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Rewriting Myth, Rethinking Nature: Intersections Of Myth And Environment In Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* And Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace Of Illusions*

1- Prachi Singh

Research Scholar

Department of English

Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur

2- Prof. Shikha Singh

Professor, Department of English

Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur

Abstract

In contemporary literary studies, ecocriticism has emerged as a vital framework for analyzing the interrelationship between literature and the natural environment. Indian mythological narratives, which frequently portray nature as both a reflection of human conduct and a manifestation of the divine, offer a rich context for ecocritical exploration. This study presents a comparative ecocritical analysis of two modern mythological retellings: Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. Although both texts are grounded in India's mythological tradition, they articulate distinct perspectives on the human-nature relationship, engaging with themes such as ecological harmony, environmental degradation, and the cycle of regeneration. The study investigates how these works address ecological concerns and reflect on the wider societal consequences of humanity's interaction with the natural world.

Keywords: Nature, Mythology, Environment, Ecology

Introduction

The word "environment" is derived from the French word "environner," which means "to surround." The physical and biological surroundings of an organism, in addition to its interactions, are all viewed as components of its environment, as outlined by the Environmental Protection Act of 1986. The environment includes air, land, and water, all of which directly affect human life. At present, humans have started polluting the environment due to the excessive use of resources and the discharge of pollutants. As a result, a situation of imbalance is arising between human life and nature. In this context, scholars study literary texts and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view and try to describe how the environment is treated in literary works. They also aim to raise awareness about the environment.

The term "ecocriticism" was first introduced by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*. He used it to describe the way ecological ideas and environmental

awareness could be applied to the study of literature. Over time, ecocriticism expanded to include all aspects related to the natural world, growing significantly in scope. In 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was founded, marking an important milestone. Following that, in 1993, Patrick Murphy started the academic journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE), which further advanced the study of environmental issues within literature. One of the most significant contributions to ecocriticism was made with Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* in 1995. The following year, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm co-edited *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996. Recognized as a key figure in ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (1996: xviii).

The realization that the natural world, if left unprotected, may lose its beauty and vitality has contributed to the rise of ecocriticism as an important field of inquiry. While nature frequently appears in literary texts, not all depictions of nature fall within the scope of ecocriticism. A defining feature of ecocritical literature is the exploration of relationships between human and non-human entities. Ecocriticism extends beyond representation; it seeks to deepen the understanding of the natural world and advocates for the preservation of ecological integrity and the rights of the environment itself.

Ecocriticism seeks to uncover the ways in which cultural narratives influence human perceptions of the natural world. Indian mythology, with its intricate cosmology and ethical frameworks, provides fertile ground for ecological reflection. Within these narratives, nature is frequently portrayed with human qualities—as both a nurturing presence and a destructive force—emphasizing the fragile balance between creation and annihilation that defines the natural order.

This ecological perspective is vividly expressed in contemporary mythological retellings such as Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. These texts offer modern reinterpretations of ancient myths, presenting imaginative portrayals of the connections between divine figures and the environment. Through an ecocritical perspective, this study investigates how environmental themes are woven into the mythological fabric of these works, analyzing their depictions of nature and the broader implications of human interactions with the ecological world.

Amish Tripathi, deeply interested in history, mythology, and philosophy, thoughtfully blends these fields in his *Shiva Trilogy*, establishing himself as one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of Indian epics in the twenty-first century. His literary journey commenced with a reimagining of the life of Lord Shiva, drawing inspiration from the *Shiva Purana* and other Puranic texts. *Shiva Trilogy*—comprising *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013)—marks his debut in Indian mythological fiction. Rooted in the myth of Lord Shiva, the series constructs a fictional narrative that explores philosophical and ecological themes with a modern sensibility.

A central motif in the trilogy is the sanctity of nature and its indispensable role in sustaining human life. Tripathi vividly reconstructs the ecological landscape of ancient India around 1900 BC, following Shiva's symbolic journey from Mount Kailash while subtly advocating for environmental preservation in the present day. Natural features such as the Saraswati River, the Himalayas, and the dense Dandak forest are not merely geographical settings but carry profound spiritual significance. They embody the symbiotic relationship between nature, humanity, and divinity. Through this mythological framework, Tripathi underscores the vital importance of a balanced and healthy ecosystem in ensuring the well-being of society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* offers a feminist reimagining of Draupadi's life, the central female figure in the *Mahabharata*, one of India's most revered epics. Told from Draupadi's own perspective, the novel revisits the ancient narrative through an ecocritical lens, emphasizing her deep and often overlooked connection with the natural world, particularly during her years of exile. A close reading of the text reveals a critical engagement with themes of war and environmental degradation, highlighting the ways in which human greed, pride, and violence wreak havoc not only on societies but also on ecosystems. The novel portrays nature as both a victim of and a witness to human excess, while simultaneously serving as a mirror to Draupadi's inner emotional and psychological journey. Draupadi's connection with nature becomes a metaphor for her struggle for freedom, offering a powerful ecological and feminist commentary. In this way,

Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi transcends traditional interpretations, positioning her as a figure whose identity is intricately linked with the rhythms and realities of the natural world.

The relationship between humans and the natural world emerges as a central theme in both *Shiva Trilogy* and *The Palace of Illusions*. In Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, nature is portrayed as sacred and intrinsically linked to the divine order. However, this equilibrium is disrupted by human intervention, particularly through the exploitation of Somras—a substance symbolic of technological advancement and ecological imbalance. In contrast, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents a more nuanced depiction of nature, portraying it as both a sanctuary and a powerful, at times threatening, force. Despite the differing representations, both texts underscore the profound impact of the natural environment on the characters' development. Nature acts as a mirror to human actions, offering insight into identity, morality, and the consequences of human behavior.

Shiva's deep reverence for nature in *Shiva Trilogy* parallels Bhishma's spiritual connection to the Ganges in *The Palace of Illusions*. For Bhishma, the Ganges symbolizes purity, strength, and a return to one's origins. In *Shiva Trilogy*, Shiva's affinity for rivers, mountains, and untouched landscapes reflects his belief in nature as a source of spiritual growth and transformation. As Shiva says, "I don't believe in symbolic gods. I believe that the real god exists all around us. In the flow of the river, in the rustle of the trees, in the whisper of the winds. He speaks to us all the time. All we need to do is listen." (*The Immortals of Meluha* 47) Both characters seek refuge and clarity in the natural world, which provides solace amid the chaos of human conflict. These connections emphasize the characters' alignment with a cosmic order that transcends the disorder of human ambition.

However, this reverence is contrasted by the anthropocentric tendencies of human societies depicted in both narratives. In *Shiva Trilogy*, the Suryavanshis' continued use of Somras, despite its destructive consequences on the Saraswati River, exemplifies a utilitarian attitude that prioritizes human advancement over environmental preservation. This exploitation reflects a broader ecological crisis rooted in short-sighted resource extraction. Likewise, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni critiques the mindset that prioritizes human ambition over the environment, especially through the destruction of the Khandava forest. Arjuna set fire to the forest, leading to the loss of countless lives and the destruction of a thriving natural habitat. This event highlights how, in the pursuit of power or political gain, ecological concerns are often ignored, reflecting a perspective that sees nature simply as something to be exploited for human purposes.

The destructive impact of war and battle on both humanity and the environment is vividly portrayed in *Shiva Trilogy*. Maharishi Bhrigu's use of the daivi astra in order to stop Shiva from reaching Panchavati illustrates the devastating consequences of unbridled human ambition. The weapon's immense power permanently scars the natural landscape, underscoring the irreparable damage caused by technological and ideological extremism. This crucial event mirrors the devastation of the Kurukshetra war in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, where violent conflict erodes both moral values and environmental stability. In both texts, war is not merely a human tragedy but a rupture in the ecological fabric, emphasizing the urgent need for a more harmonious relationship with nature. Ultimately, these narratives serve as cautionary tales, warning against the perils of unchecked anthropocentrism and underscoring the intrinsic value of the natural world.

Through their narratives, both Amish Tripathi and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni emphasize the enduring significance of nature, tracing its sacred and ecological importance from ancient times to the present. Their works collectively convey a powerful message: the survival of humanity is inextricably linked to the preservation and respectful stewardship of the natural world. Without a conscious effort to conserve the environment, the balance between humans and nature—central to both mythological and ecological harmony—stands at risk of irreversible disruption. Both *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni offer powerful ecocritical perspectives through their reinterpretations of Indian mythology. By weaving nature into the spiritual, emotional, and moral journeys of their characters, these authors highlight the intrinsic bond between humanity and the natural world. In Amish Tripathi's work, nature is revered as sacred and central to cosmic balance, while in Divakaruni's narrative, it becomes a space of introspection, resistance, and transformation. Despite their different approaches, both texts underscore the consequences of environmental exploitation and anthropocentrism, warning against the destructive outcomes of unchecked human ambition.

Through symbolic landscapes, mythological references, and ecological metaphors, the authors trace the significance of nature from ancient times to the present. Their works serve not only as literary reimaginings of ancient tales but also as urgent reminders of the need for environmental consciousness. Ultimately, both writers assert that the survival of humanity depends on restoring and preserving our relationship with the natural world—a message that resonates strongly in today’s era of ecological crisis.

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