



## Ecocritical Contemporaneity in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Buddhisaagar's *Karnali Blues*

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### Abstract

This article explores anthropocentrism, environmental ethics and biophilia in Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Buddhisaagar's *Karnali Blues*. With a focus on contemporaneity in both novels, the paper shows the global nature of environmental problems. It also highlights the urgency of environmental ethics. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is based on the epic, the *Mahabharata*. It negotiates the transactions between humans and nature. Similarly, Buddhisaagar's *Karnali Blues* reflects on human-nature interdependence and its consequences. Although the novels have been widely discussed from the perspectives of gender roles, myth and modernity, and memory and nostalgia, significant scholarly attention has not been given to ecocritical issues. Using a qualitative research approach, this study analyzes *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues* from an ecocritical perspective. For the sake of analysis, the key ecocritical theorists, namely Cheryll Glotfelty, Greg Garrard, and J. Baird Callicott, have been used to critically interpret the novels. The findings emphasize that human beings deeply depend on environmental components. The study

shows interconnectedness and biophilia in both novels. The article argues that despite anthropocentric activities, human beings must not forget environmental ethics. The study underscores the importance of the environment and the urgency of nature conservation. Finally, it concludes that human beings, for the sake of their own existence, must be ethically accountable to nature. To check for further apocalypses, the harmony between man and nature should be maintained.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, apocalypse, biophilia, ecocriticism, environmental ethics

### Introduction

Chitra B. Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* retells the story of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi, the central character, narrates the story. The plot of the novel concentrates on her birth, upbringing, marriage with the five Pandavas and her role as a queen in the palace of Indraprastha. While the narrative primarily focuses on the political conspiracy, discrimination against women, and human destiny, it also highlights anthropogenic impacts, their consequences,

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and biophilia. Though the novel is written at present, it deals with the idea of how human beings used to interact with nature in the past. Additionally, it depicts forests, rivers, and landscapes, and their morphological transformations due to human activities. Likewise, Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues*, set in the Western part of Nepal, particularly the Karnali region, depicts the landscapes, rivers and market places which give the sense of local geography. The novel comprises the regional dialects, colloquial Nepali and local expressions which provide linguistic canonicity. In this light, the study explores man-nature interactions and anthropocentric practices in these two literary works. These narratives under this study display man-nature interconnectedness in the past and at present.

### Review of Literature

Since the publications, *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues* have received significant scholarly attention. The novels have been analyzed from the perspectives of feminist issues, mythological insights, and cultural outlooks. Joseph discusses Draupadi as a new woman in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, thus, "*The Palace of Illusions* offers a feminist reimaging of the *Mahabharat*, focusing on the transformation of Draupadi, ..., into a new woman who challenges traditional gender roles and asserts her agency" (2770). On the one hand, the novel asserts that women emerge as new women by resisting and revolting against traditional patriarchal gender roles. On the other hand, the novelist provides justice to female characters. Apart from the social, economic, and political dimensions of the period, this interpretation ignites the ideas about human affinity, interactions, and perspectives on nature. Besides feminist issues, the novels recapitulate myth and modernity. Variyar and Prajapati argue that, Divakaruni's the *Palace of Illusions* is "A combination of traditional mythology and modernity of the present world is presented

here" (305). Blending myth and modernity, the novel highlights the present-day concerns of identity, gender, and agency. "Unlike the epic, *Mahabharata*, the novel, *The Palace of Illusions* throws light on the causes, sufferings and challenges of female characters. It highlights their role in domestic life and makes one to understand that they are part of the worldly affairs..." (Maheswary 30). Some scholars emphasize the novel's feminist dimension, while others highlight its thematic concerns. The scholarly discussions have situated the novel as one of the important works of fiction that has reinterpreted the traditional epic narrative.

Buddhisagar's *Karnali Blues* is a literary debut, which depicts the father-son relationship, nostalgia, memory and people's hardships in the Karnali region of Nepal. In this regard, Phuyal and KC argue that "Buddhisagar's novel centers on the father-child relationship. Father Harsha Bahadur and son Brisha Bahadur complement each other" (286). On the one hand, the father's compassion toward his son and his forgiveness have been highlighted in the novel. On the other hand, the novel contemplates poverty, struggle, and marginalization of the people. Furthermore, Meena Sharma writes, "*Karnali Blues* has been hailed as a pioneering work in introducing 'new regionalism' in the context of Nepali literature. It narrates the story of mid- and far-western Nepal and aptly captures the lives of groups belonging to the margins" (1). Apart from *Karnali Blues*, his other novels, namely *Eklo* and *Phirphire*, also explore human isolation, love, loss, and individual conflicts, with characters who reflect the uncertainties of contemporary Nepali society. In his novels, Buddhisagar explores personal memory, regional identity, and the hardships faced by marginalized people. The author raises fundamental issues in Nepali society that have long been neglected. Furthermore, the novelist blends realism and nostalgia. The

novel foregrounds the personal memory. Thus, it reshapes modern Nepali literature, helping to establish a unique canonicity within it.

Additionally, *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues* have been widely studied from feminist, psychoanalytical and postcolonial lenses. However, there is a lack of scholarly attention to the nuanced aspects of ecocritical perspectives. Though the novels depict ongoing interactions between human beings and the natural world, these issues remain unexplored in these two literary works. Thus, this study seeks to address the existing gap by analyzing how these novels depict the man-nature relationship and the consequences of anthropocentric activities.

Although scholars have studied Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Buddhisaagar's *Karnali Blues* from various perspectives, namely feminist issues, mythological perspectives, cultural outlooks, new historicism, nostalgia, poverty, and other notable social dimensions, there is a noticeable absence of ecological issues. While *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues* are thematically rich and grounded in rural landscapes, the man-nature relationship, and environmental degradation, existing studies have not explored these issues. The problem lies in the lack of profound study from ecocritical perspectives, as environmental issues have become a central focus in literary studies. Ecocritical perspectives discuss human-nature relationships, human dominance in nature and ethical concerns. In this context, Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Buddhisaagar's *Karnali Blues* present a rich tapestry of human-nature interaction in the landscapes of ancient times India and the Karnali region, particularly the lowland Terai region of Nepal.

Furthermore, the human interactions, negotiations, and perceptions of nature need to be understood in the present context of environmental ramifications. Therefore,

the problem to be investigated is how the writers, through their narratives, imagery, and characters' memories, have depicted the interplay between human beings and the natural environment, and their consequences. Owing to such scholarships, this article aims to answer the following questions:

- a) How do the selected novels portray anthropocentrism and human-nature interconnectedness?
- b) How do the novelists advocate for environmental ethics?
- c) Why do the novelists highlight biophilia?

The article aims to show the interconnections among anthropocentrism, environmental ethics, and biophilia to reveal the significant importance of the environment for humanity. Furthermore, it aims to explore the tripartite relationships between anthropocentrism, environmental ethics, and biophilia. To answer these research questions, this article draws on ecocriticism as a theoretical approach.

### Methodology

This article uses a qualitative research design to analyze *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues*. This research adopts the ecocritical perspective as a theoretical framework to unravel the selected texts. Based on the theoretical concept of ecocriticism, the study portrays Anthropocene, the urgency for environmental ethics, and human-nature interconnectedness.

### Ecocriticism : A Theoretical Framework

It is a prominent act to study environmental issues in literary texts. The way of studying environmental issues in literary texts is known as ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" and an "earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). It explores how nature, environmental problems, and human

actions are incorporated in a literary text. Ecocriticism often emphasizes the interrelationship between humans and nature. Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* discusses pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and the earth. It critiques human-centered ideologies that often lead to environmental exploitation. Garrard underscores the man-nature relationship when he says, "Dwelling is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work" (108). Human beings shape landscapes through culture, labor and rituals, whereas landscapes shape human memory and identity. Human-nature relationships must be rethought in relational rather than hierarchical terms. As Pyne explains, the Anthropocene is "environmental maladjustments-the onset of global warming, the explosion of human population, modern planetary pollution, the triggering of mass extinctions" (158). Human-centered activities have deeper negative impacts on nature. The natural environment contributes to planetary problems such as global warming, climate change, and pollution.

For Hayward, anthropocentrism is "a concern with human interests to the exclusion of non-human, 'attitudes, values or practices which give exclusive preferential concern to human interests at the expense of the interests or well-being of other species or the environment' (63). In this regard, J. Baird Callicott states that anthropocentrism confers "intrinsic value on human beings and regards all other things, including other forms of life, as being only instrumentally valuable, i.e., valuable only to the extent that they are means or instruments which may serve human beings" (299). The anthropocentric attitude is dangerous. Hence, it values only humanity and disregards other non-human components. It leads to the destruction of humanity. Therefore, human beings must

consider the value and importance of land, forests, and the river. They must consider land ethics, forest ethics, and river ethics. Thus, human-nature interconnectedness and anthropocentric practices are the prominent issues to discuss in *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues*.

### **Anthropocentrism in *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues***

Nature is the primary source of livelihood for human beings. Nevertheless, people have been exploiting it for a long time. Since time immemorial, human beings have depended on nature and interacted with each other. However, the interaction sometimes is not mutually beneficial. During the partition, the Pandavas are given the Khandav, the most barren and desolate portion of the kingdom. But amazingly, "The landscape changed; the trees grew stunted; under our feet the earth turned yellow and foul smelling" (Divakaruni 139). The land is unfavorable for residence, and human life is full of hardships. Despite this fact, human activities in Khandav are presented as, "The forest was still burning around us... There weren't any animals left in the wilderness of Khandav-not since Arjun set the forest on fire. The lucky ones had escaped. The rest were dead" (Divakaruni 141). Considering human beings to be the most important part of nature, they exploit and use other animals and resources recklessly. Arjun sets the fire in the forests of Khandava, destroys the wilderness, and kills many animals.

The forest and its creatures are used for human purposes without considering their intrinsic value. Due to the war, the destruction of humanity is beyond imagination. The cruel and violent impact of war can never recover the loss of humanity, as well as the natural resources. Draupadi narrates the ugly sight of the battlefield, "once considered holy but now laid waste by war" (Divakaruni 300). The forests, rivers, and the land remain sacred as long as human beings interact respectfully. She

further states, "Around my husbands the land stretched sick and discolored, great, gaping holes torn into its side by the blasts of *astras*. The few remaining trees were leafless skeletons. There was no sign of the many birds and beasts that had roamed here peacefully just a few weeks ago. ... This was what we had done to our earth" (Divakaruni 300). The war has completely devastated the natural environment. "Dwelling is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry, death, of ritual, life, and work" (Garrard 108). They also move from one place to another for dwelling. Such acts of dwelling must not go beyond their duties and responsibilities.

The anthropocentric activities are equally widespread in the present context. Such activities occur when people seek to fulfill their basic needs, and development activities take place in the locality. Although the settlement is illegal, the dozers crush the whole village, which has negative consequences in Amauri Khola: "The dozers stood on the roof-pole of the house. Its wheels began to spin, its noise made the whole village tremble... A cloud of dust from its walls climbed up into the sky" (Buddhisagar 105). Both human encroachment on nature and its consequences negatively impact nature. It has been tremendously affected by the slow violence on the natural environment. The Matera bazaar becomes overcrowded due to heavy migration, leading to pollution. The purity of water is affected, thus, "As the number of shops grew, litter began to spread across the riverbanks: empty packets of noodles, biscuits, tobacco... many people started cutting their feet on broken glass while they were bathing in the Amauri Khola... Even I gave up bathing in the Amauri Khola" (Buddhisagar 105). The irresponsible human activities cause environmental degradation. Though the growth of shops brings some convenience in the locality, it also causes pollution in the

pristine natural environment.

Consequently, the irrational human habits and behaviors ultimately harm the natural environment. Environmental problems are interconnected with several dimensions. Namely, technological advancements, government policies, and cultural values are important factors that cause environmental problems. "Environmental problems are not only technical but are fundamentally questions of how we live and what we value" (Naess 23). The environmental problems in the vicinity of the Karnali region are the consequences of human dealings with nature.

Human activities have a significant impact on the climate, ecology, and geology of the Karnali region. The narrator mentions the process of formation of Katase bazaar in this manner: "... a bazaar filled with folk tales. A bazaar built by clearing away cutch trees and thickets of jujube trees. ... A bazaar frightened by like a forest squirrel by the harsh sounding horns of buses and trucks" (Buddhisagar 146). Several tales, stories, myths, and legends recount that the Katase bazaar was built by clearing the forest. The land on which the Katase bazaar stands emerged from the massive deforestation. Built by the removal of the natural world, Katase has transformed into a human-centered landscape where people gather during festivities from various places such as "Khairiphanta, Matera, Pahadipur, and Jagatpur" (Buddhisagar 146). Hence, the bazaar has been constructed and has replaced the natural wilderness. To meet human needs, forests are cleared for settlement, roads are built, and markets and industries are established.

After clearing the forest, the land is transformed into either farmland or an urban space. These sorts of activities disturb the delicate interdependence of life on Earth. The writer underscores that anthropocentric human activities have consistently harmed the natural environment. The narrator reflects along these lines, "The pond was



full of rotting *sal* leaves, noodle packets, and broken *raksi* bottles, and its water was cloudy and disgusting. You could hardly call it a pond; it was more than this dirty stinking pond beneath two tall *sal* trees?" (Buddhisagar 150). A pond is a miniature body of water; however, it has a significant impact on the surrounding ecosystem. The pond, which is a symbol of purity, clarity, and cleanness, has been contaminated by the mixed noodle packets, broken bottles, and rotting leaves.

### **Human-Nature Relationship in *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues***

Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* depicts the interconnection between the natural world and human activities. The natural environment, namely the forests, rivers, and landscapes, is transformed by human activities. Human beings are also deeply interconnected with nature. The novel reflects Draupadi's experiences with nature and its influence on her life. Conversely, it illustrates the anthropocentric worldview, in which human activities dominate and exploit natural resources to fulfill human needs. At the same time, the novel reflects sheer human irresponsibility towards nature. Draupadi feels lonely and distracted at the palace of Hastinapur, but she finds solace when she visits the bank of the Ganga River. She expresses her feelings thus, "Wildflowers bloomed along the river, round and yellow, with black centers. There were random piles of white stones. Even I, who preferred gardens to wilderness, could see strange and asymmetric beauty" (Divakaruni 134). Moving some distance from the palace of Hastinapur, she finds the pleasantness of beauty.

Accordingly, the human-nature bond is very strong. Nature is beautiful and mysterious. It is a dwelling place, a source of food and a place of entertainment. Furthermore, it is a source of knowledge as well. The five Pandava brothers do not know how fast the time elapses. They recall

their forest life in this manner, "We lacked no essentials. Arjun always managed to find enough game. Bhim dug up roots and shook ripe fruit from trees. Nakul and Sahadev brought me fawns to pet and milk from wild goats...Yudhisthir sang" (Divakaruni 199). There is a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. While living in the forest, the five Pandava brothers gather their food and find comfort in nature's lap. Nature fulfills their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. This shows nature's benevolence and human beings' reverence for nature. When human beings depend on nature, they should use it sustainably. Thus, the novel subtly highlights the coexistence of man and nature. *The Palace of Illusions* sheds light on the interconnectedness of human nature in ancient times.

Humans and nature always live in proximity, interacting with each other. At the same time, the interaction is harmonious and beneficial. Conversely, the interactions are often adverse. The writer underscores how the Amauri Khola devastated the settlements, "In the afternoon, it was crazy as if it was going to wash the bridge away. As the water rose and reached the *sal* tree on the bank, Bhagiram Tharu...jumped up in alarm. The river is going to do something bad' he said loudly" (Buddhisagar 37). In the modern era, human beings have been irrational. For the sake of development, human beings are using nature irrationally. They have destroyed the forests and demolished the river banks. Human activities, such as the use of machines, have disrupted the harmony of nature. The writer has a strong sense of place connectedness. "Perhaps the most familiar way of imaging place-connectedness is in terms of concentric areas of affiliation decreasing in intimacy as one fans out from a central point" (Buell 64). By mentioning the interaction between man and nature, the writer asserts his strong affinity to such places as Amauri Khola, Katase, Matera and Kalikot. He has a deep love for such places.

The river Amuri Khola is polluted by plastic, clothing, empty medicine bottles, and alcohol and beer bottles. Moreover, the natural setting, grass, and river are extremely affected by man-made pollution. As the author recounts, "those trees looked like tall pillars of cement. It too let loose a yellow stream beneath those trees, then I sat for a long time on the river bank doing nothing at all" (Buddhisagar 168). The narrator exposes the consequences of pollution. Extreme pollution—in such places of natural beauty compels humans to seriously contemplate the future of rivers and forests. They no longer remain beautiful and pleasant. The adverse effects of human indifference to nature are unpredictable.

The nature, particularly forests and rivers, has not been affected by human encroachment and interacts positively. The narrator expresses his romanticized view while observing the Chattiban forest in this manner: "The leaves on the tree turned green. In the Chattiban jungle, the jujubes fruited in clusters, and the koili bird kept on asking, "Who is it? Who is it?" (Buddhisagar 171). Nature asks and responds to many questions. Furthermore, the forest is the source of pleasure and seasonal fruits. The birds communicate in their own ways. Humanity exists and flourishes in nature. The places Chauraha, Amauri Khola, and the blue Karnali have a positive, emotional impact on the narrator. The narrator recalls, "After a long time we saw the peaceful blue Karnali in the distance through a gap between the trees. That was how I left Katase, early one morning" (Buddhisagar 304). Thus, humans and nature interact. Places, animals, rivers, and forests have inseparable memories for people. Furthermore, the hardships faced by humans in the geography of Karnali are beyond imagination. Nature's beauty is really fascinating in the vicinity of Karnali. Nevertheless, it poses a danger to humanity. The narrator recalls his fascination with beautiful nature despite his tiredness.

He recalls the moment thus, "The hills wore a hat of snow and the evening sun was scattered all over it like vermillion" (Buddhisagar 310). Such beautiful scenery has given him a tremendous sense of pleasure. The author has romanticized nature, "When the months of Phagun and Chait come around, the forests flowered red with rhododendron and Mandire taught me to eat their flowers...sitting up in its branches, we ate myrtle berries all day. We hung from its branches like monkeys, making monkey noises" (Buddhisagar 325). Nature is not only the source of pleasure, but also it is a great source of food with the berries available in the forest. Without cultivating and protecting, varieties of food are naturally available in the forest. The wilderness has a great importance in human history.

Human beings must remember, respect, and express gratitude to nature, as it is benevolent toward us. Recognizing the danger to humanity, critics, scholars, and intellectuals should express their concerns about environmental ethics to promote sustainability, localism, and ecological awareness. Cronon implies that "practicing remembrance and gratitude, for thanksgiving is the simplest and most basic of ways for us to recollect the nature, the culture, and the history that have come together to make the world as we know it" (25). Apart from the traditional beliefs, wilderness does not mean separating humanity from nature. Rather, there is an interdependence between human beings and nature. Human beings are not outsiders; on the contrary, nature is not distant and separate from human life. Human beings struggle to live rightly in this world. To respect the environment, human beings must show gratitude, humility and morality towards the natural environment. Along with the narrator, all the inhabitants of Katase, Matera, and Chauraha share a common natural habitat, food, agriculture, and trade. They completely depend on

nature for their survival. However, they lack a profound understanding of the sustainable use of natural resources. Consequently, their activities are environmentally unethical.

### **Draupadi and Brisha Bahadur's Journey: A Sense of Biophilia**

Draupadi and Brisha Bahadur are the narrators and main characters of *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues*, respectively. Both of them have their own affinities to the natural environment. They also articulate their perspectives on nature. Literally, biophilia refers to the strong human desire for nature. Human beings consciously and unconsciously have a strong affinity to nature. Edward Wilson states biophilia as an "innate emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms" (31). They are always seeking rest, retreat, and enjoyment of nature. Though modern society positions humanity above nature, treating man as the head of nature, the undeniable fact is that human beings have always existed in nature's lap. Draupadi expresses her longing for nature as she joins the Pandavas on a great journey. She recalls, ". . . today I couldn't keep my eye off the peaks, the way the light slid and shimmered along them, . . . There was a sharp sweetness to the air" (Divakaruni 345). While on this journey, Draupadi undergoes a profound transformation, and her perceptions of nature change completely.

By reconnecting and reconciling with nature, humanity can experience inner peace and spiritual awakening. At the end of the novel, Draupadi declares man-nature interconnectedness, thus, "Above us our palace waits...Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming and dissolving again like fireflies in a summer evening" (Divakaruni 360). The nature is great, grand, and limitless. Humanity emerges, grows, prospers, and dissolves in the abode of nature.

Brisha Bahadur, the central character of the story, cannot reside in the Terai lowlands. He does not feel happy and comfortable in Kathmandu either. What he consciously and unconsciously longs for is the upper Himalayan region, where one can observe pristine natural beauty. While ascending his journey to Kalikot, he observes "one or two scraps of cloud were tinged with its color too. From the breast of the hill, a snow river was falling like a thin stripe, and near its navel, the roofs of houses shone like tiny bright grains of sand" (Buddhisagar 310-311). Nature has been described as a powerful and dominant resource as it holds its own identity and power. It has been personified with human characteristics. The narrator recalls his fascination with the beautiful nature despite his tiredness. He recalls the moment thus, "The hills wore a hat of snow and the evening sun was scattered all over it like vermillion" (Buddhisagar 310). Such beautiful scenery has given him a tremendous sense of pleasure.

The narrators Draupadi and Brisha Bahadur often reflect their emotional pain, mourning and anxiety due to environmental loss. Deforestation, pollution, and climate change result from human domination of nature. The narrator, Brisha Bahadur, while in the Terai lowland, feels sick and worried because forests have been converted into settlement areas and rivers have been displaced. His emotional sufferings are resolved when he ascends to the highlands of the Karnali region. Initially, Draupadi considers nature to be her enemy. She never appreciates it. However, she reconnects and reconciles with nature. Humanity always longs for nature.

### **Conclusion**

The novels *The Palace of Illusions* and *Karnali Blues* meditate on the human-nature relationship and anthropocentrism. The five Pandava brothers repeatedly visit the forests, rivers, and wilderness. They go for



a forest exile twice in their lifetime. While being away from the palace's luxuries, they learn valuable lessons such as humility, patience, and resilience. The characters are guided by power, pride, and human desires, which dominate harmony with nature. The Pandavas' arrival at Khandava and their wars on the battlefield of Kurukshetra are sights of anthropocentrism. Wars and human-centered activities lead to destruction and ecological imbalance. The novel suggests that the tragedy arises when human beings are arrogant and cannot understand the law and order of nature. Similarly, Brisha Bahadur's journey to various parts of the Karnali region and his narration reflect human affinity with nature and the sights of anthropocentrism.

Undoubtedly, humanity survives and thrives in harmony with nature. In fact, it is a source of wisdom and transformation. The lessons human beings learn from nature help them become free from vanity, anger, and revenge. It teaches us discipline, spiritual awareness, and mutual coexistence. The study suggests that a balanced relationship between humanity and nature is indispensable; breaking the harmony invites catastrophe. Contextually, it is time to notice, rethink, and ethically value nature. Human beings should not forget their roles, duties, and responsibilities while using the entities of nature.

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