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Mythopoetic Sustainability: Reading Sita through Ecofeminism and Archetypal Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper explores how Indian mythology is an example of ecology ethics and feminine resilience through a reconstruction of the narrative of Sita from the perspectives of ecofeminism and that of archetypes. The current study frames Sita's discourse, from her birth to expulsion, being kidnapped to returning home, as a symbolic articulation of the female body and the living earth, which would include some contemporary adaptations such as that of Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Namita Gokhale's *In Search of Sita*. The methodological approach taken has been interpretive and qualitative in nature, incorporating a close textual analysis, Jungian archetypal psychology (as explained by his proponents Carl Jung and Maud Bodkin), and ecofeminist theory (informed by Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant). The research is based on the following questions: (1) What does Sita's epic journey represent from the perspective of ethical and environmental consciousness? (2) How do modern feminist persons transform their experiences of suffering into eco-spiritual statements? (3) Is there a viable paradigm for making a connection between gender, nature and ethics in mythological narratives again? The analysis proves that the story of Sita moves beyond the bounds of patriarchy by using nature as an ethical co-pilot and an agent of rejuvenation instead of as a passive background. Her departure and return represent biological cycles of decay and regeneration, which the study calls "mythopoetic sustainability." The paper argues in favour of the conception of mythology as a dynamic epistemology, in which Sita is once again re-centred as a kind of environmental archetype. This epistemological position creates some

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crossing between spiritual ecology and feminist resistance and makes ancient narrative into a repository within which visionary voices have inscribed visions of ecology that are relevant to the Anthropocene.

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Introduction

Sita's story serves as a symbol of integrity, perseverance and moral steadfastness and is seen as a good influence in terms of both time and space. Nonetheless, this cultural ideal continues to be reframed in her cognition as a deeper ecological and spiritual comprehension, consequently provoking the reconfigured relationship of hers with the Earth. Born on earth and finally coming back to earth, Sita embodies the archetypal approach that strives for balance between human ethics and natural environment; she is a scholar's example of a living cosmology. Within the *Ramayana*, Sita's story of the transition from palace to forest, and of her escape from captivity and her choiceful self-re-return conveys not only a discourse on the responsibilities of womanhood but also is a proclamation of deep ecological wisdom based on care, reciprocity, and regeneration. These retellings construct Sita's exile and return as acts of resistance and reconnection, rather than passive resignation. In these narratives, Sita's voice affects an ecological and spiritual integrity of belongingness of Earth, effectuating a literal breach of the paternal virtue.

This paper presents a straightforward argument that, when taken as a whole, these retellings unfold a transformation of Sita from a feminine emblem of passivity (chastity) into an archetype of ecological and feminine consciousness. This is due to the fact that myth provides us with an essential epistemology for comprehending the concept of ethical coexistence and sustainability. In the study, it will be claimed that Sita's link to the Earth is ontological and not metaphorical, and that Sita's birth, exile, and return are patterns that are indicative of the cyclical patterns of regeneration and decay that occur in natural systems. The study re-contextualises Sita's mythological trajectory in terms of a mythopoetic sustainable narrative, which is based on the idea that ecological consciousness cannot be separated from emotional and ethical awareness. This is

accomplished by reading Sita from the two perspectives of ecofeminism and archetypal critique. As Vandana Shiva explains, “to recover the feminine principle is to recover the continuity between nature, women, and life itself” (*Staying Alive* 45). This is exactly what happens in the story of Sita: her exile is not a kind of punishment, but rather an ecological pilgrimage to reach self-realisation. Her connections with the forest are built up as a moral and spiritual transformation as a result of this journey.

The convergence of ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and Jungian archetypal theory – all of which provide a lens through which Sita’s tale might be interpreted as an ecological text – is the foundation of this essay. Ecofeminism dismantles the patriarchal dualisms that have linked men to reason and women to nature, as explained by Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, and Vandana Shiva. It also demonstrates how both have been employed as instruments of dominance. In order to practice Shiva’s politics of care, interdependency, and “Earth democracy,” nature must be acknowledged as living, not dead; as a recipient, not a dispenser (Shiva 88). The analogy between the instrumentalisation of nature and the devaluation of the feminine is further extended by Plumwood’s critique of Western rationality in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood 4). By illustrating how Enlightenment science supplanted earlier organic metaphors of the planet as mother with mechanistic and patriarchal systems of control, Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* successfully advances this argument up to this point (Merchant 181). Collectively, these theorists offer a critical vocabulary for analysing Sita’s myth as a counter-narrative of dominance – a counter-narrative that reestablishes an ethics of ecological balance, empathy, and reciprocity.

Sita might be viewed as an archetype of the “Great Mother, a symbol which in the past represented simultaneity of creation and destruction, expansion and decay” (Jung 217), thanks to Carl Jung’s concepts of the collective unconscious and the Anima. These antithetical forces are mediated in the case of Sita’s character by an intense identification with the Earth, and so make Sita not only a mythological construct but also a symbolic locale of cyclic rebirth. This hermeneutical practice is further enlarged in Susan Rowland’s *Jung: A Feminist Revision*, where archetypal themes can be

transmorphosed by means of feminist conscious awareness to re-actionize legendary figures into moral and ecological actors (Rowland 62). Consequently, Sita's sojourn in the jungle and her subsequent return to earth are representative allegories on the matter of life and death over successive generations, an active joining of natural and intellectual reality, rather than passive episodes of endurance. The environmental ethics of this analysis are taken from ecocriticism, as defined by Lawrence Buell and Cheryl Glotfelty. Buell's idea of the "environmental imagination" focuses on the way that literature can facilitate the relationship between a person and their environment (Buell 12). Furthermore, Glotfelty states that "human culture is tied to the physical world, and it shapes and is shaped by it" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xxii) and that "ecocriticism is at the crossroads of literary interpretation and environmental duty" (xxxi). By bringing these theoretical visions into the picture, the study places Sita's myth into an environmental discourse and allows it both to reflect and to react to environmental estrangement in the Anthropocene.

Combining these theoretical orientations, the article analyses the myth of Sita as a feminist resistance and as a symbolic ecology, showing the possibilities of myth being the storehouse of ecological knowledge. In this sense, the study aims at recovering the feminine consciousness implied in the *Ramayana* as an important dialogue between narrative and development, between nature and the ethical imagination. As a result, sustainability is argued to be fundamentally mythological and rooted in the collective memory of mankind's connection with the Earth, not in technological solutions.

Sita and the Archetype of the Living Earth

Recent feminist retellings focus more on an archetypal identification of Sita's identity with an imaginative representation of the living Earth -in its cardinal qualities of rooting, cycling, and regeneration - rather than on the moralised accoutrements that come with the tropes of wifhood and obedience. At the same time, Volga and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni find Sita as an ecological sensibility that aids in reestablishing balance between humans and nature, rather than as a tale of her victimhood. To render Sita's engagement with the natural world an act of ecological witness – a conversation between the

feminine psyche and the environment in which she can survive – these stories are returned via the language of exile and forest existence.

In contrast, the jungle serves as a site of awakening rather than punishment in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*. Sita encounters several women – Ahalya, Surpanakha, Renuka, and Urmila – who stand for various forms of feminine wisdom after she and Rama part ways. Sita's interaction with other (or her own) similarly banished women overrides her internalised notions of shame and purity. The forest is written twice here: physically (as the location where one lives in relation to the earth) and symbolically (as the place where one lives in relation to the Other). She is informed by Ahalya that "Freedom is not in returning to Ayodhya; it is in finding peace within the wilderness" (Volga 27). The ecofeminist principle put forward by Vandana Shiva, according to which "to be liberated from patriarchy's domination is to rediscover one's kinship with the Earth" (*Staying Alive* 53). According to Volga, Sita's "liberation" is ontological rather than merely emotional or personal. She regains a sacred reciprocity with the living world by building an autonomy based on ecological belonging, by identifying with the movements of nature.

Additionally, the forest serves as a moral and spiritual haven, reversing the categories of wilderness and civilisation that patriarchal myth established. As stated in "The masculine culture of control constructs nature as the other – irrational, subordinate, and feminized" (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 4), Val Plumwood's explanation of these dualisms appears particularly pertinent in this context. This construction is denied by Volga's Sita. An act of rebellion against the cultural logics of the superstructure that devalue the natural is what her communication with the forest represents. The forest serves as the base substrate for the ethical revitalisation and not as a force one must overcome. As a result, when Sita finally refuses to go back to Ayodhya, she refuses a modern, more mechanical order that Merchant refers to as the "moral economy of nature" (*The Death of Nature* 199), and not social order. By staying within the forest, Sita reveals the patriarchal meaning of exile as an ecological homeland and re-appropriates the soil as the spiritual homeland.

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a psychologically and internally regenerated version of this archetype. The novel, supposedly written by Sita herself, narrates her experiences in all its intricacies as a work of fiction, an attempt to grasp each question as a therapeutic act of emotive control and narrative truth-production. “In the forest I was no longer the queen of Ayodhya; I was the soil, wind and the fire which cooked our food. The trees were my guardians, rivers my sisters” (*The Forest of Enchantments* 121) shows how Divakaruni can envision the forest as a place of self-reflection, healing and creative potential. By taking off her identity with the elements, Sita shifts herself from a passive agent in suffering to an active participant in the creative process of the elemental earth. According to Lawrence Buell, the ability to find moral and spiritual meaning in ecological interdependence would be described as “environmental imagination” (*The Environmental Imagination* 12).

The Anima Mundi described by Carl Jung in discussions of the “world soul” which connects the energy of the universe with that of the human psyche is the Sita of Divakaruni, in this context (Jung 218). Her relationship with nature is phenomenological rather than metaphorical, with her body serving as a kind of interface between the self and nature. Her journey’s leitmotif is birth, exile, and return to Earth – the quintessential sequence of life and death. Sita is looking at the world with completion rather than despair in the final scene of Divakaruni’s adaptation, when she begs the Earth to take her in: “Mother, if I have been true, take me back into your arms” (*The Forest of Enchantments* 285). Placing her on earth brings her back into her mother’s gaze and gives all mothers a fresh sense of daughterhood and maternity. She is re-embraced into our rightful ecology, both mortal and immortal, and one of them is Sita.

Thus, Sita’s suffering is used by both Volga and Divakaruni to reconsider modernity from an ecopolitical and moral perspective. Their Sita is an ideal mother of renewal rather than the massed-up object of patriarchy. Susan Rowland refers to her return to Earth as “the feminine integration of the psyche with the living world” (*Jung: A Feminist Revision* 64), rather than a melancholy retreat. As a result, the myth undergoes a cycle that mirrors natural cycles and

ecologically vital emancipation: from subordination to nature to reciprocity with nature, from estrangement to return. These retellings leap into mythology and environmental ethics by re-applying Sita as the archetype of the living earth, which brings us full circle to the necessity of seeing the recovery of our ecological imagining as inextricably linked to the recovery of the feminine divine.

Ecofeminist Revisions and the Politics of Return

More “liberal” feminist texts reinterpret the Ramayana’s return of Sita to Earth as a radical denial based on the rejection of a particular mode of linguistic dependent-subjectivity – an act of re-appropriation of agency through withdrawal – whereas the Ramayana’s return is typically viewed as a moment of tragic closure. *Revisiting Mythology: In Search of Sita*, edited by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale is a chorus of female voices, academics, and authors challenging the patriarchal systems that have permitted Sita’s identity to be constrained in, *In Search of Sita*. Her soul toward the Earth unites their essays and stories, transforming her otherwise earthly descent into an act of eco-political sovereignty that ties her body’s autonomy to nature’s capacity for regeneration. The anthology reinterprets Sita’s singularity as a deliberate becoming – with that source of the elemental from which existence itself arises, rather than a departure from pain.

Sita is described as “the Earth’s daughter and conscience, whose endurance embodies the spirit of the soil” in the introduction by Gokhale and Lal (Gokhale and Lal x). Because Sita is incorporated into a continuum of life energies, this description aids in the instantaneous dismantling of the barrier between the ecological and the human. It turns out that her last deed, asking the Earth to adopt her, is a performative statement of identification, stating that her existence and agency are obligated to the higher moralising order of the globe rather than the royal household of Ayodhya. The ecofeminism of Vandana Shiva offers an intriguing lens through which to interpret this return. According to Shiva, “The liberation of women and the liberation of the Earth are not separate struggles; both involve recovering the principle of renewal and balance” (*Staying Alive* 90). Therefore, Sita’s reappearance on earth is not a form of defeat, but a trigger for ecology to be restored; to bring back

ecological harmony that has been disturbed by the system of hierarchy and anthropocentric domination maintained by patriarchy.

Another cliché is the patriarchal construction of the pure home. The idea of home as a place of purity is also being discarded by this political interpretation of homecoming. Sita's relationship with the Earth helps her to overcome the cultural obsession with virginity that has thus far shaped her identity. Val Plumwood would identify her act of return as a "counter-narrative to mastery" - to reject the logic that subsumes women and nature to structures of domination (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 8). Sita's fall is not her passive victimisation of a social ill, but rather an ethical refusal of the mode of production. Since even the least rebellion is a desperate attempt to survive and thus part of a higher reality, a harmony in the ecological cycle of rebirth and return rather than justice in patriarchal frameworks, it seems her retreat is part of that pattern. Thus, the embrace of the Earth turns into an auditory arena of extreme politics, a sanctuary of equality beyond the bounds of human law.

The politics of repatriation is also explored in several articles in *In Search of Sita*, which reframe exile as a ravaging psyche and the soil as a haven. "Her silence contains the sound of the Earth listening to itself" (Gokhale and Lal 63) is how K. Satchidanandan's essay *Sita and the Self* figuratively explain Sita's journey as being about spiritual ecology. Carolyn Merchant refers to this quiet as "the ethic of care embedded in the Earth's cyclical processes" (*The Death of Nature* 202), but it is a language of nonviolent struggle rather than acquiescence. In the same vein, Urvashi Butalia transforms Sita's conduct as a break in historical narrative in her essay *What Happened Afterwards*, writing that "She chooses to end the narrative written for her, reclaiming authorship over her life and her end" (Gokhale and Lal 112). In this connection, authorship is used as a metaphor for ecological autonomy, referring to the ability to inscribe an individual story in the larger time beats of the Earth.

From a psychological point of view, the return of Sita represents the Jungian archetype of integration, by which a psychological whole reverts to the source (Jung 219). The return to origin is, therefore, not conceived of as disappearance but rather as a right turning towards wholeness, a concept that is, of course, repeated in specific feminist

readings of Jungian theory. For example, in Susan Rowland's feminist reading, the feminist reading argues that "feminine archetypes save the world from stale by joining psyche back to the sacred" (Rowland 73). Sita's decision to return to Earth thus signifies healing and the reconciliation of man and the earth and has a symbolic as well as physical resonance.

The politics of return is well reflected in the existing discourse about the environment today, notably in the framework of the Anthropocene. Sita's story is an ecological myth which draws attention to the need for the potential extinction of human civilisation to bring about the balance between man and nature. Lawrence Buell's idea of the "environmental imagination" is relevant here, in that he considered that literature can "rework the moral connection between human beings and the non-human world" (Buell 21). From this perspective, Sita's gesture of returning is not a regression to a mythical period but an appeal for ecological awareness. Her narrative lies beyond time and space, and insists on prophetic relevance because it highlights how true emancipation, of either sex or nature, could only be gained by recognition of interrelatedness.

The modern ways Sita's rescue is seen re-orientate her significance away from the archetypal figure allied with Rama in the *Ramayana* and seen as the figure through which an ecological and feminist reversal is affected, reconfiguring the relationships between nature and culture, blurring the boundaries between passivity and agency, and remaking the connections between spirituality and politics. Sita is not represented simply as the daughter of the Earth but her "voice" representing virtue; her mythological role is that of a mother who silently weeps against the violence, with her seclusion, the harmony of a new world. Gokhale and Lal's anthology illustrates that repossessing Sita equates to reclaiming the land itself: sacred, sentient, and sovereign.

Sacred Ecology and the Feminine Principle

The notion of the feminine in Indian thought is not a symbolic one, or social; it is cosmological. The sacred feminine is the generative principle of the creation - *the Shakti* or primal energy from which the universe arises and to which it returns. In the context of this being of

Sita is the Earth, there is nothing metaphorical about her bodily image - it represents the immanent divinities of the natural. Her descent from heavenly realms into the Earth means that she is associated with the Hindu philosophy of Prakriti, which describes the dynamic, creative force of the world and at the same time her ability to regenerate life on earth underlines the cycle of life that takes place in natural world. In this way, it is Sita who becomes the archetype of sacred ecology-a way of viewing the world in which spirituality, ethics and ecology all come together as a way of affirming the sacrality of the natural world.

From the viewpoint of Sita's relation to the earth, this text, the Ramayana, casts it into a perceived ecological form of intimacy. In the *Ayodhya Kanda*, she insists on joining Rama into exile saying, "the forest will be my home; the trees and the rivers will be my companions" (Valmiki 2.29). Her statement holds an anthropocentric unconsciousness, or a non-anthropocentric consciousness that does more than human beings and recognizes the moral agency of the nonhuman world. This consciousness is similar to the ecofeminist claim by Carolyn Merchant that "to view the Earth as alive and female is to recognise our moral relationship to her" (*The Death of Nature* 190). Sita's conversations with the community of the forest - rivers, trees, animals - offer a dialogical conception of nature untraceable to dominance and ownership. Her love is not stewardship; she is her kinship, and not a protector, but a participant.

Vandana Shiva's interpretation of the feminine principle gives us an up-to-date framework for understanding this sacred ecology. She argues that "the recovery of the feminine principle is necessary to the recovery of the Earth as a living system" (*Staying Alive* 45). The feminine, as a theological category in relation to Shiva, represents values of nurturance, diversity and renewal, values that challenge the patriarchal recuperation strategies that ensure the persistence of the authoritarian paradigms of control. Sita's story illustrates this paradigm of feminine cosmology: not her hegemonic power but her moral strength is constituted through compassion, strength of patience and refined attentiveness to relationships. As a result of choosing to stand outside the prevailing social order after her ordeal, and then by choosing to return to the earth, she can be seen to

become, through her actions, a sovereign of ecology in the purest state of spiritual jurisprudence.

Similarly, Val Plumwood's idea of "relational autonomy" goes a long way toward generating a greater understanding of Sita's agency. Plumwood criticises the Western concept of independence as separation and suggests instead that autonomy needs to be based on interdependence (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 157). Sita's autonomy is just this sort of thing: it is generated through her communion with others - human and nonhuman; and through her acceptance of cyclical transformation. Her story is a model of ethics of balance against conquest, which reminds us of the principle in the *Gita* that the ethics of yoga is harmony between the individual and the cosmic order.

From an equivalence Jungian perspective, Sita is also the unification of the *Anima Mundi*, that is, the soul of the world, and personal consciousness. Jung's Great Mother archetype represents both nurturance and destruction, fertility and decay, and embraces the ambivalence of the natural cycles (Jung 219). In Sita, these two opposites are reconciled. Her exile is the descent part of the archetypal cycle; her return at the end represents regeneration. Susan Rowland sees this reconciliation in terms of "a return of the sacred to the mundane where the feminine mediates between psyche and the living world" (*Jung: A Feminist Revision* 73). Thus, the myth of Sita is both an ecological and a moral allegory, revealing what ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to as "the symbolic union of the divine and the natural" (*Gaia and God* 87). This is a blend of an ecological, intellectual and spiritual synthesis: Sita is pictured as representing a "holy ecology", a mode of thinking about the world in which nature no longer can be an inert, passive frame of reference for human activity -- but instead, is a moral and spiritual, active, world itself. From the furrow, through the forest, down into the heart of the earth, her journey depicts the principle of renewal in circles, which is central to all life. The merging of the feminine principles and the importance of ecology is then brought to the level of a sustainable paradigm in which an honour of the land necessitates a simultaneous honour of the divine feminine within creation.

Conclusion: Mythopoetic Sustainability and Feminine Ecology

Ecocriticism, while ecofeminist and archetypal constructs as relate to Sita, illustrates that myth remains as a dynamic set of ecological narrative. The narratives of exile of Sita, trials of Sita in the jungle, and Sita's ultimate return, as narrated by Volga, Divakaruni, and Gokhale, Lal signify the concept of mythopoetic sustainability, a dialectic comprising the psychological construct of resilience, moral consciousness, and biocultural affiliation. The story she presents epitomises what Lawrence Buell calls "the moral imagination of ecology," which views literature as a medium for conceptualising human accountability to the nonhuman world (*The Environmental Imagination* 21). Sita's voice, which in a patriarchal construct of virtue is restricted, in these reinterpretations becomes a plea in favour of relational ethics and acknowledges that the feminine and the ecological are not just metaphors but are mutually interrelated. By adapting the forest and defying the politics of purity, she is suggesting a kind of freedom that is based on interconnection and not dominance. Her return is an environmental metaphor for regeneration and is thus re-personified and alludes to the cyclical patterns of the natural world.

The paper argues that the principle of the feminine, when fused with Indian cosmological thinking and ecofeminist empirical theory, represents wisdom instead of weakness - it is the power of sustainable survival, of nurturing and regrowth. Viewed through this perspective, Sita's journey can be seen as relevant in a post-human one, for our survival in the Anthropocene: a reminder that ecological re-balancing is only possible through reconnecting with one another, defined by empathy, respect and equilibrium. Vandana Shiva concludes that "the Earth is a living system and her revitalisation will only happen due to the care offered by those who see her as the Mother" (*Staying Alive* 91). Sita's story makes it very unlikely that humankind will succeed in breaking through this old covenant - to ethically live within the web of life and to forever remember that all acts of renewal begin, as hers did, with a return to the Earth.

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