5

Environment and Women: A Study of Deep Ecologism in *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

This study follows the life of Sita and other women figures in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, as they navigate their way through a male-governed society. A close reading of the text unearths the varied facets of discrimination faced by the female characters because of violence perpetuated towards them. Sita, one of the most significant female characters in Indian Literature and Indian myth, is finally given a voice to express her feminine experiences, which were initially neglected in Valmiki's masculine narrative. Divakaruni's retelling assists in understanding gendered differences from a female perspective, especially through the personalized stories of characters such as Kausalya, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, etc. This paper primarily aims to investigate the innate spiritual relationship between women and nature through the approach of deep ecologism, an environmental philosophy. It advocates the necessity of replacing anthropocentrism with ecocentrism to avoid further ecological damage while allowing nature to heal naturally. A detailed character study of Sita reveals her transcendental affinity with her natural environment, right from her mysterious birth to adulthood. This peculiar bond between her and nature is predominantly the subject of this paper, further explored through the dichotomy of deep ecology and "shallow ecology." Therefore, it is an integral study at present times, as it draws the vitality of establishing an ecological equilibrium by reinstating a healthy relationship with nature through female characters like Sita.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Literary Re-telling, Spirituality, Ecofeminism

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in her retelling, *of The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), makes inquiries into an important space of discussion that stems out of her research on the Hindu epic

Ramayana: the female space. Research suggests that the epic reveals an undeniable presence of masculinity that negates the female space. It is, therefore, imperative to study the neglected space of women to establish an impartial point of balance at present. Divakaruni notes the "lack" of space for women in the dominant male narrative, *Ramayana* and therefore procures a female space, for the relegated female characters. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) re-interprets the epic from Sita's perspective and unearths her side of the female experience. Sita's gift with nature and her outlook on events make a staggering difference in the feminist space. It raises the question of stoicism in men and further investigates their lack of humility towards their natural environment. This stoic approach is a reflection of their "shallow" ecological views regarding their supremacy as humans, while Sita's ethereal bond with nature resonates with the selfless motive behind the movement called "deep ecology."

Her voice represents the 'muted' female characters and the voiceless green environment. She is the ecocentric feminist torchbearer of marginalized human and non-human figures at a time when hegemonic masculinity (anthropocentrism) governed Indian literature. The novel divulges her ability to overcome any challenge with resilience through her special bond with nature, making her a towering female character. Divakaruni brings to the surface an existing dichotomy of the gender binary in the ecological aspect that allows modern discourse in the feminist space. Valmiki's epic emphasizes masculine perception while aligning itself with the societal or cultural beliefs of that time, leaving little space for female experiences. This immutable fact is observed in the "Prologue" of Divakaruni's novel and later through Sita's perception of the forgotten female characters. The narrative also uncovers an innately harmonious relationship that exists between Sita and her green environment. Her strange affinity with plants and nature gives her a distinct, earthly appeal with other-worldly qualities. While the paper primarily focuses on the environmental spectrum, it is also important to observe the above in the light of feminism since women are born with a 'stronger' biophilic inclination towards their natural surroundings.

This ethereal connection of women with nature is not simply restricted to an aesthetic value; it rather expands to the spiritual and

sensory realms. The bond can be extensively studied through Sita's natural disposition to protect and nurture which is one of the basic tenets of deep ecology. Her constant need to heal, grow plants, or be in the constant presence of nature (also known as biophilia) opens this space to a modern-day environmental discussion. The movement, called deep ecology, promotes an ecocentric worldview that works towards the protection of environmental life. It seeks to transition from the current anthropocentric tradition to an ontological one for a better rapport with nature. This is observed when Sita forsakes her consumerist life in the palace for a sustainable life in the forest. Her nature is far removed from "shallow ecologism" because she views the world through an ecocentric lens and accepts that she is only a mere part of the larger natural environment. Thus, this paper is an integral study at present, as it brings to the surface the influence of the deep ecology movement in *The Forest of Enchantments* and of Sita's ineradicable relationship with nature.

A Feminist Ecocentric Retelling

Divakaruni captures the myriad struggles faced by Sita and the other displaced female characters in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). It is an interpretation of the liminal spaces where these women were abandoned in the course of the events that gave Valmiki's narrative its masculine appeal. Throughout the history of Indian literature, the female space was never remembered, for such was the height of neglect that the absence of the female narrative made no difference to the story. The early male writers gave rise to an archetypal woman: fragile, morally lax, unintelligent, sinful, and inferior. These marginalized characters were forced out of their existence to take shade in the eerie no-woman's land where they were still dependent on the patriarchal structure. Women were stigmatized as a cause for the man's impending misfortunes, which is evident from the story of Kaikeyi, or the washerwoman. Thus, it is imperative to vocalize the views of the relegated "others" by first creating a fissure in the stereotypes of the female characters – meek, submissive, and silently stoic through all their trials and tribulations.

> Women, often believed to be "the other" gender have always been understood and explained in terms of binary opposites, as whatever the man is the woman is not…Many writers depend upon ancient myths to negotiate such patriarchal ideologies. As a result, women in

literature, especially in mythologies are either silent or have been largely misrepresented and portrayed negatively. The lack of male characteristics and qualities makes women inferior, according to the general patriarchal beliefs but with the support and encouragement of various feminist movements, many writers have made attempts to rewrite and reinterpret these myths. (Kapoor 89).

Divakaruni lends her voice to Sita, the torchbearer of feminist and ecocentric thought, for the sole purpose of celebrating the collective silent battles of women and the environment against the rigid cultural ideologies that threaten their existence. The current trends in modern feminist retellings have helped to debunk the misrepresented stories of "the other" characters. Nature is dominant in the book, for most events occur in and around the periphery of the green environment. In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), the stoic male figures fail to connect naturally with their green environment, unlike Sita, who unknowingly draws nature toward her. This masculine stoicism eventually leads to a war that further damages the serene natural environment. An ecocentric undertaking verifies the centrality of nature, however, it also proves that nature exerts an influence only on Sita.

The meek Sita, portrayed in earlier works was simply a facade, for in reality, she was a force of nature: "As eldest, I knew it was my role to watch over the others…Ram wasn't the only one who knew where his duties lay" (Divakaruni 45). She was wronged by Ram on several counts, but still, her selfless love for him stood the test of time. She took a stand for herself and the women of Ayodhya: "You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? That men would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions, saying *King Ram did so. Then why shouldn't I?*" (Divakaruni 356).

Divakaruni emphasizes the way women were treated unjustly without a fair trial to prove their innocence. For example, when Sita was accused of losing her purity, Ram intervened by humiliating her publicly on two counts. She had to go through the test by fire. These were not the proper conduct of a fair King. It catered to the whims and fancies of the male characters, who were themselves promiscuous by nature.

The nature-women bond was at its pinnacle through Sita's deep ecological appreciation for her green environment. A harmonious equilibrium between the foundational concepts – feminism and ecocentrism, was strengthened through the biophilic tendency of Sita to seek and form a natural bond with her environment.

Such unconventional interpretations were not possible with the past male narrative, for it left little to no space for feminist or ecological discussions. This modern feminist ecocentric retelling not only allows for a re-interpretation of the text but also addresses the issues noted earlier. Retellings, therefore, hold a great power to bring changes to a rigid narrative.

Biophilic Tendency and The Dichotomy of Deep Ecology and Shallow Ecology: Gendered

Biophilia is defined as "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (Wilson 1). It is a personal connection that one seeks to establish with their immediate environment. This human inclination towards other forms of life is a natural disposition that stems out of a biologically driven want or 'need' to connect with nature. Wilson was himself indicative of this biological tendency that created an emotional bond between man and nature, surviving centuries of traditions. However, given the current situation, it is evident that modern humans mourn the death of a primordial connection. This man-nature binary has existed for the longest, but in the face of a progressive anthropocentric society, there can only be the dominance of man.

> The human relation to nature is vastly more subtle and ambivalent…The unique operations of the brain are the result of natural selection operating through the filter of culture. They have suspended us between the two antipodal ideas of nature and machine, forest and city, the natural and the artifactual, relentlessly seeking, in the words of the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, an equilibrium not of this world" (Wilson 12).

A similar concept that emerged out of biophilia, the biophilia hypothesis (20), proclaims "a human dependence on nature that extends far beyond the simple issues of material and physical sustenance to encompass as well the human craving for aesthetic, intellectual, cognitive, and even spiritual meaning and satisfaction"

(Kellert 20). This stands as a testimony to the influence that nature carries over human life and, in doing so, aids in its progression. The peculiar bond between man and nature is far greater than any on the face of the Earth. Our deep affiliation with nature has led to stronger survival instincts, which have been genetically transmitted through generations over time. But this instinct has been suppressed as a direct repercussion of the environmental concept of shallow ecology. Earlier, the man-nature relationship was strong; however, today, modern man is mostly surrounded by towering skyscrapers, which makes the survival of this bond nearly impossible. The progression was achieved as a result of alienation and endangerment of nature.

Deep ecology seeks to protect the environment, while Shallow ecology furthers the centrality of man by simultaneously taking preventive measures to protect the environment. The selfish motivation of "shallow ecology" is hidden behind the apparel of selflessness. In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) the gendered experiences represent the dichotomous relationship between the two environmental concepts. Deep ecology or the female experience is held by Sita, whereas, Shallow ecology, or the stoic male experience is held by Ram. The two sexes are therefore divided in their outlook on ecology.

The paradoxical nature of "shallow ecology" led to a "technocentric" view of the world, which took away the natural essence of nature by placing a higher value on technology. It supports the use of more technological advancement to come up with preventive measures for environmental protection. On another note, it is observed that the biophilic tendency to seek the presence of nature is more profound in women. There is an earthlier connection over and beyond the innate biological bond that exists in men, found in women. Nature is feminine. Therefore, the approach to nature will always be different for men and women.

The Deep Ecological Ethics: A Study of Nature-Women Bond

The article entitled "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary" (Naess, 1973) introduces an environmental concept called 'deep ecology'. It is defined as "the rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*" (Naess 1). Naess places an intrinsic value on the living environment

and all the other forms of life that exist within its domain, which is now relatively vulnerable to threats from excessive human interference. The basic tenet of deep ecology lies in the notion that humans are merely a part of a larger picture and not the centre of it. Nature is the dominant force that needs to be respected and safeguarded from all vile human-centric activities. On the contrary, "shallow ecology" has a different approach: "When nature is viewed from the perspective of a market economy, it appears to be a collection of "resources" having the potential to be transformed into commodities" (McLaughlin 1). It places anthropocentrism at the heart of its movement and simultaneously seeks to protect the environment from further damage. The interconnectedness that exists within this human and non-human world is oftentimes overlooked by the modern consumerist tradition. As a result, modern humans have lost their spiritual side.

In the philosophical sense, this environmental movement "…argues for a new metaphysics and an ethic based on the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the nonhuman world. It abandons the hardheaded scientific approach to reality in favour of a more spiritual consciousness" (Salleh 339). Furthermore, deep ecology favours ecocentrism over the humancentric anthropocentric, or technocentric worldview, which relies on technology and science for environmental protection. Here, Naess initiates bringing fundamental changes to the ecology through a 'deep' penetration into the capitalist mind. The mind needs to go through a holistic transformation to reinstate the lost but still existing connection between man and nature. An awareness of such a relationship will cause a significant change in the mindsets, leading to a perpetual equilibrium with nature. Such a striking transition from the anthropocentric view to ecocentric thought may provoke a faster result to aid in the present ecological crisis. It is, thus, necessary to first bring about a transformative change in the modern capitalist mind to achieve bigger and more fundamental changes in the preservation of the environment. There needs to be a permanent rather than a temporary solution. Such instances of environmental concern have permeated literature and other disciplines, making it a universal concern.

In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Divakaruni brings into the female narrative an ethereal bond between women and nature. For the most part, men dominated the action of the epic *Ramayana*, leaving women to brood in the shadows and margins of a patriarchal society. This retelling, as "Sitayan" (Divakaruni 4), has opened the doors to feminist ideologies and interpretations, echoing the collective harrowing reality of women. "You don't know my despair" (Divakaruni 2). Sita, the eponymous female character, represents the voice of nature. Nature was an integral part of her life: "My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born" (Divakaruni 7). This is true because she was found as a foundling in the field beside the palace by King Janak, wrapped in a piece of exquisite gold fabric. Her empathetic nature is revealed further by her actions: "I was the overseer of the palace arbours, an unusual duty for a princess" (Divakaruni 5). Her bond with nature becomes progressively ethereal as she constantly finds herself in its company. "...I was filling my basket with flowers. I didn't like plucking them. It was a kind of murder. But if I refused, the priest would just make one of the maids do it, and they'd hurt the plants. At least I was careful to pick only the blooms that had spent most of their lifespan already" (Divakaruni 11).

In Mithila, she often questioned her place on Earth, for she had no clue about her biological parents. Her answers were somehow drawn from the natural environment: "Because what called to me most powerfully were the forests that I could see from the palace turrets" (Divakaruni 7-8). This 'deep ecological' bond is more concentrated in Sita than in any other character in the novel. Although she enjoyed the comforts of palace life, the call for nature was even greater. Nature, for her, was the source of her healing abilities, and she held nature with deep reverence. Even the forest became a feverish dream: "I wanted to visit a forest someday, though I didn't think I'd ever be granted the opportunity. It wasn't something that women did" (Divakaruni 8).

Sita was aware that the human impact on Mother Nature was negative and therefore took measures to ensure its protection. On her journey to Ayodhya in her palanquin, she finally had a glimpse of freedom. Her solitude gave her plenty of time to enjoy nature and the other forms of life that it offered, but soon she was distressed over the

way Dasharath's soldiers were treating the trees. Sita remarked, "This is their home, and we are visitors…We should treat them with courtesy and not cause them needless pain" (Divakaruni 56). This natural tendency to feel "deeply" for the natural environment is stronger in women than in men. When she expressed her deep ecological concern for the innocent plants, Ram looked at her quizzically: "You are tender-hearted, my dear. I can't fault that. It's right and necessary that women should be so" (Divakaruni 56). Ram viewed this as a womanly trait. Sita was appalled by his remark: "I wanted to ask him, wasn't it as important for a king to feel the hurt of others as the woman did? Wasn't he responsible for the animals and birds and trees in his realm, as well as the people?" (Divakaruni 56). Sita's thoughts resonate with the central tenet of deep ecology, which caters to an ecocentric view of the world. She felt the pain of nature deeply and vocalized its misery caused by "shallow" anthropogenic human activities.

In banishment, she felt that her lifelong bond with nature had reached its pinnacle. She befriended many creatures, but her male companions did not approve of that. Nevertheless, Sita was more content with her life there than in the conforming life in the palace. On the contrary, Ram and Lakshman's relationship with their natural environment was unanimated and "shallow" on an ecological level. They were aware of the consequences of war on the environment, yet they agreed to move forward with their plans. This stoic side of masculinity is present in most of the male characters. Many things could have been easily averted had it not been for Ram and Lakshman's apathetic nature. Their mistreatment of Surpanakha was a metaphorical stamp of the reality women and nature faced at the hands of humans. She was a victim of an unjust society.

Likewise, Sita's only blunder was wanting to nurture an innocent forest creature-the deer. Her need for the animal grew more as a replacement for wanting a baby, which Ram refused in the first place. However, that motherly instinct cost her freedom, for she ended up on Lankan soil with Ravan. Ram's male ego hindered the acknowledgement of his mistake – the mistreatment of Surpanakha, which eventually led to Sita's captivity. Had he not felt the need to hurt Surpanakha, Sita would have lived a tragic-free life. However, the masculine drive present in him led to the abandonment of Sita,

another instance of the rape of nature. Such events may also be viewed from the ecological perspective, whereby Ram represents the anthropogenic worldview and Sita becomes the symbol of Mother Nature.

Despite her captivity, Sita still maintained her deep ecological view of the world around her: "The plants and trees were innocent…we grew to love each other" (Divakaruni 187). A remarkable alliance was established between her and the Ashoka tree, which gave her a sense of security and consolation, both emotionally and physically. It reciprocated her feelings.

Since deep ecology propagates the idea of bringing about fundamental changes by first intercepting the capitalist mind, this view resonates with Sita. Her love for nature somehow penetrates the minds of other characters, like Kaikeyi, who looks after her plants for years as one form of repentance, and her sons as well. An unnatural yet seemingly natural bond between Sita and nature brings to light the connection that women have with their environment. It serves as an instance of the power that comes with being a woman, in possession of motherly instincts that resonate with Mother Nature. Initially, the abandonment of Sita in Valmiki's hermitage causes her great misery, but after the birth of her sons Lav and Kush, she feels wistful love pouring out of her. Her knowledge of plants is transmitted to her sons in hopes of maintaining a positive equilibrium between them and nature. They show deep reverence for their environment and other forms of life, mostly because Sita never allowed the "shallow" anthropocentric view to enter their minds. This propagates the idea that the first fundamental change can only occur when humans are taught to move out of their human-centric worldview. Once it is achieved, the true ideals of the "new conservation" movement can be seen.

Women and nature have a bond that can only be represented through feminist reading and interpretation. Sita was the daughter of Earth, the goddess who sacrificed herself twice for truth and fought for the betterment of women and nature. Thus, the efforts made by women in the conservation and protection of the environment must be valued as life-altering, for their actions are selfless. The eloquent concept of deep ecology, therefore, is most definitely reflected in

Sita's character. Although Ram had re-instated his lost spiritual bond with nature, a return to civilization once again loosened the ties on his end. Sita, however, remained true to her nature and maintained the grand tradition of her past life in Mithila. Her "deep ecological" reflection of the world allows nature to seamlessly voice its sorrow, while the "shallow ecological" perspective of the male characters constantly creates a fissure between man and nature. Therefore, through the study, it is observed that Sita empowers herself, other women, and nature.

Conclusion

The Forest of Enchantments (2019) provides both female and ecological space for the interpretation of the voiceless communities. Even though at the heart of *Ramayana* lies the great battle, this retelling brings in a more humane, ecological, feminine, and emotive side of the characters. Sita is not simply the daughter of earth, her value lies in her empathetic and forgiving nature, otherwise not recognized in the male narrative. She is the progenitor of independent thought and strong perseverance at a time when male characters dominated the scene. Her "deep" affection towards nature is the direct antithesis of stoicism displayed by the men in her life. While Sita's thoughts resonated with Mother Nature, her final sacrificial act reveals an even deeper ecological bond. The reverence shown towards her by nature in return for her selfless act reflects her heart. The deep ecology movement sought to transform the selfish, capitalist mind into one that worked to protect all other forms of life. This study, therefore, aimed to express the deep-rooted connection of women, like Sita with nature in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019).

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