

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

Tracing Environmentalism and its Social Dimensions in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
Brotherhood of the Conch Trilogy

POOJA RAWAL

Lecturer in English, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar Govt. College, Sriganganagar (Raj.)

Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner (Raj.), India

Contact at: rawal.pooja9@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Amid the plethora of 'isms' environmentalism gained its footing in the west by the second half of the twentieth century. It was introduced as "a political and ethical movement that seeks to improve and protect the quality of the natural environment"¹ by curbing harmful human activities. In this context Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is internationally acclaimed for presenting environmentalism as a campaign. Gradually this movement stretched itself from the concerns of wildlife and wilderness to include wider social concerns of human health, hygiene, food and shelter. A society, according to Raymond Williams, constructs its notions of 'nature' and 'culture' through the literature of that age. The way nature is represented in literature, determines people's attitude towards nature, surroundings and environment. In the 21st century the expeditious growth in population, urbanization, industrialization and technological advancement has resulted into depletion of resources, deforestation, low biodiversity, desertification, flooding and ecological imbalance. At this juncture literature comes up as a powerful agent that brings man closer to nature and enlightens him about environmental hazards. Divakaruni's magical fantasy series *Brotherhood of the Conch* (2003-2009) is an identical attempt to discourage man from committing ecocide, by reassessing and reviving his connection with nature. The present paper intends to locate the conspicuous element of environmentalism and its social dimensions in Divakaruni's trilogy. It also explores the twin shades of man's relationship with natural environment and proposes a state of equilibrium.

Key Words: Nature, Environment, Resources, Harmony, Hostility, Environmentalism of the Poor

Recently our planet has celebrated the World Environment Day 2017 where the environmentalist discourse remained focused on the theme of 'Connecting People to Nature'.² This theme was aimed at bringing man closer to nature so that he may appreciate its beauty, acknowledge its worth and preserve its riches for the posterity. This is what literature has always been doing.

Whether it is Sumitranandan Pant's nature poetry, Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1850), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Mahasweta Devi's *The Book of the Hunter* (2002), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) or Ruskin Bond's *The Book of nature* (2008), man's bonding with nature and environment has always been a vital theme to literature. In this series *Brotherhood*

of the *Conch* (2003-2009) trilogy by the famous South-Asian writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a chain of three magical and fantastical tales. Between the lines, this magical fantasy series carries several serious environmental issues. The author not only probes into the root cause of these environmental problems but comes up with solutions also. Book one *The Conch Bearer* (2003) sets the stage for man-nature interaction, the second book *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005) reveals the ideal state of man-nature unison and the third book *Shadowland* (2009) envisages a dystopian future where the man has turned hostile towards nature and is paying a heavy price for it. Divakaruni herself has acknowledged in an interview: "The third book, *Shadowland*, is an environmentally themed novel and portrays a world that has been thoroughly devastated."³

To understand this trilogy as a narrative of environmental concerns, one has to assume the Silver Valley as an eco-friendly hub, the conch as a symbol of natural resources, the scientists as recklessly ambitious modern man, the magicians as the environmentalists and the twin heroes of the series-Anand and Nisha as mediators.

Anand and Nisha, two teen agers from the slums of Kolkata come to the Silver Valley which is located in the lap of the Himalayas. They are warmly welcomed in this natural habitat where the profundity of fauna and flora is captivating. The tall trees entwine themselves in beautiful patterns and the paths of this valley are strewn with silver flowers of the parijat trees. Since the land is very fertile, herbs and flowers grow naturally. The natural surroundings of the valley keep changing everyday to "indicate the balances of good and evil".⁴ Nature is not merely a backdrop here; it is an independent active agency. It has an emotional connect with man which is experienced by Anand during one of his lessons. When Anand is afraid of falling down from the watch tower tree, just then the tree winds a green tendril around his wrist to grab him. The way the tree acts, thinks and moves like any living being, shocks Anand. At this his mentor Vayudatta smiles saying: "Don't be alarmed, Anand. The watchtower tree senses your fear. It's trying to reassure you that it will not let you fall."⁵ Like this tree, the conch also

possesses human sentiments. It talks to Anand and guides him like a true friend. In the valley natural elements like the air, the water, the fire and the sky are adored in the form of deities. The Silver Valley is a "self-contained community"⁶ which is founded on the harmony of man and nature. The dwellers of this valley have ascetic lifestyle; therefore, this valley never lacks in resources. The healers and the apprentices serve nature which in turn fulfills all their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. Having their meager needs satisfied, the healers share their resources with the needy of nearby village. Both human and non-human life forms live here in perfect harmony until one day the scientists from a distant land send their forces to the Silver Valley and rob it of its beatitude and the conch, an object of power. As a result the flourishing valley turns into a "frozen wasteland"⁷ and all its inmates are pulled into the abyss.

Tempering with the conch which is a metaphor for natural resources, results in the ecological imbalance of the valley. Anand and Nisha are shocked to find "How can everything disappear like this, without leaving the slightest trace?"⁸ Both of them travel through time to restore the conch and the composure of the valley. They reach *Shadowland* where they are welcomed with tube guns that drain all their energy and leave them paralyzed. Unlike the Silver Valley *Shadowland* epitomizes the antagonism between man and nature. The scientists with their rain harvesting projects, artificial cloud seeding techniques, weather modification experiments, genetic experimentation, excessive use of growth enhancers and machines like X-Converter and X-Finder, have fatally damaged nature. The densely populated city lacks natural resources and is fighting with the problems of "prolonged droughts, receding oceans, dying animals, withering crops, air that is increasingly harder to breathe."⁹ There are neither natural winds nor natural flowers. The air, the earth, the water and the skyscape everything has become polluted. The air has turned brown and even indoors it is so poisonous that one has to wear mask all the time. The stinky smell of air can scrape ones throat and hurt the lungs. The earth has turned dirty yellow where not even the weeds grow. People can't grow

flowers or cultivate gardens because the little space that is available has to be used for growing food items. Piles of garbage are heaped against large buildings. Surroundings are filthy, nasty and dingy. In the name of community the citizens of Shadowland are divided into three sections - the scientists, the magicians and the commoners who live in Coal, Kol and garbage dumps respectively. The scientists of this city have kept the stolen conch in a lab to be harvested later and the energy emitted in the process will be used for purifying water and air for the scientists. What a vicious circle is this!

Having presented two contrasting attitudes towards natural environment, Divakaruni goes on to consider their impact on social environment. In the Silver Valley where man and nature live in proximity, nature is bountiful and the sentiments of love, affection, caring, sharing and brotherhood flourish. People value the needs of each other. The masters and the apprentices share their responsibilities and rewards. They work in harmony and laugh together. Peace and joy prevail this valley which is governed by the powers of natural elements and the powers of mind. On the other hand the antagonism between man and nature in Shadowland has bred the scarcity of natural resources. People are fighting over these limited resources. The scientists have prevented healthy communication through jammers and voice clips. Conflict, competition, strife, pain, agony hopelessness, listlessness, sullenness, and silence pervade the whole city which is governed by the powers of science and technology. There is strong disparity among the scientists, magicians and the commoners. The hierarchies are strictly observed where the scientists are on the top of the pyramid. They revel in endless luxury with inventions like Instant-communicators, flying vehicles, pod-messages, "Fresha-vents and Simulo-Suns".¹⁰ The magicians have lost most of their powers and are threatened by the scientists who have positioned missiles along the borders of Kol. In the strife of these two groups, the situation of the commoner is the worst. They have neither magical powers nor technological assistance. They are no better than the corpse. The social inequalities in Shadowland are the result of distorted equations of nature. The magicians who are the spokesmen of

environmentalists exhort the scientists, "You have no understanding of how hard we work to keep the energies of the earth balances, to heal things. We just can't heal them as fast as you're destroying them- you and your cohorts, the machine manufacturers who refuse to follow the safety guideline we set."¹¹

By giving environmentalism a Marxist slant, Divakaruni shows that the power structures of society affect the distribution of natural resources. Social injustice pops up when a large chunk of natural resources and energy is enjoyed by the wealthier class and the marginalized section hardly gets any access to them. The uneven distribution of these resources cements the class disparity further. Lesser sources lead to dissatisfaction that results in crime and social injustice. This is what happens in Shadowland where most of the energy resources are wasted by the scientists in creating the artificial universe and keeping smart security system for their labs. The scientists have all the comforts and amenities at their disposal. On the other side the magicians and the commoners wear tattered clothes, live in filthy slums and eat mush in the name of food. The scientists treat the commoners like non-entities, vermin and street scum. The height of disparity is evident in the fact that the commoners and the magicians are sold and bought by the scientist like commodities. The process of exploitation goes on double fronts. The scientists exploit nature and man simultaneously. They abuse nature, cause pollution but it is only the commoners who breathe in sulphuric air and drink contaminated water as they don't have hi-tech filtering devices like the scientists have. The growing frustration of the commoners turns them into criminals and chaos becomes order of the day. The argument between the scientists and the magicians throw light on the anarchic situation of Shadowland. The magicians report:

'Robbery and vandalism have increased to such an extent that the police force can no longer handle it.'

'That's why we've recommended the creation of a larger elite police force,' says a scientist. 'We've allotted enough money in our budget to buy them the best cars and

firearms. And we've come up with a highly advanced weapon that doesn't require bullets-'

'I'm against that,' a magician says emphatically. 'Violence against our own people is no solution. If we want to rescue crime, we have to fill their empty stomachs.'¹²

This reaction by the magicians is in accordance with the concept of 'environmentalism of the poor'¹³ which was extended by the environmentalists like Ramchandra Guha and Juan Martinez. The basic framework of this notion suggests that in poorer nations the concept of environmentalism cannot be de-linked from issue of livelihood, distribution of resources and social justice. According to Guha the western environmentalism is inspired by wild life and wilderness while Indian environmentalism is more about human survival. Between the battle of environmentalists and industrialists the one who suffers, is the poor class who is dependent on agriculture or forests for its survival. Deforestation for industries and evacuation of agricultural land for wildlife sanctuaries appears a mockery when a large chunk of population is deprived of the sources of its livelihood. The policies related to the environment and industrialization should be made keeping in mind the poor. Divakaruni seems to support this notion in *Shadowland*. Through Anand and Nisha she tries reconciliation between the scientists and the magicians that goes in the favour of common man. The council recommends "a more stringent lifestyle for all- especially the scientists, who have grown overly fond of luxury."¹⁴ It orders to dismantle the domes, turn off the jammers, 'Fresha-Vents and Simulo-Suns' of the scientists so that the power thus freed may be stored in the lab and used to improve conditions in the more beleaguered parts of the city. The scientists are allowed to send the rockets on the condition that they will use only safe chemicals. The magicians suggest using ancient breathing techniques to cleanse the air one inhales. The commoners come forward for manual help in the cleansing project. The youngsters form 'Youth-Kol group' that carts away much of the street garbage to the dumps. A community kitchen is opened where people can get food at affordable

price. They can eat together and laugh together. Everyone contributes in the reconstruction of the environment. In this process all the three communities closer to each other as well as to their environment. Having turned the Shadowland into a land of light, Anand and Nisha go back with the conch and restore the bliss of Silver Valley.

Lawrence Buell, the pioneer of ecocriticism, has suggested four criteria for evaluating a text as embodying an environmental consciousness:

- (i) The non-human dimension is an actual presence in the text and not merely a façade- thus implying that human and non-human worlds are integrated
- (ii) The human interest is not privileged over everything else.
- (iii) The text shows humans as accountable to the environment and any actions they perform that damages the ecosystem.
- (iv) Environment is a process rather than a static condition¹⁵

Measured by it, Divakaruni's trilogy deserves every claim to be called environmentally conscious work. These scintillating tales inspire to take small initiatives today with a broader vision of tomorrow. The Silver Valley upholds ethical and ecological concerns. The dismal vision of Shadowland is a forewarning of the extinction of life on this planet. Divakaruni has offered a middle path. She doesn't endorse primitivism but prefers a sustainable pattern of development in which the demands of the present should be met with an eye towards the needs of future. This trilogy reminds that we can't brush aside the problems emerging out of industrial waste, e-waste and radioactive waste. Timely action is need of the hour lest our planet should turn into Shadowland. In a very lucid and engrossing manner Divakaruni has merged literary studies with environmental activism and has tried to bridge the gap between man and nature, 'ecology' and technology, anthropocentrism (human-centered) and biocentrism (life-centered) and socialism and environmentalism.

REFERENCES

1. Eliot, Lorraine. "Environmentalism." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica- Social Science, 9 June 2017. Web.

- 20 June 2017.
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism>.
2. "World Environment Day 2017: Here's how you can make earth a better place." *Indiatoday.in*. Indiatoday Group New Delhi, 5 June 2017. Web. 18 June 2017. <<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/education/story/world-environment-day/1/683694.html>>
 3. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. "The Power of Storytelling: An Interview with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." Interview by Metka Zupnacic. *Contemporary Women's Writing* 6.2 (2012): 85-101. Web. 19 January 2016.
 4. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Shadowland: Brotherhood of Conch#3(2009)*. New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt.Ltd., 2011. 217. Print.
 5. _____. *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming: Brotherhood of Conch#2(2005)*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2007. 9. Print.
 6. _____. *The Conch bearer : Brotherhood of Conch#1(2003)* New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt.Ltd., 2008. 214. Print.
 7. _____. *Shadowland : Brotherhood of Conch#3(2009)*. New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt.Ltd., 2011. 19 Print.
 8. Ibid. 13.
 9. Ibid. 137.
 10. Ibid. 142.
 11. Ibid. 138.
 12. Ibid. 137.
 13. Guha, Ramchandra and Juan Martinez-Alier. *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. 1997. London: Routledge, 2013. 3-16. Print.
 14. Shadowland 137.
 15. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. London: Princeton University Press, 1995. 7-8. Print.