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Reimagining Tataka: An Ecofeminist Exploration of Gender, Nature, and Power in Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women*

Abhirami Shibu
&
Smrutisikta Mishra
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
National Institute of Technology Puducherry,
Karaikal-609609

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14605777

Article History: Submitted-30/11/2024, Revised-19/12/2024, Accepted-25/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Anand Neelakantan's retelling of Tataka's story in *Valmiki's Women* (2021) offers a compelling narrative that intertwines environmental consciousness, ethical considerations, and gender dynamics. Tataka's tale serves as a metaphor for the intricate relationship between humanity and nature, illustrating the dire consequences of unchecked greed and exploitation. Through Tataka's character, Neelakantan underscores the importance of preserving the delicate balance between civilisation and the natural world, urging readers to reflect on the repercussions of their choices and advocate for sustainable coexistence with the ecosystem. By framing Tataka's narrative through an ecofeminist lens, the text sheds light on broader systemic issues of patriarchy and environmental exploitation, offering a timely exploration of gender, power, and the environment. Neelakantan's retelling of Tataka's story prompts critical reflection on the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice issues, advocating for systemic change and collective action in the face of ongoing environmental crises and gender inequality. This paper delves into Neelakantan's portrayal of Tataka as an eco-warrior, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes while highlighting the parallels between the subjugation of women and the degradation of nature. In its study, the paper integrates various ecofeminist and gender theories to substantiate the arguments.

Keywords: Tataka, Ecofeminism, gender, civilisation, *yaksha, rakshasa,* patriarchy, nature.

Introduction

Tataka's is a story of preventing the gluttonous human invasion of forests and exploitation of the ecosystem. In Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women* (2021), the tale of Tataka unfolds as a poignant narrative aimed at preventing the rapacious human invasion of the forests and the consequential exploitation of the delicate ecosystem. Tataka's story serves as a compelling metaphor for the profound connection between humanity and nature, emphasising the devastating consequences of unchecked greed and exploitation. Neelakantan intricately weaves together elements of environmental consciousness and ethical considerations, using the character of Tataka to underscore the importance of preserving the balance between civilisation and the natural world. Through this narrative, readers are confronted with the stark reality of the impact of human actions on the environment, urging them to reflect on the consequences of their choices and advocate for sustainable coexistence with the ecosystem.

Tataka, the Vexatious Demoness

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Tataka is a demoness who plays a role in the early part of the epic. Tataka terrorised the region by attacking and devouring humans and disrupting the peaceful lives of the sages and ascetics in the Dandaka forest.

It is believed that Tataka was born with the strength of a thousand elephants in her. She was a *yaksha* (natural spirits and deities who guard a place) woman who was later cursed by Sage Agastya when she, along with her son, Maricha, wanted to avenge her husband, Sunda's death and was transformed into to a "terrible form" (Debroy). Agastya says, "You will give up this form and assume a terrible form. O great yaksha! You will become a maneater. You will become deformed, with a distorted visage" (Debroy). Ever since then, an uncontrollable Tataka started disrupting the livelihood and practices of the sages. Seeing the plight of the reverent sages, Sage Vishvamitra calls upon the two brave princes of Ayodhya to slay her.

Rama, adhering to his duty as a protector of dharma, engages in a battle with Tataka and eventually kills her, freeing the forest from her malevolent presence.

This episode serves as an early demonstration of Rama's prowess and commitment to righteousness. The killing of Tataka is often depicted as a necessary act to restore balance and protect the sages and innocent beings in the Dandaka forest from her destructive activities.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Unveiling Connections between Gender, Power, and Nature.

Ecofeminism emerges as a pragmatic and transformative movement rooted in the lived experiences and resilience of women striving to sustain their families and communities. The core struggles of these women are directed against the adverse impacts of "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation perpetuated by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. As women find themselves on the front lines of environmental crises, they recognise the interconnectedness of their struggles for gender equality and ecological justice. Ecofeminism contends that patriarchal structures not only exploit and marginalise women but also contribute significantly to the degradation of the environment. Lori Gruen (1993) writes about an ecofeminist framework rooted in the religious beliefs that emerged alongside agricultural practices, contributed to the separation of man from woman and animals (Gruen). As agricultural societies faced challenges like droughts and storms threatening crop yields, nature became both a source of fear and a provider of sustenance. Women, associated with the earth due to their ability to give birth, were similarly feared. The uncertainties of farming life fuelled a desire for control, leading to attempts to dominate both nature and women through rituals and divine intervention. Men believed that by distancing themselves from daily natural activities, they could align with supernatural forces to protect them from the unpredictability of nature (Gruen 63-64). Ecofeminism focuses on the elimination of all institutionalised hierarchy as another principal force for ending oppression. By recognising and promoting the interconnectedness of all life on earth, ecofeminism advocates for a more holistic and equitable approach to environmental and social justice.

In Anand Neelakantan's *Valmiki's Women*, the representation of Tataka can be interpreted as a manifestation of ecofeminist discourse, encapsulating the interconnectedness of gender and environmental concerns. Neelakantan's portrayal of Tataka, a formidable demoness who is eventually subdued by Ram, goes beyond a simplistic depiction of good versus evil. Instead, it subtly unveils the gendered dimensions of environmental exploitation. Tataka's fate reflects a larger narrative of the abuse of power, where patriarchal forces exert dominance over both women and nature. Her transformation from a powerful, independent being into a marginalised, demonised figure echoes the marginalisation of women and the degradation of the environment in broader societal contexts. The narrative throws light on the underlying structures that perpetuate the dual oppression of women and nature, developing an ecofeminist lens that underscores the need for more equitable, sustainable relationships between humanity and the environment. Through Tataka,

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Neelakantan provides a nuanced exploration of the intersections between gender, power, and ecological imbalance, encouraging a critical reflection on the consequences of a patriarchal worldview on both women and the natural world.

Anand Neelakantan's Tataka

Tataka was the daughter of Suketu, a yaksha. He was childless for a long time, after which he underwent severe penance and was blessed with a daughter. It is said that she was born with the strength of a thousand elephants. Coming of age, she fell in love with Sunda, who was a *gandharva*. "The gandharvas went where their songs took them" (Neelakantan 169) They used to travel like nomads in the jungle. "Even yakshas lived in the jungle" (Neelakantan 169).

The female protagonists' entry or return to nature is considered a revolutionary act "which will give them the security and courage to challenge norms and values established by a society patronised by patriarchy" (Gopinath et al. 162). Likewise, Tataka was a child of Earth. She lived her life with the principles of love. Neelakantan's Tataka is different from her conventional representation. She was a wife, a mother, a nurturer who loved her husband and children with all her heart. The forest was her home. Love was her language. She left her father's palace for love. Neelakantan unfolds the story of Tataka through the eyes of her son Maricha, who later avenges his parents' and brother's death by helping Ravana abduct Sita and unravel the whole war and violence. Neelakantan (2021) writes, "They had no money, no real home and not much to eat. But his (Maricha's) parents acted as if it were a fairy tale they inhabited. They were always humming, their eyes drinking each other in… Until Subahu was born, they did not even have a tree house. They slept in the meadows and under trees" (Neelakantan 171). The family lived one with nature. Their lives mingled with nature in the form of songs and metaphors. Recalling the changes in their life after having children, Tataka says,

> "Life back then was tumultuous like the mountain stream – a lot of noise, froth, eddies and whirlpools. Interesting, but without true meaning. Now life is like a broad river, serene, calm, deep and gliding towards the ocean. You and your brother are the boats that carry us. Let us pray there be no storms on the way" (Neelakantan 171).

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The Human-Nature Interconnect

There had been no rakshasas in the jungle until these men had come with their fire and their stories.

- Neelakantan (2021:184)

The stories and songs of Sunda "smelt of the earth after a shower. They were like the roots of a banyan tree, old yet fresh, giving birth to newer tales" (Neelakantan 172). Their life was simple, happy and content, free of greed. They did not know what one could do with gold or money.

Their lives started changing when the stories about the rise of new empires reached them. They were the initial acts of "civilisation". It was the onset of a colonial invasion of culture over nature. One night Tataka listens to her husband say,

> "These savages were conducting strange rituals to please their gods. Unlike us, who believe gods reside everywhere – in the leaves, in the blades of grass, in the grains of sand and even in the worms that wriggle under the soil – they think their gods live in heaven. Their gods thirst for the blood of innocent creatures" (Neelakantan 178).

The story shows how the histories of civilisation might have erased the trace of the violence against and the exploitation of nature in the name of modernity. Sunda enlightens Tataka on how the invaders of the forest are different from the carnivorous animals like tigers and leopards by saying, "Tigers hunt to satisfy their hunger, not to please some god in the skies. Hunger I can understand, not greed or stupidity" (Neelakantan 182).

As Gilligan notes, it is the "disconnected sense of self" that causes an ecological crisis (Gaard and Murphy 2). Tataka and Sunda believe that "a yaksha's duty is to protect the jungles and its children and keep the rhythm of nature intact" (Neelakantan 179). They live interconnected with nature, and from this interconnectedness stems the moral responsibility to save and preserve nature from destruction and exploitation.

However, the army of the so-called "civilisation" believed it to be their "responsibility" to "civilise" the communities that lived in harmony with nature in the forest. Sunda's and Tataka's story shows the transition from an ecologically balanced society to an ostensibly civilised society. There is a consumerist greed evident in the actions of the 'civilised.' Sunda tells Tataka, "These savages are conducting strange rituals to please their gods" (Neelakantan 178). It shows how, for the indigenous, the sages and Kshatriyas (one of the four varnas, or social classes, in traditional

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Hindu society who are commonly referred to as the warrior or martial class), with their "strange rituals", seemed like colonisers. The concept of emancipation, freedom and equality based on dominance over nature, historically associated with white man, can be traced in the behaviour of the sages and *Kshtariya*-borns in the story (Gopinath et al. 160). They marginalise the individuals who do not conform to their way of living, beliefs and order. Tataka and Sunda express their disappointment towards the invasion of the forests by outsiders to each other. They resented the "vana naras" adapting themselves to the "civilised" way of living. They fearfully realised that only "a few among the yakshas and gandharvas will lead the old life" (Neelakantan 180). Sunda tells Tataka,

> "People now laugh at me for living like I do. They no longer want to hear the old songs. Who wants to hear the melody of the jungle brooks, or listen to the cuckoo's cooing, when they have stories dripping in blood! They want to hear about devas winning against asuras now. They want stories with deceit, treachery, violence and death in it. No one wants our kind of songs anymore and I don't know how to sing happily about wars" (Neelakantan 180).

Gopinath et al. (2018) write, "While colonial discourses ruptured this connection with the environment, women and other marginalised groups in the community still cherished the delicate ecological balance with awe and devotion" (Gopinath et al. 161). There existed a harmonious coexistence among the humans and the nature. Tataka and her people revered nature as a "repository of wisdom and life" and was regarded as their "source of substance" while the hegemonic forces swept aside such concerns (Gopinath et al. 161). They challenged the destructive forces of development for which they were labelled as "rakshasas" (a race of malevolent beings with supernatural powers who are often portrayed as antagonistic figures who disrupt the order of the universe and cause harm to humans and gods alike. "There had been no rakshasas until these (the sages) men had come with their fire and their stories" (Neelakantan 182). This shows the patriarchy's intolerant attitude towards the groups that challenge their norms and notions. L Rose (2023) argues, "Structural practices of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism are supported by patriarchal values, norms, and beliefs, creating an ideological superstructure that views many oppressive practices as normal and expected" (Rose 322).

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Tataka's life takes a sudden turn when the new men in the forest kill her husband. The men claimed, "He was a rakshasa. He tried to stop the sacrifice. We cursed him to death. No one tries to meddle with the divine sacrifices" (Neelakantan 186). When Tataka went to question her husband's killing, she was treated brutally. "He (Maricha) shuddered when he saw the blisters on his mother's face. One side of her beautiful face was burnt. Tataka was now ugly and beautiful, beautiful and ugly, a rakshasi and a yakshini, or just a widow who dared to question, which was one and the same" (Neelakantan 188).

Nayar (2019) writes, "The anxiety of vanishing indigenes - indigenes as leading precarious lives as their ways of life, their natural environs disappear with colonial modernity - is not unique to the Project (Genographic Project). It dates back to the nineteenth century" (Nayar 153). He cites how Patrick Bratlinger noted how Europeans mourned the passing of primitive races but also treated them as inevitable, given that these were barbaric, uncivilised peoples (Nayar 153). The attitude of the princes from Ayodhya and the sages who accompanied them also fall in the same line of thought. When Ram, who slayed Tataka, later finds her son digging a pit to bury Tataka's body, he tells Subahu,

"Your mother was a rakshasi and I was forced to kill her, but I have nothing against you. She was interfering with the holy sacrifices of the rishis. She attacked them often. As a prince, it was my duty to protect the rishis and brahmins who are the upholders of our holy scriptures. Now that she is dead, please allow us to do her last rites as per the scriptures… I shall take care of the gifts due to the brahmins for the death ritual. Tataka was my mother too, as all older women are. That is our culture" (Neelakantan 201).

Subahu rebukes, "You killed her, and you call her your mother?... You can't burn her. You shouldn't burn her. You shouldn't even bury her. It was my stupid brother's idea to bury her. You have to let her rot. She is the food for the children of the forest" (Neelakantan 202).

That was their belief. They wanted to be the food to the other living organisms after they died; "to mingle with the trees and soil" they loved so much (Neelakantan). However, the princes and the sages did not allow them to follow that. They aimed to impose their culture, traditions and beliefs on the people in the forest. That is what ultimately happened in ecological invasions. The traditional culture of that particular area ceased to exist. As Clifford (1986) puts it, "with rapid change, something essential ("culture"), a coherent, differential identity, vanishes" (Clifford and Marcus 113).

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Branding them as *rakshasas* and killing them for their 'barbaric' actions contradicted with the colonisers' later actions of reverencing the uncivilised indigene. By taking their lives, the civilised authoritarians proved that "some races could not be civilised and were thus doomed to fall by the wayside no matter what customs they practised" (Brantlinger 02).

The opening line of this section can be interpreted in two ways. It can mean that only after the advent of the sages in the forest the rakshasas came into being. It can be interpreted as it is the sages or the 'civilised' and their actions that provoked the *yakshas* and the *gandharvas*. Later, they were branded as *rakshasas* for their revolt against the "civilising mission". The second interpretation could be that it was in fact the sages and the *kshatriyas* who were the real rakshasas who unleashed violence and atrocities on the forest and the people who dwelled in the forest. This interpretation suggests a reversal of roles, where the so-called "civilised" individuals are the ones responsible for unleashing violence and atrocities, while those branded as *rakshasas* are actually resisting this oppressive "civilising mission."

The Interplay of Gender and Race

Tataka is "othered" twice. Firstly, by her gender as a woman and secondly, by her race as a *rakshasi*. The latter classification dehumanises her, placing her outside the bounds of humanity and morality as defined by Brahmanical society. By physically attacking her, the men emphasised that she was not like the other women who lived as per the Brahmanical norms. Different attitudes towards women from different classes of society suggest that "all women do not share a common social status" (hooks 18). In Tataka's case, her race and her gender interdependently exposed her to violence.

The initial response of the rishis towards Tataka reflects the deeply ingrained patriarchy within their societal structure. In the act of male dominance and control, they subjected Tataka to physical disfigurement and imposed a curse upon her solely because she dared to question their authority. This reaction stems from the fragility of the male ego when confronted by female dissent, leading to a desire to assert dominance and maintain power.

Throughout history, patriarchal systems have sought to suppress and appropriate the behaviours of women who challenge cultural norms and stereotypes. In this case, Tataka's defiance threatens the established order dictated by male authority figures, prompting them to take drastic measures

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to maintain control. In this aspect, Tataka's experience is similar to that of Surpanakha. Both were the victims of male violence because they dared to challenge gender norms.

Tataka is reimagined as an eco-warrior who wanted to save the ecosystem from the exploitation in the form of civilisation. Tataka, an otherwise peaceful *yakshi* went on to carry weapons to save her land from exploitation. She says,

> "If I am able to restore the world to what existed before "civilisation" came in the form of holy scriptures, my taking up weapons would be justified. I am doing this so my grandchildren can go back to living without any weapons. This is my battle and this is my way of remembering my Sunda" (Neelakantan 199).

Ostriker (1986) writes, "…the articulation of female anger, like female body language, is culturally taboo, and a woman who breaks this taboo does so at her own peril" (Ostriker 124). Tataka received brutal treatment in return for her anger and activism. She was branded a *rakshasi* for her behaviour that did not conform to the accepted gender codes. In patriarchal societies, women who defy culturally and situationally prescribed gender norms are typically portrayed in a negative light. They are often accused of exhibiting unfeminine behaviour, attempting to assert control over male domains, and labelled as violent and aggressive. This failure or refusal to conform to traditional femininity not only underscores the importance of gender norms within society but also highlights the deviant woman as an exceptional case. The perceived sexual assertiveness and moral transgressions associated with deviant women are often interpreted as subversive attempts to challenge the existing power structures and societal norms (Mäntymäki).

Conclusion

Diana Purkiss (1992) has delineated three modes of re-writing poetry applicable to the feminist re-visioning of mythology. Firstly, one can achieve this by shifting the focus from male to female, thereby transferring agency from the 'other' (male-centric) to the 'self' (female-centric) narrative. Secondly, it transforms dominant-negative connotations and terms into positive versions. Additionally, assigning the role of narrator to a minor character empowers voiceless, marginalised, and sidelined women in the grand narratives (Purkiss 444). By framing Tataka's narrative through an ecofeminist lens, Neelakantan highlights the parallels between the subjugation of women and the degradation of nature, shedding light on the broader systemic issues of patriarchy and

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environmental exploitation that persist in contemporary society. Neelakantan's portrayal of Tataka challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Rather than depicting her solely as a monstrous antagonist, Neelakantan humanises Tataka, providing depth to her character and exploring the circumstances that led to her transformation. He shows her as a protagonist, a protector and not a destroyer. Through this nuanced portrayal, Neelakantan challenges the binary notions of good and evil typically associated with female characters in mythology, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse representation of women in literature. By depicting Tataka as a victim of ecological destruction, Neelakantan emphasises the importance of environmental stewardship and the need to address issues such as deforestation and habitat destruction in the contemporary era.

Overall, Anand Neelakantan's retelling of Tataka's story from an ecofeminist perspective offers a timely exploration of gender, power, and the environment, challenging entrenched stereotypes and highlighting the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice issues. In the face of ongoing environmental crises and gender inequality, Neelakantan's narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for systemic change and collective action.

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