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## **Eco-Feministic Concerns in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*: A Study through the Character of Sita**

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### **Abstract:**

Eco-feminism is the submerged branch of ecology and feminism that is based on the kinship of a woman and nature. Women's association with nature is an age-old practice not only in our country, but everywhere in the world. Even early texts and discussions on eco-feminism talk about historical connections between women and nature. Though the modern eco-feminist movement started during late 1970s, it was actually strengthened in 1980s with the series of conferences and workshops conducted in the United States by various academicians and professional women. Thus, eco-feminism emerged as a philosophical, political and academic movement that studies and discusses the process in which feminism and environmentalism are blended to promote respect for women and protection and preservation to nature, as both are lately and largely have been subject to oppression in entire world. In other words, it is all about drawing parallels between the systematic oppression of women and the degradation of nature, both of which result from male domination and society. The remark of Abdel Mohsen is quite appropriate in this regard: 'The common thread among ecofeminists is that the patriarchal power in society oppresses both nature and women. This interconnection between the mistreatment of nature and the degradation of women is the core of eco-feminism.'<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Eco-feminism, Patriarchy, Environmentalism, Nature, Oppression, Male-domination.

“Eco-feminism basically helps us see that we are connected, that divisions such as human and non-human, are false binaries- and that by harming nonhuman forms of life, we harm ourselves. Eco-feminism asks that we eliminate all forms of ‘power over’ and that we live in equity with all biotic life. Poison the earth, we poison ourselves. Harm others, we harm ourselves. Continuing to live in our present system of patriarchal domination and exploitation will ultimately results in our complete self-destruction and ecocide.”<sup>2</sup>

‘The Forest of Enchantments’ by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a brilliant retelling, which places Sita at the centre of the novel: this is Sita’s version. The Forest of Enchantments is also a touching human story of the other women in the epic, often misunderstood, underrated and relegated to the margins: Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Ahilya, Mandodari etc. In the prologue of the novel, when Sita decides to write the Sitayana and dips her quill in the inkpot, she is lost in the memories of her youth, wishing to start her story from the moment when she first met Ram. But suddenly she is taken aback, as many voices disrupt her peace of mind, some of these were in whispering tone, other ones were loud. Sita felt spell bounded after listening to these voices. Actually, these were the voices of Kaikeyi, Ahilya, Surpanakha, Mandodari and her sister Urmila. They all were clamoring to bring their stories into limelight. Thus, in the prologue of the novel, Chitra Banerjee projects as if all the marginalized women characters were pleading to Sita to express, share or bring into limelight their versions of stories too. “Write our story, too. For always we’ve been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten- or maligned and used as cautionary tales.”<sup>3</sup> Sita answered: “Yes, I’ll write your stories as best as I can, for without them, mine can’t be complete.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, this novel reinterprets the life-stories of the women characters and focuses on how patriarchy affect the women and nature by probing into the insights of the characters in the novel. The primary objective of the study is to interpret the Eco feminist concerns through the textual and conceptual aspects of the novel *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Woman and nature both share the similar attributes, as they are associated with reproduction, nurturing and healing. People call nature as ‘Mother Nature’ as nature takes care of humanity, in the same way, woman take care of the family and both they also share and celebrate ecological characteristics like reciprocity, co-operation, love and care. Nature’s healing power as well as a mother’s comforting and healing touch has been soothing and comforting men and children since ages. Being nature loving, women have been nurturing Tulsi in their angans from age old times,

as they are aware of the healing properties of this plant. They worship Vatvraksha, Peepal, Kadamba, and many more. To enhance their beauty they used Parijaat, Marigold, Harsingar, Sadabahaar. Additionally, they make garlands of Marigold and offer rose and lotus daily to worship the deities, use flowers to make gajras & buns to fashion their hairstyle. Besides, who can ignore their fondness to itra, rose water and mehndi. Thus, we can have abundant of examples of women, connecting, appreciating, consuming and preserving nature in their lives. Thus, nature is an essential and indispensable part of their lifestyle and day today activities. As per Vandana Shiva, an eminent environmental activist, “We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the earth or we are not going to have a human future at all.”<sup>5</sup>

Here one obvious question comes to one’s mind: Are males in our societies so much associated with nature exceptions of the gardeners and the environmentalists? Enough evidences can be provided to prove that women and nature are connected in vivid forms and aspects spiritually, philosophically and aesthetically, because women’s approach to nature is to work with nature in unison. But man’s approach is different in this regard, as they don’t often involve in nurturing and caring, considering these qualities as feminine attributes. As per Geesha G “Eco feminists claim that man dominate the nature in the same way they dominate women, and they view patriarchy as responsible for the current status of both women and nature. So, ecofeminists support women to come out of the patriarchal dominance and help them live independently. they also assist women attain a respectable position in a society.”<sup>6</sup>

The research paper tries to focus how Sita, the janak suta and the queen of Ayodhya is portrayed as an epitome of Eco feministic concerns. In the very first chapter of the novel, ‘The Forest of Enchantments’ Chitra Banerjee portrays the character of Sita, initiating her most treasured task of writing Sitayana, which she’s started actually to pour herself and also the unsung stories of her female counterparts. As she begins the story, she feels lost in pleasing memories of her huge parental household. In the reminiscent mood, she recalls her bygone days:

“I walked through the extensive gardens of my father, King Janak, revelling in the feel of the soft grass, beaded with the dews of dawn on my bare feet. I was accompanied by the chief gardeners, for I was the overseer of the palace arbours, an unusual duty for a princess. They pointed out the problem they’d been unable to solve: a gnarled champak, refusing to flower; a rare harshringar, shrivelling up no matter what they tried; a copse of bamboos with black rot creeping up their stalks.

I stroked leaves, dug around roots, breathed prayers. Behind me I could hear the awed whisper of the gardeners. Amazing; Miraculous; look, they're already healing;...7”

Thus, Sita feels delighted to notice that the chief gardeners were amazed and awestruck, knowing her skill. In their conversation they even titled her as ‘Earth Goddess’ who has come straight from the heaven to bless them all. Chitra Banerjee tells that their reverence for her increased with the passage of time. In this way, from the very beginning of the novel, Chitra Banerjee projects Sita as the Earth Goddess protecting & preserving nature. When she comes to know about her hidden talent of nature love and healing power. She feels that it is from the early childhood that she has been feeling the power of love, the power of nature. She feels that she has previously realized about it often, in her early childhood, when she didn't quite understand what it was. It reinforces her belief that Nature is the mother and provider of the all mankind and when nature is willing to offer you something, it offers in abundance. In this way, Chitra Banerjee portrays that Nature and divine power fascinates her from an early age. She acknowledges:

“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. I could tell which grasses 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 shaking sickness or gladdened a long-depressed heart.”<sup>8</sup>

This news of her healing power spreaded rapidly among the courtiers and the people. Though the queen Sunaina tries her utmost to keep this news of her daughter's talent a secretive thing, but of no avail. This news spreaded so quickly among the people, that Sunaina had to establish a healing house for her daughter, observing her extra-ordinary talent of healing people. There she started examining the ailed people and instructing the physicians on the administration of unguents and potions. The people suffering from disease deemed incurable used to come across the country to see her. Sita used to feel extremely contented, when at her touch, the ailed people grew quiet. People even with serious diseases grew calm and breathed easy at her comforting touch. Some patients, sufferings from terrible pain, did not open their eyes again. Chitra Banerjee portrays that it seemed to them that it's due to her healing power that their journey to the other immortal world would be easier. The patients used to call her a goddess and a faint smile lingered on the edge of their lips.

Sita's love towards the nature is so deep that she often sings lullabies to her younger sister to put her in sound sleep. These lullabies are actually nature songs. One day, after her first encounter with Laxman, when Urmila is excited to sleep and feeling desperate to see her future husband in her dreams, Sita makes up a song appropriate for her feelings and repeats it over and over till her eyes are closed and her breath slowed. She recites:

“The wind blows through the forest  
And comes to rest on the branches  
Of the pomegranate tree in our father's garden.  
The day has come, it sings.  
The heroes are on their way. Faces of gold, eyes glimmering like mountain lakes,  
Will they bear our hearts away with them  
To our destinies?” 9

In chapter nine of the novel, after wedding ceremony of Ram and Sita, as Sita joins her new home, her husband's palace in Ayodhya. She starts making acquaintances or mixing with her in-laws and courtly people. One day on her way to the royal temple with queen Kaushalya, she notices the palace gardens, and imagines if she could restructure the garden with some naturalness and spontaneity and with little strategizing. She feels an utmost desire to add a few of her favourite plants to the landscaping. But soon she fills with the doubt, thinking that it's her new home, so she will have to seek permission, before planning anything. Then she decides to ask his father-in-law, King Dashrath about her wish to restructure the garden. Walking with Kaushalya, she imagines:

“I'd have creepers growing over the walls, white madhavi lata or showers of pink coral vine to soften the forbidding lines of hewn stone. A spring could wind in-between the trees, splashing over stones. A jasmine bower with seats in a corner would provide privacy. And in little nooks here and there, I'd plant sweet-smelling Mithilian herbs, of which I was running out.”10pg 87

Ecofeminism believes in women's closeness to nature. Sita's nature love or her closeness to nature is also apparent in chapter two of the novel. At the starting of chapter two, Sita and her sister Urmila are getting ready to go to temple to pray to the goddess for fulfilling their wishes of getting

good husbands. Both of them had been following this process for years. So, now they are reluctant to visit the temple. Sita expresses her feelings:

“In preparation for my reluctant temple visit, I was filling my basket with flowers. I didn't like plucking them. It was a kind of murder. But if I refused, the priest would just make one of the maids do it, and they'd hurt the plants. At least I was careful to pick only the blooms that had spent most of their lifespan already.”<sup>11</sup> In this regard the remark of Vandana Shiva is quite appropriate: “Whenever we engage in consumption or production patterns which take more than we need, we are engaging in violence.”<sup>12</sup> This example proves that women like Sita, don't treat nature as an object to be exploited, but love to work in harmony with nature. They don't believe in overconsumption of natural goods.

As per the opinion of Vandana Shiva, a social & environmental activist and Mary Daly, Men exploit women and nature both. Men think themselves masters and women and nature as slaves to provide them nutrition, care and love. As per the tenets of Ecofeminism there is a threat to environment not from entire humankind, but only from men, from patriarchy, because men don't connect with nature. So, solution lies in overthrowing patriarchy and to establish a new relation between society and nature based on female values of love, care, mutual reciprocity and cooperation. As we should have to work with nature, not against nature. It is participatory. Therefore, what should we do now, overthrow patriarchy, men power.

The similar thread of patriarchy or men controlling/commanding the women, finds expression in chapter two of the novel. In chapter two of the novel, Sita expresses her wish before her mother, to stay forever in her parental city, Mithila. She expresses this wish after seeing the failure and futile efforts of one hundred and sixty suitors to win the bridal contest designed by her father King Janak to marry her. As per the condition of winning the contest, the suitor has to string a sacred bow, while many kings had failed even to lift the bow. This news of failure of worthy and brave kings dissuaded and disheartened many others. Sita was unhappy, as her marriage was an obstacle in the way of her younger sister's marriage, who was much eager to marry. Though, King Janak reported her of the fact that the bow was waiting for the right man, yet she was unhappy and restless.

Disappointed at all this, Sita thinks and plans her future differently. The novelist reveals her inner feelings: “I loved Mithila, its cool, crisp breezes, that came down from the mountains its fragrant

gardens that bloomed year-round with white and purple flowers, its gentle people who loved to sing and dance when the time came, I would have ruled the Kingdom well. I was confident of that because I'd observed my father in court and learned from his goodness. And, more importantly, in our private chambers I'd listened to my mother advising him." 13.

When she confesses her secret wish to her mother, she shakes her head in denial and says: "Even if you were a goddess among women... it wouldn't to be possible. The kingdom of Mithila can be ruled only by a man. This has been the custom of the country since before the scribes began to write its history."14 Sita angrily retorted and asked if the customs couldn't change, respectively those customs and traditions which doesn't make any sense. The mother replied in assertion, "Not this one. Because it's built upon an age-old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough-or wise enough-to guide them."15 Baffled at this response, Sita again tries to prove her point by saying that she knows it very well that she had always guided her father King Janak in each & every small or big situations, so in her view, her mother is as much a ruler as her father is.

At this mother clarified the matter: "Let's say your father and I share the royal duties- just as I hope you will, with your husband. But in the eyes of the populace, he's the king And I'd never do anything to upset their belief in him, for in that lies the stability of the kingdom."16 Moreover, Queen Sunaina even warns her in a bit harsher tone by saying that people view your father as a good and caring monarch and you have no right to play with the traditional beliefs of the people of Mithila, not for the sake of personal happiness and not even to prove a point. This incident brutally shatters her sense of fairness or gender equality. Sita wanted to arguer further, but her mother changes the subject with an unusual seriousness in her voice that silences her. She feels miserable and contemplates over the lot of girls. She realizes: "Girlhood was as ephemeral as a drop of water on a lily pad. Soon I'd to leave all that I loved- parents, sisters, palace, garden, the healing house- to take my place in another family, which I must then call mine. That's the lot of daughters, commoners or princess."17

Geesha G in her article says: "The exploitation of the nature and women is basically deep rooted as doctrines for the ecofeminists. To overcome this, one needs to restore and redefine the underlying patriarchal principles and structural relations of one's culture and encourage equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of administration to during about new social forms.18



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