

Sita In Forest: A Critical Analysis of Ecofeminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forests of Enchantment

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to study the theory of Eco-feminism in context to the character of Sita, in the prominent work The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni is an Indian-American writer who in her work discusses the connection between Sita and forests. The text is a retelling of Ramayana and also discusses the theme of Sita finding her voice in the forest. The paper also determines to bring forward the viewpoints of Eastern and Western eco-feminism. The conclusion states that the opinions and perspectives of Western eco-feminist are different from the Eastern eco-feminists, as West views the relationship between Nature and woman as the result of the subjection from the patriarchy whereas east views this relationship as the result of the connection that humans share with the nature. In Staying Alive by Vandana Shiva, a prominent Indian environmental activist and a scholar, in-depth discusses the relationship between nature and woman. Therefore, the eminent works by Shiva and Divakaruni are considered as the primary text to reach the desired conclusion.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, Epic- Retellings, Sita, Female Voice, Forest

INTRODUCTION

“The Ramayana is a story which largely takes place in a forest. How do we see the forest? What are its meanings?”(Rangarajan 2009, 23)

As rightly, stated by the critic in the above mentioned quote, from the time of the origin till present epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have been part and parcel of the South-Asian civilization and culture. They not only provide the basis for an ideal life but also exhibit the foundation for an ideal and balanced society. Where, on the one hand, an epic like Ramayana exhibits the balance between good and evil, husband and wife, and, most importantly between man and the wilderness. Mahabharata which was written ages after the Ramayana depicts the ancestral conflicts between the families, the fight over the land and the importance of Dharma in one's life (Rajagopalachari 1955). Although these two epics are written in two different ages, the narrations and the grand motive remains the same that is the victory of good over evil and the essential balance of society. The other thing which binds these two epics is the background of the forests during the narrations. These forests not only provide a background to the story but also provide inhabitation to many epic characters, for instance, in Ramayana, Ram along with his brother Lakshman and wife Sita went into exile for fourteen years. During these years, the trio travelled and lived in many forests making them their abode for the time in exile (Geeta Press). Similarly, in Mahabharata, Pandavas had to spend their time in the forest at different stages in their lives. Their journey towards glory commenced in the forest and ended with ultimate salvation as they traversed the forest towards heaven.

Forest has a very crucial role in the narration of the epics and folktales. They not only depict the struggles of the epic characters but also depict their emancipation, their enlightenment and their journey to balance society by protecting mankind from the evil spirits of the cosmic world. In the Hindu Puranas, the interconnection between humans and nature is extensively discussed. As evidenced the Puranas exhibits this relationship and the inevitable ecological destruction portending an apocalypse. In the critical work Eco-Feminist Moorings in Globalized India (Gopinath et al 2018) stated that the cyclical patterns of life and death are repeatedly narrated

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with emphasis on the destruction of nature been linked to the destruction of life. However this bond was disrupted by the colonization, as they separated the connection between man and nature. For the European colonizer men were associated with science and civilization whereas women were associated with nature, hence in the process of development both women and nature were subjugated in the hands of man, science and civilization. This European ideology was ingrained in the Indian minds during the colonization period. The European colonizers erased the ecological concerns of the Indians and replaced them with the idea that man is the centre of the universe. Making man the epitome of knowledge, science and innovation, while, marginalizing both women and nature. Despite that, there are few incidents in Indian history which have proved that women have actively participated in the movements concerning the preservation of the ecological system, for example: the Chipko or tree-hugging movement which witnessed women participation in large numbers. In response to the state's increasing commercialization and underdevelopment, women from the Garhwal region began hugging the tree, thus proving the association between nature and women (Britannica 2024).

In the Sanskrit epics, the forests are part of every character's journey from struggle to journey towards salvation or nirvana. A lot of epic characters find their inner peace and liberation when they come into contact with nature, for instance, it is in the Ashram of Rishi Gautama that Ahalya finds solace and this ashram was situated in the centre of the forest, hence when time arises she acted upon her desires and committed the adultery with Indra who was disguised as Rishi Gautama (Kane 2019). In the book "*Abalya's Awakening*", Ahalya acted upon her inner desires in the darkness of the wilderness. As society attempts to restrict the epic women from their norms and customs, they are more likely to seek comfort and freedom in the wilderness of the forests. If Ahalya had been living in the palace she would not have been able to act upon her desires. Therefore, we can say that the forests provide habitation for every character of the narration, including the much marginalized and voiceless character of epic women. This relationship between women and nature is further explored in the literary theory of Eco-feminism. The theory focuses on explaining the interrelatedness and interconnection between women and nature. The concept of eco-feminism has different perspectives and viewpoints in the literary canons of eastern and western world. The Western perspective of eco-feminism is more inclined towards the supremacy of science and men while subjugating women and nature. Whereas, the Eastern perspective, especially the Indian perspective of Eco-feminism, is about the conjunction between feminine and masculine principles, that is between Shakti and Purusha, so that Prakriti or nature can create the world. In perspective of the Indian eco-feminist critics, nature is seen as something which is the inherently active, powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, sustenance and renewal of all life. The connection between nature and mankind is significantly visible in the epic, Ramayana. The scenario and episodes in the epic and retelling are heavily centered on the forest, which is an essential aspect of the narration. The life trajectory of the major epic characters revolves around the forest. Ramayana, originally written in Sanskrit, offers readers a feeling of empowerment. The epic characters spend their lives in the forest while sharing knowledge about how to attain salvation through devotion, meditation, and following the right path. Eventually, the forest became an adobe for the epic women to feel liberated and act as per their desires. Therefore, the focus of the paper is to study the theory of Eco-feminism in context of the character of Sita from the prominent work *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Critics have often analysed how Sita has found her voice in the forest. The paper also determines to bring forward the viewpoints of Eastern and Western eco-feminists. The conclusion states that the opinions and perspectives of Western eco-feminist are different from the Eastern eco-feminists, as West views the relationship between Nature and woman as the result of the subjection from the patriarchy whereas east views this relationship as the result of the connection that humans share with the nature. In *Staying Alive* by Vandana Shiva, in-depth discusses the relationship between nature and woman. Therefore, the eminent works by Shiva and Divakaruni are considered as the primary text to reach the desired conclusion.

Emerging from the intersections of feminist research and the various movements of social justice and environmental health, eco-feminism is the branch of study which focuses on the relationship between woman and nature. It also provides an alternative perspective on the dilemmas that female characters identified with nature in reality confront and destabilize the cosmic conclusions. The term was coined by French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 and it questions the negative implication of the feminization of nature. Stephanie Lahar (1991, 29) argues, "Eco-feminist theory includes a systemic analysis of domination that

specifically includes the oppression of women and environmental exploitation, and it advocates a synthesis of ecological and feminist principles as guiding lights for political organizing and the creation of ecological, socially equitable lifestyles". This is the western perspective of the eco-feminism which states that the concept of women caring for children is related to her being closer to nature, whereas, men who work and dominate the world are considered more civilized, this opinion differs in context to the understanding of eastern eco-feminist where the women and nature are categorized under the same umbrella, since both have a power and ability to reproduce and provide for the next generations. The theory also exposes the historical and cross-cultural persecution of women as legitimized by the various male-dominated institutions of religion and culture and links the physical health of women and the environment with the recuperation of a woman-centered language and thought. The western concept of nature is more related to the wilderness something which needs to be tamed and converted into a proper civilization. In *The Masculine Birth of Time*, written in 1603 by Francis Bacon, who was regarded as the father of modern science, promised to create a race of heroes and Superman, these heroes and Superman will in turn dominate both nature and society. Originally written in Latin and published posthumously this work is seen as a shift from older science to new masculine science, the older science is depicted as passive and weak like the female gender, whereas the modern approach towards science is more ferocious and male dominated (Shiva 1989, 27). On the contrary, the Eastern perspective especially Indian opinion of nature is different. Indian eco-feminism is related to the relationship and connection between nature and man. For South-Asian or Eastern eco-feminist critics, Prakriti or nature is worshipped as Aditi, something which is in the primordial vastness, the inexhaustible and the source of abundance (Shiva 1989, 38). Nature is also worshipped as Adi-Shakti, the primordial power. The etymologically origin of the word Prakriti is from the Sanskrit language. Hinduism defines it as the original or natural form or condition of anything, or the original or primary substance, thus making it a crucial concept. It is believed that when prakriti that is female comes into contact with the spirit, purusha (male), it starts with a process of evolution that leads through several stages to the creation of the existing material world. Consequently, the meaning is the embodiment of feminine energy. Nature is contemplated as a source of multiple lives where mountains, trees, rivers and animals are an expression of diversity. In *Staying Alive* by Vandana Shiva, she mentions that "Ontologically, there is no divide between man and nature, or between man and woman, because life in all its forms arises from the feminine principle", hence, creating an association between women and nature. Western Eco-feminists say that environmental destruction and social injustice like racism, poverty and sexism have a common cause which is hierarchical thinking, conversely when compared the women are considered someone on the lower pedestal as compared to the men, therefore men are associated with politics and civilization and women on the other hand are associated with nature, thus, subjugating both women and nature. But the question is should the link between women and nature be considered subordinate in comparison to the relation between men and the civilization? Or do forests contribute to bringing the true identification of both man and woman while giving them their ultimate liberation? Another question which arises is does forest become a shelter for the epic women or acted as a mere background setting. If we keenly analyse the Indian epics we will see that throughout the epic narration, a vast number of episodes occurred in the forest. For Epic women, nature is an essential part in their life journey these women resonate, represents and embedded in nature. Along the same lines, is the character of Sita in Ramayana, her life journey started emerging from Earth and ended with the return to Earth. She as a woman felt more alive and happy whenever she was placed in the forest whether forcefully or circumstantially. This soul-searching freedom of epic women characters in the forest is established and discussed in the 2019 work of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*.

SITA IN FOREST

He had not progressed far when suddenly a lightning- flash crossed his path;
he stopped, and his dazed eyes fell on the form of a wondrous golden child
Since the vision had sprouted as it were from the opening furrow,
the enraptured Janaka cried 'Sita!' and bent down in gratitude. (Iyengar 1987, 253-254)

One fine day, a childless couple King Janak and Queen Sunaina were ploughing the earth for harvesting and found a golden child in the furrow. Famously known as, Sita or Janaki. She was adopted by the King and Queen and became the princess of Mithila. No one knew the true parentage of Sita, but since she was adopted by the King and the Queen she was famously called different names like Maithili, and Vaidehi, “The Earth-born wondrous child, the innocence that was pure Grace and Glory, was the darling of all as ‘Janaki’, ‘Maithili’ and ‘Vaidehi’” (Iyenger 1987, 279). Like her father, Sita was also known as the ‘overseer of the palace arbours’. Due to the mystery of her birth, she was also regarded as the earth goddess by the people of her palace.

I stroked leaves, dug around roots, and breathed prayers.

Behind me, I could hear the awed whispers of the gardeners.

Amazing; miraculous; look, they’re already healing;

I tell you, she’s the earth- goddess herself, appeared straight out of the ground just to bless us.
(Divakaruni 2021, 5)

Sita was brought up in the surroundings of the nature and forest, despite being a princess she was constantly in the contact with the forest. A large part of her existence is nurtured because of the constant presence of forest in her life. And that is the reason she was also known as the healer.

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. I could tell which grasses cured headaches and colds, which seeds fended off infections, which herbs to give women when their monthly blood flowed too long, and which potions healed the shaking sickness or gladdened a long-depressed heart. (Divakaruni 2021, 7)

Shiva’s opinions about the feminine principle situates women and nature as the source of life and wealth, and for maintaining and creating process, which is aligned to the epic woman’s character of Divakaruni, in the text she is represented as a healer who heals the wounds and problems of others. Divakaruni’s Sita has a similar quality to nature, where love and devotion are abundant. This quality is crucial for maintaining and creating in the life process. This particular characteristic of Sita can also be associated with another epic woman Shakuntala. Kalidasa’s Shakuntala is a woman who grew up in the lap of nature. She was not merely a personification of the forest grove in which she resides, but a nurturing protective female who has a harmonious relationship with nature. However, this feminine principle of women been associated with nature doesn’t go well with the Western eco-feminist critics who believe that since the status of women is considered secondary in the hierarchical structure of the culture and society therefore they have been associated with nature. Western eco-feminist critics are trying to negate the association between women and nature. On the contrary are the views of the eastern eco-feminist critics who strongly argue that women’s role as the feminine symbol of transcendence is generally associated with someone who is like a mother goddess, who is the dispenser of salvation, a female symbol of justice and a strong presence of feminine symbolism in the realms of art, religion and law (Shiva 1989, 51).

Divakaruni in her work beautifully illustrates young and naive Sita, the writer writes about her longing for forest and how her gender is causing hindrance in her dreams to visit the forest. This particular moment in the text can be analysed as by dreaming of the wilderness, Sita is defying the regulations of the societal hierarchy while simultaneously questioning the binaries of the world, as stated by Catherine Diamond (2017, 97), “The range of women’s interactions with the forest obviates any essentializing affinities with nature. They all, however, begin to cut down the vertical hierarchy of dominance and instead, intimate that a better world exists beyond binaries’. Divakaruni through Sita’s longing for the forest is not only breaking the barriers and binaries of society. Furthermore, the writer is also supporting the eastern ideology of syncing man and nature as unity and is also stating the Hindu fact that Purusha-Prakriti is duality in unity. Sita met her husband Ram in the gardens of Janak’s palace. The moment she married Ram, she had a significant dream about her life in the forest.

I fell into a dream. I was in a beautiful forest.

Every leaf gleamed emerald.

Every brook sang a heavenly, heartbreaking song.

Ram sat beside me in a hut whose walls and roof were made from flowering vines I'd planted and nurtured. (Divakaruni 2021, 30)

Sita sees this forest dream throughout the narration of the text. She never saw herself as the princess with the royalties but instead, as a girl who is roaming in the wilderness of the forest. The dream can be interrupted as the liberation of Sita as a marginalized woman. In the era when Valmiki wrote the original Ramayana, females were considered someone who needed to be protected and preserved by the patriarchy. Due to the patriarchy, women were subjected to few norms and restrictions, and they were obliged to follow those rules. Women were not permitted to enter the forest without male protection, which was a norm. Ironically, the epic-women characters do not see the forest as a place of wilderness but a place where they will be able to live freely, the forest in the narration is giving them their liberation. As mentioned by Catherine Diamond, the female characters do not envision dark forests as the symbol of wombs or hills as breasts, nor do they replace such kinds of images with overtly masculine features. She further stated this association between women and forest often reflect how they perceive themselves in their current situation with their male partners, whether the woman's character is feeling privileged, repressed, or destitute, whereas to many feminist and eco-feminists critique this view is considered provocative. If we closely observe Sita's life, her entire existence revolves around the forest and nature. After being exiled into the forest with Ram and Lakshman, in the last year of their exile, Sita was abducted by the demon-king Ravana. When she reached the palace of her abductor, she was a hostage in the gardens of Lanka under the Ashoka tree. However, this time nature was traumatizing her. In the prologue of the text, Sita mentions, " what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't 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" (Divakaruni 2021, 2). In time, Sita found comfort in the gardens of Lanka, creating a link between the Ashoka tree and the earth. She used to forget her sorrows in the little walks she had in the gardens of Lanka. The surroundings happened to her keeping her sanity in times of despair. As critic Rajini Kothari, states, "Femininity and ecology on the one hand and femininity and ethnicity on the other are natural allies mutually synergizing and often found in practice to be synonymous" (Shiva 1989, 49). This statement by Kothari establishes a connection between women and nature. This statement can also be supported in the perspective of Rabindranath Tagore who in his work *Tapovan*, establishes a connection between man and nature by claiming that India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. A similar has happened to the character of Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*. She realized her worth as a woman amid the forests and found a voice, which again is contrary to the ideologies of the western eco-feminists. The Western eco-feminists have contradictory viewpoints they questions about this relationship of women and nature. For western eco-feminist critics, the association of forest or wilderness with women is due to the domination of man and science. Sandra Harding in her 1997 work, "Women's Standpoints on Nature: What Makes Them Possible?" mentions that post-colonialism focuses on the expansion and growth of modern science could be the reason why women, women in science and nature are subjugated. The postcolonial man focuses on the domination of nature and women through the innovation and knowledge of science. Critic and American anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner justifies the association of women and nature as a union due to the process of giving birth that both women and nature share. Since men lack the process of giving birth to new life, hence they are associated with the culture or society. Ortner further justified her viewpoint by stating that the process of subjugation of women and nature through men and science by saying that what males create is more lasting as compared to what nature and females create which is a human being, therefore giving importance to civilization and science over the creation of human life, thus stating discrimination against women and nature. Shiva on the other hand had a contradictory opinion than Ortner. Shiva has established a connection between nature and women by proclaiming that both nature and women act as a source of life and wealth, and as active subjects while maintaining and creating life-process. During the initial days in

the forest when Sita tried to befriend the forest creatures, her decision was opposed by Lakshman, who didn't approve of her friendship with the forest creatures. He further warned her that these creatures are shape-shifters tricky and dangerous. Although Sita openly didn't oppose his opinions, she continued her admiration for the forest and its creatures. In the later days of her banishment in the forest, she even planted a vegetable garden from the seeds that were given to her by Ahalya. In the forest, Divakaruni's Sita notices a certain kind of change in the personality of Ram, "Ram was finally able to relax. For the first time since I'd known him, he could forget about being a righteous ruler". (Divakaruni 2021, 138). All the romantic gestures and closeness wouldn't be possible if Ram and Sita weren't there in the lap of nature. In the palace lover Ram was the righteous heir, who was only concerned with the welfare of his subjects. But in the forest, Ram's romantic side was visible to Sita, hence, bringing them closer as husband and wife. In the Ramayana's Aranyakanda, Sita questions the killing of the rakshasas who are not even Ram's adversaries. For Sita, the forest of Dandakaranya was the abode of the rakshasas and therefore killing them would be against the Kshatriya Dharma or his principles of a man of valour. Sita sees the forest as a peaceful place, where meditation and austerities are performed and therefore shouldn't be viewed as a war site. This particular incident from Ramayana can be depicted as the act of "development" in the hands of Ram. Ram sees forests as a war field or as wilderness which needs to be tamed and converted into a civilization. This perception of development is in reality a process of mal-development, a kind of source which is indeed subjugating women and nature throughout the world (Shiva 1989, 43). As a result, few Indian eco-feminists have a perception that any project of development is a violent form of gender subordination and patriarchy.

While reading Divakaruni's text the scholars find that after returning from Ravana's abduction Sita started dreaming about the events that happened during her exile in the forest. Once she was settled in Ayodhya her heart started aching again for the forest, she started dreaming again about life in the forest. After the festivities of Ram's coronation, the first thing that Sita noticed was the palace garden. She recognized the difference between the palace garden before and after her time in the palace. She not only manicured and revamped the garden but also made a small forest behind the palace. In this small forest that she created for herself, she would sit and enjoy her alone time reminiscing about the incidents of her life. This was contradictory to the nature of Ram, who would argue with her that their forest life is over and now they should focus on being king and queen. Hence depicting the dissociation of Ram and nature and instead focus of Ram is more with the cultural and societal aspects, this aspect of attachment of women to nature is imbibed in her nature. Any harm to nature is first sensed and observed by the women who enact the role of nurturer similar to the role of nature. Thus, Sita's attachment to the forest can be analysed as natural and imbibed in her as a part of her identity. The connection between women and nature leads to the recurring theme of women living in the forest in the postmodern South-Asian novels, where either after being rejected or tormented by society, marriage, family or love they find their liberation in the arms of nature. Eventually, the final banishment of Sita, gave rise to her liberation as a woman. After being alleged by Ram about the chastity of her character, she along with her unborn twins walked into the forest. She finally chose her happiness and her self-respect over the regulation of the patriarchy. Despite already being given the fire trial, when she was again implored for fire trial by Ram in the final act of Ramayana, Sita chose her freedom over patriarchy and society. This unhinged her anger, and she questions the duty of Ram towards his wife. She couldn't endure more atrocities in the hands of the patriarchy, and hence she chose to return to the mother earth, by going back into the earth, thus, attaining her liberation.

CONCLUSION

There are many questions, associations and dissociations concerning the relationship between women and nature. Some critics say the relationship between women and nature is established due to the process of reproduction of life, other critics claim that like nature is nurturing humans similarly women nurture her children. Her close association with the nurturing and growth of her child leads to her close association with nature. A few other critics have even linked the menstrual cycles of women with nature. The Western and Eastern perspective about the intersectionality of women and nature has a different point of view. Western eco-feminist critics' concern is to rather challenge the relationship between the environment and women and

to establish the fact that since women are given secondary status in the hierarchical order, therefore, they are associated with nature and men are associated with the culture, society and politics, basically, the roles which are powerful and challenging while women are given the roles which are more subdued and submissive. Contrary to this is the view of the Eastern eco-feminist, who rather than challenging the relationship between women and nature are establishing a form of similarity and connection between them. The concern is to establish and reconnect with nature, as the connection with nature and humans goes way back to the start of civilization. The Eastern eco-feminists are more concerned with de-colonizing the minds of the South-Asians, especially Indian readers who have adopted the ideologies of their Western counterparts when it comes to establishing a relationship with nature. Indeed, nature should be considered gender neutral. Therefore, nature is not gender specific the ideas and gender and nature intersect and shape one another (Norgaard 1999, 206). Few modern eco-feminist critics have further stated that if women are associated with nature so do men who are associated with wild animals representing their violence, aggression, sexual violence, etc. therefore establishing the relationship of both man and woman with nature.

After carefully analysing the concept of eco-feminism, one can state that the theory of eco-feminism has different perspectives and points of view for both the western and the eastern eco-feminists critics. Western eco-feminist sees nature and women as secondary they are moreover trying to question this subjugation while stating that men and science lead to this subjugation. On the other hand, the eastern eco-feminists are trying to establish a connection between women and nature. They are stating that how women are getting liberation in the lap of nature. Eastern literature is filled with the theme of women living in nature after being either rejected by society or they them self reject the norms of society. After analysing the theoretical works of Vandana Shiva, many critics have come to this conclusion that a woman is not always subdued or submissive in the wilderness of the forest. As is the case of Sita in the text *The Forests of Enchantments*, while in contact with the forest, Sita was never subdued or submissive. She never was afraid of the wilderness of the forest. Her character felt more liberal and independent when she was around or in contact with nature. From childhood until her death, she was in close contact with the environment giving strength and voice to her character. And, this is further supported by Shiva who stated that the death of Prakriti or nature is irreversibly proportionally related to the beginning of the marginalized, devaluation, displacement and ultimate dispensability of women, thus linking both the women and nature.

To conclude this paper, one can say that Western eco-feminism does not necessarily pertain to and allies in the Eastern viewpoint of eco-feminism. Because on the one hand where western eco-feminism is challenging and questioning the link between women and nature, the eastern viewpoint of eco-feminism is trying to establish the close connection between women and nature. As, is evident in the works of many Indian eco-feminist critics who are trying to focus on establishing the link between women and nature. Not only that they are also trying to make the relationship with nature more gender-neutral.

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