

Reclaiming the Feminine: Deconstructing the Representation of Sita and Mother Earth in Select Feminist Retellings of the Ramayana

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The figure of Sita in the Ramayana tradition embodies one of the most pervasive representations of indigenous Indian womanhood, an image shaped, transmitted and enforced across centuries through classical texts, oral traditions and cultural memory. Rooted in Valmiki's Ramayana, Sita's identity has been largely constructed through patriarchal frameworks that dictate and necessitate silence, sacrifice and submission. This paper examines how two contemporary feminist retellings, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* (2019), deconstruct and reimagine the dominant representation of Sita. Situating these texts within the intersecting frameworks of ecofeminism and intertextuality, the paper analyses how these authors restore and confer narrative agency on Sita, recover her voice from patriarchal silencing, and reframe her relationship with nature, female solidarity, and her own selfhood. The paper further argues that these retellings participate in a wider cultural project of decolonising indigenous mythological narratives and reconstituting the image of Indian womanhood with resilience, autonomy and dignity.

Keywords: Sita, Indigenous Womanhood, Narrative Agency, Intertextuality, Ramayana, Ecofeminism

1. Introduction

The Ramayana is among the most enduring cultural narratives of South Asia, transmitted across generations through oral performance, religious practice, theatrical tradition, regional literature, and popular media. At the heart of this grand narrative stands Sita, a figure whose identity has served as a cornerstone for the construction and perpetuation of ideals of Indian womanhood. Through classical versions of the text, Sita has

been enshrined as the *adarsh nari*, i.e. the ideal woman who personifies chastity, obedience, self-sacrifice and unwavering devotion to her husband. This idealised image is not merely literary in the Indian context; it is profoundly cultural and political, shaping social expectations of femininity and regulating women's lives through the authority of sacred tradition.

The present paper situates the Ramayana within the framework of indigenous cultural history, an oral-literary tradition transmitted through collective memory and living practice that has defined feminine identity across centuries of South Asian social life. This paper asks how that tradition's most iconic feminine figure is being reclaimed, resisted, and reimagined in contemporary literary retellings. Specifically, it examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Amit Majmudar's *Sitayana* as acts of feminist counter-memory texts that enter critical dialogue with the classical tradition to challenge the act of silencing women's subjectivity.

These texts are placed within the intersecting critical frameworks of intertextuality and ecological feminism. Intertextuality, a concept developed by Julia Kristeva and broadly theorised in literary studies, maintains that every text is a tissue of relations with prior texts constantly absorbing, transforming, and responding to them. Divakaruni and Majmudar write explicitly in intertextual relation to Valmiki's original text; their retellings gain meaning and critical force precisely from how they diverge from, fill the gaps of, and contest their classical predecessors. As A. K. Ramanujan observes, the Ramayana is not a single text but a tradition of telling, and each new telling is always already in conversation with those that came before (Ramanujan 133).

The second framework is ecofeminism, or ecological feminism. First articulated by Françoise d'Eaubonne and extended to the Indian context by Vandana Shiva, it identifies a structural parallel between the domination of women and the domination of nature under patriarchal systems of thought: both are cast as passive, fertile and available for appropriation, and both are denied a subjectivity or agency of their own. Shiva situates this shared subjugation within histories of colonial and patriarchal development that treat women's bodies and the earth's resources as equally exploitable (Shiva 881-887). Sita's origin from the earth, her exile into the forest, and her eventual return to the soil are not incidental details but a sustained enactment of the woman-nature relationship that ecofeminist theory places at the centre of patriarchal subjugation, and of resistance to it.

Narrative Agency and the Reclamation of the Feminine Voice:

The most fundamental transformation that these retellings project is the granting of narrative agency to Sita herself. In classical versions, Sita's interiority is largely invisible; she is presented through her actions and her suffering, but rarely through her own voice or perspective. Both Divakaruni and Majmudar have developed distinct narrative strategies to restore that voice and foreground Sita's subjectivity.

Divakaruni's First-Person Narration:

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is narrated entirely in Sita's first-person voice, a choice that constitutes a radical act of narrative reclamation. By granting Sita control of the telling, Divakaruni allows her to define events on her own terms to interpret, question, and resist the framework that the classical epic takes for granted. Sita's voice in this novel is neither passive nor deferential. It is emotionally complex, morally engaged, and sometimes explicitly critical of the structures that constrain her.

The novel's treatment of the agni pariksha (trial by fire) exemplifies this strategy. Where the classical text presents the trial as proof of Sita's purity and the natural order of dharma (moral duty, righteousness or a way of living), Divakaruni's Sita experiences it as a profound and irreversible betrayal. The trial does not resolve her story, it fractures it. From that point, Sita's relationship with Ram and with the ideals of wifely devotion is fundamentally altered. She continues to fulfil her social roles, but inwardly she has crossed a threshold of disillusionment that will ultimately lead to her refusal to return to Ayodhya. That narrative trajectory from idealistic bride to disillusioned but self-aware woman constitutes a feminist narrative of self-development that the classical tradition has no place for:

"I'd had enough of fires that tested and purified. Enough of men and their justice. I called out to the only one who had always loved me unconditionally. Mother, I cried. If I have been true to you, if I have loved you and honoured the values you taught me, take me back" (Divakaruni 317).

These words, from the closing pages of *The*

Forest of Enchantments, capture the cumulative force of Divakaruni's feminist reframing. Sita's final invocation is not an act of submission but of sovereign refusal: a rejection of patriarchal fire-tests, legal judgements, and public demands for proof, in favour of a maternal, unconditional truth.

Divakaruni also uses the first-person voice to create complex, empathetic portrayals of other female characters from the epic such as Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Mandodari, Ahalya, and Urmila, who are typically presented through the lens of male judgement. By allowing Sita to reflect on these women's experiences with solidarity rather than condemnation, Divakaruni builds a feminist counter-narrative that challenges the isolation and hierarchisation of women in the classical tradition.

Majmudar's Dramatic Monologue and Lyrical Agency:

Majmudar's *Sitayana* employs a different but equally powerful strategy: the dramatic monologue. Rather than sustained first-person narration, Sita's voice emerges through a series of layered monologues like interior reflections, philosophical interrogations, and direct addresses to absent figures such as Ram, the people of Ayodhya, and the Earth Mother. The title *Sitayana* (the story of Sita) is a major act of counter-naming, an intentional reversal of *Ramayana* (the story of Ram), announcing that this telling belongs to Sita.

Majmudar's Sita is intellectually formidable. She engages directly with the concept of dharma, questioning its logic, exposing its inadequacies, and refusing to accept it as justification for her suffering. When Ram demands the *agni pariksha*, Majmudar's Sita does not merely endure; she interrogates, asking why virtue demands such proof from women but never from men. Such philosophical interrogation of the gendered double standards encoded in dharmic ideology is one of the most striking aspects of the retelling.

The text's verse form allows Majmudar to move between registers from lyrical beauty to sharp irony to quiet defiance in ways that capture the full complexity of Sita's inner life. The fragmented structure of the monologue also enacts a fragmentation that Sita has experienced: the reconstruction of identity amid societal

expectations and external judgments. Her voice is not triumphant; rather, it is something more valuable, it is honest.

These strategies of narrative reclamation are themselves acts of intertextuality in Kristeva's sense: rather than simply repeating Valmiki's Sita, Divakaruni and Majmudar absorb her, transform her, and answer her back. Where Kristeva argues that every text is a mosaic of prior texts reworked into new utterance, Divakaruni's first-person novel and Majmudar's dramatic monologue rework the classical epic's external, third-person Sita into a speaking subject who interrogates the very tradition that produced her. The retellings do not simply add detail to Valmiki's account; they contest its authority from within, filling its silences with the voice it withheld, and in doing so enact the dialogic relation between texts that intertextual theory describes.

Elaine Showalter's account of women's writing as a 'muted' tradition, one that exists alongside dominant discourse but is only ever partially legible to it, offers a useful frame for what Divakaruni and Majmudar are doing formally. Showalter's 'wild zone,' the territory of women's experience that patriarchal language cannot fully name, describes precisely the interior Sita occupies in the classical epic: present in the narrative, but never permitted to narrate it. The first-person novel and the dramatic monologue are the formal means by which these retellings move Sita from that unmapped zone into speech, making her the teller rather than merely the told.

Female Solidarity and the Recovery of Silenced Voices:

A central feminist move in both retellings is the expansion of focus to include the voices and experiences of other women from the *Ramayana*, women who are demonised, marginalised, or simply ignored in classical tellings. By foregrounding these relationships, Divakaruni and Majmudar construct a vision of female solidarity that cuts across the moral and social hierarchies of the epic.

In Divakaruni's novel, Sita's encounters with Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Mandodari, Ahalya and Urmila are not structured as moral tales about women's virtue or vice. Instead, they are moments of recognition of a shared condition of patriarchal

constraint that bridges the gap between 'good' and 'bad' women, between queen and demoness, between victim and perpetrator. Kaikeyi, typically cast as the scheming villain in the Ramayana stories, is reimagined as a woman driven by political fear in a system that offers women little power. Surpanakha, mutilated as punishment for expressing desire, is seen by Sita not as a monster but as a woman shamed for her gender's crime of wanting. These reframings do not excuse harmful actions; they contextualise them within systems of power that harm all women.

Majmudar similarly positions Sita's relationship with other female characters such as Urmila and Mandodari as expressing a deeper solidarity of shared suffering. Urmila's fourteen years of silent waiting for her husband Lakshman's return, often ignored in popular versions of the Ramayana, are given dignity and recognition through Sita's reflective voice. Majmudar's Sita sees in Urmila an invisible (because it is female) heroism, along with a domestic endurance that society does not celebrate because it demands no public performance.

These portrayals collectively articulate a feminist argument that the Ramayana's patriarchal structure has not only silenced Sita but has silenced all its women, divided them against one another, ranked them by their usefulness to men, and erased the texture of their inner lives. These retellings perform a recovery of that lost texture.

This recovery of Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Urmila, and the epic's other women extends the same intertextual logic beyond Sita alone. If, as Kristeva contends, a text is constituted through its absorption of other voices, then Divakaruni and Majmudar's retellings absorb precisely those voices that Valmiki's telling left silent or condemned. The classical epic constructs these women only through Ram's or Sita's judgement of them; the retellings reopen that judgement as a site of dialogue, allowing marginalised figures to speak back to the tradition that defined them. Female solidarity in these retellings is thus not only a thematic concern but a formal enactment of intertextuality's premise that meaning is made between texts and voices, and not within a single authoritative one.

This pattern of recovery is not unique to

Divakaruni and Majmudar. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* makes the same gesture its entire structuring principle: five linked narratives in which Sita meets Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila in turn, each encounter dissolving the isolation the epic imposes on them. Read alongside Gilbert and Gubar's account of the 'angel' and the 'madwoman' as the two faces patriarchal narrative permits its women, Surpanakha is instructive: mutilated into monstrousness for daring to desire, she is the epic's madwoman to Sita's angel, and the two figures are conventionally kept apart so that each polices the other's conduct. Divakaruni, Majmudar, and Volga each break that containment, allowing the angel to recognise herself in the madwoman rather than be defined against her.

Nature, the Earth Mother, and the Feminine Identity

Both retellings invest deeply in Sita's relationship with the natural world too, and this relationship carries particular significance in the context of indigenous knowledge and cosmology. In Indian philosophical and cultural tradition, the earth is feminine, Bhumi or Prithvi, and Sita's origin from the earth, her life in the forests, and her final return to the earth encode a sacred relationship between woman and nature that transcends the social frameworks of dharma, kinship, and patriarchal judgement.

The name Sita itself encodes this relationship before either retelling begins to develop it: in Sanskrit, *sita* means 'furrow,' and the Rigveda already invokes Sita as a goddess of the ploughed field and agricultural fertility, centuries before the Ramayana narrative gives her a human biography. Divakaruni and Majmudar's insistence on Sita's earth-bound origin therefore does not import an alien ecological metaphor into the epic; it recovers a meaning already sedimented in her name, one that the classical narrative's emphasis on chastity and wifely duty had largely obscured.

Divakaruni develops this relationship with sustained attention and symbolic depth. Sita as Janaki, born from the bosom of the Earth mother, maintains a living, sensory connection to the natural world throughout the novel. In exile, the forest is not a site of hardship but a space of

genuine freedom which is free from court hierarchies, royal expectations, and the gendered performances of palace life. Nature in Divakaruni's retelling is morally truthful in a way that the social world is not. It asks for no pretences and makes no demands that are not grounded in the reality of living.

The Asoka grove (Asok Vatika) in Lanka where Sita is held captive becomes in Divakaruni's rendering a powerful site of ecological and emotional solidarity. The trees of the grove are personified as fellow prisoners of Ravan's appetite for possession, transplanted, confined, conscripted to beautify a tyrannical palace. Sita speaks to them, touches their bark, and feels their sympathy. Such a construction of nature as co-sufferer resonates with indigenous cosmologies that reject the sharp distinction between the human and the natural and understand the earth and its living inhabitants as possessing agency, intelligence, and moral standing.

"The trees of the Asoka grove were my companions. I'd touch their bark, their leaves... and though they couldn't speak, I felt their sympathy. They too were prisoners of Raavan's greed, transplanted from their native forests to beautify his palace" (Divakaruni 201).

In this passage, Divakaruni extends the scope of captivity beyond the human: both woman and tree are conscripted by masculine appetite, and both endure without surrender. The personification of the grove enacts precisely the non-hierarchical, relational cosmology that ecological feminist thought recovers: a world in which the natural and human share moral standing and mutual suffering.

The novel's climax is when Sita's call to her Earth Mother and her return to the soil are presented not as defeat but as the most powerful act of agency in the text. Having survived fire, exile, war, trial, and abandonment, Sita refuses to submit to Ram's invitation to return to Ayodhya on his terms and instead chooses reunion with her true mother. The Earth Mother receives her unconditionally, without demanding proof of purity or the performance of virtue. Such an act inverts the patriarchal order of the epic where human society has repeatedly judged and found her wanting; the natural world embraces her

without qualification. Sita's return to the Earth is a feminist and ecological statement that nature, the only authority worth recognising, offers unconditional dignity.

Majmudar develops the same motif with the concision and symbolic economy of verse. Sita's birth from the furrow is presented as a sacred miracle that links her destiny to the cycles of the natural world: fertility, cultivation, and the recurring renewal of the earth. Her return to the earth at the narrative's end is, in Majmudar's hands, an archetypal homecoming, the fulfilment of a cosmic circuit. That nature, instead of the kingdom of men, is powerful enough to free her is Majmudar's final assertion of where true value lies.

"With a monkey as charmed as you on his side," I say with delight, "Ram is going to smash this city and free me. Go back and tell him I am waiting for him!" (Majmudar 38).

At this moment, Sita's voice ringing with hope within the captive grove is emblematic of Majmudar's approach throughout *Sitayana*. Agency in this retelling is not reserved for the moment of liberation; it is exercised within captivity itself, in the decision to wait with dignity rather than with despair, and to credit her rescuer in her own terms.

Reading through the lens of ecofeminism, these patterns are not merely symbolic but structural. D'Eaubonne's founding argument, that the domination of women and the domination of nature share a single patriarchal logic, and Shiva's account of the earth and women as jointly exploited and jointly resistant, together illuminate why Sita's story returns so insistently to soil, forest, and tree. The Asoka grove's captive trees and Sita's own captivity are not a poetic parallel, but the same relation of appropriation described from two sides; her final return to the Earth Mother enacts the unconditional, non-hierarchical solidarity that ecofeminist thought proposes as an alternative to patriarchal judgement. In both retellings, nature does not merely reflect Sita's suffering; it shares her subjugation and ultimately, offers the ground of her resistance.

Ecofeminist theory is not without its internal debates. Val Plumwood cautions against readings that simply equate women with nature, since this

move can reproduce the very dualism, reason opposed to nature, culture opposed to body, that has historically justified the domination of both. The retellings discussed here are alert to this risk: neither Divakaruni nor Majmudar naturalises Sita's relationship to the earth as an essential feminine trait, an innate nurturing quality she happens to possess. Instead, both frame that relationship as chosen and hard-won, arrived at only after fire, exile, and betrayal have taught Sita what human society will not offer her. The earth's acceptance functions less as an ideology of feminine nature than as a deliberate rejection of the terms on which human, and specifically patriarchal, acceptance is made conditional.

Conclusion:

By restoring Sita's interiority, her voice, her moral agency, and her capacity for resistance and refusal, Divakaruni and Majmudar participate in what Paula Richman has described as the diversity of the Ramayana tradition, a tradition that has always included alternative, critical, and subaltern voices alongside the dominant Brahmanical versions (Richman 3). Their retellings demonstrate that the epic is not a fixed monument but a living tradition in which each generation may negotiate the terms of its inheritance.

The feminist counter-tradition they represent is also a form of decolonising ecological knowledge. Colonial and nationalist discourses alike froze the Ramayana into politically convenient forms; the diversity of the tradition, its regional variations, oral counterparts, women-centred tellings, and probable reinterpretation of multiple subjugations were systematically suppressed in favour of a unified, authoritative text. To retell the epic from Sita's perspective is to insist on the heterogeneity of the tradition and to claim space within it for women's knowledge, women's experience, and women's authority.

This paper has argued that Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and Majmudar's *Sitayana* constitute significant feminist and ecological interventions in the Ramayana tradition. By restoring narrative agency to Sita through first-person narration in one case, and through the layered dramatic monologue in the other, both authors challenge the classical tradition's suppression of female interiority and subjectivity.

Through the recovery of other silenced women, the texts construct a vision of female solidarity that transcends the patriarchal hierarchies of the epic. Through Sita's relationship with the natural world, they invoke an ecological feminist attitude that positions the earth's unconditional acceptance of women as a moral counterclaim to patriarchy's conditional and demanding ideals.

Being read together, intertextuality and ecofeminism have supplied this paper's two complementary methods: the first tracing how these retellings talk back to Valmiki's authoritative telling to reclaim Sita's voice and the voices of the women around her, the second tracing how they reclaim her bond with the earth as a shared history of subjugation and resistance rather than a passive metaphor. Between them, the two frameworks account for both the narrative and the ecological dimensions of Sita's reclamation in these contemporary retellings. The further vantage points drawn on along the way, Showalter's account of a muted female tradition, Gilbert and Gubar's angel and madwoman, Volga's parallel structure of feminist encounter, and Plumwood's caution against essentialist ecofeminism, do not compete with these two frameworks so much as sharpen them, specifying more precisely what silence, monstrosity, and nature have been made to mean for women within patriarchal narrative, and what it costs to refuse those meanings.

The Ramayana is not simply a text; it is a living dimension of South Asian cultural memory, a part of the indigenous heritage through which communities have understood themselves for millennia. To engage critically with that tradition to ask whose voices it has preserved and whose it has suppressed, to recover the feminine interior of a male-centred narrative, to insist that the earth herself is on Sita's side is to perform a reclamation of power and agency that is urgently relevant to contemporary conversations about gender, ecology, and human-nature bonding. Sita, long reduced to the emblem of silent suffering and perfect wifely devotion, emerges in these retellings as a woman who thinks, resists, grieves, loves, judges, and ultimately chooses. That emergence is both a literary achievement and a cultural argument, an assertion that nature, an equal sufferer in the hands of man, is powerful and unconditionally there to hold her child.

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