

Ecology, Patriarchy, and Resistance in *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

The research article examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* through an ecofeminist perspective, emphasising the interconnections of nature, power, and femininity. It analyses the portrayal of the protagonist, Sita, not only as a legend existence, but as a symbol of protest and power, rebounds her narrative from the margins of the Ramayana. The work depicts a complex link between women and nature, wherein Sita's identity is deeply connected with the planet, mirroring ecofeminist ideals. The research examines how Divakaruni resists patriarchal institutions and emphasises women's liberation through a symbiotic relationship with nature, emphasises themes of ecological harmony, resistance, and feminine strength. Eco-feminism focusses on the dominance of nature through people and the societal oppression of women. It primarily examines the oppression of women and environment with patriarchal culture. Thus, it explores both the supremacy of men over women and the dominance of humans over nature. The study also portrays Sita's journey as a powerful ecofeminist critique of environmental degradation and prejudice against women.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Oppression, Culture, Patriarchy, Identity.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee is an Indian-American writer. Divakaruni transformed the narrative of Sita from a feminist viewpoint in her novel *The Forest of Enchantments*. In this reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, Banerjee positions Sita as the central figure in the narrative. *The Forest of Enchantments* is a deeply human narrative that explores the experiences of several other women in the epic, frequently misinterpreted and undervalued: Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, and Mandodari. It is a profound commentary on obligation, treachery, unfaithfulness, and integrity. It pertains to women's endeavour to maintain their individuality in a patriarchal society. Banerjee illustrates Sita's fervour for emancipation upon her return to the Earth of her origin. Sita, a Goddess, was had to prove her innocence through two trials of fire on two different times. Sita was required to live up to the expectations of the patriarchal culture even if she was a Goddess. The novel opens in Sage Valmiki's ashram, where Sita lives with her twin sons, Lav and Kush, after Rama banishes her from his kingdom. Valmiki, having completed his epic *Ramayana*, gives it to Sita to read. When she finishes, the sage asks her opinion, and she says it is very good and captures the descriptions of Earth and Heaven well, "But...what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't either know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt – first in the forest and then in Ayodhya – when I was the most beloved woman in creation" (2). To this Valmiki replies that he wrote what the divine vision showed him. The great sage then tells her, "You must write that story yourself, Ma, for you only know it" (3).

Literature frequently glorifies Sita as the ideal woman, faithful spouse, and devoted mother. Banerjee portrays her nevertheless as an ecofeminist who recognizes the ways in which men control both nature and women. Ecofeminism, a subset of feminism, scrutinizes the relationship between women and the natural world. French author Françoise d'Eaubonne first used the term in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. The ecofeminist research paper emphasises the neglect of both the natural environment and women under patriarchal society. As per Mary Mellor, "Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (1). Another feminist thinker, Susan Griffin in her book *Women and nature: The Roaring Inside Her* Proposals posit that essentialism in ecofeminism does not articulate a political philosophy, but rather illustrates the historical manifestation of the connection between women and nature through their victimization. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita, meaning "furrow," symbolizes nature. She is born from Earth when her father, King Janak, discovers her while ploughing the ground. Sita then writes her own story, "Sitayan," to share her voice and speak for all women who have been overlooked. Sita's mother, Sunaina; Lakshmana's wife, Urmila; Ravana's wife, Mandodari; Ravana's sister, Surpanakha; Rama's stepmother, Kaikeyi; and Sage Gautama's wife, Ahalya. "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (4).

Banerjee portrays the trio's expedition through the forest in a manner similar to the scene in the *Ramayana*. The forest is exploited as invaders encroach onto the territory of the indigenous inhabitants and attempt to subjugate them. Rakshasas were indigenous to the forest and have complete rights to it. Her early years are portrayed as "My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born. Maybe for the same reason, when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties" (7). Women's issues and environmental problems are connected, and ecofeminists work to free both women and nature from male dominance. From an early age, Sita feels drawn to the forest and its people. She is upset at the troops' negligent handling of the trees as she rides in her palanquin to Ayodhya after getting married to Rama, "This is their home, and we are visitors," I added. "We should treat them with courtesy and not cause them needless pain" (56). Sita wanted to experience every aspect of nature and had a wonderful time traveling through the forest. She wanted to smell the sap as she ran barefoot across the grass. "But such things were not allowed to princesses, especially those married into the royal family of Ayodhya" (57). Even in Ayodhya, Sita planted trees and plants on her balcony, and when she heard the rustling of the leaves, she imagined herself in a forest. Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana traveled to the Dandaka Forest during their exile.

Sita foresaw the clash between culture and civilisation and cautioned Rama that the infringement upon the jungle would result in devastation. She warns him that using force to subdue nature will upset the balance of things. She thinks that the woods are home to Rakshasas, who ought to live respectable lives. Rama, however, ignores her. Different ethnic groups still live in Dandakaranya, a mineral-rich geographical area nowadays. The arrival of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana in the Panchabati park is a significant historical event, Sita described it as the "true heart of the forest, mysterious and unspoiled and beautiful home to beings unlike any we had seen before" (127). But Rama and Lakshmana were blind to the grandeur of nature. They believed the woodland animals to be cunning and dangerous. Sita, however, was unaffected by their perception. Sita felt marginalized when her husband banished her to the wilderness. According to Divakaruni:

And then he'd sent me away without even having the courage or the consideration to tell me to my face what he was doing to me and why. Without asking me, his helpmate and queen, what I thought should be done, he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people. (320)

She opposed Rama and Lakshmana's strong desire to tame the wilderness of nature. Later, when Ravana kidnaps Sita and holds her hostage in Lanka's Asoka Garden, nature feels sorry for her. Nature comforts Sita, like a mother does for her child. The trees and animals feel her pain and share it. It makes Sita miss the forest, which she had lived in for many years after she moved back to Ayodhya. "When I touched them I could feel their sympathy for me. If they were willing my touch

cured them. And thus, we grew to love each other. I was particularly fond of the Asoka tree under which I slept" (187). As Divakaruni writes, Sita is a strong, independent woman who proudly declares her love for Rama. She embodies dignity and resilience through her patience, while Rama remains honorable, sincere, and devoted to his wife. This narrative illustrates contemporary trends in reinterpreting traditional stories and contexts, addressing modern challenges, particularly the anger and frustration of marginalized groups, which is a common theme in post-colonial literature. Nancy Hartsock in her book *Feminism/Postmodernism* asserts that feminism should retain its own identity but as overlapping with and participating in the broader struggle which captures the politics implied by "the web-like nature of oppression and enables a balance between requirements of identity politics and requirements of connected opposition which arises from the connected natures of oppression" (163). The work emphasizes the enduring nature of these issues while also recognizing their limitations. It plays a vital role in the historical discourse on gender and femininity, offering a clear definition of womanhood and providing a nuanced overview of the complex and diverse landscape of femininity.

Divakaruni introduced numerous fresh dimensions in the tale that enhance Sita's character. After the fight between Ram and Ravan concluded fourteen years after Dashrath's proclamation, Ram assumed the kingdom with his wife, Sita. Rumors from Ayodhya damaged Ram's reputation, leading him to instruct his brother Lakshman to abandon Sita in the forest near Sage Valmiki's hermitage without her knowledge. Ayodhya exiled Sita to the woods once more, but she was aware of the injustice and voiced her displeasure. Sita directed Lakshman, "You go back and tell him this, Lakshman. He sentenced me to banishment because people were whispering that I might have betrayed him. But he's the real betrayer, who's going to sentence him" (317). As she walked through the woods, observing its boundless possibilities, Sita thought about her young children, the picture of purity. Subsequently, Sita acknowledges that she will be solely responsible for raising her children. Throughout the arduous voyage, she exhibits emotional resilience and positivity; her mental fortitude merits commendation. She considers, "I'll teach you what you need to know be good human beings, so that you'll never do to a woman what your father has done to me" (317). Sita lives in the shadows of the jungle with her sons, Lav and Kush. Sita remained tireless, consistently smiling despite the challenges of her son's existence, which were arduous for her; however, she faced her terrible circumstances with optimism. Sita's fortitude, spirit, wisdom, compassion, and endurance demonstrate her embodiment of the feminine aspect of the supreme being. As a result, Sita's character remains relevant in the present day.

Ram banishes Sita to the wild following accusations of infidelity made by a disreputable character from Ayodhya. She is compelled to deliver her twins alone and to inhabit the jungle as a solitary parent. After an extended duration, Ram interrogates her fidelity upon unexpectedly encountering her again, despite encountering multiple obstacles in reclaiming her affection. Sita summons her mother Bhumi for support in overcoming Ram, and in reply, the earth, symbolising Sita's mother, graciously receives and envelops her. The Earth, referred to as Bhumi, could not endure witnessing her progeny endure inequitable treatment by humankind. Sita encountered no adversities till she arrived at Bhumi. Nature encapsulates the essential attributes of love and serenity. The depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* well illustrates this facet of ecofeminism. Exploitation subjugates women to their husbands. Mandodari, Kaushalya, and Kaikeyi are considered subservient. They recognise that their revered partner is unfaithful and has never harboured affection for them. The female characters in this novel are shown as lacking authority, especially the queens who inhabit their palaces. They are denied any opportunities to assert themselves in the patriarchal society.

Banerjee's Suparnakha embodies the wild essence of nature, unreserved in expressing her thoughts. Civilization has set normative standards for women to follow. When Suparnakha approaches Ram, seeking him as a mate, Sita initially sees her behavior as improper. However, she soon realizes that a Rakshashi is not bound by the same rules and is simply following her natural instinct for a partner. She is mentioned as: ".....I'm not much for palaces, but even I can see how fine it is. Me, I prefer roaming in the forest. Living the natural life. Plus I like to speak my mind- and that can get you trouble in court. Wouldn't you agree?" (147). When Sita voiced her sorrow concerning their terrible actions,

Ram and Lakshman rationalized their conduct by asserting that Rakshasas posed a danger to humanity, thus it was their obligation to eliminate them whenever encountered. Ram further rationalized Lakshman's actions: "...Infact', he continued, 'Lakshman was being kind to this one, sparing her life because she was a female'" (151).

The Forest of Enchantment fully expresses the feminist perspective in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. It shows the suffering that female characters face due to patriarchy. Yet, victims of patriarchy include not only women but also nature—the forest and the indigenous cultures within it. Rama's exile leads him into the Dandaka and Panchabati forests. Ram and Lakshman often discuss with the Rishis the need to eliminate the asuras, the forest's native people. The forest is their home, and they have the right to challenge the Rishis who invade their land. From the start, asuras are killed, while sages are portrayed as victims. Divakaruni's retelling highlights how men exploit both nature and women in the *Ramayana*.

The female characters in the narrative, including Sita, Ahalya, Mandodari, and Kekayi, often experience a feeling of impotence. Sita faced marginalisation during her sojourn in the desert. Sita experienced occurrences of both verbal and physical aggression from male and female characters in the narrative. Cultural imperialism ultimately perceives women as simply servants or slaves, subjecting them to mistreatment comparable to that endured by animals, hence dismissing their intrinsic value. Ecofeminists celebrate the relationship between women and nature by popularising ancient rituals centred on the Mother Goddess, and the female reproductive system. Sherry Ortner argues that "the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions" (67). This research elucidates the existence of oppression predominantly within a male-dominated culture and the issues affected by this oppression. The novel explores the significant turmoil and internal instability that Sita encounters over several stages of her life. Sita is an exceptionally intelligent woman who interacts with society through a reflective and questioning approach. In contemporary society, there exists a pervasive aspiration for power, resulting in the marginalisation of oppression. Like Sita, individuals must assert themselves, especially when confronted with adversity and injustice. Otherwise, he or she would endure subjugation and exist under the control of others.

Sita addresses her mother Bhumi for assistance in transcending her attachment to Ram, and in reply, the earth, symbolizing Sita's mother, graciously receives and envelops her. The Earth, referred to as Bhumi, could not endure witnessing her progeny endure unjust treatment by humanity. Sita encountered no adversities till she arrived at Bhumi. Nature encapsulates the essential attributes of love and serenity. The depiction of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* well embodies this facet of ecofeminism. Nature remains unwavering in its support of Sita, fulfilling its function as the nurturer and guardian of life. It may be viewed as a repudiation of the inflexible male lifestyle in favour of a more empathetic existence for both the victims—nature and the feminine. The concept, although historical and legendary, resonates with contemporary society. The feminine aspect has evolved over time but remains imperfect, while the ecological aspect has declined relative to the past. Chitra Banerjee effectively communicates the main message of environmental conservation and providing a platform for the subaltern.

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