

ECO-ETHICS OR THEO-ETHICS? Situating Sītā in and out of the Vedic and the Post-Vedic Societies

P S Dwivedi, Priyanka Tripathi and PK Verma*

Abstract: The primary objective of the paper is to understand the ethical interface in the Vedic and the Post-Vedic societies through revisiting the female divine figures who symbolized nature in various texts. It attempts to show how theoethics embodied in the character of Sītā is different from ecoethics required to foster a sustainable society for today's world. The article draws parallels among the characters of Araṇyani, a Ṛgvedic goddess, Sītā of

***Prabha Shankar Dwivedi** is an Associate Professor of English and Head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Tirupati. He has published numerous research articles, and two books. His recently published book is *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: Comparative Perspectives*, Routledge. His areas of interest largely lie in the intersections of Indian literary texts and environment, comparative literary studies, and Indian aesthetics. Email: prabhas.dwivedi@iittp.ac.in

***Priyanka Tripathi** is an Associate Professor of English, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Patna. Her PhD from IIT Kharagpur was titled "Sexual is Political: Gender, Body and Language in Indian Women's Short Fiction in English". Before joining IIT Patna, she taught for about two years at National Institute of Technology Jamshedpur. She is Book Reviews Editor for Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities. She works in the area of Gender Studies, Postcolonial Literature, Graphic Novels, South Asian Fiction, Literary Cartography and Spatiality Studies. Email: priyankatripathi@iitp.ac.in

***Pankaj Kumar Verma** is Assistant Professor of English at the School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University, Hyderabad. He has published his research articles in reputed journals and presented his research papers in prestigious institutions like Harvard Divinity School, USA, and London Centre for Multidisciplinary Research, England. Email: pankajkvphd@gmail.com

Vedic literature, and Sītā of Rāmāyaṇa. The paper, further, intends to situate Sītā outside the Rāmāyaṇa to understand her real place. Her character in the Rāmāyaṇa also epitomizes the clash of Sanskr̥ti (culture, civilization) and Prakṛti (nature). Her character overlaps with the Ṛgvedic goddess Araṇyanī, whose significance in environmental philosophy can be understood from the hymns dedicated to her in the 10th book of the Ṛgveda. Many facets of Sītā's character can be understood from the hymns dedicated to Araṇyanī, the goddess of forest and fertility. Sītā of Vedic literature, appeared much before the epic Rāmāyaṇa, venerated always for good crop and prosperity. The reappearance of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* reinforces her image as nature goddess. This article, upon literature review, argues emphatically that the depiction of Sītā in the Rāmāyaṇa and its succeeding texts basically supports the contention that Araṇyanī, a Ṛgvedic goddess, and Sītā of Vedic literature were directly related to nature and are prototypes.

Keywords: Ecosophy, eco-care, environmental philosophy, eco-aesthetics, Rāmāyaṇa, Ṛgveda, Sītā

1. Introduction

In the intellectual landscape, from the times of *Upaniṣads* to the contemporary times, ecological mediation into feminist or female-centred reading of mythological figures and texts is a significant academic intervention. This article delineates the ecological concerns of the Vedic and the Post-Vedic theological and literary canons by revisiting the divine figures who symbolized nature in various texts. The article, centring its focus on the character of Sītā, draws parallels among the characters of Araṇyanī, a Ṛgvedic goddess, Sītā of Vedic literature, and Sītā of *Rāmāyaṇa*, who is believed to be a reincarnation of Lakṣmī by virtue of being the consort to Rāma (an incarnation of Viṣṇu). Sītā's relation to nature and ecology can never be disentangled for she had emerged from the earth and disappeared into it like any other plant or tree that is born to maintain the ecological balance on a planet which is ironically owned by humans – the biggest threat to its existence. Having been born from the earth (Bhūmi), she was also named as

Bhūmijā (means, one who is born from the earth). Her love for nature depicted in Vālmīki’s *Rāmāyaṇa* also referred to as *Sita Charitam*, the story of Sītā (Pattanaik, 3) is exemplary in itself for it finds no parallel in any other scripture or epic. Her pain and sufferings, for which she was never explicitly responsible, are only due to her love and association with humans. She had always drawn unconditional support from non-humans to the extent that they had even sacrificed themselves to rescue her when she was in trouble or pain. It is quite obvious in the epic that Sītā’s love for forest and forest dwellers is much requited, while it does not happen in the case of cultured society in the right proportion. It all emphasizes more upon her co-existential relationship with other beings in the forest, including humans and non-humans.

However, Sītā, from her very birth appears to be the goddess of forest, a sylvan deity, or a goddess of agricultural fertility, land, and good crop resembling closely the goddess of Vedic literature named Sītā. This ‘Sītā’ of Vedic literature appeared much before the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*. The recurrence of this name in *Rāmāyaṇa* with similar attributes of the goddess of the Vedic literature with an additional trait of having been born from the earth reinforces her image as a nature goddess who can certainly be accepted and revered to be synonymous with the goddess of prosperity for nature has always bred prosperity. Unquestionably, the genesis of the name, ‘Sītā’, was somewhere there in the mind of Vālmīki, pervasive throughout while he was writing his epic poem. From her birth itself, Sītā emerges to be the persona of nature for whom wealth has no meaning. She chose to have been found by a king who was well known as Videha (one who does not have ‘*deha*’ -body, which represents ‘self’, ‘ego’, ‘greed’), and was also regarded as Rajarshi (royal sage) among common people. She was found as a blessing to the King who was performing a *yajña*[†] for the good crop and prosperity of his

† The word *yajña* is rooted in the Sanskrit word *yaj* which means “to honor a god with oblations.” “A *yajna* is a ritual involving oblations in the Vedic tradition. It may be simply an offering of clarified butter into a fire, or it may involve 17 priests in an elaborate 12-day ritual including the building of a large fire altar as in the *AGNICAYANA*. The ritual of the *yajna* always

subject. As a fruit to this yajña, King Janaka finds a baby girl whom he calls Sītā, named after Sītā (the Vedic goddess of good crop and fertility) – “Janaka moved the dirt away, and found hidden within the soft, moist earth a baby, a girl, healthy and radiant, smiling joyfully, as if waiting to be found ... Janaka picked up the infant ... I will call her Sita ...” (Pattanaik, 22).

Sītā’s appearance and disappearance in this world is more like a goddess of nature, ‘Araṇyanī’, who is ‘Ayoniḥ’ not born from the womb of a woman. We also come to know that Sītā doesn’t die, instead, she, with her mortal frame, herself goes there where she had emerged from. It is also believed that Rāma was born to Kauśalyā due to Viṣṇu’s boon to her. While Sītā’s birth is a blessing of a different sort to her father. She narrates the story of her birth to Anusūyā on her insistence:

Once upon a time, he (Janaka) was ploughing the land worthy for *yajña*, at this moment only, I, tearing through the earth appeared. It is my only relationship with Janaka that makes me his daughter. That king was sowing the fistful of medicinal seeds while his eyes fell on me. All my limbs were smeared into soil. Having seen me in that state, King Janaka was very much entranced”‡ (Valmiki-1, 549).

Considering her ‘Ayoniḥ’, Janaka decided to marry her to one who would be equally divine in might and knowledge, and fortunately, he came across Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa who visited him with sage Viśvāmitra. Finally, Rāma, the eldest son of the king of Ayodhyā could satisfy the condition of marrying Sītā.

2. Sītā: Lakṣmī or Araṇyanī?

Though Vālmiki, often, uses the *tenor*^s (*upamana*) of Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī for Rāma and Sītā respectively, yet Sītā’s character is more of Araṇyanī than Lakṣmī. Her love for quiet glades and animals

includes a fire, Sanskrit MANTRAS, and some sort of offering” (*Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 507).

‡ *tasya laṅgalahastasya kṛṣataḥ kṣetramaṇḍalam/aham kilotthitā bhitoā jagatīm nṛpateḥ sūtā// sa mām dṛṣṭvā narapatirmuṣṭivikṣepataparāḥ / pānsugunṭhitasarvāṅgīm vismito janakoabhavat / /* (Quartet 2.CXVIII.28-29)

^s The term was formulated by I. A. Richards in his book *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1965).

of the forest makes her character overlap with the Ṛgvedic goddess Araṇyanī, whose significance in maintaining ecological balance can well be understood from the hymns dedicated to her in the tenth book of the Ṛgveda. Many facets of Sītā’s character can be analyzed from the hymns dedicated to Araṇyanī, the goddess of forest and fertility. Her love for natural objects especially for forests, makes her character identical with that of the Ṛgvedic goddess Araṇyanī, whose position in Hinduism can be understood from the following hymns of the Ṛgveda:

¹Goddess of wild and forest who seemest to vanish from the sight.
How is it that thou seekest not the village? Art, thou not afraid?

²What time the grasshopper replies and swells the shrill cicala’s voice,

Seeming to sound with tinkling bells, the Lady of the Wood exults.

³And, yonder, cattle seem to graze, what seems a dwelling-place appears:

Or else at eve the Lady of the Forest seems to free the wains.

⁴Here one is calling to his cow; another there hath felled a tree:

At eve, the dweller in the wood fancies that somebody hath screamed

⁵The Goddess never slays, unless some murderous enemy approach.

Man eats of savoury fruit and then takes, even as he wills, his rest.

⁶Now have I praised the Forest Queen, sweet-scented, redolent of balm,

The Mother of all sylvan things, who tills not but hath stores of food. (p. 146)**

If we analyze the episode of Sītā’s birth, it seems, it was more like a blessing to the worshipper who, with full devotion, was worshipping the goddess and performing the *yajña*. She was

** arañyānaraṇyānyasau yā preva naśyasi/kathā grāmam na pṛchasi na tvā bhīriva vindati// vṛṣāravāya vadate yadupāvati ciccikaḥ/ āghāṭībhiriva dhāvayannaraṇyānirmahīyate// uta gāvaivādantyuta veśmeva dṛśyate/uta arañyāniḥ sāyam śakatīrinva sarjati// gāmaṅgaiṣa ā hṛyati dārvagnaipo apāvadhī/vasannaraṇyānyām sāyamakrukṣaditi manyate// na vā arañyārnihantyanyaścennābhigacchati/svādoḥ phalasya jagdhvāya yathākāmam ni padyate// āñjanagandhim surabhim bahvannāmakṛṣivalām,pāham mṛgāṇām mātaram marañyānimaśansiṣam // (X/146)

found by Janaka as a benediction during his *yajña* and after her birth in Janaka's kingdom, there was never a dearth of food. There was affluence which is duly mentioned also in the Rgvedic *hymn* dedicated to Araṇyanī, the mother of all sylvan things. It explicitly states that she never tills but has stores of food; where there is Araṇyanī; there is an abundance of food.

2.1. *Sītā's Character: A Clash Between Sanskr̥ti and Prakṛti*

Sītā's portrayal in the *Rāmāyaṇa* places her closer to the goddess of forest and fertility (Araṇyanī) than the goddess of wealth, fortune and prosperity (Lakṣmī) as her character can be seen representing a clash between *Sanskr̥ti* (culture, civilization) and *Prakṛti* (nature) in the epic. She has always been wanting to live in a forest rather than in a palace. She expresses her wish in this regard to Rāma several times. Ayodhyā representing a cultured society in the epic fails to embrace her while the forest is shown to be embracing Sītā with an open arm. Her care for forest is reciprocated unabatedly in the epic. In the ninth canto (sarga) of *Araṇyakānda* (the third book of the epic), Sītā tries to stop Rāma from killing the inhabitants of the forest who, in no way, were harmful to them. She narrates him the norms of living in forest and requests him not to kill even demon occupants of forest (Vālmīki-1, 570). She considers the killing of an animal or any living being without enmity as *adharmā* (unrighteous act) and she categorizes it as one of the cardinal sins born out of desire. She reminds him about the duty of an armed Kṣatriya in the forest saying that those chivalrous Kṣatriyas, who practice restraint over their emotions and senses and carry bow and arrows with them in the forest, are bound by their duty to protect the beings living in the forest (Vālmīki-1, 573-74). She adds that Rāma has promised the sages to protect them from ogres while living in the Daṇḍaka forest, and for this purpose, he has taken up a bow and arrows as a weapon. However, seeing his behaviour in the Daṇḍaka, she worries about his ethical value toward the highest well-being and worldly interests. She stresses that she does not like him going towards the Daṇḍaka in the way he is proceeding. She explains the reason and states that when one goes to the forest with bow and arrows in hand and comes across all kinds of animals in the

forest, one might perhaps shoot an arrow somewhere, committing the third sin – *adharma* (unrighteous act). She states that when a weapon and a fuel are placed near a warrior and a fire respectively, they enhance their strength greatly in this world (Vālmiki-1, 574). Rāma was not killing any innocent animal or bird but demons, still she did not want him to disturb the natural way of living in the forest, and therefore was trying to forbid him from doing so. This, further, supports the argument that Sītā prefigured in Araṇyanī, about whom in the *hymn*, it is stated, “The Goddess never slays, unless some murderous enemy approach” (*Rgveda*, 117). Further, Sītā tells Rāma:

From Dharma follows wealth, from Dharma comes happiness, by recourse to Dharma one gets everything. This world has Dharma as its essence. The wise emaciate themselves with effort by imposing several restrictions on themselves and achieve Dharma. Dharma does not follow from merriment. With a pious mind, O gentle Rāma, always practice righteousness in the forest suited for austerities” (Vālmiki-1, 574).

Thus, having been suggested by the Dharmajña (one who has expertise in Dharma) Sītā, Rāma promised her that he would not kill any living being who is harmless but those ogres who are killing sages and other forest dwellers cannot be spared. The afore-mentioned conversation between Rāma and Sītā expresses Sītā’s sensibility for the value of life be it human, animal or an ogre. She was aware of the principles of *dharma* which in turn defines her eco-ethical attitude towards fellow beings and innate ecological character.

When Rāma was asked to live in forest for fourteen years by his stepmother Kaikeyī, he had decided to go alone to the forest considering Sītā to be feeble for bearing the pain and sufferings of the forest and tried to make her understand not to follow him there. But she was not ready to be convinced at all to live in the palace, instead, she convinced Rāma to join him in the forest. She tells him that living in the forest won’t be different for her from living in her mother’s house. She further assures him that whatever fruits and roots the earth will be giving, she would live on them without creating trouble to her husband (Vālmiki-1, 313). Sītā’s attachment to the forest, birds and animals is far more

passionate than any other ordinary human being. She always longs to live amongst them like 'Araṇyanī'. She says that she'll go with him to that dense forest where thousands of deer, monkeys and elephants live, and she'll live there in the manner she was living in her father's house (Vālmīki-1, 313). Still, Rāma was not ready to allow Sītā to undertake that prolonged painful journey with him. She, further, tells him that it has already been prophesied that she will have to live in the forest. She says: "I have heard it from the mouth of a Brahmin at my father's house that I have to live in the forest, this prophecy of his has to be true. Having heard this prophecy from the mouth of the astrologist Brahmin, I have always been eager to live in forest"^{††} (Vālmīki-1, 316). It shows very clearly that Sītā's longing to live in forest is unusual for any human, but it is natural longing for the goddess of forest as it is her abode. She spent her childhood in the palace of a king who was well-known for his natural way of living without obligations or yearning for any kind of wealth and fame.

She, again, reminds Rāma that after their marriage, she had already requested several times to him to live in the forest for some time. And she claims that she had got his consent too. Therefore, it should be understood by Rāma that it was predestined for her to live in forest (Vālmīki-1, 317). Upon such insistence from Sītā, Rāma says how he can leave her if she has made up her mind to live in the forest with him and agrees to take her along with him. Lavanya Vemsani (2011) also opines similarly in this regard: "Her (Sītā) insistence about following Rāma into the forest does not just seem as an urge of a dutiful wife, but someone longing for a life in a forest filled with fruit-bearing trees, lakes, and fountains, where she can splash the water and enjoy looking at the flowers and birds while sporting with Rāma" (36). However, we don't agree with Vemsani's point of view wherein she opines that Sītā's urge to go to the forest was also to "splash the water and enjoy looking at the flowers and birds while sporting with Rāma" (36). Her urge to go to the forest is more like

^{††} *athāpi ca mahāprājña brāhmaṇānām mayā śrutam/purā pitṛgrhe satyam vastavyam kil me vane//lakṣaṇibhyo dwijātibhyaḥ śrutvāham vachanam grhe/vanavāsakṛtotsāhā nityameva mahābala//* (Quartet 2.XXIX.8-9)

going to her mother’s home that she also expresses, or it’s a kind of pilgrimage for she tells Rāma that she would be strictly adhering to the rules of celibacy (Vālmiki-1, 313); hence the fantasy of sporting in water is quite questionable. This can further be understood from her yearning to go to the forest in *Uttarkāṇḍa* where she doesn’t even ask Rāma to accompany her to the forest, and she feels extremely happy on coming to know that Lakṣmaṇa was asked by Rāma to drop her in the forest to grant her wish. Sītā’s resemblance to the goddess of forest is further affirmed by Śūrpaṇakhā when she taunts Rāvaṇa upon his return from Pañcavaṭī where he had failed to harm Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. She, narrating Sītā’s beauty vividly, instigates Rāvaṇa to make Sītā his wife. Recounting Sītā’s beauty in front of Rāvaṇa, Śūrpaṇakhā says: “Her hair, nostrils, breast, and appearance are highly beautiful and captivating. That glorious princess seems to be the deity of the Daṇḍakavana (the name of the forest in which they were residing, and on the other hand she is having luster like Lakṣmī)”^{‡‡} (Vālmiki-1, 634).

2.2. Nature’s Role in Searching Sītā

Sītā’s abduction by Rāvaṇa leaves all her surroundings dismayed; this, in turn, indicates about some ill-happening when Rāma returns after killing Mārīca. The whole forest can be seen supporting Rāma, in whatever manner it was possible for them, in finding the whereabouts of Sītā. When Rāma returns to his hut in Pañcavaṭī with a premonition due upon various ominous indications from the surrounding environment, he does not find Sītā in the hut. Out of love and grief, he starts wailing and asking the trees around. He asks the Kadamba tree, telling it that his beloved Sītā was a great lover of its flower, is she there? Then he asks Arjuna that his beloved had a special love for its flower and if it could tell him some information about her. He addresses the Aśoka tree saying that it frees people from grief. He has lost his beloved, making him like the name of ‘Aśoka’ (literally meaning: without grief). Likewise, Rāma went to other trees such as Mango,

^{‡‡} *sā sukeśī sunāsorūḥ surūpā ca yaśasvinī/deva teva vanasyāsyā rājate śrīrivāparā//* (Quartet 3.XXXIV.16)

Śāla, Kaṭahal, Kuruva, Dhava, Pomegranate, Punnaḡ, Sandal, and Kevada for asking about Sītā. He also went to animals like deer, elephants, lions, etc. to ask about her (Vālmiki -1, 700). Rāma was informed about Sītā by a pair of deer indicating the direction and the path. He tells Lakṣmaṇa that these deer are repeatedly looking at me as if they want to convey something to me, I understand their intention, and then he asked the deer to tell him about Sītā on which they just stood up and started moving in the south direction looking at sky indicating the path and the direction to which she was taken by Rāvaṇa. They were moving forward looking back at Rāma, which he understood and started following them. On the way, Rāma found some flowers which he recognized as he had given them to Sītā to adorn herself (Vālmiki-1, 708-9). He, then, finds dead donkeys and charioteer on the way that affirmed his doubt that Sītā had been abducted and killed by demons. It was Jaṭāyu, who informed Rāma about the abduction of Sītā by Rāvaṇa. It is clearly shown in the epic that Sītā's rescuers were only birds and animals except for Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. It can further be noted here that when Rāma got to know that Sītā was abducted by Rāvaṇa, the king of Laṅkā, he could have gone to his kingdom, and could have taken the biggest army that Ayodhyā was having. But the dedication and support from non-humans seemed to him more than humans, and he relied on that support. These non-humans finally freed Sītā who always was dear to them, and who were always dear to her.

When Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa and forcefully put in the Puśpaka Vimāna, Sītā requests all trees, river Godāvāri, various deities who live on trees, and all birds and animals to inform her husband Rāma about the fact that she had been abducted by Rāvaṇa.

I greet all the deities who reside on these trees, you immediately inform my husband that your wife has been abducted by a demon. All birds and animals etc., all other various types of beings who live here, I take shelter under your patronage, convey to my Rāmacandra that Sītā, whom you loved more than yourself, has

been abducted. Your Sītā in the helpless state has been abducted by Rāvaṇa^{ss} (Vālmiki-1, 572).

After spotting Jaṭāyu on a tree, she requests him to inform her husband, Rāma. She refrains from seeking his help, as she observes that the demon is armed and more powerful than Jaṭāyu. She understands that Jaṭāyu cannot save her and implores him to inform Rāma about the situation. Having heard this wailing sound of Jankasutā, sleeping Jaṭāyu addresses Rāvaṇa as Ten-headed Rāvaṇa. He further asserts that he, the follower of *Sanātana Dharma*, is truthful and a mighty One. He tells him that his name is Jaṭāyu and warns him not to do such a condemnable deed in front of him. It is quite obvious here that even birds are counted in the religious creed of *Sanātana Dharma* so that the affinity between humans and non-humans remains intact and no human intends to harm non-humans.

The role of non-humans in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is of paramount importance, which, from another angle, can be perceived to be for maintaining the ecological balance in the world. If humans come to know that non-humans fought for their dear King, their God, they will start having immense respect and reverence for them and stop harming them. And subsequently, we can see this in Hinduism that several animals having relation with the Gods and Goddesses in various capacities are adored and worshipped. Lord Hanumāna is one of the best examples of it. 50th and 51st cantos (*sargas*) of *Aranyakāṇḍa* (the third book of the epic) are devoted to Jaṭāyu’s fight against Rāvaṇa, and finally, Rāvaṇa kills him, as in no way he was ready to allow him to go. This martyrdom of Jaṭāyu for saving Sītā is perhaps the first in human history where a bird dies saving a human being. And, finally, Rāma gives him apt respect and regard, and performs his last rites as per *Sanātana Dharma* like his own father. In Bhavabhūti’s *Uttarrāmacarita*, Sītā remembers Jaṭāyu at Janasthāna (the place where, usually, he used to perch) addressing him as father – “*Hā tāta Jaṭāyo sūnya*

^{ss} *daivatāni ca yānyasmin vane vīvidhapādape/namaskaromyaham tebhyo bhartuḥ śansata mām hṛtām// yāni kānicidapyatra satoāni vīvidhāni ca/sarvāṇi śaraṇam yāmi mṛgapakṣigaṇāni vai// hṛiyamāṇām priyām bhartuḥ prāṇebhyoapi garīyasīm/vivaśā te hṛtā Sītā Rāvaṇaneti śansata//* (Quartet 3.XLIX/32-34).

tvayā vinedaṁ janasthānaṁ" (Bhavabhūti, 67). Sītā laments his absence at Janasthāna, stating that the place has turned to be dreary without him. The epic, in all the ways, puts non-humans parallel to humans and tries to suggest that their co-existence is the best way to lead a peaceful and happy life. Rāma, having heard the incident of Sītā's abduction from Jaṭāyu, who died in his lap, says "Valiant saviours, to those who resort to them for safety, and righteous and exalted people are seen everywhere. There is no dearth of such people even in birds and animals"*** (Vālmiki-1, 720).

Thereafter, Rāma meets Hanumāna, Sugrīva, Aṅgada, and Jāmbavāna, and punishes Vāli for his vice. All monkeys start searching for Sītā. Aṅgada meets Sampāti, the elder brother of Jaṭāyu, who on listening about the death of his brother wails and tells him about the exact location of Sītā with approximate distance. When Rāvaṇa killed Jaṭāyu, and started moving further with Sītā towards his kingdom, Sītā was not finding anyone strong enough to fight against Rāvaṇa and save her from abduction. Sītā wraps all her jewelry in a silk blanket and throws it down near monkeys, thinking that the jewelry might help them convey the news of her abduction to Rāma when he comes to them searching for her. Vālmiki writes that when Sītā was abducted by Rāvaṇa, even the mighty Sea felt defeated, as its raising waves stopped, and fish and snakes that lived in that stopped moving. The sequence of events and episodes strongly suggests that the entire forest was eager to see the return of the goddess of the forest. Consequently, the forest collectively exerted considerable effort to assist Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in bringing her back.

2.3. *Sītā's Unyielding Love for Forest and Forest Dwellers*

Sītā's love for forest and elements of nature was never satisfied. She is the true epitome of sylvan deity which is also very well depicted in the epic. Her depiction in the *Rāmāyaṇa* truly epitomizes Araṇyanī. The suffering that Sītā underwent was immense. On analysis, one can conclude that had she not gone to

*** "sarvatra khalu dṛṣyante sādhave dharmacāriṇaḥ/śūrāḥ śaraṇyāḥ saumitre tiryagyonigatesvapi/" (Quartet 3.LXVIII.24).

the forest she would not have faced what she suffered. But no suffering could lessen the love of Sītā for the forest and forest dwellers. In the 42nd canto of *Uttarkāṇḍa* (the Seventh book of the epic), Rāma was having a walk with Sītā in his Aśokavāṭikā (An Aśoka orchard on the premises of his palace) and asked her to express her desire that she may want him to fulfill as a gift to her on account of her delivery that was coming closer (Vālmiki-2, 793). Sītā responds: “Raghunandan! I wish to see those sacred forests; I want to live closer to those austere sages who live on the bank of Gangā. I want to reside in the hermitage of those sages who feed on fruits and roots for a night. This is the foremost desire of mine.”^{†††} (Vālmiki-2, 793). This desire of Sītā shows her attachment to the forest and unyielding love and longing to live closer to her kins like Gangā, Tamasā, Murlā, etc. and it also suggests that her love for feeding on fruits and roots of the forest is far more than any delicious dishes cooked in the palace.

In the subsequent canto, when Rāma meets Bhadra, his close associate and spy, and asks him about the opinion of people on the king and his relations, he tells him about the rumour spreading among people about Sītā. As a response to it, he decides to renounce Sītā and calls upon his brothers for the same. He entrusts the task of leaving Sītā in the desolate forest to Lakṣmaṇa and asks him not to intervene in the matter as that would be preventing him from doing his moral duty. He asks Lakṣmaṇa to leave Sītā out of the periphery of Ayodhyā near Vālmiki’s hermitage that was situated on the other side of river Gangā, and the bank of Tamasā. He further adds that Sītā had expressed her desire to see the hermitage of sages on the bank of Gangā; so her desire will also be fulfilled by it (Vālmiki-2, 798). When Sītā comes to know from Lakṣmaṇa that the promise Rāma made to her about the forest is going to be fulfilled, she felt extremely happy. But when she was about to board the chariot, she says that she sees the earth unlively which indicates that something ominous may happen. When she was informed by Lakṣmaṇa about her fate on

††† “phalamūlāśinām deva pādamūleṣu vartitum/eṣa me paramaḥ kāmo yanmūlaphalabhojinām// apyekarātrim Kākutstha nivaseyam tapovane/” (Quartet 7.XLII.34)

leaving her near Vālmiki's hermitage, she wails there and gets seen by the children of sages living in the hermitage who go and inform sage Vālmiki about the same. And then Vālmiki himself comes and takes her inside the hermitage. Being alone, Sītā jumps into the river but is rescued by the river Ganges where after a few months she gives birth to two sons: Kuśa and Lava (Kumar, 58).

2.4. Sītā's Eco-Sensibility and Love for Biodiversity

Rāma, during his journey into the wood, reaches a hilly place named Citrakūṭa and decides to stay there. Having set up a hermitage there, Rāma wanted to please Sītā. He knew that nothing could please her as much as the picturesque vista and sublimity of nature. Sītā loves natural beauty, especially the natural vistas where different species of flora and fauna sport together surrounded by rivers and mountains. Keeping this in mind, Rāma gives a graphic description of Citrakūṭa (the name itself shows the picturesque vista of the place). Pointing out the ecological features of the place, Rāma shows his spouse the beauties of the hill. He explains the flora and fauna of the place to Sītā giving a vivid description of the rich biodiversity of the place:

Behold this mountain, inhabited by flocks of birds of every description, and adorned with peaks rich in minerals, parts of this king of mountains shine brightly, some glittering like silver, some blood-red, some yellowish, some red as madder, some sparkling like the foremost of gems, some possessing the lustre of topaz and crystal and the hue of Ketaki flower and other shining like stars and mercury... this mountain looks charming^{##} (Vālmiki-1, 485-6).

Here, Rāma intends to delineate the beauty in the wildlife of Citrakūṭa forest to please Sītā by giving every minute detail of flora and fauna with physical features of the mountains and surrounding environment. Rāma's vivid description of the picturesque and sublime nature of Citrakūṭa stimulates her eco-aesthetical sentiments by reviving her innate affinity with fellow

^{##}Paśyemamacalam bhadre nānā dvijagaṇāyutam/śikharaiḥ
khamivodvoidhdaidhārtumdivoibhuṣitam// Kecit rajatsamkāsāḥ kecit
kṣatajasaṁnibhā/pītamānṅiṣṭhvarṇāśca kecinmaṇīvaraprabhāḥ//
puṣpārkaṛkaketakābhāśca kecijjyotīrasaprabhāḥ/virājanteacalendrasya deśā
dhātuvoibhuṣitāḥ// (Quartet 2.XCIV.4-6)

beings and green nature. She finds solace in seeing the beauty of the surroundings which defines her eco-sensibility. As Anuj Vaidya notes, “Our bodily ability to sense the world is what Sobchack calls ‘sense- ability’ or sensibility – in other words, aesthetics. The range of our sense- ability in turn defines our ‘response - ability’ or responsibility – in other words, ethics” (131). That means Sītā’s eco-sensibility or eco-aesthetical sentiment always would make her appreciate nature and induce a fellow-feeling with other creatures. Rāma keeps on describing the forest’s enchanting beauty to his wife, Sītā. He speaks to his wife, indicating toward the couples of Kinnaras^{§§§} rejoicing and sporting on the tops of the surrounding mountain with their minds engrossed in passion for each other. Rāma also urges her to behold the swords (of the Kinnaras) suspended on the branches of trees and the charming garments of Vidyādhara^{****} women engaged in their recreational activities, which captivate his senses. These semi-divine beings descend to forests such as Citrakūṭa for leisure, singing, dancing and enjoyment, simultaneously adding to the beauty of the forest ecosystem. Hence, Rāma, pointing towards them, describes the pleasing visual of their recreational activities to Sītā aligning with her aesthetic sensibilities.

Sītā loves the sublimity of nature where water bodies and mountainous forests attract aquatic and wild birds and animals in their nexus. Such a place is always demonstrated with different kinds of birds hovering over blossomed water lilies and lotuses, and, also, aquatic birds and animals sport together. This is why, Rāma, now diverts Sītā’s attention towards river Mandākinī, carrying holy water. The river is generally known for its association with Alakanandā, and for being home to various species of lotus, waterlilies and aquatic birds. Rāma speaks to Sītā, indicating the river’s stream is inhabited by swans and cranes and is rich in flowers. The river is hemmed in with numerous species

§§§ A Kinnar is a Celestial creature in Hindu mythology figures, who is partly human and partly bird, and who sings and plays musical instruments.

**** Semi-celestial beings who possess magical powers and live in the Himalayas.

of trees laden with flowers and fruits on its banks. He further notices that the tops of trees are shaking because of the wind and shedding flowers and leaves all along the riverbed. Here, Rāma intends to involve Sītā in appreciating the beauty that nature is filled with. He asks her to behold the water of Mandākini that glitters like a pearl on its sandy banks which is thronged by the Siddhas (a class of semi-divine beings). He asks her to look at the flowers fallen on both sides of the river and those flowers that float along the current of water. He brings the melodious notes of Cakrawāka birds to Sītā's notice. And then, he asks her to take a dip in the water of the river with him (Vālmīki-1, 487). Thus, we see here that Rāma portrays the ecological vistas of the river comprising rich aquatic biodiversity inhabited by numerous species of flora and fauna. The trees alongside the river add to the richness of the diverse ecosystems of the surroundings. This pleases Sītā's aesthetic sentiment which is lit up whenever her senses find connection with ecological beauty as P. Lindemann-Matthies notes that a person finds those ecosystems aesthetically pleasing that are most diverse. Such ecosystems, characterized mainly by their rich biodiversity, foster aesthetic sentiments (201).

3. Sītā's Disenchantment and Return to her Mother Nature

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as we know, Sītā's misfortune repeats it and Rāma again proposes to accept Sītā. He sets a condition in which she has to publicly pledge. She had to agree to it as Vālmīki had already consented to it. Therefore, she takes pledge in front of all those who were worthy of worship in the following manner, "Except Raghunath (Rāma), I never even think of any other man. If it's true, then goddess earth should give me space in her lap. If I adore only Rāma in mind, speech, and action, then goddess earth should give me space in her lap. I do not know any other man except Rāma. If these words of mine are true, goddess earth should give me space in her lap"⁺⁺⁺ (Vālmīki-2, 899). Just as Sītā

⁺⁺⁺ *yathāham Rāghavādanyam manasāpi na cintaye/tathā me Mādhavī devī vivaram dātumarhati// manasā karmaṇā vācā yathā Rāmam samarcaye/tathā me Mādhavī devī vivaram dātumarhati// yathaitat satyamuktam me vedmi*

finishes her pledge in such words, there comes an ethereally elegant throne from the earth on which the goddess Earth herself was seated and she took Sītā in her arms and makes her sit on her lap welcomingly, and then with the rain of flowers, she went to the Rasātala (abyss) (Vālmīki-2, 899). This last episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa* also implies that Sītā, born from the earth, chose to return to the place of her origin instead of going to Vaikunṭha, where Viṣṇu lives with Lakṣmī. Being Araṇyanī, her territory is the earth only. Even in Laṅkā, when Sītā is abducted and taken to the palace of Rāvaṇa, she is kept in the vicinity of ‘naturalized forest’^{###} that is in *Aśoka-vaṇa*. Here Sītā dwells in the entire duration of her captivity which again portrays her inevitable affinity with nature and her sylvan spirit.

4. Conclusion

In the concluding episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, although Sītā seeks refuge in the earth from which she emerged, her interaction with nature and fellow beings left an indelible imprint on the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world. Sītā’s persona is never seen as different from nature and ecology on this planet. Throughout history her relation to nature and ecology has been portrayed in different literary traditions. Even in the epoch of Anthropocene, her persona has been continually explored in hope to find an escape from patriarchal social setup which has led to global ecological crisis. In this regard, filmmaker G. Aravindana in his film *Kanchana Sita - Golden Sītā* (1977) - represents Sītā not as human personae but as Prakṛti, the

Rāmāt param na ca/tathā me Mādhavī devī vivaram dātumarhati//
(Quartet 7.XCVII.14-16)

^{###} Mira Roy writes that there are two-fold sylvan spirits of Laṅkā forest: Natural Forest and Naturalized Forest. “The Natural Forests are mainly sub-forests. The other forest-features, like rock-plants, sufficient water-sources and their biodiversity are the ancillaries to the ecology of these natural forests ... the Naturalized Forest is best presented in the graphic account of *Aśoka-vaṇa*, named after the principal plant, *Aśoka*. As a sister evergreen forest, though naturalized, it shows all the elements of forest eco-system” (Roy 2005, 21).

animating power of natural phenomena conceived as female. In the film, Sītā is absent in her physical form and, instead, she communicates only through movement in natural forces such as when leaves rustle or the surface of the river ripples (Zacharias, 99). In the film, Rāma is stopped from committing mistakes by various manifestations of Prakṛti. For example, the influence of music and the depiction of nature's movements prevent Rāma from impulsively harming Śambuka and engaging in conflict with Bharata. Similarly, disturbances in the natural order serve as a warning to dissuade Rāma from proceeding with the horse-sacrifice ritual. And, at the end Rāma (Puruṣa) walks into the water of Sarayū and immersed into Sītā/Prakṛti (Zacharias, 106). Thereupon, the film intends to illustrate Sītā through its cinematic representation as an embodiment of Prakṛti.

Anuj Vaidya's play, "Forest Tales: A Sitayana", which is inspired by the movie *Kanchana Sita*, presents Sītā as microbes germinating in the aquatic planet named Gaṅgā. With the evolution of time, the microbes turn into a dense forest consisting of millions of floral and faunal life forms. When Rāma (portrayed as a businessman) plays the string of Shiva's bow (portrayed as a musical instrument), the forest (Sītā) is smitten and captivated. Rāma requests Sītā to take human form so that he can marry her, which she accepts. The play is a metaphor for the modern society where "presenting Rāma as a businessman is a comment on the 'corporatizing of religion' and his playing Shiva's bow as a musical instrument is a call for an end to war. The forest, where digital plants grow, is a dystopian view of the future" (Nath, "Forest Tales"). This is why, Vaidya says, Sītā is represented as microbes in the play. We need to understand that every smallest organism on this planet is needed for human survival. So, the play is presented from Sītā's points of view keeping forest and micro-organisms in the centre, projecting the life/path of Sītā (*Sitayana*). Hence, we see that Sītā's association with forests and other organisms is still portrayed in different literary forms keeping in mind the essence of her character in the Anthropocene.

To conclude, the depiction of Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its subsequent texts support the contention that Arāṇyanī, a Ṛgvedic goddess, and Sītā of Vedic literature were directly related to

nature and are prototypes of her. Her attachment to forest, birds, animals, and even otherwise with other dwellers of forest is not simply womanly; it has its background in which Vālmīki intentionally or unintentionally creates a kind of a cosmos in which these goddesses are incarnation or supporter of nature in one way or the other. Further, Sītā has many other names while she is close to every heart mainly as Sītā, a goddess of fertility. While acknowledging the linguistic factor that disyllabic names are generally easier to remember and recite, its inference is substantiated through arguments concerning Sītā of the Vedic literature. It also reiterates the fact that Araṇyanī, the sylvan deity and a manifestation of the Ṛgvedic Śakti transforms into Sītā in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. As the consort to Rāma, she is also identified as Lakṣmī, another manifestation of Śakti. The distinction lies in their association with Prakṛti (nature) and Sanskṛti (culture). The former epitomizes Prakṛti, while the latter relates to Sanskṛti.

References

- Rigveda: The Oldest Divine Book*, translated by R. T. H. Griffith and edited by F. Max Muller. Vijay Goel Publishers, 2014.
- Bhavabhūti. *Uttarrāmacarita*, translated by M. R. Kale. Motilal Banarsidass, 2010.
- Brockington, John. *The Sanskrit Epics*. Brill, 1998.
- Constance A. Jones and James D. Ryan. ed; *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*; Infobase Publishing, 2007.
- Kumar, Pratap. “Sita in the last episode of the “Ramayana”:
Contrasting paradigms from Bhavabhuti and Vālmīki.” *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 5/1 (1992): 57-66.
- Lindemann-Matthies, P., et al. “The influence of plant diversity on people’s perception and aesthetic appreciation of grassland vegetation.” *Biological Conservation*, 143/1 (2010): 195-202.
- Nath, Dipanita. “Forest Tales: A Sitayana presents eco-feminist reading of an epic.” November 27, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/forest-tales-a-sitayana-presents-eco-feminist-reading-of-an-epic-6138984/>. Accessed 22 December 2022.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*.

Penguin Random House, 2013.

_____. *The Girl Who Chose a New Way of Narrating the Ramayana*. Penguin Random House, 2016.

Richards, I. A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Oxford U P, 1965.

Roy, Mira. "Environment and Ecology in the Ramayana." *Indian Journal of Historical Science*, 40/1 (2005): 9 – 29.

Vaidya, Anuj. "Forest Tales: Restoring the Ramayana." *QED*, 5/3 (2018): 130-147.

Vālmīki. *Srimad Vālmīki-Ramayana*, Vol. I. Gita Press, 2016.

Vālmīki. *Srimad Vālmīki-Ramayana*, Vol. II. Gita Press, 2016.

Vemsani, Lavanya. "Sita: Nature in Its Feminine Form." *Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 20/1 (2011): 29-45.

Zacharias, Usha. "Union with Nature: Prakṛti and sovereignty in Aravindan's Kanchana Sita." *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology*. Ed. Paula Richman. Indiana U P, 2008: 99–107.