



The Role of Environment in Shaping Sita's Identity in Chitra Banerjee's "Forest of Enchantment"

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Abstract: Hindu mythology is a huge universe of paramount Gods, mesmerizing Goddesses, breath-taking actions, angelic and majestic stories, spectacular kings and queens, heavenly deities, Rakshasas, Sages, magical and melodious hymns and chants, holy rivers, shaded and fruitful trees, dense and lush forests and appealing Nymphs, tolerant Mountains, secure Sky and forgiving Earth, blissful Sun, soothing Moon, soulful atmosphere, mellifluous breeze, ascetic water, authentic rituals and paradigm customs, eminent cultures and, endless and prosperous Nature (Prakriti). The Valmiki Ramayana is one the greatest epic which is written and rewritten in various languages even today. To keep this epic alive, many writers and scholars either write it in a fictional format or pick one character and write on that character. This paper aims to discuss the female protagonist of Ramayana which is Sita and the role of nature in shaping her identity. More than half of the epic is being performed around nature. This is the reason why mother earth plays a vital role in this epic.

This paper aims to discuss the role of an environment specially forests, nature, soil and elemental forces in shaping the real identity of Sita, the female protagonist of Valmiki's Ramayana. Sita's relationship with Mother Earth is very important in order to understand her character throughout the epic. From her birth, childhood, her 14 years of exile in a forest with her husband and brother in law, her stay in Ashok Vatika, Rama's abandonment, her stay in Valmiki's Ashram, birth of Luv and Kush and finally returning back to Mother Earth clearly proves that environment plays a very important role in shaping her identity and defines her moral strength. Also, there are numerous similarities between nature and Sita's Character. This paper aims to present the importance of environment as well as the similarities between Sita and Mother Earth. With the help of theoretical concept Ecocritical and Ecofeminism, this paper also proves that nature not only helped in shaping the Sita's real character of the epic but also empowers her voice within the patriarchal narrative. Mother Earth becomes the witness and collaborators in shaping Sita's personality.

Keywords: environment, nature, soil, Sita, Ramayana

Introduction

Valmiki's "The Ramayana" is embraced as the embodiment of Hindu religious commandments. The characters of Ramayana are the symbolic representation of traditional values and are viewed as an epitome of culture. The writers across the world refer back to their conventional mythology to address contemporary issues by reinterpreting the past in the light of the present. Chitra Banerjee's "**The Forest of Enchantment**" is a feminist retelling of the epic through the lens of its female protagonist Sita. Sita holds a very strong and powerful role in shaping the entire mythology.

"She is there in songs, in poetry, in the tears that Indian women have been shedding through generations as they tread the Lakshmana rekhas that barricade their lives" (Namita Gokhale)

Originally written by greatest sage Valmiki, "Ramayana" is an epic poem which is divided into 7 books and consisted 24000 verses. This epic represents the journey of Rama, his childhood, his marriage with Sita, his fourteen years in exile with his wife and brother Laxman, abduction of Sita and the combat between Rama and Ravana. This epic ends with the death of Ravana and Rama's returning back to his



kingdom. This epic focuses on the life and journey of Rama, Ravana, Laxmana or other male characters of this epic but nobody really notices the side of Sita. The most important female character of this epic who is none other than “Sita” was given very less attention but not in this dissertation as this paper will focus on her journey. Many modern writers wrote the epic from Sita's point of view but Chitra Banerjee’s “**Forest of Enchantment**” is a feminist retelling of Sita in which a reader notices the existence and role of Environment in shaping and strengthen the character of Sita. Whether in epics or poetry, nature holds a very significant role in every being’s existence. This paper will focus on the energetic and unmatched energy of (Prakarti) environment through the character of Sita. In Ramayana, the impulsive temperament of Sita can be observed as the natural expression of environment, forests, rivers and soil.

In Chitra Banerjee’s “**Forest of Enchantment**” Sita is considered as the embodiment of nature. Born from earth and returning back to Earth, her story lies in between this filled with endless sufferings, ill-treatment, abduction by Ravana, sufferings, tearful journey.

After reading “Ramayana” majorly every reader will appreciate the heroism, intelligence, kindness, patience and sinless life of Rama whose life revolved around the circle of morality but there will be very less people who will appreciate the life of Sita as a whole and decisions which she took and accepted everybody's welfare. Sita was the epitome of purity. She was the daughter of mother earth and that's why she had all the qualities which a nature has. Incarnation of Goddesses Laxmi, she married Rama who was the incarnation of Vishnu. She had all the qualities which a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter in law and a mother should have. She is a true inspiration for all the women. Pure in nature, she was sinless. An ideal woman, a faithful wife, a dutiful mother, Sita was the greatest women yet was not well appreciated. Valmiki in his “Ramayana” gives a very less attention to Sita and majorly portrays the heroism of Rama “Sita is strangely absent. Valmiki allows her very little space” (Namita Gokhale pg 3) but even the name of Rama is incomplete without Sita. “Siyavar” is one of the many names given to Ramchandra which means “the groom of Sita”. Though very less is written about her in mythological period, many writers, poets and authors have written about her and her strength. Namita Gokhale in her work not only wrote about her but also mentioned various people who wrote about Sita and her nobility. Few of them are Meghnad Desai, Arshia Sattar, Reba Som, Ratna Lahiri, Kren Gabriel, Malashri Lal and Devdutt Pattanaik. The writings of all these great personalities focuses on Sita and wrote about her goodness and integrity. This text can be considered as a very unique way of portraying mythological character “Sita” in a modern style if literature.

Written in 2019, “**The Forest of Enchantment**” focuses primarily on the female protagonist of Ramayana. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The entire story revolves around Sita’s journey throughout Ramayana. Chitra Banerjee first wrote “**The Palace of Illusion**” which received critical acclaim from various scholars, writers, poets and critics. Story entirely revolving around Draupadi, it depicts the journey and sufferings of Panchaali from her angle. In the same manner, she wrote this book to highlight the entire journey of Ramayana from an angle of a women.

To understand the status of a women in the epics, one must first read and understand the myths which were considered in these epics. The most hilarious myth is the gender-based role which is determined by nature and not by society. The role of women and men were biologically decided which were unchangeable. If one is born as a woman in a male dominated society, she is responsible for homemaking, family, children and husband. The major role of women was to serve and nothing so huge and impactful. Men were supposed to control their destinies.



Women were only supposed to witness and agree quietly and peacefully. Rather than their strength, their weakness was highlighted in terms of physical, emotional or mental. It is inevitable that men have not only been the main originators but also the main practitioners of writing. It is very well known that both the literary composition of both the epics were done by men.

The main purpose of this paper is to understand the character of Sita in depth and how nature plays a vital role in shaping her identity in the Ramayana. Also, this paper will highlight all the similarities between mother Earth and Sita Devi which will help us to understand the character more deeply. The theoretical framework used to understand the similarity between Sita and nature will be-

- **Ecocriticism:** This theory will help us understand the literature from the perspective of nature and environmental ethics. Ecocriticism is a component which leads in understanding how nature in shaping literary identity shaping.
- **Ecofeminism:** Ecofeminism helps us to understand how women and mother earth holds unique spiritual and cultural attachment in a male dominated society and how both were exploited by men.

Both the frameworks in the paper will not only help us to understand the character more deeply and accurately but will also highlight her voice of ecological wisdom and feminine strength.

Birth from the Mother Earth

In Vedic Literature, the name “Sita” is mentioned twice. The first Sita mentioned is considered as the “**Devi of Agriculture**”. The second Sita is mentioned in the “*Taittiriya Brahmana*” in which Sita, Savitri, Surya’s daughter and Raja Soma’s tale is given. Other than this, there is no mention of Sita in Vedic Literature. Henceforth one can consider why King Janaka named her daughter Sita in Valmiki Ramayana. In Valmiki Ramayan, King Janaka while ploughing the field, received Sita from the furrow of the soil. As King Janaka and his wife had no children, they decided to adopt the girl child and thanked all the Gods for this blessing. They named their daughter Sita which means “**Furrow**”.

The origin of Sita directly from the earth presents her character as very unique from others as it is directly rooted in nature and purity. Sita since her childhood had a very deep and strong bond with the nature and mother Earth. Through the epic, sage Valmiki without any overbearing picture of femininity, describes her as the woman filled with love, respect, care and purity. Her story and her personality in whole gives reverence and respect in the mind of readers. Before marriage she was completely devoted to her family and after her marriage her devotion towards her husband is still mentioned today. In Ramayana, Valmiki calls Sita “**Ayonija**” which means not born from mother’s womb. Instead of being born from a mother’s womb, she was born from the furrow of the earth which sets the tone and motto of her life: silent strength, endurance and fertility. Her birth from the Earth’s womb in whole is symbolic of agriculture.

Sita’s Journey in Forest Exile: Role of nature and Sita during the journey of Rama in exile, her abduction, her stay in Ashol Vatika and her abandonment

Sita’s life in forest exile is the transformative phase of Sita’s Life. We hear Sita’s voice for the first time in “**Ayodhya Kaanda**”. Sita’s opinion and her strong stand for her Dharma is worth mentioning. Sita’s strength, endurance and true dedication towards her husband in the exile is mentioned in the “**Aranya Kaanda**”. In Ayodhya Kanda, when Shri Rama was asked to leave



the throne and go into exile for 14 years, Sita Devi herself decided to go with Shri Rama. Though he opposed her decision but she reminded him about her Dharma towards her husband. Living away from royal luxurious and comfortable lifestyle, she passionately accepts to live in the forest with dignity and grace.

“The forest opened itself to me, not as a place of fear, but of learning.” (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*)

The forest life is very difficult to adapt but she did graciously which made her character strong and powerful. Instead of taking 14 years of exile as a punishment, she took it as a blessing to spend more time in serving her husband. Exile in forest acted like a spiritual mentor which helped her in developing her inner strength. During her stay in forest, her character reflected deep ecological awareness. With respect and love, she used to interact with the common people, forest dwellers and sages. She learned about Ayurveda and herbal medicines. The forest offers Sita an education in resilience, nonviolence, and empathy—not through courtly instruction, but through lived experience in a wild, natural setting.

Sita's Stay in Ashok Vatika

After being abducted by Ravana, When Sita was held captive in Lanka, rather than staying in the palace, she chose to stay in Ashok Vatika. As Shri Rama was sentenced for 14 years of exile in the forest, she stayed in the garden under the Ashoka tree. Throughout her journey, one can observe that nature is not playing a passive role. Nature is always present around her. Even during the period of exile, we see birds and trees sympathizing with her.

“The trees of Ashoka Vatika bent toward me, shielding me with their branches.” (Divakaruni)

Even today, the place where Sita stayed in Lanka exists. Ashoka Vatika is the name of the garden in Seetha Ehilya exists near Nuwara Ehilya in Lanka which has been a beautiful place filled with flowers. This place holds mythological importance.

During the abduction, nature itself became her shelter, offering her emotional comfort. This moral ecology strengthens Sita's resolve to remain dignified even when stripped of material protection. Sita gains strength not through any weapon but the nature around her. In the later Ramayana, it is mentioned when Ravana came to Sita with an offer to marry him, in order to protect her dignity, she picked one small piece of leaf and asked Ravana not to cross that leaf or else he will die at the same moment. Though physically small, one tiny leaf symbolizes Sita's divine energy (Shakti) and moral strength. Ravana despite being very powerful, lost against the subtle force of Dharma and inner strength.

Sita's final return to Mother Earth: After the end of period of exile, Shri Rama along with his brother wife came back to Ayodhya. Soon after the end of exile, Rama was declared the king of Ayodhya. Soon after the coronation, why the questions started arising on Sita's chastity, public doubted on her character which made her husband abandon her. She accepted the decision of her husband calmly and peacefully. Pregnant Sita left the palace and started living in Valmiki's ashram. She raised her sons Luv and Kush all by herself in the ashram. After the encounter of Luv and Kush with Shri Rama and getting to know about their relationship with their father, Sita Devi was again called in the palace and asked to prove her chastity and she finally decided to return back to her Mother earth. Tired from all societal questions and insults, Sita returns back in the lap of nature. The scene of finally returning to mother Earth is viewed as a tragic exit of Sita.

“The earth opened her arms for me. It was not death. It was a coming home.” (Divakaruni)

From the ecofeminist view, the scene can be observed as the act of agency as after being doubted again and again on Sita's chastity, she finally decided to call her mother “Bhumi Devi” as leaves with her. Her act of returning back to Mother earth completes the whole cycle of her



life- from being born from Earth, she returns back to the same place. Also, it projects her complete rejection against patriarchal norms and systems.

Conclusion

Ramayana or one can call the journey of Rama is not a new story but writers of today's generation is bring out whole new perspectives from an old epic. Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni's small attempt to present Ramayana from the viewpoint of Sita makes her book re-readable. *"The Forest of Enchantment"* retrieves Sita's journey from an ecological and ecofeminist lens. Chitra Banerjee projects that nature is not only a backdrop of Sita's journey but an energetic and powerful force that develops and nurture her and made her character different from the other female characters in the epic. Devakaruni through her style of positioning the forest, nature and animals as the most important figure in the evolution of Sita in Ramayana makes her style of writing different from others. In her novel, environment plays a very big role in shaping Sita's identity. For readers and scholars, this reading invites a broader appreciation of how literary narratives intertwine with ecological consciousness, and how women's stories—especially in mythology—are often rooted in and empowered by the natural world.

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