



Redefining Sita: A Biocentric Perspective in Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore and redefine Sita's character in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* as an embodiment of biocentric values, offering a counter-narrative to traditional anthropocentric perspectives. By reinterpreting Sita as a figure deeply interconnected with nature, Divakaruni challenges human-centred ethical frameworks, drawing from the environmental philosophies of Albert Schweitzer, Aldo Leopold, and Paul W. Taylor. This study highlights how Sita's respect for natural life, embodied through her profound connection with the forest and her bond with the Ashoka tree, aligns with Taylor's biocentric principles of nonmaleficence, fidelity, and non-interference. Sita's reverence for the untamed beauty of the forest, contrasted with her distaste for the artificiality of Lanka's controlled gardens, serves as a critique of human-centric materialism, advocating instead for nature's intrinsic worth and autonomy. Through this lens, the article examines Sita's journey as a model of ecological resilience, urging a re-evaluation of human-nature relationships. Sita's biocentric values offer a timely, ethical alternative, calling for an ecocentric approach that foregrounds respect, coexistence, and harmony within our natural environment, especially relevant in the context of today's environmental crises.

Introduction to Biocentrism and Sita's Character as a Biocentric Figure

Biocentrism, a foundational philosophy in environmental ethics, asserts the intrinsic value of all living beings, directly challenging anthropocentric worldviews that prioritise human interests. Early 20th-century thinker Albert Schweitzer laid the groundwork for this perspective with his principle of “reverence for life,” positing that all forms of life, from the simplest organisms to the most complex, hold equal moral worth (Schweitzer 101). This marked a radical departure from human-centred ethics, expanding moral duty beyond human society to include non-human life and dismantling traditional ethical hierarchies.

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution further bolstered biocentric philosophy by revealing the shared ancestry among species, positioning humans as part of an interconnected biological network (Darwin 490). Darwin's insights challenged the notion of human exceptionalism, providing a scientific basis for valuing all life forms as components of a cohesive whole. Building on these ideas, Aldo Leopold integrated biocentrism into environmental ethics with his “Land Ethic,” advocating for ethical relationships that extend to “soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (Leopold 204). Leopold urged society to respect and protect natural systems for their own sake rather than for human benefit, emphasizing that humans are members of the ecological community rather than conquerors.

Expanding upon these foundational concepts, Paul W. Taylor developed a systematic biocentric ethical theory in his book *Respect for Nature* (Taylor 3). Taylor emphasizes that humans are not inherently superior to other species; instead, all organisms are “teleological centers of life” with their own purposes and intrinsic worth, independent of human utility (Taylor 56). His theory is structured around four key principles guiding human interactions with nature:

1. Nonmaleficence: Avoiding harm to all life forms.
2. Non-interference: Allowing natural processes to unfold without human intervention.
3. Fidelity: Maintaining trust-based relationships with nature.
4. Restitutive Justice: Making amends when harm is caused to the environment.

Taylor's emphasis on respect for nature's autonomy aligns with Schweitzer's reverence for life and Leopold's Land Ethic, underscoring that humanity's role is that of a co-inhabitant within the natural world (Taylor 99).

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reinterprets Sita's story through a biocentric lens, portraying her as profoundly connected to and respectful of nature. This depiction aligns Sita with Taylor's biocentric values, particularly the principles of nonmaleficence and non-interference. Unlike traditional portrayals focusing on Sita's familial roles, Divakaruni's Sita exhibits a profound connection with the forest and its creatures, treating them as equal companions rather than resources. She finds empowerment and solace within the natural world, suggesting that her identity and resilience are closely linked to nature. Sita notes, "The plants and trees were innocent and beautiful. When I touched them, I could feel their sympathy for me... And thus, we grew to love each other" (Divakaruni 88). This bond reflects Taylor's ethical framework, wherein each life form deserves respect and protection for its own sake.

By reimagining Sita as a biocentric figure, Divakaruni not only challenges traditional narratives but also emphasizes the relevance of biocentric ethics in contemporary literature. Through Sita's journey, Divakaruni invites readers to reconsider humanity's role within the ecological community, aligning with the biocentric view that all forms of life possess inherent worth and deserve moral consideration.

Literature Review

In recent years, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially for its feminist and ecofeminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* through Sita's perspective. Scholars have extensively analyzed the novel's approach to environmental ethics, gender dynamics, and cultural narratives, offering valuable insights into how Divakaruni redefines traditional archetypes within a contemporary framework.

Several studies examine the ecofeminist dimensions of Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita, focusing on her profound connection to nature. For instance, in *Exploring Ecofeminist Themes in Chitra Banerjee's Novel 'The Forest of Enchantments'* (2023), the authors analyze Sita's empathy for the natural world, which highlights ecofeminist values by illustrating her harmonious bond with plants and animals. This portrayal aligns with ecofeminist ideas that consider women's and nature's experiences as interlinked, often under patriarchal exploitation.

Building on this ecofeminist analysis, research such as *Cultural Feminism in The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni* (2023) emphasizes how the novel redefines traditional female roles. This paper highlights Sita's nurturing role within a patriarchal society, reframing it as a

source of strength rather than subjugation. Through Sita's compassion and commitment to family and nature, the study interprets Divakaruni's Sita as a figure embodying cultural feminist ideals, emphasizing her as both a mother and protector of life.

Some scholars delve into the novel's intertextuality and mythological dimensions. For example, *The Forest of Enchantments: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sitayan* (2019) explores how Divakaruni's reinterpretation of the *Ramayana* engages with traditional epic narratives while allowing Sita to narrate her own story. This intertextual approach provides readers with a fresh perspective on her character, positioning her as an empowered narrator who subverts the gendered silencing of women in ancient epics.

Another valuable study, *A Feminist Reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments* (2020), analyzes how Divakaruni's retelling allows Sita to articulate her humanity, agency, and inner strength, challenging patriarchal values traditionally associated with her character. By centring Sita's perspective, Divakaruni's narrative provides a voice to a marginalized figure, enabling her to share her joys and struggles while challenging the often hierarchical, patriarchal portrayal of her role in the *Ramayana*.

Lastly, *A Study of Ecofeminism and the Conflict Between Civilization and Nature in The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) examines the novel's contrasting portrayal of the natural world and human-made environments. This paper explores Sita's preference for the forest over the opulence of Ravana's palace, suggesting a critique of materialism and advocating for a harmonious relationship with nature. The study emphasizes the tension between the purity of nature and the destructiveness of human constructs, underscoring Divakaruni's critique of anthropocentrism.

Research Gap

While these studies provide essential insights into *The Forest of Enchantments*, most analyses concentrate on feminist and ecofeminist readings without specifically examining Sita's character through a biocentric lens. Existing literature emphasizes intersections of gender and ecology or Sita's empowerment in a patriarchal context, yet it overlooks how Divakaruni's portrayal aligns with biocentric principles, which value all life forms for their inherent worth beyond human utility. This study aims to fill this gap by redefining Sita as a biocentric figure who embodies environmental ethics aligned with Paul W. Taylor's biocentric principles.

This research will analyze Sita's character through a biocentric lens, exploring her connection to nature as an ethical stance that respects the intrinsic value of all living beings. By highlighting this biocentric aspect, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions of environmental ethics in literature, offering a perspective on Sita's character that extends beyond feminist and ecofeminist interpretations.

Discussions

Sita's Connection to Nature as a Source of Strength and Identity

Sita's relationship with nature is an essential aspect of her identity, serving as both a source of strength and a reflection of her inner character. From her early years in Mithila to her exile in the forest, her bond with the natural world anchors her, providing her with resilience that transcends her royal obligations.

As a child, Sita's connection with nature was nurtured in her father King Janak's palace gardens. She found comfort in the earth, often walking barefoot through the dew-covered grass. Divakaruni describes how she would "revel in the feel of the soft grass, beaded with the dews of dawn, on her bare feet," suggesting a profound connection to the earth (Divakaruni 8). The palace gardeners, in awe of her affinity for plants, believed she might be the "earth-goddess herself," indicating the spiritual depth of her bond with the natural world (Divakaruni 8). This early connection to nature lays the foundation for her later experiences in the forest, where her bond with the environment becomes even more pronounced.

During her exile in Panchavati, Sita's identity as a "forest dweller" flourishes, forging a bond with the wilderness that transcends mere survival into a purposeful existence. She embraces her surroundings, reflecting on the allure of her environment: "I saw brilliant sunsets spreading like a smile across the sky and molten-silver moonrises... I was struck with awe" (Divakaruni 66). This reverence for nature echoes deep ecological values, which emphasize the inherent worth of the natural world. Sita's preference for Panchavati's raw beauty over Ayodhya's comforts underscores her biocentric worldview, treating nature as an essential presence rather than a mere backdrop.

Sita's actions in the forest reveal her profound ecological sensitivity and respect for all living beings. She lovingly nurtures the plants and feels deeply connected to them: "The plants here were particularly attuned to me... when I watered them or loosened the earth around their roots" (Divakaruni 66). This interaction embodies Paul W. Taylor's ethical principle of fidelity, as Sita fosters a caring, trust-based relationship with nature, viewing plants as beings with intrinsic worth.

Her relationship with the forest creatures also illustrates her commitment to a non-interfering approach to nature. Sita describes how “squirrel-like creatures... would scurry up to take berries from my palm. Brilliant blue songbirds... would land on my shoulder and allow me to stroke their plumage” (Divakaruni 66). This mutual trust and harmony reflect her deep respect for the natural world, aligning with the idea that humans are integral members of an interconnected ecological community.

Sita’s strength, both emotional and spiritual, is intrinsically tied to her relationship with the natural world. The contrast she draws between the structured life in Ayodhya and the liberating simplicity of the forest underscores her belief in the inherent worth of all beings. Through her experiences, Divakaruni portrays Sita as finding true fulfilment not through power or status, but through mutual respect and harmony with the environment. This sense of fulfilment is central to understanding Sita’s resilience and the source of her inner strength.

Contrasting Panchavati and Lanka—Nature versus Materialism

In Panchavati, Sita discovers a sanctuary that deeply nourishes her spirit. The forest symbolizes freedom and spiritual fulfilment, aligning with her intrinsic need for connection and peace. Sita reflects, “I knew I’d miss the forest in spite of its hardships, for I’d known a kind of freedom here, a lightness that I’d never experience again” (Divakaruni 74). This line underscores her deep connection with the natural environment, a place where her intrinsic values of simplicity and peace are mirrored by the forest’s quiet strength. Her relationship with Panchavati embodies the biocentric ideal of coexistence, where humans are integral parts of nature’s vast, interconnected web. In this environment, Sita’s values are not only respected but also nurtured, allowing her true self to flourish.

Conversely, Ravana’s palace in Lanka represents human ambition to reshape nature into an artificial spectacle. Sita observes that “everything had been planted in strict rows and tied to stakes so they stood at attention” (Divakaruni 138), a direct contrast to the wild, free growth of Panchavati. These lush yet constrained gardens reflect Ravana’s desire to showcase his wealth and grandeur, but they lack the vibrancy and authenticity she cherishes in Panchavati. The artificiality of these gardens becomes a metaphor for the anthropocentric desire to dominate nature, reducing its inherent beauty to something ornamental and lifeless. This depiction highlights Sita’s discomfort in an environment that prioritizes control over the natural world’s intrinsic value.

Despite the opulence surrounding her in Lanka, Sita feels confined and detached from her true self. She reflects on her longing for simplicity, realizing that the luxury around her could not replace the peace she felt in the forest. She admits, “In spite of the luxury around me, I longed for the humble forest hut where I had been so happy” (Divakaruni 139). Her longing for Panchavati—where the vibrant colours of wildflowers and the earthy scent of rain evoke a profound sense of freedom—reinforces her belief that true beauty lies in the untamed aspects of nature. In Panchavati, she finds an authenticity that cannot be replicated through artificial means, a connection to nature that fuels her sense of identity and peace.

Sita’s discontent with Lanka’s artificial environment aligns with her ethical values, emphasizing her deep respect for the natural world. She reflects, “The garden was beautiful but it was not alive in the way the forests of Panchavati had been” (Divakaruni 138). This sentiment affirms her belief that peace and fulfillment come not from material possessions but from an authentic connection to nature. Her yearning for the forest reflects her rejection of material wealth as a source of fulfillment. This underscores her commitment to a biocentric worldview that values nature’s intrinsic worth over human-centered luxury.

Through Divakaruni’s vivid contrasts, we witness two opposing ways of relating to nature—one rooted in coexistence and respect, the other in control and alteration. For Sita, Panchavati is more than a physical refuge; it is a spiritual and emotional sanctuary where she experiences unity with the environment absent in Lanka’s human-controlled spaces. Her preference for the forest reflects a commitment to an ethical framework that values the intrinsic worth of all living beings. In Panchavati, she embraces her identity and values without the constraints imposed by materialistic pursuits, highlighting the profound connection between nature and self-discovery.

The Ashoka Tree—A Symbol of Nature’s Agency

Building upon the contrast between Panchavati’s natural harmony and Lanka’s artificial opulence, Sita’s bond with the Ashoka tree during her captivity further emphasizes her deep connection to nature and highlights the theme of nature’s inherent agency. Despite being confined in Ravana’s palace, where the gardens are meticulously controlled and lack the spontaneity of wild growth, Sita finds solace in the Ashoka tree—a living embodiment of the resilience and empathy that nature offers.

She reflects:



“I was particularly fond of the 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 88).

This intimate interaction illustrates Sita’s need for a genuine connection with nature amid the artificiality surrounding her. Her actions are not merely habitual but deeply symbolic of her reliance on the natural world for emotional sustenance. The Ashoka tree becomes a silent confidant, providing her with a sense of companionship that the opulent but lifeless environment of Lanka cannot offer.

Sita’s fear that her captors might harm the tree if they knew of her attachment— “I was afraid that if my guards knew how much I cared about the tree, they would harm it just to cause me pain” (Divakaruni 88)—reveals the vulnerability of both herself and the natural world under oppressive forces. This concern underscores the mutual fragility shared between humans and nature when confronted with domination and exploitation. It also highlights the ethical responsibility to protect and preserve nature, aligning with Paul W. Taylor’s principle of nonmaleficence, which advocates avoiding harm to all life forms (Taylor 74). The Ashoka tree serves as more than just a source of comfort; it symbolizes nature’s agency and autonomy. By offering Sita solace without expecting anything in return, the tree embodies the concept of unconditional support inherent in the natural world. This relationship exemplifies Taylor’s ethical principle of fidelity, which emphasizes maintaining trust-based relationships with nature (Taylor 85). Sita’s nurturing actions toward the tree—clearing dead leaves and caring for it discreetly—reflect a reciprocal bond founded on respect and mutual benefit.

Moreover, the tree’s presence challenges anthropocentric assumptions that nature is passive and exists solely for human exploitation. Sita’s reliance on the tree for emotional support demonstrates that nature possesses its own agency and can actively participate in human experiences. This perspective aligns with the biocentric view that all living beings are “teleological centers of life” with their own purposes and intrinsic worth (Taylor 56). The Ashoka tree, in its silent companionship, becomes an active character in Sita’s narrative, influencing her emotional state and providing strength.

This bond also reinforces the themes established in the previous sections, where Sita finds strength and identity through her relationship with the natural world. The Ashoka tree acts as a tangible link to the freedom and authenticity she experienced in Panchavati. It represents the enduring presence of nature’s empathy, even within the confines of Ravana’s controlled environment. Sita’s connection to

the tree is a form of silent rebellion against the materialism and artificiality imposed upon her, asserting the significance of natural bonds over superficial luxuries.

Furthermore, the Ashoka tree symbolizes hope and resilience. Despite being in an environment where nature is manipulated and subdued, the tree stands as a testament to the enduring power of the natural world. It continues to grow and offer solace, undeterred by the surrounding opulence that seeks to overshadow its simplicity. This resilience mirrors Sita's own strength in adversity, highlighting the parallel between her character and the natural world she so deeply cherishes.

By depicting the Ashoka tree as a source of empowerment, Divakaruni challenges readers to reconsider the role of nature in human life. The tree is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in Sita's journey, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. This portrayal encourages a shift from an anthropocentric worldview to a biocentric one, where nature is valued for its own sake and recognized for its capacity to influence and support human existence. Through Sita's bond with the Ashoka tree, Divakaruni illustrates the profound impact that nature can have on individual well-being. The tree's silent strength offers Sita comfort in a way that material wealth and controlled beauty cannot. This emphasizes the limitations of materialism in providing genuine fulfilment and highlights the importance of authentic connections with the natural world.

In essence, the Ashoka tree embodies the agency of nature, serving as a beacon of hope and a source of unwavering support for Sita. Her relationship with the tree underscores the narrative's broader themes of respect for nature's intrinsic value and the necessity of harmonious coexistence. It invites readers to acknowledge the active role that nature plays in human life and the ethical imperative to honor and protect it.

Sita's Rejection of Anthropocentrism

Sita's journey in *The Forest of Enchantments* critiques anthropocentrism by embracing an ecocentric worldview that values nature beyond human utility. Her discomfort in Lanka—surrounded by a “gigantic palace glittering with gold and precious stones” and ornamental gardens with “flowering vines carved into the columns” that release overpowering perfumes—highlights her aversion to imposed opulence and artificial beauty (Divakaruni 83). Despite Ravana's attempts to win her with “all comforts and luxuries, all wealth, all pleasures,” she finds his material world empty, yearning even more for the simple, untouched beauty of the forest (Divakaruni 123).

Sita's rejection of materialism conveys a message about the limitations of wealth and power. Her longing for Panchavati underscores her belief that ethical fulfilment stems from a respectful relationship with nature, echoing Paul W. Taylor's philosophy that true contentment arises from recognizing the autonomy of all life forms (Taylor 99). She subtly criticizes Ravana's display of luxury as devoid of true substance, embodying a call for humanity to reconsider its domination of nature and embrace a more biocentric perspective.

In her secluded moments with nature, such as when she secretly clears dead leaves from the Ashoka tree and draws comfort from its trunk, Sita finds solace and companionship that Ravana's riches cannot provide. This connection emphasizes that sustainable joy stems from a harmonious relationship with nature, not from controlling or exploiting it. Through her experiences, the narrative advocates for an ethical approach that values nature's intrinsic beauty, resonating with Taylor's principle of fidelity, which calls for respecting nature as an autonomous community rather than a mere resource (Taylor 85).

Sita's journey critiques materialism and anthropocentrism, portraying an ecocentric worldview that encourages respectful coexistence with the environment. Her story suggests that ethical living and true happiness lie in valuing nature's authenticity over human-centered luxury and control.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines Sita as a powerful advocate for biocentric values, portraying her profound connection to nature as essential to her identity and resilience. Through her life in the forest, her relationship with the Ashoka tree, and her rejection of materialism in Lanka, Sita embodies a worldview that respects nature's autonomy and intrinsic worth. This portrayal aligns with Paul W. Taylor's principles of biocentrism—nonmaleficence, non-interference, fidelity, and restitutive justice—suggesting that her true strength lies in her commitment to these values rather than adherence to human-centred constructs of power and wealth.

The narrative encourages readers to question anthropocentric perspectives, advocating for a shift toward an ecocentric view that respects all forms of life as inherently valuable. Sita's experiences reflect a call to live in harmony with nature, finding peace not in dominating the natural world but in coexisting with it. Her journey becomes an exploration of ethical maturity, showing that genuine fulfilment comes from respecting nature as an equal community member.



In today's context of environmental crises, this biocentric portrayal of Sita serves as a powerful reminder of the ethical imperative to honour and protect nature. By celebrating her commitment to biocentric values, the author invites readers to reconsider their own relationship with the environment, recognizing that a meaningful and sustainable future depends on acknowledging the inherent worth of all life.

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