

## EMBRACING CALMNESS THROUGH THE AISLE OF NATURE: A PROBE INTO CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*.

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### Abstract

Human life is inexorably connected with nature and this connection has been celebrated by various traditions throughout ages. With the rapid growth of technology and industries, the sacred bond between humans and nature has gone interred under the layers of modernity and materialism. Creative artists use art as a tool to wrap the populace with the quilt of awareness about the need to shield the environment. In the sphere of literature Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni serves as a torch bearer who throws light on the various issues that munch the growth of the society. In her novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* along with many issues she elegantly touches upon the unfathomable role of nature in the wellbeing of human community. This article aims to delineate the benevolent kernel of nature that guides the populace towards the pinnacle of peace.

### Keywords

Aesthetics, Ecology, Healing, Peace.

Human existence is intricately laced with nature and this tapestry has undergone a huge shift because of the extreme invasion of technology. Educating the human mind is the best way to ensure a safe planet for the posterity. Understanding the transformative power of art, many artists have attempted to create awareness among the people to protect the purity of nature. In this novel, through the character of Sita, Divakaruni unwraps the kind of joy embraces the people who live in tune with nature. As rightly mentioned in the book *Literature, Nature, and Other Ecofeminist Critiques*, “A healthy blanced ecosystem, including human and non-human inhabitants, must maintain diversity” (Murphy, 1995, p. 6). All the creatures that live in the earth share a special connection with nature which makes their lives a wholesome tale. Nature is a creation of God which is to be protected and cherished but today the demolishing plight of environment stimulates people to rethink the relationship they share with nature.

Forest is one of the mysterious and wonderful gifts of nature that generously provides food and shelter for many living beings. The title of this enthralling novel hints the

importance given to forest throughout the tale. The protagonist Sita shares a special relationship with plants that helps her to dissect their complicated nature. Her compassion towards nature enables her to understand the pangs of fellow beings. Women and nature are intricately connected because of the oppression they endure in the dominant hands. Sita leads her life as an eco-feminist who understands the importance of shielding the selfless damsel from annihilation. She talks about her relationship with nature 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. 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. (Divakaruni, 2019, p.7)

Nature is a house of countless medicines that cure the ailments that trouble people. In the words of Clifford, “Going to nature for healing has a long tradition in many if not most cultures. Indeed, until recent industrial times all medicines came from nature in the form of herbs, roots, ritual, and relationship with other beings” (Clifford, 2021, p.5). In ancient times, nature is respected and celebrated. All the elements of nature were worshipped by people because they understood the interconnectedness between nature and other living beings. But today there is a huge shift in the attitude of people and in this world of technology and materialism the words of Sita powerfully assert the potency of nature. Earth is compared to a mother because it provides all the living beings with elements needed for survival. All the creatures are children for this selfless mother who nurtures every living being impartially. Kheel quotes the words of Carloyn Merchant which describes the connection between women and earth as,

The image of earth as a living organism and nurturing mother has historically served as a cultural constraint restriction the actions of human beings. One does not really slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body... As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it. (Kheel, 1993, p. 251)

Nature is bestowed with the ability to appeal the heart of a person who is sensitive enough to appreciate the beauty of it. Forests never misses the mark in leaving a sense of wonder in the heart of Sita as she divulges, “... what called me most powerfully were the forests that I could see from palace turrets. Raincloud-coloured, mysterious, full of stories, they pushed up against our kingdom from every side” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 7-8). The bond she develops with nature assists her to a great extent throughout her life. As a lover of nature, whenever possible she voices out against the oppressed caused to natural elements. In her way towards Ayodha when soldiers harm the trees, she feels infuriated and asks Ram to order them not to hurt the trees. She understands the pain of trees and birds and this sense of understanding enables her to embrace all her fellow beings with compassion. She uses her knowledge of herbs to cure the diseases of many people. The world of woods fills her heart with a strange sense of longingness as she has a deep desire to know more about the forest. She voices her desire as, “I wanted to climb out and run my hands over bark and stem, smell

the sap. I wanted to walk barefoot through the tickle of grass, find bird-nests and fox-lairs, and rare precious healing herbs” (Divakaruni, 2019, p.57).

Nature selflessly contributes various things that are essential for the survival of human beings. In addition to that, it also provides deep emotional comfort to people who find sanctuary in its lap. The major duty of human community is to embrace the elements of nature compassionately which in turn shells out joy and peace. In the world of chaos, nature offers peace. As Calvert rightly points out, “We have forgotten that nature is essential to the survival and well-being of human community. Disconnection from nature has left us feeling homeless, uprooted and displaced... returning to nature can help us experience ourselves and others more deeply and enjoy renewed feelings of health and wholeness” (Calvert, 2021, p.12). During her banishment there is no feeling of homelessness or displacement in the mind of Sita because she considers the lap of nature as her home. The entire earth is a home for living beings and it is the eternal home for everyone who is born in this universe. A person who is sensible enough to connect with nature becomes emotionally strong and they help in the healing process of others. Sita’s connection with nature gives her the ability to cure the ailments of other people.

The existence of human community is solely dependent on nature. The land is inevitable for the production of food that can also be used as medicine. The benevolence of nature is needed for designing a proper shelter for living beings. In the words of Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, “Nature is a valued and appreciated part of life. Examples abound. People plant flowers and shrubs and nurture house plant... landscapes for centuries have been the subject of painting and poetry. Nature seem to be important to people” (Cardone, 2017, p. 19). Even when there is nothing the survival is possible under the gracious wings of nature. Ram, Sita and Lakshman spend fourteen years in the forest without any luxuries and the multiple facets of forest teach them many valuable lessons for life. In the world of growth and competitions, sometimes people put on a mask to project themselves as individuals who are far different from who they really are. In Ayodhya, Ram immerses himself in the sea of politics and never gets enough time to pamper Sita but in the forest, he becomes a young lover who attempts his best to win the heart of his beloved. Forest gives them a chance to be themselves forgetting all the worries about being good leaders for the citizens of their country. Sita explains their moments of love in forest as, ... “here I’d had Ram all to myself. In Panchabati, he had shed all his responsibilities as son and prince and become, foremost, my friend and lover. Though we’d been married for so long, we still played courtship games, I pretending to be upset over little things, he wooing me back into good humour with a small forest-gift” (Divakaruni, 2-019, p.155). Forest and its soothing ambience enable them to forget the pang of banishment and aids them in the process of preparing themselves to ameliorate their power of endurance. The escape from the world of industries to the world of trees help the human community to restore their physical and mental wellness. When people learn the knack of finding joy in the world of nature, they develop a desire to live in its loving fondle forever. For Sita the forest shells out a comfort and freedom of home which she cherishes dearly.

A person who maintains a good relationship with nature holds the power to survive amidst all hardships. Sita's familiarity with plants and herbs helps her to survive effectively in the forest. The moments of hardships strengthen the bond between Sita and nature because in times of troubles she derives strength from the clasp of nature. When she is trapped in the clutches of Ravan, to the ground she speaks, "Give me your strength in this place of sorrow and fear, Mother Earth, you who protected me when I was a helpless infant... Give me the courage to bear my imprisonment until Ram comes" (Divakaruni, 2019, p.185). When there is no ounce of positivity left in the hearts of people, they can bounce back with enormous will power if they master the art of healing through nature. Calvert inscribes, "Nature is always revealing to us how it is to be alive—changing, evolving, letting go, surrendering, adapting, dying. These are beautiful lessons" (Calvert, 2021, p.17). The sphere of nature is abundant with bundles of lessons that help the humanity to lead a wholesome life. Despite all the impairments, earth always teaches the lessons of love, acceptance and compassion. Though the palace of Ravan is filled with negativities, the trees radiated goodness which soothes the soul of Sita as she says,

The plants and trees were innocent and beautiful. When I touched them, I could feel their sympathy for me. If they were ailing, my touch cured them. And thus we grew to love each other. I was particularly fond of ashoka tree under which I slept. When no one was watching, I cleared the dead leaves that piled up around it, and when I lay down to sleep, I placed my palms against its trunk to draw in comfort. (Divakaruni, 2019, p.187)

Nature always serves as a loyal companion for Sita by helping her to manage all her troubles. Even when there is no one for her, nature stands as a pillar of strength for her. Nature has always been a silent witnesser of all the atrocities of human community. With no judgements it watches all the trials undergone by Sita in the clutches of Ravan. After rescuing her when Ram asks Sita to prove her innocence, she seeks the helps of fire and as always, the element of nature comes to her rescue and declares her innocence. By offering a helping hand during all times of distress, nature proves itself to be the loyal companion of Sita. According to Calvert, "The elements—earth, water air, fire, and space—are present all around us and within us; in our environment, in our bodies, and woven into the way we live in the world" (Calvert, 2021, p.63). The universe has a great impact in the life of human beings. Because of this intricate connection humans adopt themselves to the flow of the universe. In his book *Ecospirituality: An Introduction*, Wheeler quotes the words of Capra, "Ecology and spirituality are fundamentally connected because deep ecological awareness, ultimately is spiritual awareness" (Wheeler, 2022, p.1). Sita's realisation of the sacred affinity between herself and the cosmic sphere enables her to view life with wider understanding.

People normally place the blame on God and destiny when they notice the waves of troubles heading towards them. As a woman with great maturity Sita turns to the empathetic bosom of nature during times of troubles and nature as a loving mother never fails in its duty of offering relief to her ailing heart. When she is banished by Ram, forest offers her the needed comfort to move on in life. Her faith in mother nature serves as a strong rope that she clutches firm throughout her life. She entrusts the safety of her unborn babies to mother earth

and says, “I lay down, pressing my cheek to the earth. Help me, I whispered. You are my first mother. You kept me safe when there was no one to take care of me. Help my babies now” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 321).

The desire to enjoy a peaceful life is common to all living beings. In the world of modernity, many people go for a vacation to beaches, waterfalls, trekking, camping and so on to relax themselves amidst their packed schedules. The fondness of people towards eco-tourism shows their desire to establish a strong connection with nature. The sphere of nature enables the human community to enjoy life to the fullest. To quote the words of Calvert, “We can restore our inner biology, our psyche, and our relationship to ourselves and the world by cultivating mindfulness, body awareness, and connection to nature. Each of us has the potential to heal and fully experience life” (Calvert, 2021, p.10). The life in the forest helps Sita to deal with the pain of betrayal and she makes herself busy in exploring the vastness of forest. She feels delighted when she discovers different kinds of herbs that heal many ailments. Though there are no luxuries in forest, the freedom she finds in the woods offers a great sense of comfort for Sita. The simple life she leads in Valmiki’s ashram gives her a chance to spend quality time with her sons. Sita knows the importance of developing a bond with nature so she teaches her sons to recognize and use various herbs that heal injuries. In introduction to the book *Harness the Healing Power of Nature and Travel the Road to Forgiveness*, Kranz writes, “Nature provides messages and answers we seek in life—all we are asked to do is listen” (Kranz, 2020).

The fast pace of the world coerces people to run in the race of life and they often miss the chance to create good memories with their loved ones. When life stuffs the plate of people with bundles of responsibilities, anxiety and stress make way into the minds of people, creating space of illness and discomfort. During such times, rather than seeking temporary relief, if populace divert their attention towards developing a connection with nature, they can enjoy benefits beyond bounds. Rochelle Calvert in his book *Healing with Nature* writes, “The Earth is and has always been here to support us. We are made of all the elements of nature. If we learn to connect our inner natural way of being, we can connect more deeply to ourselves, and this in turn allows us to heal and to connect to others and the world” (Calvert, 2021, p.14). Though Sita misses the palace life, she feels contented in the forest because the carefree forest life blesses her with countless opportunities to inundate in the love of her sons. While talking about their love Sita says, “They brought me little gifts from their trips into the forest: petty stones, a garland they’d woven, a chunk of honeycomb, a colourful feather” (Divakaruni, 2019, p.332). Following the footsteps of their mother, the children of Sita learn the art of holding the compassionate hands of nature. In his book *The Healing Power of Nature*, Cardone quotes the words of Einstein as, “Our task must be to free ourselves...by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty” (Cardone, 2017 p. 11). Sita and her sons treat all the living beings with kindness and reverence which helps them to lead a holistic life brimming with joy.

The world of nature is pristine and always filled with love that heals whoever in need. In the preface to his book, *The Wisdom of Wilderness*, Gerald G. May writes, “...the healing came through Nature itself” (May, 2006). People often run behind growth and money without

realizing the inevitability of nourishing a bond with nature. For Sita and her children, the forest with all its perks and perils parcels out courage and strength to withstand the storms of life. They never crave for the grandeur and posh palace life because their life in woods gives them everything they desire. When people experience betrayal in the relationships, they slip into darkness and depression which curtails their entire growth. In the life of Sita, Ram holds an earmarked place and when he banishes her, the entire castle of love she fosters carefully turns into pieces, leaving her in the pit of sadness. Despite distress, she manages to bounce back because she seeks the help of the elements of nature. As she wanders deep into the woods, her strength and power of endurance grows stupendously and she decides to move forward in the stream of life. In the book *Your Guide to Forest Bathing*, Amos Clifford, writes, “When the forest is allowed its place within you, it supports your body’s natural capacity for wellness and healing” (Clifford, 2021, p. 2). Leading a life that align with the elements of nature helps the human community to unlock the door of peace.

The power of nature lies beyond the grasp of human knowledge yet before retaliating it always endures the selfish acts of human beings to a great extent. Likewise, Sita too endures a huge amount of pain before standing up for herself. When Ram asks her to pass the fire test in front of many people, she retaliates and again calls for the help of her saviour, nature. She says, “I call on my mother earth and father fire—for both have shaped me into the woman I am today—to come to my aid. O mother, O father, all my life I’ve suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 357). With great anticipation she steps inside Ayodhya but the attitude of Ram again shatters her heart. Nature has always been a part and parcel of human existence and it serves as a hideout for people who seek emotional comfort. Though there is a craze for technology, people still make conscious attempts to water their relationship with nature by creating their own garden. In their prosy routine, these little gardens serve as an energy booster that enable people to alleviate stress and depression.

Sita’s life is a tale of unexpected bends and through all days and nights, nature stays by her side as a saviour. Earth is the consumer of everything and in its embrace life sprouts adding beauty to the universe. The seed that falls in the bosom of earth comes to life and spread goodness impartially. Finally, when she calls for the aid of natural elements to prove her innocence, the earth takes her in its embrace forever. Sita describes, “... I feel a powerful energy course through me. Underneath my feet, the earth cracks open with a deafening roar. The wood around me ignites. Leaping flames surround me, forming a protective barrier” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 357). As a silent witnesser of all her troubles and sacrifices, nature offers itself as a bridge that guides her to the pinnacle of peace. In the empathetic embrace of mother earth, she feels light as the petals of a floret for she has no burden of grudges or hate. The breeze of rapture makes way into her heart as she attains the state of poise.

Nature continues to play the role of constant supporter of human community by offering its soothing presence. In the kingdom of nature there is neither religion nor caste, rather it is a paradise filled with compassion. The person who surrenders his/her wounded speckle to nature will experience the happiness of painless healing. It stimulates people to probe deep into themselves to unveil their untainted self. Falling in the embrace of nature

transports people “into a timeless state of peace and rapture” (Chard, 2010, p. 23). In the world of continuous hubbubs, nature never fails to lift the people to the realm of joy that embellishes their existence. As the entire globe focus on upgrading machines and technology, it is the ultimate responsibility of every individual to shield the benevolent hands of nature that guides the human community towards the reign of exuberance.

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