



Between Earth and Exile: An Ecofeminist Rewriting of Sita's Journey in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

Dr. J. Kavitha

Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English
The Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu



Manuscript ID:
BIJ-SPL3-Nov25-ES-022

Subject: English

Received : 29.07.2025

Accepted : 08.08.2025

Published : 27.11.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si3.25.Nov022

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments (2019) is a feminist reimagining of the ancient Indian epic Ramayana, narrated from the perspective of Sita, a voice historically overshadowed by the grandeur of male heroism and divine duty. The novel not only humanises a mythic figure but also reclaims her agency, inner world, and resistance. This research article, "Between Earth and Exile: An Ecofeminist Rewriting of Sita's Journey in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments", aims to examine the novel through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. By foregrounding Sita's voice and interiority, the novel challenges androcentric readings of the Ramayana that have long marginalised or silenced the female perspective. The paper proposes that Sita's narrative moves beyond a mere account of suffering and endurance to emerge as a complex site of ethical reflection, ecological consciousness, and spiritual self-determination. Her affinity with the forest, her empathetic bond with non-human life, and her rootedness in care and non-violence reveal alternative modes of agency that disrupt patriarchal and anthropocentric structures. Through a close reading of Divakaruni's text, this research article seeks to justify how the intersection of ecological and gendered resistance is intricately woven into Sita's journey, and invites further reflection on what it means to resist from both within and beyond exile.

Keywords: ecofeminism, myth, forest, Chitra Banerjee, Sita, *Ramayana*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prolific Indian-American writer and professor of creative writing at the University of Houston, is renowned for her evocative narratives that centre female voices and diasporic identity. Her literary oeuvre spans poetry, short stories, and novels, with a distinctive emphasis on reimagining myths and epics through a feminist lens. In her 2019 novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni retells the epic, *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective, drawing readers into an emotionally resonant narrative that challenges patriarchal

structures embedded in classical mythology. By restoring voice, dignity, and agency to Sita, the novel becomes a fertile ground for ecofeminist inquiry, an approach that sees the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature as interlinked consequences of patriarchal domination.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s as a philosophical and socio-political movement that explores the intersection between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. It interrogates systems of power that legitimise the control of both



women's bodies and the environment. Pioneers such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies argued that women, particularly in the Global South, possess unique ecological knowledge due to their historical roles as food growers, caretakers, and keepers of traditional practices. According to Shiva, "Women produce through non-violence, by cooperating with nature, not by subjugating it" (*Staying Alive* 22). Ecofeminist literature thus seeks to recover narratives where women and nature resist together, revealing ecological consciousness through acts of care, endurance, and resistance. *The Forest of Enchantments* seamlessly fuses these themes, as Sita's bond with the natural world and her silent endurance reflect a form of ecofeminist resistance to masculine violence and control.

A substantial body of scholarly work has explored Divakaruni's feminist reinterpretation of myth in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Scholars such as Shalini Nadaswaran view the novel as "a retelling that reclaims women's interiorities from the epic's margins" (Nadaswaran 135). Similarly, Kavita A. Sharma recognises how Divakaruni "disrupts the traditional dichotomy of ideal womanhood by giving Sita voice, agency, and choice" (Sharma 48). However, while the novel has received attention through feminist and narratological lenses, an ecofeminist reading remains underexplored. This research aims to fill that gap by examining the symbiotic relationship between Sita and nature, and how her story, aligned with ecological symbols, functions as a critique of both gendered and environmental exploitation. In doing so, the paper posits that *The Forest of Enchantments* is not merely a feminist retelling but an ecofeminist intervention in mythic literature.

Divakaruni's narrative renders Sita as the daughter of the Earth, Bhumi Devi, and emphasises this connection repeatedly to underscore the sacredness of both feminine identity and the environment. Sita's origin from the soil becomes a metaphor for her affinity with nature, and also for her vulnerability to violation. "I was born of the earth. I had always felt a pull toward it, a sense of comfort,

of being known" (Divakaruni 81). This self-identification with the Earth is not romanticised but complicated by suffering. Just as the land is colonised and ravaged, Sita too becomes a site of conquest, reduced to an object over which men assert power. Her abduction by Ravana and subsequent abandonment by Rama represent forms of violence that parallel ecological destruction under patriarchal systems.

The forest in which Sita spends her exile is crucial to understanding her transformation and inner resilience. Rather than viewing exile as punishment, Sita perceives the forest as a space of learning, healing, and connection. "The forest had taught me many things, how to live with less, how to listen, how to observe without judgment" (Divakaruni 139). These lessons are steeped in ecological awareness. Her compassion towards animals, her attentiveness to the changing seasons, and her intuitive respect for the forest all mark her as someone deeply aligned with nature's rhythm. She does not seek to conquer it, but rather listens to it, learns from it, and lives in harmony with its cycles. The forest emerges as a distinctly gendered space in the novel, serving as a nurturing, feminine counterpoint to the rigid, masculine realms of Ayodhya and Lanka. This spatial contrast underscores the ecofeminist belief that natural spaces can offer refuge from patriarchal norms and may host alternative systems of knowledge and power. The Dandakaranya forest becomes a sanctuary for Sita, not because it is peaceful or perfect, but because it gives her the freedom to live on her own terms, without being controlled or judged by men.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's chastity becomes the obsessive measure of her worth, reflecting the same logic through which patriarchy views untouched land as valuable and violated land as degraded. Rama's insistence on a trial by fire echoes this logic of purity: "I must prove to my people that their queen is pure. That I, their king, am not one to put up with the slightest stain" (Divakaruni 265). Through this statement, Divakaruni lays bare how patriarchal institutions



treat women and nature as possessions whose value lies in their untouched state. The fire trial is not only a personal ordeal but also an ecological symbol, conflating feminine suffering with environmental destruction. Sita's final act of resistance, her return to the Earth, redefines this logic. Her final words to Rama are telling: "You gave me a kingdom. But it was not enough. I need peace. I choose the mother who had given me birth" (Divakaruni 359). In choosing Bhumi over the court, Sita reclaims both her origin and autonomy. This is not an act of retreat but of reclamation. She re-enters the Earth not as a broken woman but as one who has renounced the structures that denied her voice. This moment aligns with ecofeminist imagery of regenerative resistance, where Earth becomes not a grave but a sanctuary that receives the wounded with dignity.

Sita's resistance is not loud or militant. Instead, it is expressed through endurance, storytelling, and maternal care. She raises her sons in the hermitage not with bitterness but with purpose, teaching them compassion and equanimity. This form of resistance resonates with what Val Plumwood terms the "ethical standpoint of care" which seeks transformation rather than domination (Plumwood 9). In Sita's pedagogy, Divakaruni presents a model of feminine strength rooted in nurturing rather than conquest. Sita's narrative is laced with grief, but never defeat. Her emotional introspection, captured in lyrical prose, becomes the novel's quiet strength. "Pain doesn't kill you. It's fear that does. And shame. And the silence that wraps itself around you when no one believes your story" (Divakaruni 182). Here, Divakaruni articulates this as an ecofeminist ethic of speaking out, not only against gendered injustice but also against the silencing that enables it.

Divakaruni's choice of first-person narrative further aligns the novel with ecofeminist principles. By granting Sita her voice, the novel resists the epic's hierarchical narration and centres subjective experience. This internality allows readers to engage with Sita not as a mythic figure but as a woman whose emotions, fears, and joys are grounded in lived, embodied experience. This narrative strategy reflects ecofeminism's aim to bring attention to

voices that are often overlooked. It draws special attention to the voices of indigenous and subaltern women, whose wisdom is too often dismissed in dominant discourses. It holds space for complexity, grief, and ambivalence, qualities that are often excluded from heroic narratives. An ecofeminist reading of *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a nuanced understanding of the deep connection between nature and femininity, woven through themes of resistance, spirituality, and suffering.

The spiritual dimensions of ecofeminism are deeply embedded in Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita, whose connection to nature transcends the physical and enters the realm of the sacred. Karen Warren, a key ecofeminist theorist, articulates that ecofeminist spirituality offers "a power to move from unhealthy, life-denying systems and relationships to healthy, life-affirming ones" (Warren 2000, p. 200). This belief is palpable in Sita's journey, where the forest becomes not only a space of exile but also of healing, spiritual awakening, and resistance. The sanctuary of the forest, as Divakaruni envisions it, is not merely a geographical retreat but a transformative site where Sita's suffering deepens her consciousness and enables her to reclaim her agency through introspection and communion with nature.

Sita's sensitivity to environmental harm is evident when she questions Ram's soldiers' destruction of trees during a march. She asks, "Could he order them not to harm the trees? Wasn't he responsible for the animals and birds and trees in his realm, as well as the people?" (Divakaruni 56). Her concern reveals an ecofeminist ethic of care that goes beyond human-centred governance. Ram's response, that women are expected to be tender-hearted, reinforces the patriarchal tendency to dismiss empathy as a feminine trait rather than a valid ethical stance. Sita's ecological awareness is not born of fragility but of moral clarity, making her a representative of what Val Plumwood describes as the critical standpoint of care in ecofeminist ethics (Plumwood 9). Sita's identity is shaped through her constant communion with plants and animals. She remarks that her "strange gift with plants" may be due to being "earth-born" (Divakaruni 7). This



spiritual rootedness aligns with Warren's notion of earth-based spirituality which affirms the sacredness of both women's bodies and the natural world (Warren 2000, p. 130). Divakaruni uses Sita's affinity with nature not to confine her within stereotypical notions of femininity but to reveal a deeper, intuitive intelligence that patriarchal systems overlook. Sita's nurturing of a garden palace in Ayodhya and her longing to return to the wild forest demonstrate her understanding that true healing and power come from ecosystems that are untamed, unpredictable, and alive with diversity.

Divakaruni also critiques the civilising narrative embedded in male characters' attitudes towards the forest. When sages urge Ram and Lakshman to eliminate the rakshasas and spread the "light of civilisation," Sita quietly questions their logic. She asks, "What right did we have to cause destruction to those who had been here long before we came?" (Divakaruni 152). Her resistance to this rhetoric mirrors contemporary ecofeminist concerns about how colonial, patriarchal expansion often justifies ecological destruction under the guise of progress. The forest, in Sita's view, already possesses its own laws, rhythms, and sacredness, none of which require human interference or conquest.

Another powerful moment of ecofeminist symbolism is Sita's final return to the Earth. Her plea to her mother Earth, to receive her if she is indeed innocent, transcends despair and becomes an act of defiance. She declares, "If I am indeed blameless...give me a sign" (Divakaruni 357). As the Earth splits open to reclaim her, this gesture becomes more than symbolic death. It is a moment of reclamation, protest, and spiritual homecoming. Velcheru Narayana Rao affirms that in this return, Sita "demonstrated her independence...a powerful indictment against a culture that suspects women" (Rao 226). This return to nature reaffirms ecofeminism's belief in Earth not merely as a resource, but as a living entity capable of offering justice and sanctuary when human systems fail. Sita's prophetic dreams in the forest, where women like Ahalya and Mandodari encourage her to endure,

also serve as a spiritual inheritance of feminine wisdom. Endurance, in this context, is not silent submission but a form of active resilience and ethical clarity. As Sita reflects, "It meant taking the challenges thrown at us and dealing with them...until we grew stronger than them" (Divakaruni 322). Her endurance is thus not a retreat but a journey towards strength, rooted in earth, spirit, and shared womanhood.

The research article demonstrates that *The Forest of Enchantments* serves not only as a feminist reimaging of myth but also as a significant ecofeminist text. Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita is a woman of earth, spirit, and voice. Sita listens deeply to the world around her, resists injustice through presence rather than aggression, and ultimately reclaims her destiny by returning to her elemental source. Her return to the Earth is not an act of surrender but a conscious reclamation of agency. By reframing both nature and womanhood as sites of strength, memory, and resistance, the novel challenges dominant narratives that depict the natural world as passive and women as subservient. It presents an alternative ethic rooted in care, connection, and autonomy, which reflects the foundational principles of ecofeminism. Through the ecofeminist lens, this research article contends that Sita's journey between earth and exile emerges not as a tale of victimhood, but as a powerful rewriting of spiritual and ecological resistance against patriarchal structures.

References

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. HarperCollins India, 2019.
2. Nadaswaran, Shalini. "The Feminine Subject in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2020, pp. 130–144.
3. Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
4. Rao, Velcheru Narayana. "When Does Sita Cease to Be Sita?" *The Ramayana Revisited*,



- edited by Mandakranta Bose, Oxford UP, 2004, pp. 219–241.
5. Sharma, Kavita A. “Rewriting the Epic: Feminist Retellings in Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments*.” *Contemporary Literary Review India*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 45–52.
 6. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Zed Books, 1989.
 7. Warren, Karen. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2000.