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## **Ecospiritual Feminism: Exploring the Role of Nature in Self Discovery in Volga's Reunion**

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**Abstract:** The majesty of nature from the serene sounds of gentle streams to the awe-inspiring grandeur of mountain ranges, possesses a transformative power that can heal, uplift, and liberate. Nature's profound impact on human well-being has earned it a revered place across cultures. For centuries, it has served as a sanctuary for mystics, poets, sages, and those seeking emotional and mental solace. For mystics and spiritual seekers, nature has traditionally served as a catalyst for introspection, self-discovery, and spiritual growth. The tranquil atmosphere of the natural environment, such as forests, mountains, and rivers, provides an ideal setting for meditation, contemplation, and communion with the divine. The scriptural heritage of Hinduism is replete with reference to the sacredness of nature. This research endeavors to deconstruct the transformative power of nature in facilitating healing, liberation and empowerment, particularly for women in a patriarchal society. Through a critical analysis of a short story "Reunion" from Volga's *Liberation of Sita*, a retelling of Hindu scripture *Ramayana*, this research highlights the modalities by which nature can facilitate women's healing and empowerment. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how ecospirituality can serve as a potent catalyst for women's liberation, fostering a profound sense of connection with the natural world and, by extension, with themselves.

**Keywords:** Ecospirituality, feminism, nature, patriarchy, Surapanakha, Sita, Ramayana, self- discovery.

Humanity has long been oscillated between two seemingly disparate impulses; constructing urban centres as a bulwark against unforgiving aspects of nature and seeking spiritual sustenance in the very same



natural world. This paradox is exemplified in the lives of revered spiritual figures or mystics who retreated to nature in the pursuit of enlightenment. For instance, Buddha and his followers ventured into the woods to capture the essence of life. The sacred Hindu scriptures were penned by visionary sages who dwelled in nature to commune with the divine. This phenomenon is not unique to Hinduism or Buddhism, biblical narratives of Jesus' life are replete with instances of his seeking solitude in nature and discovering profound significance in the natural world in his spiritual quest.(Luke 4:1). This affinity for nature is a universal human impulse to seek transcendence in the natural world.

However, this spiritual pursuit has historically been gendered, with women being barred from venturing into nature due to patriarchal norms and societal expectations. In many ancient cultures, the wilderness was perceived as a realm of chaos and disorder, inhabited by malevolent spirits and ferocious beasts. Women, already viewed as vulnerable and inferior, were deemed particularly susceptible to the dangers of the wilderness and were therefore restricted from venturing into this realm. According to Merchant, the Scientific Revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century led to women's exclusion from nature, replacing the metaphor of nature from a nurturing mother to a domination model. It positioned man as the masters of everything. This shift had a profound implication for women's relation with nature and their roles in society. There are few women who were acknowledged as great spiritual leaders. Notable exceptions include a handful of female figures like Gargi and Maitreyi, and other devotional icons like Andal and Mirabai. While many female saints and gurus likely lived in the past, were largely omitted from recorded history, likely due to the fact that historical accounts were predominantly written by men. The omission reflects the broader societal trend of androcentrism, where men have dominated domains such as government, business, science, religion, and spirituality. Conversely, women have been relegated to the domestic sphere, with limited expectations to pursue spiritual quests or abandon their homes and families in search of truth, knowledge, or wisdom. The patriarchal underpinnings of this exclusion are further reinforced by the dominant cultural narratives that have shaped human history. The concept of homogeneous womanhood has been a persistent theme across cultures. From the Indian mythological figure of Sita to the Conventry Patmore's idea of 'Angel of the House', These concepts have been used to justify the oppression of women by the patriarchal societies. The trajectory of women's experiences in India has been marked by a persistent struggle against marginalization and



oppression. This phenomenon is succinctly encapsulated in the dichotomous representation of Sita, the iconic heroine of Hindu mythology, and her contemporary counterparts. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita embodies the quintessential virtues of femininity. Her character serves as a paradigm for women's roles in traditional Indian society, reinforcing that women's primary responsibilities lie in their role to serve their husbands and their families. Roland Barthes rightly said "... the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth" (Barthes 135). Modern Indian writers have been challenging the notion of homogenous womanhood by retelling ancient myths. The *Ramayana*, an iconic Indian epic written by sage Valmiki has been extensively analysed through modern lens. While Valmiki's *Ramayana*, is a male dominated text, many modern retellings focus on the experiences and emotions of the female characters like Sita and other marginalised characters, providing voice to those often overlooked in traditional epic. Scholars like Sharayu Shejale critiqued the portrayal of women in *Ramayana*, particularly Sita, as passive and submissive, highlighting the need for feminist retellings. Shruti Chakraborty analyzes Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* as a revisionist text that challenges patriarchal interpretations of the epic, giving Sita agency and challenging androcentric notions. Retelling allows authors to reinterpret classic epics in contemporary society, making them more relatable and relevant to modern audiences.

Popuri Lalita Kumari, pen named as Volga, is one such writer who has made significant contributions to contemporary Telugu literature. She is known for her bold remarks and feminist perspectives. Her work, *The Liberation of Sita*, places Sita at center stage. This narrative deviates from the traditional epic as Sita encounters and learns from several women like Surpanakha, Ahalya, Urmila and Renuka Devi who were relegated to minor roles in the traditional epic. Originally written in Telugu, the book was translated into English by T. Vijay Kumar and C. Vijayasree. The stories in the collection are presented in a non-chronological order, with each tale standing independently while remaining connected to the others. One of these stories is "Reunion", which is about the imagined and pleasant meeting of Surpanakha and Sita after the war.

In the traditional epic, Surpanakha falls in love with Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, while he was in exile in the forest. She proposes marriage to him, but Rama rejects her, citing his devotion to his wife, Sita. Surpanakha then attempts to attack Sita, but is thwarted by Lakshmana, Rama's brother. In a fit of rage,



Lakshmana mutilates Surpanakha's nose and ears, leaving her disfigured and humiliated. Ravana, the brother of Surpanakha avenged his sister by abducting Sita which waged war between Rama and Ravana. The war was conquered by Rama with the help of Lord Hanumana, the Monkey God in Hindu mythology. Surpanakha's character has been interpreted in various ways over the centuries. Some see her as a symbol of unrequited love and the dangers of unchecked passion. Others view her as a representation of the feminine power and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society.

The characterization of Surpanakha in Valmiki's traditional epic and Volga's narrative differs significantly. In Valmiki's version, Surpanakha is depicted as a demonic figure, driven by lust and a desire for revenge. Her actions are portrayed as evil and chaotic, ultimately leading to her punishment at the hands of Lakshmana. In contrast, Volga's Surpanakha is a humanized and complex character, driven by a desire for love and acceptance. Her actions are understood and sympathized with by Sita, who recognizes their shared experiences as women in a patriarchal society. In Volga's narrative Sita feels pity for Surpanakha. Sita contemplates "No man will ever love her. The man who loved me abandoned me. Have the two stories become one and the same, finally?" (Volga 6). Sita came to realize that both of them are the victims of patriarchy. Even after giving Agni Pariksha (a trial by fire) to prove her chastity, Rama abandoned her. Sita contemplates "Rama insulted Surpanakha, Ravana wanted to take revenge by abducting me [her]... Do women exist only to be used by men to settle their scores." (Volga 4)

In Volga's narrative Surpanakha is reimagined as a complex and multidimensional character. The story explores her emotional journey and her transformation as she comes to terms with her past and finds a new sense of purpose. Surpanakha who hankered after beauty, was consumed by anger and sorrow for her disfigured face. She says, "I loathed my own appearance, I hated myself. There were also days when I wanted to kill myself. I want beauty. I want love. I can't live without them. But I, who was such a worshipper of beauty, was turned into an ugly figure" (Volga 10). Her love for beauty turned into jealousy of all those who were beautiful. However, as she merges herself with nature, she begins to understand the true meaning of beauty and undergoes a transformation. In this poignant episode, the profound power of nature is beautifully illustrated. She says, "To come out of that spitefulness to love beauty once again to understand the essence of form and formlessness I had to wage a huge battle against myself, my only collaborator in that battle was this



infinite nature” (Volga 11-12). In Volga’s narrative, nature is depicted as a fundamental force that precipitates an existential awakening, prompting Surpanakha to confront the quintessence of human existence. Through her interaction with nature, she learns to appreciate beauty in unexpected places. She says, “I struggled a lot to grasp that there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature. I observed many living creatures and understood that movement and stillness are one and the same. I discovered the secrets of colours. I have no guru in this matter. I pursued it on my own. I searched every particle in nature and in the course of that search my own vision has changed. Everything began to look beautiful to my eyes. I who hated everything including myself, began to love everything including myself” (Volga 12). She learns to see beyond her physical appearance and finds beauty in the natural world around her. This newfound appreciation for nature enables her to let go of her anger and find peace.

The human-nature relationship is a paradoxical and enigmatic phenomenon, marked by a profound dialectical tension. While our existence is inextricably linked to the natural world, contingent upon the fragile balance of ecosystems and the earth's bounty, our species is being driven by a hubristic impulse to dominate and control nature, often yielding catastrophic consequences like climate change, biodiversity loss and various natural calamities, we are facing today. This fundamental contradiction gives rise to a metaphysical inquiry: what is the essential nature of our relationship with the natural world? Does it conform to a paradigm of mastery and domination, or one of reciprocity and interdependence? Alternatively, might it transcend these binary oppositions, revealing a more primordial and ontological entanglement between humans and nature, one that underscores our inherent embeddedness within the natural world?. Surpanakha’s transformative journey, marked by a deepening sense of compassion and love for the natural world and by extension with herself, underscores the ecofeminist principle of kinship between women and nature. Additionally, non-dualism, a central tenet of Advaita Vedanta, posits that the universe is ultimately a unified, interconnected whole. This perspective recognizes that the distinctions between subject and object, self and other, are mere illusions, and that all existence is ultimately one.(Espin and Nickoloff 14) Shurapanakha's journey reflects this non-dualistic understanding, as she comes to develop a sense of empathy and reciprocity with natural world. Shurapanakha in Volga’s narrative realises the love and beauty in all creatures through the site of a little bird which had been “pecked and displumed” (Volga 12) by its fellow birds. It was a feeling



“at once of love and beauty and to seize that response and understand its meaning”, she created a beautiful garden”(Volga 12). The bird's experience can be seen as a metaphor for the Surpanakha's experiences of marginalization, oppression, or trauma. Surpanakha sees herself in the bird's vulnerability and is able to empathize with its pain. This principle, which prioritizes empathy, care, and reciprocity, offers a radical alternative to the dominant paradigms of mastery and domination that have characterized human relationships with nature. This incident invoked the feeling of compassion in Surpanakha. and she became able to practice self compassion and self love. The garden may also serve as a space for connection and community, allowing Surpanakha to build relationships with others who share similar experiences. She feels herself becoming one with nature.

Surpanakha, through the transformative process, comes to embody the principles of ecospirituality, fostering a relationship with the natural world. Notably, Hinduism has long venerated the natural world for its profound impact on human physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being... This intrinsic connection between humans and nature is at the heart of ecospirituality. Ecospirituality is defined as "a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment" (Lincoln 227–44). This eco-spiritual perspective finds its roots in the philosophical foundation of Hinduism. The Rigveda, one of the oldest Hindu scriptures, contains hymns that celebrate the beauty and wonder of nature. Furthermore, the Upanishads, another influential Hindu text, contain teaching on the interconnectedness of all existence. Also the Bhagavad Gita highlights the existence of the divine in all living beings.

Surpanakha creates a stunning garden, which becomes a symbol of her growth and self-acceptance. Her garden, a vibrant tapestry of colors, is a testament to the redemptive power of nature, which has transformed her from a “walking volcano” to a fulfilled individual (Volga 11). The garden represents a space where she can express herself and find solace. This perspective is echoed in the words of John Muir, who notes “in every walk with Nature one receives far more than he seeks” (Muir). It suggests that the natural world is not just a collection of resources to be exploited but a complex web of relationships and processes that can inspire, educate and transform us. The natural world has been shown to possess a profound impact on human health and well-being. Studies have demonstrated that exposure to nature can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels, while also improving mood, cognitive functioning, and overall sense of well-



being. Moreover, the concept of Biophilia effect, introduced by biologist E.O. Wilson suggests that humans have an innate tendency to seek connections with nature. The Biophilia Effect refers to the positive emotional and psychological responses people experience when they interact with nature. Walking in nature can be a therapeutic experience that allows individuals to disconnect from the stresses of daily life and reconnect with their surroundings, themselves and others. Researches have shown that spending time in nature can have numerous psychological benefits including stress, improve mood and increase self-esteem (Arvay 2018).

Hence, nature plays a pivotal role in self-discovery for Surpanakha, serving as a catalyst for transformation from a vengeful and bitter individual to a compassionate and self-assured person. It suggests that nature is not just a passive backdrop for human experience but an active participant that responds to our love and reverence. Through an act of total surrender to the natural world and the rejection of the artificial constructs of a materialistic society, she achieves a state of self-sufficiency. The garden created by Surupankha represents a space of transformation and growth where the boundaries between nature and culture are blurred. The phrase "Nature never did betray the heart that loved her" (Wordsworth) resonates deeply in Surapanakha's experience, highlighting the steadfast and unwavering bond between humans and nature. Unlike human relationships, which can be fragile and fleeting, nature remains a constant source of comfort and strength. It neither judges nor seeks to manipulate or control; instead, it simply exists, offering its resources, beauty, and wisdom. This nurturing relationship with nature empowers Surpanakha to challenge dominant beauty standards, subverting the shame and stigma associated with perceived ugliness.

Similarly, Sita, after being abandoned by Rama, finds solace in sage Valmiki's Ashrama, where she lives with her two sons. Reflecting on her experience, Sita notes, "I, too like the forest life. When Rama abandoned me, this forest softened my suffering" (Volga 2018 location 173). Initially, Sita pities Surupankha, but upon entering her beautiful garden, she admires Surupankha's good fortune. Despite Surupankha's physical disfigurement, Sita discovers that she has a husband, Sudhira. However, Surupankha asserts her independence, stating, "I've realized that the meaning of success for a woman does not lie in her relationship with man" (Volga 2018 p13). Sita says, "As the queen,.. I must at least give Ramrajya its heir" (Volga 2018 p14). Surupankha astutely observes Sita's lingering ties to the kingdom that wronged her, remarking, "You never lived in that kingdom, yet see how your life is entangled in it" (Volga 2018 p14). While Surupankha



embodies a powerful and free woman, Sita is revealed to be a victim here. Surupankha's journey, marked by rejection and marginalization, ultimately leads to self-acceptance and empowerment. Her story serves as a compelling testament to the possibility of a woman's life and value existing beyond male control. Furthermore, Sita tells Surupankha that she feels fulfillment in bringing up her sons and when they will migrate to the city, she will take refuge in her mother Bhudevi. Surupankha responds by saying "Isn't your mother omnipresent, Sita? I think your mother is manifest more here than anywhere else" (Volga15). It hints that Bhudevi is a person, the mother of Sita, whereas Surupankha hints at nature as a motherly figure, a better place to seek refuge. This poignant exchange serves as a catalyst for Sita to introspect, prompting a critical examination of her situation and ultimately yielding a liberating insight that frees her from the shackles of patriarchal society.

Surpanakha, a character traditionally portrayed as envious and scornful, is reimagined by Volga as a powerful and complex individual who finds liberation and self-acceptance through her relationship with nature. In this narrative, Dravidian Surupoankha. and Aryan Sita come together to form a sisterly bond. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of recognizing and honoring the intrinsic value of nature and the interconnectedness of all living beings. As we navigate the complexities of the anthropocene, it is essential that we adopt a more nuanced and reciprocal understanding of our relationship with the natural world and with each other, one that prioritizes equality, empathy, care, and reciprocity over mastery and domination.

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