other kingdoms, they employed ceremonies such as horse yagna to eradicate their traditions. Lav and Kush, the sacrificial horse, had journeyed extensively throughout Bharatvarsha. They do not believe that the horse could have experienced fatigue from traveling a considerable distance. Lav and Kush provided the horse with fruit, drink, and grass. The horse was deprived of rest, yet it was expected to travel without sustenance. "We thought he was hungry, so we gave him some fruit and soft new river-grass. He really enjoyed that" (Divakaruni 337). Ram demonstrates concern for his country and the inhabitants of Ayodhya, although he fails to consider the welfare of the horse that is tirelessly running to ensure the prosperity of his realm.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, known for her dynamic writing, presents *The Forest of Enchantments* as a reimagining of a mythological tale, while also emphasizing powerful female viewpoints. Divakaruni aimed to highlight the

intricacies and subtleties of the situation. She did not intend to depict Ram as purely negative; it was a difficult decision for him to banish Sita to the forest. One of the more patriarchal interpretations contradicts the notion of Ram as a stoic and self-assured guy who does not require any encouragement. Divakaruni challenges the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita depicts her as a strong and independent lady who no longer doubts her loyalty. She displays dignity and courage through her patience, while Ram remains honorable, earnest, and devoted to his wife. The novel exemplifies contemporary tendencies to reinterpret narratives, circumstances, and examine present-day obstacles by transcending the resentment and exasperation of marginalized individuals, as observed in post-colonial texts from previous centuries. It endeavors to highlight the resilience of the situation without diminishing its drawbacks. This book is significant in the context of the history of gender and womanhood as it establishes a clear definition of womanhood. It offers a brief insight into the complex and diverse world of femininity.

Ram exiles Sita to the forest after she is accused of adultery by one of Ayodhya's incompetent individuals. She is obliged to give birth to her twins without assistance and to reside in the forest as a sole parent. After a prolonged period, Ram questions her loyalty when he coincidentally finds her again, despite facing numerous barriers in winning her back. Sita calls for her mother Bhumi to assist her in moving on from Ram, and in response, the earth, representing Sita's mother, warmly welcomes and embraces her. The Earth, known as Bhumi, was unable to tolerate the sight of her offspring being subjected to unjust treatment by humanity. Sita did not experience any hardships till she reached Bhumi. Nature embodies the fundamental qualities of affection and tranquility. The portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* well captures this aspect of ecofeminism.

Exploitation renders women as subordinate to their husbands. Mandodari, Kaushalya, and Keikayi are regarded as slaves. They are aware that their esteemed spouse is not faithful and has never loved them. The female characters in this novel are depicted as being devoid of authority, including the queens who reside in their palaces. They are not afforded any opportunities to assert themselves in the patriarchal society.

The female characters in the story, such as Sita, Ahalya, Mandodari, and Kekayi, frequently encounter a sense of powerlessness. Sita experienced marginalization when she was exiled to the wilderness. Sita encountered instances of both verbal and physical aggression from both male and female characters in the story. Ultimately, cultural imperialism has regarded women as mere servants or slaves, subjecting them to mistreatment akin to that inflicted upon animals, disregarding their inherent worth. This research illuminates the prevalence of oppression primarily within the male-dominated culture, and the problems that are impacted by this oppression. The book delves into the profound upheaval and inner instability that Sita experiences at different times of her life.

Sita is a highly bright woman who engages with society using a thoughtful and inquisitive mindset. In the contemporary day, there is a universal desire for power, leading to the marginalization of oppression. Similar to Sita, it is important for individuals to assert themselves, particularly in the face of hardship and unfair treatment. Otherwise, he or she would be subjected to oppression and live under the dominion of others. Several nations, including India and Nepal, have placed significance on both nature and goddesses, which they have revered. Additionally, they emphasize the importance of treating women with the respect and dignity that every woman deserves. Preserving the natural environment is our duty, and it is unacceptable to seek power by exerting dominance or exploiting others.

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