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Forest as a Feminine Space of Refuge: An Ecofeminist Study of Lanka's Princess, Tara and Sita's Ramayana

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Abstract— This paper examines the representation of women and nature in contemporary retellings of the epic Ramayana through an ecofeminist perspective. The paper focuses on three novels namely- *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane, *Tara* by Koral Dasgupta, and *Sita's Ramayana* by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar. Ecofeminism deals with the study of the relationship between nature and women, and examines how both are exploited and oppressed by the patriarchal society. These counternarratives challenge the dominant patriarchal narratives and thereby provides an alternative narration of power, female agency and ecological relationships. The study explores how Tara, Surpanakha, and Sita are deeply connected to the forests mentioned in the epic. They share common ecological wisdom and a holistic way of living in contrast to the patriarchal civilized world. Through the reconfiguration of the epic, these texts reveal the role of forest as a feminine space of refuge.

Keywords- Ramayana, Ecofeminism, Retelling, Myth, Women and Nature, Ecological wisdom, Vandana Shiva

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of mythology across different cultures provides a long-term historical sense of various civilizations. More than a historical record, it delves deep into the social, cultural, and political life of ancient times. Unlike the Western mythology, the Indian mythology comprises of written records and oral stories. There are three historical traditions in Indian mythology namely Akyana, Ithihasa, and Purana. Among this, the epic can be described as an Ithihasa Purana in Indian tradition. Valmiki himself calls the Ramayana as an Ithihasa. The two great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata portray India's glorious storytelling traditions. These epics are still evolving. Ramayana is not merely a mythical tale, the various characters in the epic continues to act as prototypes of an honest man, an ideal woman and the familial relationships. Contemporary revisionist writers have dismantled the epic and brought out its various perspectives. Ramayana is no longer the story of Ram alone, it has now become the Ramayana of Sita, Ravana, Surpanakha, Mandodhari, Tara, Urmila, Kaikeyi and the Ramayana of every single man and woman who are being oppressed.

Ecofeminism is a philosophical movement emerged during 1970s and 1980s that highlights the oppression and domination of both nature and women by the patriarchal society. The term was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne referring to the interconnected oppression. Ecofeminists argue that the same dominant power structures that oppress and marginalize women are responsible for the degradation and abuse of environment. In India, Ecofeminism gained popularity through the writings of Vandana Shiva.

Indian philosophy is deeply rooted in a holistic and harmonious relation with nature. The Puranas and Vedas depict a deep sense of communion that human beings shared with the Earth. In her book *Hinduism and Nature*, Nanditha Krishna, a historian and environmentalist writes: "In Vedic literature, all of nature was, in some way, divine, part of an invisible life force uniting the world of humans, animals and plants" (3). The Indian tradition views nature as 'Prakriti' - the dynamic and primal motive force of the entire existence. In the context of contemporary mythological retellings, this interconnectedness is unveiled through an ecofeminist analysis of the selected texts.

Kavita Kane, in her novel *Lanka's Princess*, depicts the life of Surpanakha the forgotten queen of Lanka. Koral Dasgupta's novel *Tara* portrays the female agency and wisdom of Vanara women of Kishkindha. Through the graphic novel *Sita's Ramayana*, Samhita Arni narrates Ramayan through the life of Sita, the abandoned queen.

II. FOREST AS A SANCTUARY OF REBIRTH IN LANKAS PRINCESS

"How many Ramayanas? Three hundred? Three thousand? At the end of some Ramayanas, a question is sometimes asked: How many Ramayanas have there been? And there are stories that answer the question" (Ramanujan 22). Ramayana, the great epic is often seen as the collective consciousness of the Indian society. More than a religious and philosophical text, the Ramayana is a repository of tales about women, men, gender, caste, class and nature. The postmodern writers have dismantled the epic, portraying various hidden and forgotten stories. As Anand Neelakantan mentions, "No other religious text or folk narratives has influenced Southeast Asia's heritage over the past three thousand years as the grand epic Ramayana has" (xiii).

Kavita Kane is an enthralling writer and journalist who often portrays the marginalised characters of Indian epics. Lanka's Princess is Kane's fourth novel published in 2016 which explores the life of Surpanakha, Lanka's forgotten princess. Through her novel, Kane challenges the disfiguring cult and questions the dominant narrative which casts her as the perpetrator of war.

The novel tracks the journey of Surpanakha, the forgotten princess from Meenakshi to Surpanakha; a woman more hated than hateful. Women are always portrayed as the perpetrator of war and so does in Ramayana. But Kane provides a fresh look at the epic through Surpanakha's eyes; thus revealing her story of survival, struggle and finally finding refuge in the forests. The chapter titled as "Kumar" deals with the heroine's exile in the Dandak forest. After the death of her husband Vidyujiva, Surpanakha decides to go to the Dandak forest which she calls as her "Janasthan". Leaving the golden walls of Lanka, she walks into the untamed wilderness. Her journey from civilization to the wild can be seen as a woman's journey in search of peace and identity. As she lays in the lap of the forest, she finds solace. Surpanakha; the 'untamed woman' of Ramayana becomes the child of Dandak forest; free and untamed in the lap of Nature.

Surpanakha who was earlier known as Meenakshi, was born as an unwanted girl child. Raised in a highly patriarchal family guarded by her five brothers, Surpanakha was doubly marginalized both within her family and outside. She was humiliated and disfigured by Rama and Lakshman. Lawrence Buell, a well-known ecocritic, in his essay, "Literature and Environment" states that "the battle for ecological survival is intrinsically intertwined with the struggles for women's liberation and other forms of social justice" (Buell 424).

Ram, Sita and Lakshman were in exile in the Panchavati, the greenest part of the Dandak forest. Ram kills Taraka, "the unusual and powerful Yaksha princess", who is also the grandmother of Surpanakha (Kane 17). Kathleen M Erndl, in her essay "The Mutilation of Surpanakha", notes that Ram the dharmic hero has killed two women of the Asura clan – Ayomukhi and Taraka. This act of the rama brothers can be seen as men trying to oppress and subjugate both nature and women. They cleared the forests after the invasion and killed the women of the land who freely wandered there.

Dandak is a forbidden place, where both humans and animals are feared to enter. Dandak is dark, deep and mysterious and so is Surpanakha. She was untamed, free with no boundaries and social expectations. She finds her true identity when she was part of the wild forest. Kane metaphorically names the forest as "Janasthan"; the place where she was reborn from Meenakshi to Surpanakha (181).

This was Dandak forest, and it was here that she had discovered the freedom she had yearned for, to employ the power to act, speak or think without externally imposed restraints... Man makes rules and breaks them, to trespass and trounce them; but in the jungle, he has to follow a different law. Animals, free and untamed, were more true to their nature, Surpanakha believed, than Man who have turned against his. (Kane 182)

As compared to humans, Nature was more kind to her. Born as an unwanted girl child, and oppressed under her brother's rule and finally losing her most loved husband, Surpanakha reaches the forest in the most scattered and devastated state. Ecofeminism encompasses the view that an interconnected sense of self is more common in women when they are part of Nature. The untamed feminine self of Surpanakha finds home in her "Janasthan".

And she loved it, finding beauty in the ravaged wilderness.... In Dandak, existed a natural discipline of the wild, where all feared but respected each other, be it an animal or sapling, manav or danav. The forest was everyone's to have but none's to possess.... This was her Dandak. (Kane 182)

The common motifs and sense of liberation shared by women and nature is visible here.

III. EXPLORING THE ECOLOGICAL WISDOM OF VANARA WOMEN IN TARA

Tara, in Koral Dasgupta's novel also joins the long chain of oppressed women who finds solace in nature. In the Ramayana, she is identified as the daughter of a Vanara physician Sushena. Tara later marries Bali and bears him a son named Angad. Through the eyes of Tara, Dasgupta unveils the deep bond that the womenfolk of Vanara share with the Kishkindha forest. Challenging the dominant narrative, the novel depicts Tara as an embodiment of ecological wisdom and kinship.

In the context of ecofeminism, Vandana Shiva identifies women's role in protecting nature and also associates them as preservers of indigenous knowledge related to medicinal herbs. Since ancient times, forest women across different cultures have been serving as healers and custodians of indigenous medicinal knowledge. Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive*, points out that women share a vast knowledge of seeds, plants and medicinal herbs and thus making them as the central figures of ecological preservation.

In Dasgupta's novel, Ruma who is Sugriv's wife is a genius who knows to heal any ailments. Jambavan, the great bear once tests her wisdom in medical knowledge and to his surprise Ruma answers all his doubts. Tara, being the daughter of a renowned physician in Kishkindha always felt that she does not possess her father's wisdom.

In the novel, Ruma shares the secret recipe of the divine syrup to Tara which reveals the bond they share. “Ruma is a genius...Her brain is born for discoveries, her hands blessed to heal”, says Tara’s father (Dasgupta 40). In her book *Staying Alive*, Shiva states that women possess a deeply localized, holistic understanding of Nature. Agreeing with her statement, the women of Kishkindha also possess a deep understanding of their forest. When a forest fire broke out suddenly, the Vanara women acts quickly without waiting for the men to put out the fire. Tara commands the women to dump rocks immediately. “The *vanar* women rushed forward to throw water at the flames” and Tara felt that “only the rains could quench this inebriate” (Dasgupta 18). The women split into three groups. They collected leaves and rocks, and gathered water from river Pampa. In no time, Tara struck the earth with Bali’s mace. Suddenly the powdery sand covered the entire forest, stones began to fall thus extinguishing the fire. Ecofeminists often associate the concepts of nourishment and caring with women. Agreeing with this view, Tara never disrupts the balance of nature. Before striking the earth with mace, she says “Forgive me Mother Earth. We need to survive. We need resources. We have no other way” (18). In an ecofeminist lens Tara’s action of seeking forgiveness depicts her understanding of ecological balance. “We turned away before the tears could fall from our eyes” says Tara (Dasgupta 19). They knew how to live harmoniously with nature, and hence never disrupted this holistic view.

IV. HEALING, RESISTANCE, AND TRANSFORMATION IN SITA’S RAMAYANA

Samhita Arni’s novel *Sita’s Ramayana* presents the abandoned Sita, spending her time in Dandak forest during her exile. The novel opens with the depiction of Sita, alone and fully pregnant, entering into the wilderness. Mythological narrations hail Sita as the ‘daughter of earth’ believing that she emerged out of the womb of Mother Earth. According to Ramayana, when King Janaka was ploughing, he discovered Sita in a furrow. In Arni’s novel, after being left out into the forest, slowly she reconnects with the nature. Abandoned, and pregnant, this daughter of the earth finds refuge in the forest. “Until one day the daughter of the Earth came. At her touch the flowers, creepers and the trees of Dandaka awoke from their long sleep. The forest watched her, with great interest” (Arni 8). According to Françoise d’Eaubonne, ecofeminism relates the oppression and domination of women to the oppression and domination of environment. Sita, the queen of Ayodhya was also oppressed, dominated and exploited by the patriarchal society.

She was doubted of her chastity not once but twice and is now abandoned in an unknown forest. Arni challenges the act of ‘dharmic hero’ in the novel through her retelling. The greatest irony is that it is the same civilized men who fought for her, who destroyed an entire kingdom for her has abandoned her in a forest. “Let me live here. The world of men has banished me”, says Sita (Arni 9). Dismantling the dominant narrative, Arni’s Sita contemplates on what the world of men, even her most loved man has done to her. “My belly is huge, and I cannot see the ground under my feet” (127). Hearing her story the entire Dandak forest offered her comfort. Even the snakes, lions and tigers swore to live her in peace. The forest and its wild animals that are ready to attack the prey are the ones who protects her. Towards the closure, Rama asks Sita to accompany with him to Ayodhya. But Sita, the daughter of the earth no longer wishes to be doubted and tested again. Leaving everything, she goes “deep into the earth’s belly, abode of her mother, the earth goddess” (Arni 146). Sita’s reunion with the Mother Earth depicts the intricate bond between women and nature. The patriarchal society in which she lived was full of war, power, jealousy and rules. The forest on the other hand is untamed, free and wild. Sita becomes liberated in the forest. Cuomo, an ecocritic identifies the connection between woman and earth as “providers of life, sustenance and creativity” (Swanson 83). There is a common connection between women’s fertility and the fertility of land.

V. CONCLUSION

“There are an infinite number of Ramayanas...This epic is not merely about the events that happened long ago, but what is happening here and now and will keep happening”, this statement by Anand Neelakantan in his book *Many Ramayanas Many Lessons* highlights the relevance of Ramayana stories in the contemporary world (xvii). The Ramayana has influenced and guided the entire Southeast Asian heritage for over the past three thousand years. It spans over different nations and cultures. The contemporary revisionist writers have dismantled the epic through various retellings. These retellings reveal how every character in Ramayana act as a prototype of modern people. An ecofeminist reading of the select Indian novels namely *Lanka’s Princess, Tara, and Sita’s Ramayana* depict how the womenfolk of Ramayana shared an intricate and holistic relationship with Nature. Dasgupta’s Tara narrates: “Once liberated, I began to withdraw from inequitable relationships enforced by earthly conventions. I disowned all that was not mine. Sita had also done the same. This disowning and withdrawing. She went to Mother Earth” (310). These lines depicts that forest becomes the feminine space of refuge.



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