10.

Quest for Eco-spirituality: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

Shivangi

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands as a literary giant with several awards to her credit and a trailblasing career as a novelist, poet, children's writer, activist, and creative writing teacher. The passion and zeal with which she weaves her imaginative world have gained her a wide readership and much critical acclaim across the globe. Divakaruni's writings offer a unique standpoint that embraces nature while challenging the doctrines of patriarchy at the same time. Her unwavering belief in the reciprocity, mutuality, circularity, and interconnectedness of the natural world injects vibrancy and potency into her celebrated fictional cosmos. This article seeks to scrutinise Divakaruni's modern retelling of the Ramayan under the lens of spiritual ecofeminism.

Keywords: spiritual ecofeminism, environmental justice, nature, gender, Indian mythology.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's distinguished novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, presents a refreshing and nuanced retelling of the *Ramayana* through the perspective of Sita. In the prologue, Divakaruni emphasises that Sita designates her narrative as "the Sitayan" (Forest 4). By positioning Sita at the forefront of the story, Divakaruni transforms this esteemed Indian epic into a narrative rich in pluralities and possibilities. As the narrator who defines her journey, Sita serves to interrogate the dominant patriarchal discourse critically. This modern reinterpretation creates new frameworks within traditional, male-centric narratives, enabling women to challenge the masculinist paradigms inherent in the so-called 'grand narrative'. Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita transcends the notion of victimhood, presenting her as a figure of considerable strength, fortitude, and resilience. The novel invites readers into a complex

world where women are no longer cast in passive roles designed to serve others.

Divakaruni often uses nature as a metaphor to explicate her philosophy of life. As the narrative unfolds, we see that nature plays an important role in Sita's self-discovery as a spiritual being who enjoys a profoundly intimate relationship with her natural surroundings. In the novel, Sita's identity is strongly mediated through her love and care for the natural world. Indeed, the close connection of Sita with land and nature cannot be understated. Her myriad interactions with the natural elements have deep spiritual undercurrents. This article seeks to ascertain strands of spiritual ecofeminism in *The Forest of Enchantments*. It attempts to study feminist and ecological lessons embedded in Divakaruni's retelling of the *Ramayan*, using the ideals and beliefs of neo-pagan thinker and foremother of the Goddess movement, Carol P. Christ. Though Divakaruni and Christ belong to different religious backgrounds, they are bound together by their vision to challenge the androcentric mode of thinking. At this stage, it is imperative to mention that while Carol P. Christ's Goddess scholarship acts as the main analytical framework in the article, views espoused by ecofeminists Charlene Spretnak, Vandana Shiva, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Starhawk (Miriam Simos), also play an important role in the thematic progression of the article,. A common thread runs through all of their writings, linking the arguments raised in the article, to a cohesive theoretical framework.

Carol Christ is credited with seeking to create a comprehensive account of the religious and ethical worldview implied by Goddess thought and practice. Her work is seminal to Goddess studies and scholarship. Feminist writings and the feminist movement resulted in her increased awareness of how Christianity was infused with patterns of thought that justified the subordination of and contempt for women and modeled divine power after the male warrior. Her early work in religion and literature was intended to connect theology to the experiences of people's lives and those of others. It led to the resolution of her uncertainty about whether the Goddess was simply a metaphor for oneself, the sum of an indifferent "nature" or whether the Goddess stood for an embodied personal power within and beyond us who deeply cares for us. Christ embraced the latter

view (Ruether, *Goddesses* 285-87). Christ believes that humans must not aspire to set themselves apart from nature. She believes humans should consciously eschew dualistic philosophies claiming human ascendancy over nature. Christ's feminist-ecological spirituality is revealed when she urges humans to "commune with nature and other people" (Christ, *Rebirth* 170) in new and empowering ways to save our planet from irreparable damage. At the core of her writings is the belief that the entire spectrum of life ought to be nurtured and celebrated. A deeper analysis of Divakaruni's novel will show that her characters echo Christ's radical ecofeminist notions and concerns. Both believe in the reciprocity, circularity, and symbiosis of the cosmic whole. Both believe in life-affirming values that envision all beings as deeply connected in the web of life.

Christ puts forth a new critical framework to challenge the unexamined presuppositions in Western theology. She calls her critical paradigm "the Goddess hypothesis," which recognises women as important historical and religious actors. Christ venerates the Goddess religion for its "effort to resurrect the egalitarian harmony between humans, men and women, and nature of prepatriarchal times" (Ruether, *Integrating* 99). Goddess religion endeavours to reintegrate the alienating hierarchical dualisms of patriarchal theology into a life-affirming communion. It does not simply reverse the patriarchal subjugation of women, nature, and the nonhuman world. Rather, it reestablishes these dualisms in an interactive harmony. Despite stiff resistance, the Goddess religion has made a powerful comeback recently. Christ feels that the re-emergence of Goddess symbolism is a force to reckon with. She believes that the resurrection of Goddess symbolism is a manifestation of the emerging power of women (*Laughter* 156). Divakaruni's creative epistemology seems to spring from her deep reverence for Goddess-based religion. In the novel, Sita presents a vivid account of the temple of the Goddess:

> The temple of Parvati was smaller than one might have expected in a palace: a single, windowless room built of rough-hewn stone. But the plain spire thrust itself unapologetically into the sky, demanding to be noticed by the heavens. No one knew when it had been constructed. Perhaps it was built by one of the earlier Janaks, or perhaps, as certain tales claimed it, it rose fully formed from the earth. Whenever I stepped into it, I felt I was entering a space of power where the

> relationship between men and gods remained intimate and primeval. (Divakaruni, *Forest* 18)

The above lines testify to Divakaruni's belief in the Goddess religion. They establish Divakaruni's theological stance as a liberating one. They also demonstrate how a confluence of shared interests in Goddess religion binds together Christ and Divakaruni. Divakaruni's Goddess seems to redress an imbalance by redefining the divine-human relationship. Her counter-discursive ideology is clearly reflected in her description of the Goddess. She seems to be inspired by the myths and symbols of the Goddess culture in her spiritual leanings. Divakaruni's representation of the Goddess contradicts the normative view of divine power as an unrelated and aloof spectator. In its most profound sense, it reflects the essence of divinity itself. Here, the Goddess stands for an egalitarian view of divinity. It challenges the patriarchal, masculinist paradigms of theology.

According to Christ, "Goddess/God is present with and in every individual, hoping to lure or persuade it to make choices that will be beneficial both to itself and to the whole of life" (*She* 52). Christ believes that Goddess/God is not separate from the world. Goddess/God is "internally affected by what happens in the world" (88). Goddess/God is relational and absolute at the same time. Goddess/God keeps the balance of the world "tipped in favor of life and creativity, thus preventing it from disintegrating into sheer chaos" (*She* 106). The power of Goddess/God is "infinite" which means that Goddess/God has the "power to be with every individual in the universe in every moment" (107). We are never really alone. However, the Goddess/God can "influence and inspire us only if we open ourselves to her power" (*Rebirth* 106). Christ argues that our world will improve if we open our hearts and work in tandem with Goddess/God to co-create a different world (*She* 108).

There are numerous instances in the novel when Sita prays fervently to the Goddess for guidance. At the novel's beginning, she invokes the Goddess to guide Ram's hand as he strings Shiva's bow so that he can secure her hand in marriage. After praying ardently, Sita waits hopefully for the Goddess to present her with a sign. However, there is no sign from the Goddess. Sita is halfway back to the palace when the temple priest calls her name. He informs Sita

that the Goddess has heard her prayers. The flower Sita placed on the idol's head while praying had fallen (Divakaruni, *Forest* 18-19). When Ram and Sita are about to exchange garlands after he wins her hand in marriage, Ram reveals his promise to his brothers long ago that they will all get married simultaneously. He refuses to proceed with the wedding unless King Janak fulfills Ram's vow. Sita again prays to the Goddess to help her find a way out of this unexpected roadblock. The Goddess comes to Sita's rescue, and words rise within her throat "like a fountain." Sita is able to fix the problem by reminding her father of her two unmarried cousins, Mandavi and Shrutakirti (36). Sita implores the Goddess for divine assistance when Kaikeyi invites her to fight a duel with her. She says, "*Oh Goddess... . Why do you send me this challenge, just when things are going smoothly and I'm beginning to think of Ayodhya as home?"* The answer comes to her with lightning speed and she realises that she has to fight this one battle to prepare herself for the many battles she must fight in the future (80-81). When Ram is banished to the forest for fourteen years, Sita prays to the Goddess to help her convince Ram to take her with him to the forest (110). She again invokes the Goddess to protect Ram after she regrets sending him on a risky errand to procure a golden deer for her. She says, "*Please, Goddess, let him come back to me quickly. I promise, I'll never ask him – or you – for anything again".* However, the Goddess does not send her a sign as she has angered the Goddess by being petulant and selfish (162). In the end, Sita realises that she is herself an embodiment of the divine spirit. Hence, Sita's power in the novel is both within and without. The Goddess bursts forth through Sita's personal experiences as power from within. However, the Goddess is also transcendent, as she has the power to empower, transform, and heal Sita.

Christ's philosophy exhibits strands of nature mysticism. Her works often describe her "sense of mystical connection to the natural world" (*Rebirth* 113). For Christ, no "fundamental distinctions" exist between humans and nature. She seeks to reconstruct egalitarian harmony between humans and the earth's body. In her opinion, neither humanity nor divinity supersedes nature. She urges us to transform the way we think. It calls for a deconstruction of the patriarchal methodology of thought. According to Christ, we must view the cosmos in a matrix of ongoing interconnectivity and

relationality. Similarly, Vandana Shiva, a leading Indian ecofeminist, attempts to dismantle patriarchal hegemony in her works. Her ontological vision is rooted in the symbolic association of women with nature. She argues that "[w]omen in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice" (*Staying* 39). In her works, she turns to traditional Hindu cosmology to explicate the worldview needed to restore ecological harmony and balance. She calls for the recovery of the "Feminine Principle" to counter the vicious forces of Western maldevelopment. She speaks of this recovery, not in the Western sense of a dichotomising of masculinity and femininity as polar binaries. Instead, it is a dynamic interaction of creative energy. Shiva says female *Shakti* and male form (*Purusha*) produce *Prakriti* (nature). She further states that both *Shakti* and *Prakriti* have been viewed and venerated as feminine in Hinduism. To further cement her point, she adds that Hinduism celebrates women as key agents in maintaining life (Ruether, *Integrating* 107).

Shiva asserts that the relationship between man and nature here differs radically from the view of man as separate from and dominating nature. She sees the daily worship of the sacred tulsi within Indian households as a good illustration of this difference. (*Staying* 41). She further adds that women have the potential to create new intellectual ecological paradigms. Their role in circumventing and preventing ecological crises is of the utmost importance. She believes that the producers of life alone can be its real custodians. Since women are embedded in nature, they have the wherewithal to take charge of its sustenance (*Staying* 47).

Christian feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether is another prominent voice critiquing patriarchal hegemony in traditional Christian beliefs. Ruether states that every aspect of life is intimately connected with nature in Hindu cosmology. Nature is seen as an embodiment of the divine in traditional Hindu thought. Hence, the veneration and worship of nature form an integral aspect of Hindu cosmology (*Integrating* 48). Divakaruni demonstrates similar views in the novel through Sita's character. In the novel, Sita shares an indispensable bond with nature. An attachment to the natural landscape seems crucial to her sense of self and personhood. Even though Sita is a princess, she yearns to commune with nature by walking barefoot in the palace gardens. She relishes the feel of

planting her feet in the luscious, dewy grass of the palace arbours. Moreover, she looks after the palace gardens, which is an unconventional responsibility for a princess of her stature:

> I walked through the extensive gardens of my father, King Janak, reveling in the feel of the soft grass, beaded with the dews of dawn, on my bare feet. I was accompanied by the chief gardeners, for I was the overseer of the palace arbours, an unusual duty for a princess. They pointed out problems they'd been unable to solve: a gnarled champak, refusing to flower; a rare harshringar, shriveling up no matter what they tried; a copse of bamboos with black rot creeping up their stalks. (Divakaruni, *Forest* 5)

The palace gardeners venerate Sita for her unique ability to heal withered flowers and plants through physical touch. Sita's innate closeness with nature equips her with the power to enter into an egalitarian communion with her environmental landscape. Through her benevolent and curative touch, Sita breathes new life into the palace gardens. Her reciprocal relationship with nature underpins and theorises the ecofeminist stance of the novel. Divakaruni subtly draws attention to the prevailing ecological issues by linking Sita to her natural landscape. In a way, Sita seems to be disseminating a new holistic paradigm through her incessant care and concern for her natural surroundings. It can help counter the ruthless plunder of our ecology, which is rampant in the current epoch.

Starhawk says, "From earliest times, women have been... priestesses, diviners, midwives, poets, healers, and singers of songs of power" ("Witchcraft" 260). She states that in ancient matrifocal civilisations, priestesses "discovered and tested the healing herbs" to unlock their therapeutic secrets. In addition, their knowledge of nature allowed them to tame cattle, grow wheat and corn, and keep track of the movements of the moon, stars, and sun (261). In this novel, Sita's ability to fathom the curative potential of plants and herbs demonstrates strands of nature-oriented spirituality. As an embodiment of the Goddess, she sustains all life forms and finds spiritual fulfillment within nature. Her ability to unravel the mysteries of nature is in harmony with her conception as a divine being which grounds and sustains the process of life itself. Sita's spirituality is closely linked with the healing arts, reflecting her earth-based theological worldview (Divakaruni, *Forest* 323).

Indian civilisation is unique in its veneration of forests as the primary source of life and fertility. All our ancient texts and scriptures allude to forests as places of retreat. Our sages revered them as sites for spiritual, intellectual, and metaphysical reawakening. It is believed that all our Vedic literature was composed in the forests. According to Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, ancient Indian civilisation has its genesis in the sacred groves of our earliest forest hermitages. According to Vandana Shiva, "All religions and cultures of South Asian region have been rooted in the forests, not through fear and ignorance but through ecological insight" (*Staying* 57). She further adds that "[w]omen's environmental action in India preceded the UN Women's Decade as well as the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference." She points out that some three hundred years ago, a few members of the Bishnoi community in the state of Rajasthan, laid down their lives to save their sacred *khejri* trees by clinging to them. At the forefront of this movement was a woman named Amrita Devi. Vandana Shiva says that this event marks the beginning of the recorded history of the Chipko movement in India. The Chipko movement was a novel forest conservation movement in India that embraced the concept of tree-hugging to prevent government-sponsored deforestation and lumbering. The movement began in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand (formerly a part of Uttar Pradesh) in 1973. It has popularly been referred to as a women's movement as it was spearheaded predominantly by rural women. The movement was fueled by the "ecological insights and political and moral strengths of women" (66). The movement continues to be a landmark event in the annals of Indian activism for its collective mobilisation of rural women for the cause of forest conservation. According to Vandana Shiva, "The significant catalysers of the transformations which made Chipko resistance possible have been women like Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, Bimala Behn, Hima Devi, Gauri Devi, Gunga Devi, Bachni Devi, Itwari Devi, Chamun Devi, and many others" (67).

In the novel, Sita feels an inexplicable pull towards the forest. It foregrounds her inclusive vision along with her earth-based spirituality. Sita identifies herself with all the elements of the natural world, including the forests. Her holistic worldview acts as the facilitator, imbuing her with a deep yearning for the mysterious

world of the forests. Sita's spiritual reality is located in the natural world, and forests form an important aspect of her spiritual vision (Divakaruni, *Forest* 8). During their exile, Ram and Sita stay in the bounteous forests of Panchabati. Sita finds the region "wild and mysterious" but "welcoming" as well. Sita finds that the plants in Panchabati are "particularly attuned" to her. Bushes pull in their thorns or loosen the earth around their roots when she waters them. In this place, far apart from the world of cities and towns, Sita feels an undeniable sense of belongingness. Tired of their bland diet of fruits and roots, Sita plants a vegetable garden in Panchabati from the seeds given by Ahalya. Much to her surprise, the vegetables grow "enthusiastically", and Sita feels grateful to see that she has not lost her touch (Divakaruni, *Forest* 137-39).

When it is time for them to return to Ayodhya, Sita realises that she will miss the forest despite its hardships. She reckons that she has enjoyed freedom here, a lightness that she will never experience again once she is crowned queen of Ayodhya. In the forest, she has Ram all to herself. In Panchabati, Ram becomes her true confidant and lover. Their bond strengthens as Ram is no longer weighed down by his princely responsibilities and duties in the forest. Sita truly enjoys their intimate interlude in the forest (Divakaruni, *Forest* 154). This article, has shown how Divakaruni's novel explores the interconnections between ecology and feminism holistically. Her contemporary retelling of the *Ramayan* predates and anticipates much of the ongoing debates on ecofeminist theology and spirituality. Characterising Sita as an ecologically conscious person will inspire many to make mindful efforts to repair the web of life.

Works Cited

Christ, Carol P. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*. 2nd ed., Boston, Beacon Press, 1986.

---. *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess.* San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987.

---. *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. Routledge, 1997.

---. *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

---. "Rethinking Theology and Nature." *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, edited by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, New York, HarperOne, 1989, p. 321.

Christ, Carol P., and Judith Plaskow, editors. *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*. HarperOne, 1992.

Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-80. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/ 3173239.

Divakaruni, Chitra Lekha Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.

Held, Virginia. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global*. OUP, 2006.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." *College English*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1972, p. 18. JSTOR, www. Jstor.org/stable/41403188.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History*. U of California P, 2005.

---. *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalisation, and World Religions.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. North Atlantic Books, 2016.

Spretnak, Charlene. "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering." *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism, edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein*, Sierra Club Books, 1990, p. 5.

Starhawk. "Witchcraft and Women's Culture." *Christ and Plaskow*, pp. 260-62.

Washbourn, Penelope. "Becoming Woman: Menstruation as Spiritual Challenge." *Christ and Plaskow*, pp. 246-57.

Yaegar, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*. New York, Columbia UP, 1988.