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## Reimagining Sita: A Critical Study of Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* with Reference to Animism and Deep Ecology

**Krishan Kumar**

PhD Scholar, Dept of English & Foreign Languages, Chaudhary Devi Lal University,  
Sirsa.email:krishycdlu@gmail.com

*Write your story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized misunderstood, blamed, forgotten-or maligned and used as cautionary tales.*

Chitra Banerjee in her text, *The Forest of Enchantments* narrates the story of Sita and her voice that seems different from the epic *Ramayana*. She is considered as one of the prominent female characters in Indian mythology. The text shows not only the spiritual journey of Sita but also redefines her identity through various dimensions of her life. The novel explores Sita as a human figure not a divine power as mentioned in Indian epics especially in *Ramayana*, and her enormous strength and courage while living in the amidst the unfamiliar, haunted and mysterious forest. The study is an attempt to examine the relationship between Sita and the nature through the lens of animism and deep ecology. In the narrative the forest serves as an essential source of empowerment to her. In Divakaruni's narrative, nature embraces Sita as a source of power that empowers her to speak for self-identity.

Both animism and deep ecology are interconnected concepts that underline a thoughtful relationship between humans and the non- human world. E.B. Tylor, an English anthropologist, defines **animism** as the **belief that all natural objects, phenomena, and the universe itself possess a soul or spirit**. He describes animism as the earliest form of religious belief in his book *Primitive Culture*. He further suggests the idea that early humans have developed deep understanding of their dreams, death, and natural events. He considers animism a fundamental stage in the evolution of religion, preceding more complex religious systems. The animism postulates the idea that all elements of universe, including animals, plants, and even non-living objects, possess a divine spirit or soul. The term, deep ecology, on the other hand, is an environmental principle that expands the fundamental value of all existing human being and the ecosystems. It basically emphasizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and believes in a thoughtful change in human-nature relationships. Norwegian philosopher, Arne Naess in his 1973 article "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary" distinguishes between shallow ecology that addresses environmental issues for human benefit, and deep ecology that gives importance to the intrinsic worth of all life forms while considering these entities as independent as humans. Besides, environmental philosopher Warwick Fox expands the concept of transpersonal natural balance that cultivates a sense of identification with the broader ecological community that recognizes one's interconnectedness with all other forms of life to form more ethical environmental behaviors. Thus, both the ideas; animism and deep ecology, help to make us understand the interconnectedness

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between human world and non-human world beings, help human beings to develop their relationship with nature.

Sita establishes a close bond with the environment around her as she has the ability to interact with various elements like trees, animals and elemental objects. This kind of bonding shows that object of this world may be seen as animistic as Sita suggests that nature is not merely a backdrop but it also works as an active participant in the cosmic order. *The Frost of Enchantment* has the concepts of flora that includes all life plant life as trees, flowers, grasses mosses etc. whereas fauna refers to animal life as mammals, birds, insects, fish etc. Characters like Jatayu, an eagle, may not be seen just as an animal as he is a noble being with many virtues, plays an important role in Sita's narrative. Sita always sees herself as part of a larger web of life. Her respect for nature and its creatures strengthens Sita to succeed in difficult circumstances in the wilderness as the nature has mutual respect towards her. Thus, it may be seen as a demonstration of an animistic perspective where Sita learns the virtues of collaboration and compassion in nature.

Chitra Banerjee skillfully makes an attempt to show the adversity faced by women especially Sita in order to counterbalance the patriarchal norms and imperatives in her narrative. Sita listens to Valmiki's *Ramayana* and seems dissatisfied with its biased narrative that favours men without talking about women's agony, pains, sacrifice etc. in the narrative. As a reaction, Sita wishes to share her own viewpoint that showcases her range of sentiments, dilemmas, and inner chaos throughout her life. Divakaruni bestows agency on her women who endure challenges of life and establish meaningful relationship both with fellow human and non-human entity. The narrative comprises the concept of animism and deep ecology where Sita shows a deep concern about the forest. She moves to Ayodhya in a palanquin after getting married to Ram and on the way, she sees the soldiers destroying the forest. She reacts while saying, "This is their home, and we are visitors," I added. We should treat them with deference and not cause them needless pain. Ram's brows drew together in surprise. Clearly, he had never considered that plants feel pain as we do" (Divakaruni 56).

Sita has a strong empathy for nature since her birth. She always maintains a harmonious relationship with nature and its different constituent parts. She also desires to sprint without shoes on the lawn in Ram's palace. "But such things were not allowed to princesses, especially those married into the royal family of Ayodhya" (Divakaruni 57). It is also believed that Yakshas, Rakshasas, Gandharvas, and tribal communities have been the original inhabitants and rightful owners of the forest. However, ever since humans began monopolizing the forest, displacing its inhabitants and exploiting it for their personal purposes like gardening and hunting. The forest has suffered a significant loss due to human's desires and greed that highlights the concept of deep ecology.

Sita demonstrates a great sense of respect for all forms of life and lives with non-human world in harmony when she spends time in the forest in the narrative. Deep ecology also depicts Sita's connection and experiences with the forest reflect the idea that she is not an autonomous entity rather she is an integral part of this complex ecosystem that includes flora and fauna, vegetation, and the earth. The tale of *Ramayana* shows the act of environmental degradation, particularly when Ravana attacks the forest many times to exploit it for his desires and greed but Sita's wholesomeness and association with the forest serve as a counter discourse that discredits such exploitation, illustrates deep ecology's call for sustainability synchronization with the environment. Besides, Sita has a great sense of empathy towards all creatures of the forest and feels their struggle and pain as her own that reflects deep ecology's emphasis on sympathetic commitment of Sita with the natural world.

The novel portrays Sita's deep and inevitable connection with the nature. Though, there are many instances in the epic Ramayana that explore Sita's association with nature, Divakaruni reinterprets Sita's co-evolution with non-human world. She has an intimate bond with the nature that embraces Sita as her own child. She advocates her idea while saying, "My favourite responsibility (as the Queen of Ayodhya), the garden palace....The entire side of the grounds that lay behind the palace I'd made into a little forest" (Divakaruni 303). Moreover, she prefers to join mother when she is asked to prove her chastity and being a queen, she lives amidst the jungle which was full of demons and evils show her determination and independent action. Both the events indicate that nature embraces and empowers Sita as a form of "healing green canopies" (Divakaruni 352). Sita does not find any difficulty in this unfamiliar forest during her exile as she connects herself with this place as she says, "Here in Panchabati 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 cloud. 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 here 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" (Divakaruni 137).

Sita may be seen as a symbolic representation of nature in the text as she claims, "I'm Sita, the forest dweller, Sita, daughter of earth. And yes, Sita, daughter of fire as well" (Divakaruni 352). She is found by her father, king Janaka found her while ploughing the ground. Her childhood is depicted as: My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because, like them, I was earth-born. Maybe for the same reason, when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties (Divakaruni 7). She is often regarded as a "Goddess" by the people of her kingdom as she has the efficient knowledge about the medicinal properties of herbs that cures many sick people and soldiers who get wounded in war. Sita always seems fascinated by the forest and its people since her early days as she keeps thinking to visit the forest but women are not allowed to visit a forest as it is considered as man's job in patriarchal society. "It wasn't something that women did" (Divakaruni 8). Besides, she cannot understand the actual role of the forest as she says, "Wasn't he responsible for the animals and birds and trees in his realm, as well as the people?" (Divakaruni 56).

Sita maintains a deep connection with the forest from her early childhood to the ends of her life while joining mother earth after the fire trial. She transforms her garden into a "little forest", and mentions that "but some days a strange dissatisfaction would come over me, a longing to go walking in a real forest, a wild, unpredictable forest, the kind that had been my home for so many years" (Divakaruni 303). In the case of Sita, it is obvious that the jungle has never been a real of darkness and unfamiliar place to her which is also depicted in Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* where she waits for her children Luv and Khush who have not returned to the ashram by late evening. On this occasion, the anxious mother says that she is not afraid of jungle as her children are familiar with it, but she fears of the city (the place outside the forest). In other words, Sita's character as portrayed by Volga seems the most authoritative and living; during the time of her exile and after the fire trial embodies the principles of animism. She argues that it has been a basic problem of our society since ages to understand that each and every living and non-living thing has its own way to grow and flourish within its chosen space. The human-centric worldview has always been unmindful of the right place of non-human entities in the grand order nature.

To sum up, it may be said that both the terms animism and deep ecology offer a holistic point of view that fosters reverence, worship, and a deep sense of interconnectedness with nature that has been portrayed through Sita's character and her journey especially within the enchanted

forests. Divakaruni's text also offers a fresh perspective on Sita's character that seems different and more authoritative than epic *Ramayana*. Both Animism and deep ecology emerge as a response to counter such exploitative and extractive approaches that seek to preserve nature. The characters embody different perspectives on nature: Ravana and his brother Kumbhkaran who continually destroy the forest, symbolize environmental degradation and on contrast, Sita is shown as a character who nurtures and preserves the forest since her childhood. Likewise, Surpanakha, another female character in narrative, nurtures a beautiful garden, reflecting resilience and reverence for nature after her mutilation. Both female characters embody a profound sense of attachment and empathy toward the forest, advocating for a sustainable and balanced coexistence where all beings are valued equally within the intricate ecological web. This understanding reflects a significant shift for the environment that challenges the prevailing norms of environmental degradation while offering mutual respect and kinship between different entities of the nature. One may see a spirited engagement with the spiritual association of Sita with the forest that becomes a source of healing. So, it resonates with the whole humanity that needs to respect the coexistence of all forms of life in this present ecological system.

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