



The forest of enchantments: an eco-feminist perspective

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Abstract: *The paper proposes to unravel the deep, albeit less acknowledged relation between Ecology and the female. Through a very contemporary retelling of the great epic, Chitra Banerjee seeks to convey a very modern need to empower the female if we want to create a kind, generous world. The paper seeks to study the empathetic relation that Sita shares with the forest and other elements of nature. Nature and Sita both are presented as healers bestowed with a very strong persona. The female protagonist's developing connect with nature is emphasised as she herself evolves through time, from childhood to motherhood. Characters with strong feminist traits like Sunaina and Ahilya are discussed and their hitherto suppressed thoughts and ideas brought out. The entire epic has been retold in the modern context by the author and the paper focusses on the strong presence of eco feminist traits.*

Key Words: *Conservation, Ecofeminism, Education, Empathy, Female, Kingship, Nature, Rule of law.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The novel *Forest of Enchantments* though deals with a period subject and a mythological protagonist, yet is quite contemporary when it comes to dealing with themes like ecology and feminism. Interwoven in the intricate themes of love, sacrifice and kingship, feminism and ecology are prominent and presented in a celebratory and problematic manner. The phrase ecofeminism has been coined quite recently when we keep in mind the other concerns voiced in literature but the novel deals with it in a very beautiful manner. The concern has been woven in an effective manner to give a contemporary colouring to an old sacred mythological tale. The tale resonates with the people of India as something very close to their culture and family structure so much so that it has become embedded in their conscience. When read in the contemporary context, the novel yields itself to a plethora of interpretations including some very relevant subjects like ecology and feminism. Chitra Banerjee has beautifully dealt with these themes through the persona of Sita, who is at once traditional and modern in outlook. Besides the strong character of Sita, the forest and the natural landscape is portrayed in great detail as something that has a heart and emotion of its own. It stands firm as Sita's greatest support system which is available to her in her greatest hour of need. Beginning from childhood, when Sita displays keen interest in the science of healing, it is the trees and herbs that are her biggest ally. Subsequently she develops an emotional bond with nature which sustains her during hardships and nurtures nature as far as she can. The whole epic, in fact is a tribute to the beauty and might of natural elements, be it the forest, mountains or the mighty ocean that Ram and his army had to cross to rescue her from the clutches of Ravan, the demon.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS:

The novel begins with the description of the lush palace gardens of king Janak revealing to the readers at the very outset Sita's special relationship with Nature. The princess with the magic touch herself shares with us the special bond she shares with the plants: 'I stroked leaves, dug around roots, 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, 5) Among her other accomplishments Sita had a special talent to recognise the various properties of plants and herbs and how best they can be used to heal wounds and cure diseases. An ardent learner Sita made full use of her education and became a healer renowned for her effectiveness in Mithila. "When I touched a plant , I knew its healing properties. I could tell which grass 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 shocking sickness or gladdened a long depressed heart.”(p.7). The people of Mithila trusted her and came to her to seek treatment for their ailments, which she did whole heartedly. But the talent is pampered like the whim of a princess and she was not acknowledged as a healer. Sita nevertheless persevered in her pursuit of learning. Besides this healing power Sita had a vital connect with the forests that surrounded the palace on all sides and were an integral part of the kingdom of Mithila. The presence of forests around Sita in her formative years is something that has been given prominence by the author, thereby making nature as important a protagonist as the female. Both display an aura of love, affection and healing in their own right. Forests have always been present in Sita’s life right from childhood dreams to her youth most of which spends living in the forest with Ram and Lakshman. The way Sita empathises with the forest in her thoughts and dreams speaks very eloquently about her desire to give a rightful place to not just the subaltern humans but to the forests and trees , which nurture us selflessly but have to face neglect in return. She speaks about nature in the same sympathetic tone which she would use for the women of the times. “ Sometimes I dreamed that I was walking the wilderness with its swaying grasses, its leaping golden beasts, the earth -mother the way she’d been before people bent her to their desires...At other times, a wide expanse of water came to me in sleep, stretching to the horizon filled with tumultuous waves...”(p.8) In sharp contrast to Janak’s palace would be the Ayodhya palace, her marital home. ‘Dashrath’s palace, built more for fortification than elegance, possessed few balconies.’ (Divakaruni, 75) The contrasting landscape and the dwelling also reveals the life of people living there. While Janak comes out as an empathetic ruler who does spare thoughts for the weakest in his kingdom, Dashrath is a king who has larger territorial concerns. Dashrath’s palace accordingly has more fortifications than forests. Similar contrast is seen in Ravan’s Lanka and his pleasure houses. Besides a few orchards some of which he curates to lure Sita, the city is more mechanical and all gold and precious metals. This conveys very subtly to the readers the importance of conserving ecology which breathes and feels the same air as we do and has the power to stand by us in our hour of distress. Sita carries an empathetic heart and love for the natural world wherever she goes. The herbs and flowers too flourish under her loving touch and yield all their medicinal properties to her. The beauty of the forests accompanied Sita in the distressful times when her husband is exiled from his kingdom. When she has to dwell in the forest with her husband for fourteen years, it is nature and its bounty that she seeks solace in. ‘ Here in Panchbati I saw brilliant sunsets spreading like a smile across the sky and molten- silver moonrises. I saw stars glimmering like shy eyes from behind veils of clouds. I saw birds and beasts, multi-hued, multi-pelted, so different from the creatures I’d known that I was struck with awe. The plants were particularly attuned to me. Bushes would pull in their sharp thorns and burst into flower when I watered them or loosened the earth around their roots. Squirrel- like creatures, their long white hair smooth as silk-thread, would scurry up to take berries from my palm. Brilliant blue songbirds with curved beaks would land on my shoulder and allow me to stroke their plumage.’(Divakaruni, 137) She cures many a maids in her matrimonial home and even surprises Kaikeyi who herself is a knowledgeable woman, with her skill in treating the sick. The landscape ,the trees and foliage help Sita create a comfortable dwelling in the midst of the forest. It does stand true to her and helps her as a mother in her hour of need. Even in her darkest hour the Ashoka trees in Ravan’s grove are like companions to her. The tree under which she spends her days and nights crying in despair over her fate seems to bring her great solace. She hugs the tree and hides in its embrace when Ravan repeatedly intimidates her.

The ecological elements are as much the victims of circumstances as our Sita is. The bond between Sita and nature is one that the suppressed usually share, being cogs in the same wheel of worldly hierarchy . The ecological elements find a parallel in the feminist strength to endure and cure ,and Janak’s queen Sunaina is the perfect embodiment of this feminist aspect. Sita’s mother Sunaina is a very sensible, enlightened and mature woman. She knows the importance of education and skill in the lives of women and that’s the reason she provides Sita with the requisite learning. Sita is educated not just in letters but also other skills like martial arts and healing so that she has the wherewithal to survive in a not so friendly world. The best tutors are hired by Sunaina to train and prepare her daughter for a life as a princess and later a queen. Though a woman with modern thinking and ideology , we see how Sunaina herself hides her own talents so that her husband gets the place of prime importance. Sita many a times overhears her mother and father discussing matters of state in the bedroom and tells us how good a strategist her mother was. She was the one who would find effective solutions to the problems and Janak would use her advice the next day in his court proceedings. Sunaina was a woman of great intelligence and talent but she had to conform to the social norms which required women to take a subservient position and not acknowledge her intelligence and understanding of state affairs. Sita ,a precocious child was trained in the same manner by the mother. But she had a rebellious streak in her which prompted her to question whatever rules her mother apprised her of, regarding the way a woman should behave. A woman trained well in the sciences as well as fighting techniques like the martial arts , Sita has an inquisitive and logically thinking mind . She did question when Ram and his family were given more importance than the views of her own family. When Ram at the time of marriage suddenly reveals his vow that he has promised his brother that they would all get married together,



everyone is dismayed but Sita the quick thinker finds a solution to the dilemma and asks her father to inform her uncle and summon her cousins Mandvi and Shrutkirti . But here again the reader is bound to think how no one deemed it appropriate to ask about the opinion of the two girls regarding the marriage. The mother daughter conversation before Sita departs for her marital home speaks volumes not just about them but also about the societal norms which remain unchanged to this day. Sita comforts a worried mother ; “ You’ve taught me to defend myself...you’ve allowed me to learn to heal both plants and humans. You’ve inspired me to be kind and courageous . To not tolerate wrongdoing. I’d rather live my life by these strategies than any other.” But her mother’s reply here is more the voice of the world than her own; “ They’re good qualities, but not , unfortunately the ones society values most in a woman...if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn’t bruise a man’s pride. You’ll have a better chance of success.” (Divakaruni, 46) This stands true to this day and it seems that the world progressed leaving man’s ego at the same unevolved stage. Moving forward in time , when Sita goes to stay in the forest along with her husband and Lakshman the same feelings are evoked in our minds when we meet the silent Ahilya . Ahilya is another strong feminist force after Sita and Sunaina who appears to be a very intelligent woman who is bound to endure things which she does not endorse, silently. Apparently she had taken a vow of silence to purify herself spiritually and her husband took great pride in it, but her glance towards Sita conveyed how little her husband understood her. The silence very eloquently expressed her restive spirit , and conveyed much that she hitherto couldn’t speak due to fear of rejection from dominant forces.

While the man’s pride was an important consideration to uphold as far as human relations were concerned, nature and forests had their own battles to fight against humans in general. Sita’s marriage procession from Mithila to Ayodhya is one such instance where human callousness is vividly visible. The soldiers were ravaging the trees and other forest growths when Ram and Sita’s marriage procession was on the way to Ayodhya. This troubled Sita, who had always had great empathy with nature. She intervened and asks Ram to restrain the soldiers, which he heeds and executes immediately. Here Ram’s response speaks volumes about the traditional traits attributed to men in general and kings and rulers in particular. To Sita’s appeal to treat the trees with courtesy and not to cause them needless pain, he says, “ you are tender hearted my dear...it’s right and necessary that women should be so.” (Divakaruni, 56) The empathy for nature or for any voiceless creature is considered a feminine attribute and any man or powerful king who exhibits such feelings is perceived as weak. But Chitra Banerjee’s Sita has her own views unaffected by the years of training in feminine behaviour by her maternal home and she does ask herself, ‘ I wanted to ask him ,wasn’t it as important for a king to feel the hurt of others as women did? Wasn’t he responsible for the animals and birds and trees in his realm, as well as the people?’(Divakaruni, 56). Later also when Sita is settled in her marital home, Ram shares his concern for the common man and mentions how he dreams of a country where everyman will have a voice. Here again Sita thinks silently , ‘...and what about the women.’ And even Ram’s dream of giving importance to every man in the kingdom bothers Sita as she thinks, ‘did every man in the city have his opinions listened to, or his grievances addressed .’(Divakaruni, 97) This resonates in the minds of the reader as he goes forward and thinks about the washerman who sealed Sita’s fate with his undeserving voice. The thoughts are revolutionary but our Sita here is a woman who thinks and questions the norms . She does express the unexpressed, the concern for the subaltern whom hitherto the strong have always ignored. But most of the times she keeps her thoughts to herself abiding by her mother’s teachings. Banerjee’s Sita is far removed from the Sita of the traditionally told Ramayana. The traits attributed to the traditional Sita are those of a meek , obedient daughter and wife, a pious woman who has little opinions on subjects beyond her family. But the author delves into the depths of the epic and brings out the real Sita who does have a mind of her own and a noble, thinking one at that.

The ecological concerns of the author go hand in hand with the feminist ones and are manifest in Sita’s deep knowledge of the forest as well as her empathy with it. Here Banerjee interprets the famous battles between the humans and the demons in a different light and gives it a fresh sympathetic ecological perspective. The *Vanvaas* is one such long journey that unravels the female mind and what it feels to live in close communion with the nature. The nature here is not merely a background presence but one thriving and living entity that like the female has a heart and soul but mostly ignored by the dominating forces. At the very start of the forest journey, Sita describes the *Rakshasa* tribes like the demon Tarhaka, and instead of viewing them as hostile destructive forces, tries to identify the issues they are coping with. The cause of their aggression and hostility towards humans is not due to any inherent murderous traits they have or intolerance of other beings, but the constant encroachments by the so called civilised humans who show no respect to their right of existence. ‘ Each tribe is unique. Tarhaka belonged to a militant group that believed that the forest was theirs-the last space left to them, since humans had taken over most of the cities-and thus they wanted to drive us, through death if necessary,’(Divakaruni, 128) The forces of wilderness were constantly at war with humans in the forests. Apart from



a few rishis who knew how to coexist with the other living beings, most others were pitted against equally demanding forest creatures. ‘ They’ve become dangerously strong lately, and better organized. Holy men can hardly live in the forest nowadays without being attacked and routed. Several have had to close their Gurukula and sent their students home, after few violent incidents...’ (Divakaruni, 132) The rishis are asking Ram to help them in their fight against the rakshasas. This is a symbolic battle which humans have been fighting for ages against the forces of nature. This interpretation of the epic brings forth Chitra Banerjee’s prime concern that of living in communion with the ecology and not as competitors. While the female in the novel merely thinks rebelliously to long oppression and rarely voices her discontent , ecology takes a belligerent form and speaks loud and clear. The demons are nothing but voices of an angry nature speaking against the oppressor. While Ahilya and Sita seek solace in feminine companionship and comfort each other , nature has its own way of retaliating. The rishis and Ram are one in joining forces against the demons, Sita protest briefly about their course of action but is cut short by Ram so just thinks, albeit silently again, ‘ I didn’t argue further. I could see the men wouldn’t change their minds. Their belief in the superiority of their own ways was too deeply ingrained in them. But I wasn’t satisfied. We were visitors to the forest, which had its own rules, its own rhythm, its own savage beauty. It belonged more to the rakshasas than to us. What right did we have to cause destruction to those who had been here long before we came?’(Divakaruni, 152) The selfish and invasive mindset that most humans have is nurtured for the most part and leads to conflicts which result in further unrest. Sita’s logical and compassionate advice is ignored most of the times which results in silence of women like Sita , Ahilya and even Sunaina. This is a silence that women have resorted to in many a conflicting situations. After a long period of despair and hardships, the day finally comes when Ram defeats Ravana with the help of Hanuman and the Vaanar Sena , but for Sita it brings fresh surprises. Ram, the king replaces the loving husband who was distraught at the separation from his wife. The ruler wants an unsullied wife in order to appear a perfect man and does not rely on Sita’s entreaties in this regard. Sita finally decides to give herself up to fire but is miraculously saved by the Gods. This finally melts the law abiding king’s heart and he takes her back with her to Ayodhya. But listening to every common man who has opinions on the life of women, and at that a man who himself has mistreated his own wife, again leaves Sita’s fate hanging. She is ousted from her household when she’s pregnant and left in the forests again to fend for herself. This toughens our goddess further who brings up her twins on her own in Rishi Valmiki’s ashram. The trust was one sided ,while Sita had blind faith in Ram’s integrity ,the same cannot be said about Ram. The rules and duties of the ruler seem to have a bias for the stronger and the males more than the weak and females. A humane Lakshman seems to emerge as more considerate than the perfect Ram. Sita’s parting speech at the end when she refuses to spend her life with Ram anymore resonate with all the women who have had to suffer in life. ‘ ...you’ve always placed your role as king ahead of your role as husband.did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered? Did you stop to think- as a wise king would-that there would always be people who gossip, even in the best run kingdoms, for its their nature? Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny?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?And that is why, O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, *No more!*’ (Divakaruni, 356-357) The evolution of Sita’s character is complete and she does take a stand and speaks her mind. Now it is Ram who repents his past rejections of a chaste Sita but is himself rejected when he demands a second *agnipariksha* . Being the daughter of earth and fire she seeks refuge in the lap of the earth to escape an unjust world. Sita who was found abandoned in a forest near the palace of Mithila and adopted a daughter by the kind Janak has finally returned home to mother earth.

3. CONCLUSION:

Nature stands steadfast with Sita and is true to its role as the nurturer and protector of life. It may be perceived as the rejection of the rigid male way of life in favour of a more compassionate world by both the victims- nature as well as the female. The theme though historical and mythological, does echo for us in the contemporary times. The feminine aspect has evolved and changed with the times but it is far from perfect, whereas the ecological aspect has deteriorated when compared with the past. Chitra Banerjee succeeds in conveying the overriding message of conserving nature and giving space to the subaltern, a lesson we have learnt through the decades but are yet to heed.

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