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REIMAGINING DRISHADVATI: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF WOMEN, NATURE, AND EMPOWERMENT IN BRIDE OF THE FOREST

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ABSTRACT

Madhavi Mahadevan's *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* reimagines the life of Drishadvati, also known as Madhavi, a woman from the Mahabharata who is subjected to patriarchal exploitation. This paper explores the interconnectedness between women and nature through an ecofeminist lens, focusing on how nature offers solace, shelter, and empowerment to women in times of adversity. Unlike traditional ecofeminist narratives that focus on environmental degradation, Mahadevan's work emphasizes the healing and nurturing bond between women and nature. Through Drishadvati's journey, this paper argues for the acknowledgment of this interconnectedness as a pathway to understand broader themes of autonomy, resistance, and ecological harmony. It emphasises the significance of embracing a more inclusive approach to both gender and ecological justice, advocating for the celebration of nature as a source of strength and renewal for women.

INTRODUCTION:

Madhavi Mahadevan is a renowned mytho-fiction writer. In her fiction, *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* (2020) Mahadevan presents a remarkable retelling of the largest Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. In an interview conducted by Surabhi Rawat and published in the Times of India, titled 'It takes a kind of crisis within yourself to realize you have a gift to write: Madhavi Mahadevan,' Mahadevan shares the inspiration behind her exploration of Drishadvati's character. She highlights that 'The Mahabharata is often regarded as a tale centered on men, heroes, and war, with this particular story existing in the backdrop. Yayati's daughter, Drishadvati, embodies the story of women's exploitation. However, when one connects the narrative threads from its inception to its conclusion, a realization dawns that this is also a journey of self-discovery and self-empowerment. Ultimately, it's a narrative of redemption—for both Drishadvati individually and the entire clan collectively. For me, this story encapsulates themes of forgiveness and compassion. It stands as a beacon of light amidst the overarching darkness within the Mahabharata.'

The story of Madhavi appears in the 'Udyoga Parva' of the Mahabharata. She is the daughter of King Yayati. When Sage Galava sought 800 unique horses from King Yayati to gift to Sage Vishwamitra as gurudakshina, Yayati, unable to comply, offered Galava his daughter Madhavi. Destined for 'royal womb', Madhavi was given to three kings in exchange for priceless horses- first to king Haryashva of Ayodhya, then to king Divodas of Kashi, later to king Ushinar of Bhojnagari. She bore three sons for these kings and was presented to Vishwamitra with 600 horses, eventually bearing his son. After giving birth, Madhavi returned to Yayati, who prepared her swayamvara, but she chose asceticism. Upon Yayati's death, his heavenly stay was brief, and he wandered earth until he met Madhavi. He explained his fall from grace, and moved by his plight, Madhavi implored her four sons who are now famous kings to share merits to redeem Yayati. Initially resistant, the sons embraced forgiveness upon Madhavi's counsel. Their shared merits along with Madhavi's restored Yayati's heavenly status, and he bestowed blessings on Madhavi and her grandson before returning to heaven.

In Her retelling, Mahadevan follows the essence of the original mythological tale but she portrays Drishadvati beyond the boundaries of a passive and helpless character. Instead, Mahadevan portrays her as a kind, compassionate woman but most notably, an outspoken advocate for the injustices and audacious challenges to the constraints of patriarchy. Her Drishadvati not only articulates her choices but also forges an independent path toward claiming her autonomy. As she takes centre stage, Drishadvati's transformation from a meek and obedient daughter to an embodiment of strength becomes a

symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. With a distinct voice and an unwavering sense of agency, she becomes a testament to the empowering impact of allowing readers to reclaim their voices and assert their own identities.

Ecofeminist Insight into *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter*

In the book *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* (2020), Drishadvati's story is told from her own voice - her journey from dwelling in the heart of the forest to her brief sojourns in various palaces, finally her ultimate return to the embrace of the forest. At the heart of the story is her profound affection and intimate connection with the natural world, particularly the forest and its inhabitants. Mahadevan depicts harmony, peace and serenity between Drishadvati and environment. Environmental degradation and exploitation do not find place in the novel, rather it focuses on the mutual interaction between nature and human.

Satish Kumar, an Indian-British activist in his "Three Dimensions of Hindu Ecology: Soil, Soul and Society" (2016), writes, "There is a great deal of difference between learning 'from' nature and learning 'about' nature. When we learn about nature she becomes an object of study, leading to her exploitation...When we learn 'from' nature we establish a close relationship with her. Then there is implicit humility and reverence towards the mystery of her natural processes" (p.142).

Nature is presented as a source of knowledge to lead human lives. It provides sustenance to tribal women and also empowers them to express voices. As Vandana Shiva says "they have the holistic and ecological knowledge of what the production and protection of life is about. They retain the ability to see nature's life as a precondition for human survival and the integrity of inter-connectedness in nature as a precondition for life" (Shiva 45). She expresses that the survival and liberation of both nature and women depend on adopting an ecological approach centered on harmony, sustainability, and diversity, rather than one of domination, exploitation, and excess. Women play the role of stewards of the environment and advocates for sustainable living. Liberated from conventional gender roles, the forest provides an escape from patriarchal norms, encouraging women to express themselves freely. Chayya Datar in *Ecofeminism Revisited* (2011) emphasises local production, decentralization, and support for rural women dependent on natural resources as well as raises awareness about environmental destruction.

Only Drishadvati is strongly connected with forest. Though she is King Yayati's daughter, but her king father does not accept her. She lives in the forest with other tribal women and is treated as one of them. In his article 'Women's Knowledge as

Expert Knowledge: Indian Women and Ecodevelopment,' Dane Curtin discusses tribal women's knowledge of caring. He points out that "Because women have been charged with many kinds of caring labor, women's knowledge is relational. Women tend to locate knowledge in the concrete, relational space between individuals, not in the abstraction of isolated, autonomous individuals. The relations that define community are broader than the human community" (Warren 90). Drishadvati's bond with nature and its inhabitants grows gradually and she finds solace in the lap of nature.

Drishadvati's foster mother shares her wisdom about the forest, reflecting the values passed down through generations of women. When King Yayati laughs at the tribal woman's claim to the forest as their own, Drishadvati's mother responds with confidence "It was my mother's before it was mine" (Mahadevan 26) that implies a sense of ancestral connection and heritage tied to the land. Later her fearless response to King Yayati's scepticism about his daughter's identity not only highlights her self-assured nature but also emphasizes her daughter's rightful presence in the forest. When she asserts, "If you can't provide for her, just say so. She is no burden to me, O king," (Mahadevan 26), she effectively challenges King Yayati's role as a father, pointing out his inability to acknowledge and respect his daughter.

When Drishadvati is brought to the palace, her discomfort becomes apparent. Although she spends just one day within the palace walls, then she is swiftly relocated to Sarmistha's hut, where she assists with all the domestic chores. But, her desire to escape this confinement remains evident: "she ran away twice, was found and brought back" (Mahadevan 181). This shows how Drishadvati's yearns for the natural world and the freedom it represents. Her repeated attempts to return to the forest highlights her profound longing for the wilderness and the familiarity of a life unrestrained.

Drishadvati questions the value and purpose of sons in a patriarchal society and challenges the idea that a woman's highest destiny is tied to motherhood, specifically the taboo of 'putravati bhaba'. She says "Two of your sons have left home. And the third, with a curse on his head, is an old man who needs to be fed and cleaned like an infant. When I wasn't around, you did your own work; now I do it for you. So what good are sons?" (Mahadevan 117). Her questioning of societal norms and her concern for women's well-being highlight the interconnectedness between women's rights, environmental well-being, and the imperative to challenge patriarchal structures. Drishadvati's longing for freedom and questioning of societal norms and ultimately desire for alternative possibilities and the envisioning of a world where women's roles and choices are not limited reflect broader ecofeminist perspective of seeking liberation from oppressive systems.

In the male-dominated society, both the female body and nature are often reduced to mere objects or things, assigned economic gain or utilitarian roles, while disregarding their complexity, autonomy, and intrinsic worth. As Maria Mies in the Preface of the book *Ecofeminism* (1993) says "We also understood that women all over the world, since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like 'nature', devoid of rationality, their bodies functioning in the same instinctive way as other mammals. Like nature they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man" (Shiva and Mies Preface XXIII). Haryashva's desire for male hair, and for this his treating and making sex with of Drishadvati in brutal way, "The moon reduced to its bare skin" (Mahadevan 198) without any emotion can be seen as treating women solely as a means to produce offspring to secure a dynasty, highlighting the utilitarian view of women's reproductive capabilities. This is clear in Drishadvati's words "I slipped from the bed and lay on the bare stone floor, cradling my violated body. It began to shiver uncontrollably. Never had I felt so bereft in my entire life as I did then. Where was the tenderness, the passion that

the love songs went on about? ... Was this how it would be from now? Cold. Lonely. Dark. A lifeless night, with only my strangled sobbing for company" (Mahadevan 213).

Her deep knowledge about forest and profound love for its inhabitants becomes a vital shield for her. As Vandana Shiva says "they have the holistic and ecological knowledge of what the production and protection of life is about. They retain the ability to see nature's life as a precondition for human survival and the integrity of inter-connectedness in nature as a precondition for life" (Shiva 45). During her fever, when royal astrologer tries to make sex with him, Drishadvati ingeniously channels her connection with the natural world. Imitating the ominous hiss of a king cobra, she skilfully averts the impending danger. "I had to be able to breathe, to calm down in order to do what I wanted-it was the only way out. Willing myself to grow still, I waited... slowly the energy uncoiled. It rose within me. Dark, glistening, twisting, expanding, fanning out its head. An angry, attacking energy that made itself known to the world through sound. A warning. A hiss so real that I saw-as I had once before in the forest" (Mahadevan 217). This moment emphasizes how her profound understanding of nature empowers Drishadvati to cope with dangers.

Drishadvati's connection with deer consistently empowers her. Firstly, during her pregnancy, her dreams of deer establish a symbolic link between her maternal state and the innate traits of these animals, potentially signifying strength and adaptability. Later, when a tribal woman tattooist offers to depict swans, symbolizing eternal love, Drishadvati's deliberate choice to have a 'deer' tattoo on her back with a forest backdrop exemplifies her personal journey and embodiment of empowerment. "I describe it to her in detail. The front hooves slightly raised, the head turned sideways so that one beautiful eye looks out at the world, the majesty of the antlers. In the backdrop, a hint of the forest" (Mahadevan 239). By selecting a creature associated with the wild and placing it against its natural habitat, Drishadvati visually communicates her affinity with nature and asserts her autonomy, voices her desire to live freely without the bondage that societal expectations may impose.

Drishadvati spends three years in different palaces across various kingdoms. She always shows no interest in the luxurious surroundings and even dislikes them. Her profound connection with nature and lack of affinity for palace life are evident through the phrases: "You can keep your palaces. They are not for me. Not for me these lofty arches and spacious rooms" (Mahadevan 205) and "This palace is a trap" (Mahadevan 205). On the contrary, the natural environment consistently holds a special place in Drishadvati's life. The depiction of a rain-soaked garden and a mist-covered scene evokes a sense of serenity and pleasure within her. The description of dawn's arrival, the subtle entrance of light, the quietness of the palace, and the distant sounds of birds and boatmen collectively emphasize her harmony with the environment. Through these experiences, she perpetually seeks her liberation, remembering the river's wisdom, "Though you, born as a mortal, are subject to Time, the essence of you, like mine, is in constant motion. Never the same river, but ever the flow. This, too, is liberation" (Mahadevan 253).

The forest is presented as a symbol of freedom and agency for Drishadvati. She decides to live her life beyond the confines of patriarchal norms. On the day of her swayamvara, when her father urges her to consider marrying princes or kings, she declares, "I have nothing in common with these people... how can I spend a lifetime among them? All those women before me were nothing but birds in gilded cages. I desire freedom; how then can I endure a lifetime in a palace?" (Mahadevan 319). Her rejection of the restricted and controlled world of palaces and arranged marriages establishes her reclamation of agency over her life and choices: "I now know whom I must

marry, whose wife I will choose to be" (Mahadevan 319). As Anuja Chandramouli says "By choosing to walk away from all the things she has been taught to aspire towards as a woman, Drishadvati reclaims her agency. Having returned to her beloved forests, she heals and more importantly learns to forgive those who wronged her even benefitting them with supreme selflessness" (The New Indian Express).

CONCLUSION:

Madhavi Mahadevan's *Bride of the Forest: The Untold Story of Yayati's Daughter* exhibits the deep interconnectedness between women and nature. While the novel does not directly address the exploitation of nature or natural resources, it emphasizes the mutual dependence between women and nature. Nature provides shelter, protection, and solace, empowering women to express their voices and assert their autonomy. This relationship reflects the need for ecological justice, emphasizing the interdependence of human and environmental well-being.

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