

The Lived Forest: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Eco-Agency in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest Of Enchantments*

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Abstract

This paper examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) through the theoretical lens of phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment and recent developments in eco-phenomenology. It argues that Divakaruni's reimagining of the *Ramayana* foregrounds Sita's embodied consciousness and constructs the forest as an agentive, coexistent world rather than a passive backdrop. The novel performs a narrative ecology where phenomenological perception, corporeal knowledge, and intersubjective encounters between human and nonhuman entities converge to articulate an ethics of relational attentiveness. Integrating ecofeminist theory with phenomenological ontology, this essay situates *The Forest of Enchantments* as a key text in contemporary eco-literature that resists anthropocentrism, reconfigures mythic temporality, and envisions the forest as a lived and perceiving subject.

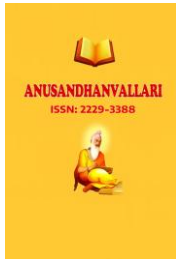
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Introduction

In the last decade, Indian English fiction has witnessed a surge in mythic retellings that center women's voices, reclaiming narrative agency from patriarchal canons. Among these, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) occupies a distinctive place for its feminist reimagining of Sita's story from the *Ramayana*. Yet, the novel's significance extends beyond its gender politics. It articulates an alternative ontology of being-in-the-world, wherein the forest functions not merely as a geographical or symbolic site but as a lived, perceptual environment that shapes consciousness and ethical awareness.

The "lived forest" in Divakaruni's narrative becomes a phenomenological field: a realm of embodied perception and mutual correspondence between human and nonhuman life. Through Sita's voice, Divakaruni reorients the epic's moral axis from law and duty to empathy and relational coexistence. In doing so, she advances an ecofeminist ethics rooted in care, corporeality, and ecological intimacy.

This essay reads *The Forest of Enchantments* as an eco-phenomenological text. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and contemporary ecophenomenology, it explores how Sita's bodily consciousness becomes a mode of ecological knowing. The novel situates human subjectivity within the material intercorporeality of the forest — a world of trees, rivers, animals, and elemental presences that co-constitute her sense of self.



Review of Literature: Feminism, Ecology, and Mythic Revision

Critical discourse on Divakaruni's fiction has traditionally foregrounded her feminist intervention in mythic narratives. Scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, Jasbir Jain, and Uma Chakravarti have read her mythic retellings as strategies of resistance against patriarchal silencing. *The Forest of Enchantments* continues this trajectory but extends its scope to ecological and ethical concerns.

Several studies situate the novel within ecofeminist frameworks. K. S. Narayan (2022) argues that Sita's connection with the forest "embodies the essential ecofeminist dialectic of care and coexistence," asserting that the novel "renders visible the shared subjugation of women and nature under patriarchal order." Similarly, A. Rajalakshmi (2023) identifies Sita's environmental empathy as "a form of resistance that transforms domestic virtue into ecological virtue."

Beyond ecofeminism, scholars have begun to read Divakaruni's work through biocentric and ecophenomenological lenses. Deepa Mukherjee (2021) observes that "Divakaruni dissolves the human/nature binary through a sensuous, embodied narrative that privileges tactile and somatic knowing." This critical shift aligns her work with broader currents in environmental humanities that emphasize relational ontology and affective ecology.

Phenomenological approaches to literature — especially those influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, David Abram, and Val Plumwood — offer tools for analyzing Divakaruni's forest-world as a "lived environment." Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) proposes that perception is ecological: our senses are continuous with the "flesh of the world." Such frameworks illuminate how Divakaruni's text invites readers into a similar sensuous participation in the more-than-human world.

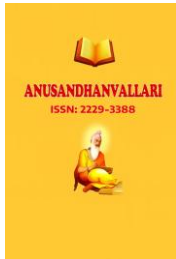
Theoretical Framework: Phenomenology and Ecological Embodiment

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology challenges Cartesian dualism by asserting that perception arises through the lived body — the *corps vécu*. The body is not an object in space but the very means through which the world becomes visible. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he writes: "I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it" (Merleau-Ponty 150).

Eco-phenomenology extends this insight to environmental relations. As David Abram explains, the human body is "a part of the encompassing flesh of the world, and our breathing, our seeing, our hearing are participations in that greater sentience" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 65). This understanding collapses the separation between human consciousness and natural environment, envisioning perception as a reciprocal dialogue between perceiver and world.

In Divakaruni's novel, this dialogue is dramatized through Sita's embodied consciousness. Her perception of the forest — tactile, olfactory, auditory — enacts what Merleau-Ponty calls the "chiasm," the intertwining of seer and seen. The forest gazes back, responding to her presence; perception becomes a mutual act.

Ecofeminist phenomenology, developed by thinkers like Val Plumwood and Stacy Alaimo, further situates embodiment within networks of power and care. Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) critiques the "hyperseparation" of culture from nature and male from female. Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" (*Bodily Natures*, 2010) emphasizes the material interchanges between bodies and environments. Both frameworks are germane to Divakaruni's representation of Sita as a permeable, responsive being whose bodily integrity is continually negotiated within ecological and patriarchal matrices.



Sita's Embodied Knowledge: The Body as an Epistemic Site

Sita's consciousness in *The Forest of Enchantments* emerges not as an abstract or disembodied moral ideal, but as a sensuous, embodied form of awareness grounded in the textures, rhythms, and vitality of the nonhuman world. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's narrative renders Sita's exile not as an episode of suffering alone, but as an *ecological apprenticeship*, a period through which she learns to feel, sense, and think through her body's reciprocity with the forest. This marks a profound shift from the patriarchal epistemology of the canonical *Ramayana*, which idealizes Sita as passive virtue, toward an *embodied epistemology* in which her body becomes a site of knowing and ethical responsiveness.

From a phenomenological perspective, Sita's body mediates her relationship with the world — she *is* the threshold through which the forest is lived and experienced. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *lived body* (le corps vécu) illuminates this dynamic: the body is not a mere object in space, but the very medium through which the world is revealed (Merleau-Ponty 147). In Divakaruni's retelling, Sita's gestures — touching leaves, bathing in rivers, walking barefoot on forest paths — are not symbolic adornments but modes of perception that articulate an intercorporeal dialogue with her surroundings. When Sita describes the forest as breathing with her, or when she feels the trees respond to her grief, Divakaruni translates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insight into narrative form: perception is participatory and reciprocal.

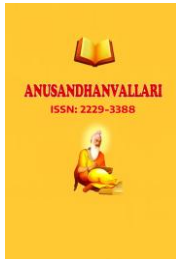
This embodied knowing also disrupts patriarchal dichotomies between reason and emotion, culture and nature, or mind and body. Ecofeminist theorists like Val Plumwood have argued that such binaries sustain both gendered and ecological domination ("Feminism and the Mastery of Nature" 41). In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni reclaims the female body as a locus of knowledge — one that *feels* its way into truth. Sita's sensory intimacy with the environment becomes an alternative epistemic mode: to touch is to know, to nurture is to understand. This corresponds with Stacy Alaimo's concept of *trans-corporeality*, where human bodies are understood as open to material flows and ecological entanglements (Alaimo 2). Sita's experiences with the forest, the soil, and the elements exemplify this porousness; her corporeality becomes a site of ecological inscription.

In this reimagining, the feminine body is not a site of vulnerability but of agency. Sita's embodied awareness resists the disembodiment of patriarchal discourse — the idealization of the wife, the goddess, or the moral emblem. Instead, Divakaruni's Sita is *fleshly*, porous, and alive — her knowledge arises not from detachment but from touch. This phenomenological grounding allows her to articulate an *eco-ethical subjectivity* that transcends both mythic transcendence and political subjugation. Her embodied experience becomes the ground of an ecological ethics that recognizes relationality as the essence of being.

Ultimately, Sita's embodiment is a form of resistance. In reinhabiting her body as a site of feeling, perception, and meaning, she reclaims agency from both divine and patriarchal hierarchies. The forest is not her exile but her awakening — a space where she learns the phenomenological truth that existence is interdependence. Divakaruni's language of touch, breath, and rhythm transforms Sita from a passive icon into an active participant in what eco-phenomenology terms the more-than-human world. Her body becomes an instrument of ecological attunement — not merely suffering but sensing, not merely enduring but knowing.

The Forest as Lived Space and Interlocutor

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, the forest functions not merely as a physical backdrop for exile but as a lived space—a phenomenological field of relations, sensations, and meanings that shape the consciousness of Sita and the narrative itself. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reconfigures the forest as a site of intersubjectivity, where the



boundaries between the human and nonhuman dissolve into a fluid dialogue of mutual responsiveness. This transformation marks a decisive departure from the epic's conventional spatial hierarchy, where the court represents civilization and the forest, its moral and social antithesis. Instead, Divakaruni's forest is a living interlocutor, a sentient participant in Sita's journey toward self-understanding and ecological awareness.

Phenomenology, particularly in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, insists that space is not an abstract container but something we inhabit through our bodily being. As he observes, "space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible" (Phenomenology of Perception 243). In Divakaruni's reimagining, the forest is this kind of existential space — one that constitutes and is constituted by Sita's embodied consciousness. Every rustling leaf, every trembling branch, every breath of wind is felt as part of the same perceptual fabric that Sita herself inhabits. The forest does not merely surround her; it articulates her existence.

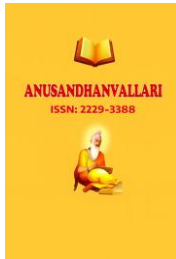
From the first moments of her exile, Sita's sensory immersion in the forest dismantles the hierarchical logic of domination that underlies her earlier royal life. When she writes of the scent of wild jasmine that lingers on her skin, or the hush that falls at dusk "as if the trees themselves were listening" (Divakaruni 134), the forest emerges as an animate interlocutor—a being capable of listening, feeling, and responding. This reciprocity aligns with David Abram's phenomenological ecology, which views nature as "a vast breathing organism in which our own breathing is sustained" (The Spell of the Sensuous 125). The forest, in Divakaruni's rendering, is precisely such a breathing organism—its pulse intertwined with Sita's own corporeal rhythm.

Furthermore, the forest redefines the very notion of dwelling. Heidegger's concept of *wohnen*—to dwell—is not to occupy a space but to live poetically within it, to let beings be (Heidegger 213). Sita learns to dwell in the forest not as an exile from Ayodhya but as one who belongs to a larger web of being. The forest teaches her to listen, to perceive, to accept impermanence. Through this apprenticeship in attentiveness, Sita becomes a phenomenological subject who no longer perceives the world as external but as within and around her, inseparable from her being. The forest thus becomes both mirror and mentor, reflecting her inward transformation as she learns to dwell ethically within the world's unfolding.

Ecofeminist readings deepen this spatial phenomenology by highlighting how the forest's relational ontology challenges the patriarchal logic of mastery. As Val Plumwood asserts, patriarchal culture positions nature as the "shadow" of the human self—female, emotional, chaotic, and subordinate (Plumwood 41). Divakaruni inverts this logic: the forest, coded as feminine in traditional narratives, becomes the source of agency and wisdom. The trees, rivers, and creatures that populate Sita's world are not inert symbols of passivity; they embody the vitality of being that the patriarchal kingdom of Ayodhya suppresses. The forest's voice is, in effect, the silenced feminine voice of the epic made audible.

This intersubjective forest also reconfigures temporality. In Ayodhya, time is linear and progress-oriented, tied to royal duty and succession. In the forest, time unfolds cyclically and rhythmically—marked by flowering and decay, dawn and dusk. This temporal shift resonates with phenomenological temporality, where the lived experience of time is bound to perception rather than chronology. As Sita writes, her days "merged into each other like ripples on the river" (Divakaruni 147). Such temporal fluidity destabilizes heroic teleology and replaces it with what Timothy Morton calls ecological time—a temporality that emphasizes entanglement, simultaneity, and the interdependence of beings (Ecology Without Nature 95). The forest, therefore, becomes a phenomenological chronotope: a space-time nexus that enables the emergence of ecological subjectivity.

In this way, Divakaruni's forest is not passive scenery but a phenomenological interlocutor—an active participant in the construction of meaning. It speaks through silence, scent, and movement; it educates through presence rather than instruction. For Sita, to live in the forest is to enter into conversation with existence itself. Every moment of her dwelling there becomes an enactment of being-with—with Rama, with Lakshmana, but also with



the wind, the soil, and the spirits of place. The forest, as lived and felt, becomes the ultimate teacher: it reveals that all beings, human and nonhuman alike, exist not in isolation but within a shared fabric of life.

Nonhuman Agency and Intercorporeality

If *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagines exile as an initiation into ecological consciousness, it also redefines agency itself by decentralizing the human subject. In Divakaruni's retelling, agency is not the exclusive domain of gods, kings, or even humans, but rather an emergent quality of the intercorporeal fabric binding all living beings. The forest does not merely host Sita's experiences; it acts, responds, and transforms her. Through this dynamic reciprocity, Divakaruni gives voice to what phenomenologists and new materialists alike call nonhuman agency—a mode of being in which the more-than-human world participates in the creation of meaning and ethical relation.

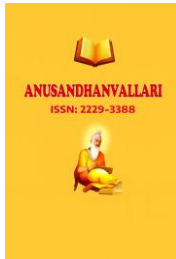
In phenomenological terms, Merleau-Ponty's later writings on the flesh of the world provide a theoretical foundation for this expanded notion of agency. The flesh, as he conceives it, is not physical matter but a "general element" that underlies both perceiver and perceived (Merleau-Ponty 147). All beings share in this elemental texture, which allows them to sense and be sensed, to affect and be affected. In Divakaruni's forest, such reciprocity is rendered with literary precision: trees sigh with sorrow, the earth trembles at Sita's anguish, and the wind carries whispers of the unseen. These are not poetic metaphors but phenomenological articulations of the forest's intercorporeality—its participation in the same ontological fabric as human existence. Sita's sorrow is the forest's sorrow; her stillness resonates through its roots.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* helps us understand this world of vibrant interactivity. Bennett challenges the modern tendency to see matter as passive, instead proposing that materiality possesses a "vitality" that acts upon and within human bodies (Bennett x). Divakaruni's forest embodies this vitality: it is animated, agentic, and deeply affective. The forest does not merely symbolize inner emotion; it acts back—comforting, warning, sheltering, and transforming those who dwell within it. This mutual responsiveness marks a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric phenomenology, where human perception is but one expression of a broader, living field of sensibility.

Sita's relationship with this animate forest highlights her awakening to intercorporeality, the shared bodily existence between human and nonhuman forms. As David Abram observes, "the body is not a discrete entity but a porous membrane through which the world breathes" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 92). Divakaruni enacts this insight through Sita's embodied experiences—her barefoot contact with the soil, her immersion in rivers, her attentive listening to the murmur of trees. These sensory moments express a phenomenology of participation, a recognition that to live ethically is to acknowledge one's permeability within a web of relations. Sita's exile becomes, then, not a withdrawal from the world but a becoming-with the world.

This intercorporeal sensibility destabilizes the traditional hierarchy between human mastery and natural subservience. In the canonical *Ramayana*, the forest is a site to be endured, tamed, or transcended. In Divakaruni's revision, it becomes an agent of revelation, moral testing, and regeneration. When Sita tends to injured animals or communes with the trees, she acknowledges their subjectivity, thereby enacting an ethics of response-ability—a term used by Donna Haraway to describe the capacity to respond to others across species boundaries (*When Species Meet* 88). The forest's agency thus demands a new kind of ethical subject, one defined not by control but by care, not by sovereignty but by sensitivity.

Moreover, the forest's nonhuman agency complicates the notion of divinity itself. The gods in Divakaruni's narrative often appear distant, inscrutable, or indifferent, whereas the forest remains immediate, nurturing, and perceptibly alive. Divinity seems relocated from the transcendent heavens to the immanent world of matter and breath. In this sense, *The Forest of Enchantments* participates in what Kate Rigby calls "a poetics of earthly dwelling," wherein sacredness inheres not in supernatural transcendence but in the relational vitality of the natural



world (Topographies of the Sacred 55). Through this relocation, Divakaruni's text aligns with eco-phenomenology's spiritual dimension—the rediscovery of the sacred within the sensuous.

Sita's recognition of nonhuman agency culminates in her transformation from passive victim to ecological witness. By the end of her exile, she no longer perceives herself as separate from the forest but as its voice, its conscience. When she later invokes the earth to bear witness to her truth, her plea is not an act of desperation but of deep ontological recognition: she calls upon the earth as kin, as participant in her being. The earth's response—opening to receive her—is the final act of intercorporeal affirmation. This moment crystallizes what ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood identifies as the "dialogical self"—a consciousness that "knows itself as part of a communicative world of others" ("Feminism and the Mastery of Nature" 181).

Thus, Divakaruni's forest is more than a landscape of mythic exile. It is a phenomenological matrix where self and world, human and nonhuman, converge in shared agency. Sita's ecological awakening is not merely moral or spiritual but ontological: to be is to be entangled. Through intercorporeality, Divakaruni recovers an ancient ecological wisdom embedded in myth and renews it for a posthuman age—a wisdom that insists that every breath, every root, and every heartbeat participates in the same vibrant continuum of life.

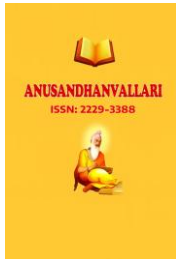
Embodied Ethics and the Exilic Reorientation

Sita's exile in *The Forest of Enchantments* serves not merely as a punishment or a test of chastity, as it is traditionally portrayed, but as a profound process of *ethical reorientation*. In Divakaruni's retelling, exile becomes the medium through which Sita unlearns the hierarchies of civilization and relearns the ethics of coexistence. This transformation is not intellectual but embodied — it unfolds through her sensory, affective, and corporeal engagement with the forest. Her body, in contact with soil, water, and wind, becomes the site where a new ecological ethic is inscribed and lived.

From a phenomenological standpoint, Sita's ethical awakening aligns with what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as the *ethical dimension of perception*: an awareness that arises from our being *in the world with others*. For Merleau-Ponty, perception always implies a relation, a *being-toward* that grounds ethical responsibility. In the forest, Sita's perception expands beyond the human sphere to encompass the sentience of trees, animals, and elemental forces. Her exile thus initiates what David Abram calls an "ecological reciprocity" — a state in which "to perceive is to participate in the unfolding of the world" (*The Spell of the Sensuous* 58). The ethical shift here lies in recognition: Sita perceives herself not as master or moral superior, but as participant within an interdependent network of life.

The forest, in this sense, becomes a *moral ecology*, a living teacher that dismantles the anthropocentric assumptions of her royal upbringing. In Ayodhya, ethics was defined by duty (*dharma*), hierarchy, and patriarchal codes of obedience. In the forest, ethics emerges from relation, attentiveness, and reciprocity. When Sita tends to the wounded doe, or thanks the trees for their shade, these gestures are not sentimental embellishments but enactments of what ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood calls an *ethics of mutuality*, one that resists domination by affirming interdependence ("Feminism and the Mastery of Nature" 171). Through care and listening, Sita practices an ecological ethics grounded in vulnerability rather than control.

Sita's exile also subverts the patriarchal moral economy of purity and sacrifice. In the canonical *Ramayana*, Sita's moral worth is measured by her capacity for endurance — her body becomes the site upon which patriarchal virtue is inscribed. Divakaruni reverses this economy by making Sita's body the source of *ethical agency*. Her bodily endurance, her sensory openness, and her capacity to *feel with* the world become moral strengths rather than signs of fragility. This redefinition parallels ecofeminist readings that reclaim embodied knowledge as ethical wisdom. As Stacy Alaimo notes, "ethical responsibility emerges from our material interconnections with the more-than-



human world” (*Bodily Natures* 16). Sita’s exile dramatizes this truth: to live ethically is to live responsively, acknowledging that one’s flesh is continuous with the world’s.

Divakaruni also positions Sita’s exile as a critique of moral abstraction. In patriarchal cosmology, ethics is often articulated through transcendence — obedience to divine or royal command. But Sita’s moral insight arises from *immanence* — from the immediate, sensuous experience of being alive among other beings. Her exile becomes a descent into immanence, where morality is no longer about submission to external authority but about embodied attentiveness to the living world. This echoes the phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, who locates responsibility in the face-to-face encounter with the other. In Divakaruni’s ecofeminist extension, the *face* includes the nonhuman: the wounded animal, the river’s flow, the forest’s silence. To encounter these others is to be called into ethical relation.

Furthermore, exile functions as an *ecological pedagogy*—a process of unlearning the human-centered arrogance of Ayodhya. Stripped of royal comfort and patriarchal supervision, Sita learns humility before the more-than-human world. Her body adjusts to the rhythms of the forest: she wakes with the birds, eats what the land offers, and sleeps to the sound of rustling leaves. This attunement cultivates what philosopher Irene Klaver calls “ecological humility,” a disposition that acknowledges dependence and refuses mastery (“Dwelling with Water” 92). Through this humility, Sita’s ethics becomes one of *dwelling-with* rather than ruling-over.

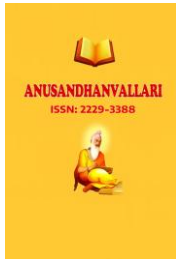
By transforming exile into ecological awakening, Divakaruni challenges the dominant mythic trope of suffering and restoration. Sita’s return to Ayodhya is not a return to moral order but a fall from ecological grace. The forest, once seen as wilderness, now stands revealed as the true moral center — a space where being and knowing coincide in embodied relation. In this reorientation, Divakaruni’s narrative performs what eco-phenomenologist Charles Brown describes as “the moral recovery of the Earth as subject” (“The Ethical Space of Nature” 33). The forest is not object but interlocutor; exile is not punishment but apprenticeship in the ethics of coexistence.

In this light, Sita’s ethical evolution transcends both the theological and the heroic paradigms of the epic. She becomes neither a passive sufferer nor a divine emblem but an *ecological subject*, whose moral vision arises from embodied participation in the web of life. Her exile teaches her the phenomenological truth that ethical being is inseparable from ecological being. As she later invokes the earth in her final act of truth, her ethics culminates in an act of *re-integration*: she returns not to heaven but to soil, rejoining the elemental continuum from which all ethics and all life arise.

Fire, Flesh, and the Phenomenology of the Agni-pariksha

Among the many symbolic reconfigurations in *The Forest of Enchantments*, none is more radical than Divakaruni’s treatment of the Agni-Pariksha, the trial by fire. In the canonical Ramayana, this ordeal serves as the ultimate proof of Sita’s purity — an external test of virtue defined by patriarchal suspicion. Divakaruni, however, transforms this scene into a moment of eco-agency, where Sita’s relation with the element of fire transcends its punitive function and becomes an act of elemental communion. In her retelling, Sita does not passively submit to the flames; rather, she becomes fire — embodying a consciousness that is both human and elemental, flesh and flame.

This transformation can be read through the lens of phenomenology and material ecocriticism, which view the body not as an object but as a field of dynamic interaction with the material world. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms, Sita’s body is “a hinge between subject and world,” the medium through which experience unfolds (*Phenomenology of Perception* 203). When she enters the fire, she dissolves the boundaries between subject and element, enacting what Stacy Alaimo calls trans-corporeality — the recognition that “the human is materially continuous with the more-than-human world” (*Bodily Natures* 2). The trial, thus, becomes a phenomenological



revelation: Sita experiences herself as elemental, inseparable from the living matrix that patriarchal order had sought to dominate.

Divakaruni's language during the Agni-Pariksha scene reinforces this elemental unity. The fire does not consume her; it recognizes her. Flames curl around her like kin, whispering rather than roaring. In this sensory portrayal, Divakaruni departs from the punitive spectacle of the traditional narrative and creates a scene of reciprocal recognition between Sita and nature's most primal force. Fire ceases to be a tool of patriarchal judgment and becomes a voice of the Earth — an agent of affirmation. Through fire, Sita reclaims her embodied divinity, but this divinity is no longer celestial; it is ecological. She is divine because she is of the Earth, not because she is beyond it.

Ecofeminist theory helps illuminate this reclamation. Val Plumwood critiques the dualistic structure of patriarchal thought that aligns men with reason and transcendence, while relegating women and nature to emotion and immanence. In the Agni-Pariksha, Sita overturns this binary. Her entry into the flames is not an act of submission to divine reason but of solidarity with immanence. She embraces her identification with the natural, reclaiming what Plumwood calls "the denied others of reason" (Feminism and the Mastery of Nature 41). Fire, symbolically associated with purification, is redefined as communion. By entering it willingly, Sita asserts that the elemental and the ethical are inseparable — that truth, like flame, is both destructive and life-affirming.

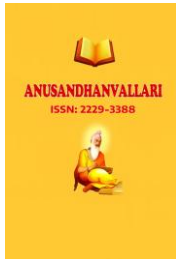
From a phenomenological angle, this moment can be read as Sita's final embodied knowing. Her perception is no longer mediated by fear or social constraint; it becomes direct and participatory. The pain of the flames, the scent of smoke, and the pulsation of heat are not sensory experiences to be overcome but languages of being through which she communes with the elemental. This resonates with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion that "to feel is to inhabit" — that sensation is the foundation of all understanding (The Visible and the Invisible 148). Through the tactile immediacy of fire, Sita inhabits truth itself.

Moreover, the Agni-Pariksha represents an eco-spiritual culmination — a convergence of self, earth, and element. Earlier in the narrative, Sita's relationship with the forest taught her relational ethics; here, that relationality reaches a metaphysical intensity. Fire functions as both destroyer and revealer, embodying what phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard calls the dialectic of reverie and rupture. In The Psychoanalysis of Fire, Bachelard writes that fire is "intimate and universal... it lives in our heart, it lives in the sky" (15). Sita's passage through the flames literalizes this intimacy. She becomes both subject and cosmos — a site where the human and elemental coalesce.

This transformation also marks Divakaruni's subtle critique of Hindu patriarchal theology. The gods who demand Sita's trial are silent witnesses to her transcendence of their own moral framework. Her communion with Agni reconfigures divinity from hierarchy to participation. Sita's fire is not the divine male principle of Agni Deva, but the living energy of matter itself — the animating pulse of the cosmos that includes, rather than excludes, the feminine. Divakaruni's Sita thus reclaims the feminine principle not as passive purity but as cosmic vitality.

In this moment, The Forest of Enchantments achieves its titular metaphor: the forest and the fire are revealed as two aspects of the same living continuum. The forest, with its verdant multiplicity, represents the body of the Earth; fire, its pulsating spirit. Sita's body becomes the medium that unites them — she is the living bridge between matter and energy, nature and consciousness. This is the apex of eco-agency: not mastery over nature, but self-realization through nature.

Finally, Sita's exit from the flames — unscathed, luminous — is not a miracle of purity but a phenomenological rebirth. She emerges with the awareness that her truth does not need patriarchal validation; it is already inscribed in the elemental order of existence. The Agni-Pariksha, then, is both a rejection of oppressive morality and an affirmation of ecological being. By aligning herself with fire, Sita asserts that truth, like nature, is self-sustaining and irreducible to human judgment.



In this re-envisioned episode, Divakaruni completes her project of de-anthropocentrizing the epic. The moral drama is no longer played between human characters but between elements, sensations, and beings in reciprocal exchange. Sita's fire-trial becomes an emblem of ecophenomenological revelation — the moment when embodied experience, material agency, and ethical consciousness converge.

Ecofeminism, Biocentrism, and the Politics of Relational Being

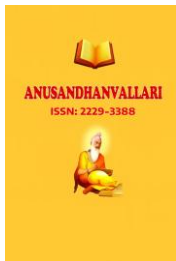
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* can be read as an eco-political reimagining of the Ramayana, one that places Sita at the intersection of ecofeminist consciousness and biocentric ethics. By reconfiguring Sita as both human and ecological subject, Divakaruni disrupts the dualistic systems—man/woman, culture/nature, reason/emotion—that have historically sustained patriarchal and anthropocentric worldviews. Through her embodied relationship with the forest, the earth, and the elemental forces of fire and water, Sita becomes a figure of relational being, one whose existence is defined not by hierarchy but by connection, care, and interdependence.

Ecofeminism, as articulated by theorists like Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Val Plumwood, exposes the deep structural affinities between the exploitation of women and the domination of nature. Patriarchal culture, grounded in Cartesian dualism, constructs both the feminine and the natural as passive, irrational, and subordinate to the masculine domain of reason and control. In Divakaruni's text, this logic is epitomized by Ayodhya — the center of civilization, governance, and male authority — which functions as an ideological counterpoint to the forest. While Ayodhya represents order, law, and moral surveillance, the forest embodies fluidity, multiplicity, and life in motion. Sita's movement from Ayodhya to the forest, therefore, is not merely spatial but ontological — a journey from domination to relation, from separation to participation.

In this sense, Divakaruni's rewriting of the Ramayana enacts what ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren calls the logic of domination: the intertwined systems of hierarchy that oppress both women and the natural world. However, through Sita, Divakaruni also offers what Warren terms a logic of care — an alternative epistemology grounded in empathy, reciprocity, and relational ethics (*Ecofeminist Philosophy* 25). Sita's moral authority emerges not from divine sanction or social duty but from her capacity to listen, to nurture, and to coexist with the more-than-human. Her gestures of gratitude to trees, her dialogues with rivers, and her communion with animals embody a politics of relational being — one that privileges coexistence over conquest.

This politics of relation finds resonance with biocentrism, the ethical philosophy that extends intrinsic value and moral consideration to all living beings. In biocentric terms, Sita's world is one of distributed agency, where the forest, the river, and even the soil participate in the unfolding of existence. Biocentric thinkers like Paul Taylor and Albert Schweitzer argue that all life possesses inherent worth independent of its utility to humans. Divakaruni dramatizes this principle through Sita's ecological sensibility. She perceives herself as part of the Earth's body, not its master. Her ethical decisions are filtered through an awareness of the interconnectedness of all beings — a recognition that mirrors Taylor's idea of "respect for nature" as the foundation of moral life (*Respect for Nature* 99).

Sita's relationship with the Earth in Divakaruni's retelling also invokes a maternal cosmology that subverts patriarchal conceptions of divinity. The Earth is not a passive ground to be possessed but an active, sentient being — Bhumi Devi — who listens, feels, and ultimately reclaims Sita in the novel's final act. This relationship is both literal and symbolic: Sita, born of the Earth, lives as the Earth's conscience and returns to her mother not in defeat but in affirmation of her ecological identity. Her final act is one of biocentric defiance — a refusal to let patriarchal institutions dictate the meaning of her existence. By returning to the Earth, she reclaims her origin and her autonomy, dissolving the human/other divide that underlies patriarchal domination.



From a phenomenological perspective, Sita's biocentric vision emerges from embodied perception. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of intercorporeality — the idea that all beings are intertwined through shared material existence — offers a useful lens for understanding Sita's ecological subjectivity. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, perception itself becomes ethical: to see, to touch, to feel is to acknowledge the other as co-existent. When Sita places her hand on the bark of a tree or feels the rhythm of the river, she does not stand apart as observer; she participates in their being. This is the essence of phenomenological ecology — knowledge through contact, ethics through touch.

The politics of relational being that Divakaruni constructs through Sita has profound implications for both feminist and ecological thought. It rejects the masculinist ideal of transcendence — the idea that knowledge, morality, or divinity lies beyond the material world — and instead affirms immanence as the ground of value. In Sita's world, the sacred is not distant or abstract; it pulses through the veins of rivers and the breathing of trees. This move from transcendence to immanence dismantles the hierarchies of gender and species, inaugurating a moral vision rooted in reciprocity and belonging.

Furthermore, Divakaruni's ecofeminist narrative resonates with the biocultural ethics articulated by philosophers such as Enrique Leff and Leonardo Boff, who argue that ecological justice is inseparable from cultural and gender justice. By giving voice to Sita — a silenced figure in patriarchal myth — Divakaruni reclaims the ecological and feminine principles that have been historically marginalized. Her Sita does not represent an idealized Mother Earth trope; rather, she embodies what Boff calls the Earth community: a relational network in which humans, nonhumans, and elements coexist as co-creators of life (*Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* 18).

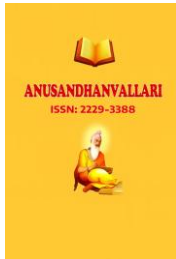
In this network, agency is no longer the exclusive property of rational subjects but a shared attribute of all living and material entities. Stones, trees, and rivers act, respond, and communicate. Sita's attunement to these agencies reflects a posthuman ecological sensibility, one that transcends the binaries of subject and object, human and nonhuman. Her ethical awakening is, therefore, not an inward moral purification but an outward expansion of consciousness — a movement from selfhood to ecological selfhood.

By aligning ecofeminism with biocentrism, Divakaruni articulates a politics of life that challenges both patriarchal power and human exceptionalism. Sita's story becomes a philosophical meditation on what it means to live ethically in a world of entanglement. Her journey demonstrates that liberation — whether feminine or ecological — cannot be achieved through dominance or transcendence but only through relation. The politics of relational being, as enacted by Sita, is not merely a moral stance but a mode of existence: to live with rather than over, to act through rather than upon, and to know by participation rather than separation.

In the end, Divakaruni's Sita embodies the very principles that ecofeminism and biocentrism strive to theorize: an ethics of care that is also an ontology of connection. Her narrative is not one of human triumph or divine reward but of ecological belonging — the recognition that the self is never singular, that the forest, the river, and the fire are extensions of one's own being. Through Sita, *The Forest of Enchantments* becomes not only a feminist reclamation of myth but also a biocentric manifesto, envisioning a world where justice, love, and life are woven together in the same living fabric.

Conclusion: The Lived Forest and the Ethics of Embodiment

The Forest of Enchantments invites us to inhabit myth phenomenologically — to perceive not as distant observers but as embodied participants in a shared ecology of being. Divakaruni's retelling transforms Sita from symbol of chastity into agent of ecological knowing. Her voice articulates an ontology of interdependence where the forest lives, feels, and remembers.



Through the fusion of phenomenology and ecofeminism, Divakaruni offers an ethical vision grounded in embodiment, attentiveness, and reciprocity. The forest becomes a lived consciousness, a partner in moral reasoning. This “lived forest” challenges us to reimagine agency beyond human mastery and to affirm what Merleau-Ponty called the “flesh of the world” — the intertwining of all life in shared materiality.

In its mythic scope and phenomenological subtlety, *The Forest of Enchantments* thus stands as a contemporary ecological scripture — a reminder that to live ethically is first to perceive with care, to feel with the world rather than over it.

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