Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

1

Forests as Narrative Cartographies: A Space Theory Reading of Divakaruni's Environmental Imagination

1. **Shradha Nanda Dash,** Research Scholar, Department of English, Berhampur University, Odisha, India, ORCID iD: 0009-0002-4770-1130
2. **Dr. Ananda Sethi,** Assistant Professor, Binayak Acharya Degree College, Berhampur University
Page No. 1-9

Abstract: *This article posits that in the fiction of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, forests are not merely backdrops or symbols but function as dynamic, agentic spaces that actively shape narrative, identity, and epistemology. Moving beyond traditional ecocritical readings that often frame nature as a passive victim of anthropocentric exploitation, this study employs the theoretical frameworks of spatial theory, particularly the triadic models of Henri Lefebvre and the concept of "thirdspace" from Edward Soja, to argue that Divakaruni's forests are complex "narrative cartographies." These literary maps chart her characters' psychological, cultural, and spiritual journeys, most women navigating diasporic, historical, and mythological landscapes. Through a close reading of select novels, including The Mistress of Spices (1997) and The Forest of Enchantments (2019), this paper demonstrates how Divakaruni's environmental imagination reconceptualises the forest as a heterotopic site of transformation, resistance, and knowledge production. It is a liminal space where the binaries of culture/nature, self/other, history/myth, and realism/magic realism dissolve, enabling the emergence of new subjectivities and alternative narratives. This article contends that by mapping her characters' trajectories onto these arboreal geographies, Divakaruni contributes to a postcolonial ecocritical discourse and crafts a potent feminist spatial practice that rewrites women into the heart of both story and space.*

Keywords: *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Spatial Theory, Narrative Cartography, Ecocriticism, Postcolonial Ecology, Feminist Geography, The Mistress of Spices, The Forest of Enchantments, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja.*

Introduction: Charting the Arboreal Narrative

Spaces of transition and transformation richly populate the literary landscape of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. From the cramped, aromatic confines of an Indian spice shop in Oakland to the sprawling, mythic forests of the Indian epics, her settings are never inert. They breathe, influence, and possess a narrative agency that often rivals that of her human characters. Among these potent spaces, the forest stands out as a particularly recurring and complex trope. It is more than a collection of trees; it is a realm of possibility, a testing ground for the spirit, a repository of ancient wisdom, and a crucible for identity formation. This paper argues that to appreciate the depth of Divakaruni's environmental imagination fully, one must move beyond a symbolic or purely ecological reading of these forest spaces and instead understand them as what can be termed "narrative cartographies."

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

The concept of "narrative cartography" here is twofold. First, it refers to how the forest's physical and metaphysical geography actively maps the characters' inner and outer journeys. The paths taken, the clearings discovered, the rivers crossed, and the creatures encountered are not random plot points but form a deliberate cartographic design that charts psychological growth, cultural conflict, and spiritual awakening. Second, it signifies Divakaruni's authorial project of *mapping* alternative worlds and histories onto the known world. She uses the forest as a blank space on the patriarchal, colonial, and modernist map to inscribe new stories, particularly those of women whose narratives have been marginalised or ossified by tradition. This cartographic endeavour is a profoundly political one, aligning with postcolonial and feminist projects of reclamation and re-narration.

To theorise this function of the forest, this paper turns to spatial theory, a critical framework that insists space is a social product, active and lived, rather than a passive container. The work of French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre is foundational. In his seminal *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre dismantles the notion of space as a neutral void, proposing instead a conceptual triad through which all social space is produced and understood:

1. **Spatial Practice (Perceived Space):** The physical, material space that can be measured and mapped—the trees, paths, and geography of the forest.
2. **Representations of Space (Conceived Space):** The space conceived by planners, architects, scientists, and social engineers—the forest as an economic resource (timber), a political border, or a protected national park. It is the dominant, abstract space of power.
3. **Representational Spaces (Lived Space):** The space is directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and the complex, often unconscious, lives of its inhabitants. This is the space of the imagination, myth, memory, and resistance. It is the forest as a sacred grove, a place of fear and wonder, a site of personal memory and cultural story.

Building on Lefebvre, geographer Edward Soja, in *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), proposes the concept of "Thirdspace." This is a creative recombination of the first two terms of Lefebvre's triad (the real and the imagined, the perceived and the conceived). Thirdspace is a radically open and inclusive space of possibility, a "lived space of radical openness" where everything comes together… subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable" (Soja 57). It is a space that challenges all binaries and totalizing narratives.

Divakaruni's forests are quintessential Thirdspaces. They are simultaneously real, tangible ecosystems and imagined, mythic realms. Patriarchal and colonial discourses conceive them as wilderness spaces to be tamed or resources to be exploited. However, they are *lived* by her characters (and by the forest itself) as spaces of magic, agency, and subversion. By applying this spatial lens, we can see how her fiction performs a powerful ecological and feminist intervention. It resists the conceived space of patriarchal and imperial domination—which seeks to map, control, and extract from both land and women's bodies—by foregrounding the lived, experiential space of the forest and its inhabitants.

This article will first establish the theoretical framework in greater depth, weaving together spatial theory, ecocriticism, and feminist geography. It will then proceed to analyse two of Divakaruni's most forest-centric novels. The first, *The Mistress of Spices*, presents a diasporic context where a magical forest's wisdom is translocated to an urban American setting, creating a palimpsestic space where Old World knowledge confronts New World

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

realities. The second, *The Forest of Enchantments*, is a direct and deliberate re-mapping of the ultimate Indian epic forest, the Dandaka forest of the Ramayana, from the perspective of Sita. This novel represents the apex of Divakaruni's project of narrative cartography, using spatial theory to dismantle a millennia-old conceived space and re-inhabit it as a lived, feminist Thirdspace. Through this analysis, this paper aims to demonstrate that Divakaruni's environmental imagination offers a crucial model for understanding how space, story, and self are inextricably linked in the postcolonial and feminist project.

Theoretical Coordinates: Space, Story, and the Lived Environment

Before navigating the specific geographies of Divakaruni's fiction, it is essential to chart the theoretical territory that informs this study. The analysis rests on a triangulation of three interrelated critical domains: Spatial Theory, Ecocriticism, and Feminist Geography. Together, they provide the tools to decode the forest as a narrative cartography.

1. The Spatial Turn: From Container to Agent

The "spatial turn" in humanities and social sciences marked a paradigm shift from understanding space as a static, neutral backdrop—a container in which history unfolds—to recognising it as a dynamic, socially constructed, and politically charged agent in its own right. In a 1967 lecture, Michel Foucault noted, "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" ("Of Other Spaces" 22). This shift dethroned time and history as the primary categories of critical analysis and brought space to the forefront.

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* is the cornerstone of this turn. His critique aims to reduce space to a mental abstraction or a mere physical fact. For Lefebvre, space is a social product, continuously generated and transformed by social relations, actions, and struggles. His triad is not a rigid classification but a set of interacting moments:

- **Spatial Practice (Perceived):** This ensures continuity and a degree of cohesion. In a social formation, spatial practice "secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction" (Lefebvre 38). It is the daily routine, the network of paths, the physical infrastructure. In a forest, this is the ecosystem itself: the cycle of seasons, animal migrations, the growth of trees, and the physical paths worn by animals or people.
- **Representations of Space (Conceived):** This is the dominant space in any society, tied to the "relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose" (Lefebvre 33). It is the space of planners, bureaucrats, scientists, and cartographers—a space of verbal and visual signs, codes and knowledge. This is the forest mapped for logging, designated as a reserve, surveyed for its resources, or depicted in colonial literature as a "heart of darkness" to be conquered. It is space as an instrument of power and control.
- **Representational Spaces (Lived):** This is the inhabitants' and users' subordinate, appropriated space. It is "space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre 39). It is complex, symbolic, and often unconscious. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects. This is the forest of folklore, childhood memory, spiritual retreat, fear and enchantment. It is the space that resists the purely functional logic of conceived space.

Edward Soja's "Thirdspace" emerges from a desire to break the persistent binary thinking that plagued even Lefebvre's triad—a tendency to see the perceived and conceived as opposites. Soja argues for a "thirding" of this binary, introducing an "Other" term that "does

not derive simply from a combination of the two but… contains them in a… recombinant and radically open way" (Soja 61). Thirdspace is the space where the real and imagined, the abstract and concrete, the past and present, are simultaneously held. It is a space of endless possibility and critical potential, from which new perspectives and politics can emerge. For literary analysis, Thirdspace is the realm of the text, where the real city of Oakland and the imagined magic of spices can co-exist and interact to produce new meanings.

2. Second Wave Ecocriticism: From Nature to Environment

Traditional, or first-wave, ecocriticism often focused on nature writing, wilderness preservation, and a sometimes-romanticised view of "Nature" as a pure, separate realm to be revered. It risked falling into a form of ecological essentialism. Second-wave ecocriticism, or "green cultural studies," complicated this picture. Influenced by poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism, it began questioning the categories of "nature" and "environment."

In The Environmental Imagination (1995), Lawrence Buell argued for a literature that forces a reconsideration of the human place in the natural world. Later, in *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), he expanded this to include urban and degraded environments, emphasising that "environment" is not just wilderness but the entire physical context of life. This aligns perfectly with Lefebvre's notion of socially produced space—no "natural" space is untouched by social processes.

Postcolonial ecocriticism, spearheaded by scholars like Rob Nixon (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2011) and Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (*Postcolonial Ecologies*, 2011), explicitly connects the exploitation of land with the exploitation of colonised peoples. They show how environmental degradation and social injustice are often two sides of the same coin. The conceived space of colonial capitalism produces landscapes of extraction and plantations, overwriting the lived spaces of indigenous populations and their relational understanding of the land. While not always explicitly about colonial ecology, Divakaruni's work is deeply informed by this postcolonial condition, where landscapes are always inscribed with histories of displacement and power.

3. Feminist Geography: Embodied and Gendered Space

Feminist geography brings a crucial gendered lens to spatial theory. Scholars like Doreen Massey (*Space, Place, and Gender*, 1994) and Gillian Rose (*Feminism & Geography*, 1993) argue that space is not gender-neutral. Patriarchal power operates by controlling space—from the macro-scale of national territories to the micro-scale of the home (the private/public divide). Women's access to space, their right to move freely and safely, and their ability to shape it have been historically constrained.

Feminist geography emphasises *embodied* experience. Knowledge and identity are not formed in a vacuum but in a body that moves through specific spaces. The experience of a forest for a woman is inherently different from that of a man, shaped by societal norms, fears, and expectations. Furthermore, feminist geographers have highlighted the concept of a "sense of place"—not as a rooted, parochial identity, but as a fluid, negotiated, and often contested experience.

Divakaruni's fiction is a literary laboratory for these ideas. Her female characters' journeys are profoundly embodied. Their hunger, pain, desire, and fear are felt viscerally and are inextricably linked to the spaces they inhabit. The forest becomes a site where these gendered spatial constraints can be tested, contested, and sometimes transcended.

Synthesis: The Forest as Narrative Cartography

When these three theoretical streams converge, we have a powerful lens for reading Divakaruni. The forest in her work is:

- A **Lefebvrian social space**: produced by the interplay of its physical reality (perceived), its ideological construction (conceived as wilderness, resource, or danger), and its mythical, personal, and spiritual meanings (lived).
- A **Sojian Thirdspace**: a site of radical openness where the binaries of real/magic, history/myth, India/America, and power/resistance break down, enabling new stories to be told.
- An **Ecocritical environment**: not a pristine nature but a space deeply entangled with human history, culture, and conflict, reflecting a postcolonial awareness of displacement and belonging.
- A **Feminist geographical space**: a territory where gendered spatial norms are imposed but also where they can be subverted through embodied female experience and the creation of counter-narratives.

Thus, as a *narrative cartography*, the forest is the map and the mapping process itself. It is the terrain on which Divakaruni's characters lose and find themselves, and she uses the tool to chart alternative geographies of identity and belonging. The following sections will explore this cartographic project in two distinct literary landscapes.

The Translocated Forest: Thirdspace and Diaspora in *The Mistress of Spices*

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* presents a unique case study in narrative cartography. The forest is not a literal, physical setting for most of the narrative. Instead, it is a remembered, magical space whose logic, power, and wisdom have been translocated into the heart of urban Oakland, California. This translocation creates a dense palimpsest, a layered Thirdspace where the conceived space of American urban reality is constantly disrupted and overwritten by the lived space of an ancient Indian forest. The protagonist, Tilo, is the cartographer-agent of this process.

The novel begins with Tilo's origin story in the timeless, magical spice forest, a classic Representational Space (lived space). It is a realm of sentient spices, a powerful Old One, and a community of women who learn to harness the forest's power. This space operates on a logic entirely different from the modern world. Knowledge is esoteric, communication is with non-human entities, and power is derived from a deep, symbiotic relationship with the environment. The forest's first conception is as a place of learning and power for women, a secluded matriarchal realm. As the Old One tells the young initiates, "This is the place of your becoming… The spices will be your life, your magic, your sorrow" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 5). This initial training grounds Tilo in a worldview where space is alive and agential.

However, this idyllic, perceived space of the forest is also a conceived space of exile and punishment. When Tilo breaks the rules of the forest by using her power for personal vengeance, she is banished. Her punishment is to be sent to a new, foreign space: Oakland. The Old One maps her mission: "You will go to a city by the bay… in the land of the Americans… You will open a shop" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 25). This movement from a mythic Indian forest to a postcolonial American city is crucial. It sets up a dialectical tension between two conceived spaces: the ancient, mystical East and the modern, materialist West.

Tilo's spice shop in Oakland becomes the nodal point of this spatial conflict. Physically, it is a perceived space within the conceived grid of an American city—a place of commerce. However, Tilo transforms it into a lived Representational Space, a tiny outpost of the magical forest. The shop is described in organic, forest-like terms: "dark and cool as a cave," with shelves that "curl like forest vines," and smells that are "thick, primal, of another

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

time and place" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 33). Through her rituals and communication with the spices, she overlays the urban landscape with the cartography of her forest training. The shop becomes a heterotopia—a real place that simultaneously represents, contests, and inverts all other conventional spaces (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces"). It is a piece of the forest embedded within the city.

Tilo's role is that of a cartographer for the Indian diaspora community. Her clients are people迷失 (disoriented) in the conceived space of America—the space of immigration officials, racist stereotypes, economic struggle, and cultural alienation. They are lost on the map of their new lives. They come to her with their problems—lost love, failing businesses, racist attacks, homesickness—which are all ailments of displacement. Tilo, using the knowledge of her forest, reads their stories spatially. She identifies the "wrong turns" they have taken on their life's map and prescribes a spice to guide them back, to re-chart their course. For Jagjit, the cab driver haunted by memories of violence in Punjab, she prescribes fenugreek to "make new memories, strong and good, to cover the old" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 72). The spice acts as a cartographic tool, re-mapping his psychological terrain.

The central conflict of the novel is a spatial one: the tension between Tilo's sworn duty to her forest-based identity (the conceived space of the Mistress, which demands celibacy and detachment) and her growing desire to inhabit a different lived space—that of an ordinary woman, Raven's lover, embodied and rooted in the physical reality of Oakland. The magical forest, through the voice of the spices, constantly polices this boundary, warning her against "mixing with the ordinary" (Divakaruni, *Mistress* 112). The spices represent the absolute authority of the old conceived space.

Her attraction to Raven, a Native American man, is deeply symbolic at a spatial level. He is himself a figure from a displaced culture, one whose lived space and representational spaces (the sacredness of land) have been violently overwritten by the conceived space of American colonialism. His body is marked with a bird tattoo, symbolising the freedom of space he and Tilo crave. Their relationship represents a potential fusion of two different marginalised spatialities, creating a new Thirdspace of belonging outside dominant cartographies.

The novel's climax is a crisis of cartography. When Tilo chooses to use her power to save Raven, breaking the ultimate rule of the forest, she is severely punished. The spices revolt, the shop burns, and she loses her magical connection to the forest. However, this destruction is also a liberation. It burns away the old, rigid map imposed upon her. Stripped of her magical identity, she is forced to navigate the perceived space of Oakland using only her human, embodied experience. The ending is ambiguous but hopeful. She finds Raven, and though she is now mortal and vulnerable, she is free to draw her map, to produce a new space for herself that is a genuine integration of her past wisdom and her present, lived reality. The translocated forest's authority is dissolved, but its lessons are internalised, allowing for a new, hybrid lived space in the diaspora.

In *The Mistress of Spices*, Divakaruni brilliantly uses the concept of the forest as a narrative cartography to explore the diasporic condition. The forest is the internal map that characters carry within them, a guide that is both necessary and ultimately constraining. The journey involves learning to transpose that map onto a new territory, negotiate the conflicts that arise, and ultimately, create a new, more fluid, personal cartography of belonging.

Re-mapping the Epic: Feminist Thirdspace in *The Forest of Enchantments*

If *The Mistress of Spices* involves translocating a forest's logic, *The Forest of Enchantments* represents Divakaruni's most ambitious and direct act of narrative cartography. Here, she takes the most famous forest in Indian literature—the Dandakaranya of the

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

Ramayana—and completely re-maps it from a feminist perspective. The original Ramayana, a foundational epic of Hindu culture, is a master narrative that has functioned for centuries as a powerful "Representation of Space" (in Lefebvre's terms). It conceives the forest as a space of exile, trial, and danger for the heroic Rama, a wilderness to be traversed and conquered. The woman, Sita, within this conceived space, is a passive object: the abducted victim, the chaste wife to be protected and later tested.

Divakaruni's project is to shatter this dominant conception and recover the forest as a "Representational Space" as lived by Sita. She re-centres the narrative on Sita's embodied experience, transforming the Dandaka forest from a backdrop for Rama's heroics into a vibrant, agentic, and transformative Thirdspace central to Sita's identity formation. The novel is an act of feminist counter-cartography.

The title itself is a declaration of intent. The Sanskrit word for forest, *vana*, is replaced with the English "Forest," but it is modified by "Enchantments." This immediately signals a move away from the conceived space of exile (Aranya, meaning wilderness, is part of the name Dandaka*aranya*) and towards the lived space of magic, mystery, and possibility. It is Sita's forest, defined by her perceptions.

From the very beginning, Sita's relationship with the natural world is established as fundamental to her character. In Mithila, she is the daughter of the earth and has a sacred grove where she communicates with the trees and animals. This innate connection is her source of strength and knowledge. When exile is announced, her reaction starkly differs from the epic tradition. While Lakshmana laments the dangers, and Rama accepts it as his dharma, Sita *chooses* to go. She rejects the conceived space of the palace—the space of patriarchal protection and confinement—and actively chooses the uncertainty of the forest. "The forest called to me," she says, "A longing rose in me… a great adventure" (Divakaruni, *Forest* 59). This active choice reframes the entire narrative. The forest is not a punishment; it is a destination.

Once in the Dandaka forest, Divakaruni's cartographic project unfolds in rich detail. The forest is not a homogeneous void of danger. It is a differentiated, known, and cherished space. Sita learns its paths, seasons, fruits, and secrets. She describes its beauty with a lover's passion: "The forest was a net of jewels cast wide… The air was a perfumed kiss" (Divakaruni, *Forest* 87). This sensual, embodied description directly opposes the typical epic description of the forest as a place of fearsome beasts and demons. She maps the forest through her daily life: the clearing where they build their hut, the river where she bathes, the groves where she gathers food. This space is perceived as experienced and organised by a woman making a home.

The forest also becomes a space of female community and solidarity, a concept absent from the original. Sita encounters and forms bonds with other women of the forest: the ascetic Anjana, the tribal women, and even the demoness Shurpanakha, whose story is told with unprecedented empathy. The forest becomes a conduit for sharing women's stories, grief, and wisdom in these interactions. It functions as a feminist counterpublic sphere, hidden from the dominant male discourse of kingship and dharma. Through Anjana, Sita learns powerful healing herbs, gaining practical, embodied, and life-giving knowledge—a sharp contrast to the destructive knowledge of weapons that the men possess.

The heart of Divakaruni's re-mapping is the abduction episode. In the conceived space of the Ramayana, the golden deer is a trap, and the *Lakshmana rekha* (the protective line drawn around the hut) symbolises male protection that Sita foolishly crosses. Divakaruni dismantles this entirely. In her version, the deer is a beautiful, tragic creature whose magic Sita feels

Literary Enigma *ISSN (Online): 3049-2033*
The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (August 2025)

compelled to understand and alleviate. Her stepping out is not an act of foolish desire but compassion and agency. The *Lakshmana rekha* is reinterpreted not as protection but as confinement. Sita reflects, "It was a prison, that line… a symbol of his lack of faith in me" (Divakaruni, *Forest* 155). She asserts her autonomy by crossing it, even if it leads to catastrophe. This radically alters the moral geography of the epic. The fault is shifted from female transgression to male mistrust and the imposition of limiting boundaries.

Her time in Ashoka Vatika, Ravana's garden-grove in Lanka, is another key spatial re-imagination. It is not just a prison but a gilded cage, a perversion of the natural forest. The plants are too perfect, and the birds sing on command. It represents a conceived space of control and possession, contrasting sharply with the wild, free, and mutualistic space of the Dandaka forest. Sita's resistance here is to be herself, to remain connected to the earth simply (she refuses to sit on the throne he provides, preferring the ground) and to wait, turning his space of display into her inner fortitude.

The final and most powerful act of cartography comes after the war. The public agnipariksha (trial by fire) is the ultimate expression of the patriarchal conceived space—a space of spectacle where a woman's worth must be proven through brutal, public testing. The earth, Sita's mother, rises to take her back, rejecting this violent logic. However, Divakaruni does not end there. In her version, Sita chooses a second exile. She returns to the forest, this time not as an accompanying wife but as a single mother seeking refuge and autonomy.

This is the ultimate creation of a feminist Thirdspace. She goes to Valmiki's ashram, which is not a place of isolation but becomes a thriving community of women and children—other outcasts, widows, and survivors. Here, in the forest, she raises her sons, teaches them her values of compassion and equality, and finds a peace and agency that was never possible in Ayodhya's palace, the epicentre of patriarchal power. Once a site of exile imposed by others, the forest becomes her chosen home, the space where she writes the final chapter of her own story on her terms.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni performs a breathtaking feat of narrative cartography. She takes the most firmly conceived space in Indian cultural history and, through the powerful lens of Sita's lived experience, transforms it into a liberatory Thirdspace. The forest is no longer the setting for Rama's story; it is the protagonist of Sita's. It is the space that allows for the emergence of her voice, her agency, and her alternative vision of love, duty, and justice. By re-mapping this epic geography, Divakaruni does not just retell a story; she reclaims a space for female narrative power within the deepest layers of cultural memory.

Conclusion: The Enduring Map

The forests of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's imagination are far more than scenic backdrops or symbolic representations of the unconscious. As this analysis has demonstrated through the frameworks of Lefebvre, Soja, and feminist geography, they function as sophisticated narrative cartographies—dynamic, agentic spaces that actively produce and are produced by the stories unfolding within them. In *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, the forest is the central engine of plot, character development, and thematic exploration.

In the diasporic context of *The Mistress of Spices*, the forest exists as a translocated logic, a set of rules and a source of power that clashes with the conceived space of urban America. Tilo's journey is one of navigating this palimpsest, using the old map of the spice forest to guide the lost souls of Oakland until she must ultimately confront the limitations of that very map. Her liberation comes from synthesising its wisdom with her lived, embodied

experience in a new land, thus producing a new, hybrid space of belonging. The forest's cartography is internalised and adapted, not discarded.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, the cartographic project is even more profound. Divakaruni challenges the dominant "Representation of Space" encoded in the Ramayana. This patriarchal map charts the forest as a space of exile and the woman as a passive object. Through Sita's voice, she reclaims the Dandaka Forest as a "lived space" and a "Thirdspace" of female agency, community, knowledge, and transformation. She re-draws the map, placing Sita's embodied experience at the centre and revealing the forest as the catalyst for her evolution from a princess defined by others to a woman who defines herself. This is narrative cartography as a radical feminist and postcolonial act.

Divakaruni's environmental imagination, therefore, offers a crucial contribution to contemporary literary and cultural studies. It shows that ecology in literature is not just about describing nature or advocating for its preservation. It is about understanding the deep, constitutive relationship between space and identity. Her work demonstrates that to tell a new story—particularly the stories of those marginalised by gender, race, or history—one must often start by re-mapping the very ground on which the old stories stand. By envisioning forests as narrative cartographies, she provides a powerful model for how we can all learn to read the spaces we inhabit not as fate, but as a text constantly being written and rewritten, and in which we all have the power to inscribe our path.

Works Cited

1) Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.
2) ---. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001.
3) DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George B. Handley, editors. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
4) Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. Simon & Schuster, 2019.
5) ---. *The Mistress of Spices*. Anchor Books, 1997.
6) Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/464648.
7) Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell Publishing, 1991.
8) Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
9) Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
10) Rose, Gillian. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
11) Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell Publishing, 1996.