

# Ecofeminist Re-readings of Myth: The Natural World and the Feminine in Deepa Sahu's *Sita*

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**Abstract-** This paper explores Deepa Sahu's retelling of the Ramayana as an ecofeminist narrative that re-centres Sita as both woman and symbol of the earth. Drawing on the insights of Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Bina Agarwal, and Cheryll Glotfelty, the paper argues that Sahu's novel re-imagines the mythic heroine not as a passive sufferer but as a figure of ecological awareness and resistance to patriarchal and colonial structures. The study shows how the novel re-animates cultural memory of human-nature reciprocity, recasting myth as a resource for post-colonial ecofeminist ethics.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism; Deepa Sahu; *Sita*; post-colonial literature; mythic retelling; gender and ecology

## I. INTRODUCTION

In many cultures, myths have served as frameworks for defining women's roles and for legitimising human dominion over the natural world. In South Asia, the Ramayana has long shaped ideals of femininity by enshrining Sita as the model of dutiful wifehood and sacrificial virtue. Post-colonial literature often revisits such canonical myths to recover voices that were marginalised—particularly those of women and the ecologically grounded communities that colonial and patriarchal orders displaced.

Ecofeminism emerged in the late twentieth century to examine the interconnected subordination of women and nature. It argues that patriarchal and colonial systems not only exploit land and resources but also feminise and control both women and the earth. In the Indian context, this critique links environmental degradation to the loss of women's traditional ecological knowledge and agency.

Deepa Sahu's novel *Sita* retells the epic from the heroine's own perspective. The act of narrating in her own voice enables Sita to appear not merely as the obedient consort of a heroic prince but as a woman whose life is entwined with the rhythms of the earth. This paper explores how Sahu's re-narration reclaims the ecological and ethical dimensions of the epic

heroine and contributes to post-colonial ecofeminist discourse.

## II. ECOFEMINISM AND POST-COLONIAL CONTEXT

Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive* (1988) argues that women in subsistence economies have historically maintained biodiversity and sustainable use of land, yet their knowledge has been eroded by the dual forces of colonial resource extraction and capitalist development. Maria Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (1993) further contends that the domination of nature and the subjugation of women arise from the same patriarchal mindset. Bina Agarwal's work on gender and environmental governance (2010) has shown that ecological degradation often intensifies the vulnerability of rural women.

Ecocriticism, introduced to literary studies by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), calls attention to how literary texts imagine the human-nature relationship and how they encode ideological conflicts over land and resources. For post-colonial contexts, this perspective is crucial because colonial regimes often appropriated forests and common lands, displacing communities—especially women—whose survival and cultural practices depended on them.

Re-readings of myth in post-colonial literature often serve to de-centre imperial and patriarchal historiographies. By returning to the voices of women in myth, writers like Sahu illuminate older cultural memories of ecological reciprocity and challenge the heroic, often militarised, ethos of conquest.

## III. SITA AS A MYTHIC-ECOLOGICAL FIGURE

In the *Ramayana*, Sita is introduced as *Bhumija*—"daughter of the furrow." Her miraculous emergence from tilled soil ties her symbolically to fertility and

the sustaining powers of the earth. Equally significant is her final withdrawal into the earth, a gesture that resists political authority and re-affirms her primordial connection with nature.

Traditional patriarchal interpretations, however, have tended to emphasise Sita's obedience and suffering, turning her into an emblem of wifely sacrifice. An ecofeminist re-reading highlights instead the ecological arc of her life: the earthy origin, the forest exile, the ordeal by fire, and the final home-coming to the soil. Each stage reflects a contest over the treatment of both women and the natural world—treated as resources to be possessed and disciplined.

#### IV. DEEPA SAHU'S RE-NARRATION OF *SITA*

Sahu's retelling is distinctive in that the narrative voice belongs to Sita herself. Speaking in the first person, she frames her life not as a supplement to Rama's heroic quest but as an odyssey of her own—of survival, memory, and ethical choice.

##### 4.1 Voice and Agency

Sita's narration frequently interrupts the patriarchal epic script. Instead of the silent sufferer, she emerges as a self-aware subject who questions the codes that demand female submission. Her reflections also extend sympathy to the non-human world, often describing the moods of river, forest, and soil as though they were companions rather than passive backdrops.

##### 4.2 Nature as Nurturer and Witness

The natural world in Sahu's novel is vividly personified. Sita's earliest memory—"the moist scent of rain-fed earth that had cradled me" (Sahu [p. xx])—marks her organic bond with the land. During her exile, the forest is described as "welcoming her like a long-lost daughter" (Sahu [p. xx]). Such descriptions foreground an ethic of kinship between human and environment that ecofeminist critics identify in many indigenous traditions.

##### 4.3 Resistance to Violence

A crucial transformation in Sahu's narrative is the portrayal of Sita's trials not merely as personal suffering but as acts of resistance. On the ordeal by fire, she observes that "the flames rose not to destroy me but to burn the arrogance of those who doubted a woman's truth" (Sahu [p. xx]). The fiery element is thus reclaimed as witness rather than instrument of

patriarchal power. Her final choice to return to the earth is presented not as defeat but as an assertion of autonomy: "I went back to the womb of the soil that had borne me, leaving behind the clamour of kings" (Sahu [p. xx]).

#### 4.4 Post-colonial Resonances

Although the novel remains set in mythic time, its subtext evokes the continuing exploitation of land and women under both colonial and neo-colonial orders. By reclaiming the heroine as earth-centred and resistant, Sahu implicitly critiques the modern development paradigm that alienates communities—especially women—from the ecosystems that sustain them.

#### V. ECOFEMINIST THEMES ILLUSTRATED THROUGH TEXTUAL PASSAGES

##### 5.1 Birth from the Furrow

Sita recalls her miraculous birth as "a child cradled by the soil's damp arms, breathing in the fragrance of the monsoon earth" (Sahu [p. xx]).

This image foregrounds the idea of the land as living, nurturing mother rather than inert property. Ecofeminist theorists often highlight how colonial regimes converted living landscapes into abstract 'resources' for extraction; Sahu's Sita embodies an older perception of the earth as animate kin.

##### 5.2 Forest as Refuge and Counter-Space

During her exile, Sita remarks:

"In the forest I felt a strange freedom; the river knew my grief, the trees gave shade without asking for obedience" (Sahu [p. xx]).

This experience contrasts sharply with the constraining etiquette of the palace and the moral scrutiny of the court.

Ecofeminist readings see in such wilderness spaces the memory of subsistence and community-based living that colonial and capitalist projects often disrupted.

##### 5.3 Agni-pariksha Re-imagined

The ordeal by fire, in Sahu's telling, exposes the logic of patriarchal domination—testing a woman's body as property to be certified.

Yet Sita interprets the event differently:  
“The flames rose as if to bear witness, not to devour”  
(Sahu [p. xx]).

This shift of perspective undermines the patriarchal narrative of female subjection and recasts nature’s element as ally.

#### 5.4 Final Return to the Earth

In the climactic moment, Sita turns away from royal authority:

“I called to the mother who had birthed me, and the earth opened in silent welcome” (Sahu [p. xx]).

Her voluntary return signifies a rejection of hierarchical, conquest-driven politics and an affirmation of cyclical, regenerative cosmology.

### VI. POST-COLONIAL IMPLICATIONS

By re-centering Sita’s voice and ecological consciousness, Sahu contests both patriarchal religious orthodoxy and the colonial legacy that treated the land as a domain of conquest.

Her novel implicitly aligns the dispossession of women with the dispossession of indigenous communities under imperial forestry and agrarian policies.

Such re-narrations reveal how myths can be mobilised to legitimise domination, but also how they can be re-imagined to articulate resistance.

Sita’s earth-centred subjectivity embodies the suppressed ecological wisdom that post-colonial ecofeminism seeks to recover.

### VII. DISCUSSION

Sahu’s *Sita* shares affinities with other feminist reinterpretations of the epic, such as Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) and Kavita Kane’s *Sita’s Sister* (2014), as well as with the ecological sensibility found in poets like Mamang Dai and Tishani Doshi.

Yet Sahu’s contribution is distinctive for weaving ecofeminist insight directly into the mythic arc of birth, exile, trial, and return.

Her narrative shows that the oppression of women is historically inseparable from the exploitation of the land and that reclaiming one requires recovering respectful, reciprocal relations with the other.

This focus makes the novel relevant not merely as a feminist revision of epic myth but as a literary expression of contemporary environmental justice debates in post-colonial societies.

### CONCLUSION

Deepa Sahu’s *Sita* demonstrates how the retelling of myth can contribute to ecofeminist critique by re-inscribing the silenced heroine as an agent who embodies earth-centred ethics.

The novel challenges traditional portrayals of Sita as passive sufferer and reframes her as a voice of ecological awareness and resistance to patriarchal as well as colonial modes of domination.

For post-colonial literary studies, this suggests that the recovery of women’s voices in myth also involves the recovery of alternative ecological imaginaries.

For ecofeminist criticism, Sahu’s work underscores the potential of literature to foster narratives of sustainable coexistence between humans and the natural world.

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