

**From Trauma to Healing: A Study of Sita's Suffering and Recovery in  
*The Forest of Enchantments***

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**Abstract:**

Trauma can be defined as an overwhelming experience that is not felt when the event is occurring but later recurs as episodes in the mind of the sufferer. Trauma is not actually fully experienced by the person or understood at the moment. But later, it repeats itself through memory and causes emotional suffering. It also creates a fragmented sense of self. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that narrates the Ramayana from Sita's point of view. She faces trauma right from the time she is separated from her birthplace, Mithila, after her wedding to the Prince of Ayodhya, Ram and trauma keeps challenging her till the end of her life when she is asked to prove her chastity by her husband by jumping inside the fire pyre. Throughout her life, nature was her only constant and comfort. This paper tries to prove that nature can provide solace in times of trauma through the application of ecopsychology.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Ecopsychology, Sita, Forest, Nature

**Introduction:**

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, it can be noted that Sita could never actually rely upon humans. But nature never left her hand. Whenever humans walked far away from her, nature was her only dependence. This could also be a lack of attachment, as mentioned by Bowlby in his Attachment Theory. The theory states that a human finds comfort among their familiar people and is at peace. A strange or unfamiliar environment will cause tension and distress. This is seen in Sita too. Sita faces trauma because of the lack of attachment. For instance, she was confused about her real mother and her source of existence. Even though she considered Queen Sunaina as her mother and Mithila as her birthplace, she was always in a dilemma. Bowlby explains that a traumatic wound can occur due to separation, rejection,

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loss of attachment and emotional abandonment. Cathy Caruth, in her Trauma Theory, argues that trauma persists due to repeated emotional suffering, unresolved pain, feelings of betrayal and silent endurance. One may find a resemblance in the theories of trauma suggested by both Bowlby and Caruth. Hence, it can be argued that the lack of attachment created a sense of trauma in Sita.

Sita, the princess of Mithila, always had an umbilical cord connection with nature. She could feel the plants and knew the exact cure if the leaves or petals were withered. She had the magical healing properties within her. This could also be because King Janak got her as a blessing from the earth. Sita could identify the problems that were a mystery even to the chief gardeners of Mithila.

I was accompanied by the chief gardeners, for I was the overseer of the palace arbours, an unusual duty for a princess. They pointed out the problems they'd been unable to solve: a gnarled champak, refusing to flower; a rare harshringar, shrivelling up no matter what they tried; a copse of bamboos with black rot creeping up their stalks.

I stroked leaves, dug roots, breathed prayers. Behind me, I could hear the awed whispers of the gardeners. (Divakaruni 5)

To her surprise, her strange gift with plants was a mystery to Sita herself. When she touched a plant, she knew its healing properties. Not only was Sita excellent with plants, but she was also trained in martial arts, which gave her mother, Queen Sunanina, relief. Sita was married to Ram after he had come to Mithila, slaughtering a demon along with his brother Lakshman, who married Urmila, Sita's sister.

According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, a traumatic wound occurs due to separation and rejection. The first major incident that engulfed Sita after her wedding occurred on the day Ram was to be crowned King of Ayodhya. Kaikeyi, with her crooked mind, asked King Dasharath to make her son, Bharat, the king and wanted Ram to be banished to the forest for fourteen years. Even though Sita agrees to live with her husband in the forest as a dutiful wife, she is separated from her royal life, comfort, as well as her siblings. She faces rejection at the same time when she is not made the Queen of Ayodhya. As she was leaving, even her plants showed her sorrow and disapproval. "I almost didn't recognize it, for all my flowers and herbs, which I had tended so lovingly all these years, had shrivelled and turned black." (Divakaruni 116). This shows that Sita was emotionally connected to the plants, and just like children who would feel sad when their mother leaves, the plants also felt so. According to attachment theory, the plants considered Sita as their safe person, and when they knew that she was leaving them, they started throwing tantrums by turning ugly.

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Caruth defines that trauma persists through repeated emotional suffering. Sita faced it when she had to leave the royal palace along with her husband. Next, when Bharat came with the army, pleading with Ram and Sita to return to Ayodhya. Even though the offer was tempting, they had to fulfil their promise to King Dasharath and live in exile for fourteen years. She understood that humans cannot be trusted, and they cannot enter the palace without completing their period. Again, nature did not abandon her, unlike the humans. Although Sita, Ram and Lakshman suffered profusely during their exile in the forests. They faced their hardships seeking solace in nature, their home for a few days, the forest of Panchabati, which was acclaimed to be one of the most beautiful places. Nature could erase the trauma they suffered from their mind without leaving any trace of it. At Panchabati, they enjoyed the sunsets, stars, birds and animals and found their comfort in them. Sita also tended to the plants there, and the plants in turn expressed their love to her.

Here in Panchabati I saw brilliant sunsets spreading like a smile across the sky and molten-silver moonrises. I saw stars glimmering like shy eyes from behind veils of cloud. I saw birds and beasts, multi-hued, multi-pelted, so different from the creatures I'd known that I was struck with awe. The plants were particularly attuned to me. Bushes would pull in their sharp thorns and burst into flower when I watered them or loosened the earth around their roots. Squirrel-like creatures, their long white hair smooth as silk- thread, would scurry up to take berries from my palm. Brilliant blue songbirds with curved beaks would land on my shoulder and allow me to stroke their plumage. (Divakaruni 137)

Another sign of trauma, as explained by Caruth, is silent endurance. Sita endured a lot of pain both physically and mentally when Ravan, disguised as a Sadhu, abducted her in the absence of Ram and Lakshman. Sita faces the trauma of captivity and emotional survival in Lanka. This shock is evident in her words. She felt her mind was broken into two pieces. One part was adjusting to what was happening in her life, and the other part was trying to keep her sane during the traumatic situation.

Bowlby's Attachment theory is also evident when Sita was once again separated from her familiar people and planted in an unfamiliar place, which put her in trauma. She was held hostage in Ashok vana, Ravana's garden, with yakshinis as her guards. Each time Ravan visited her, Sita was scared that he would lay his hands on her. One could understand the trauma Sita could have felt during that time, when an unknown man was present with her in an unfamiliar place, the incident being a woman's highest fear. Even during that time, when Sita did not have any human to rely upon, she had her greatest source of comfort, nature. She began praying to Mother Earth. " 'Give me your strength on this place of sorrow

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and fear, Mother Earth, you who protected me when I was a helpless infant,” (Divakaruni 184).

The guards tormented her in many ways by poking her skin with their nails, by disfiguring themselves as scary monsters, etc. They didn't injure her but did their best to break her down. During her time of captivity, Sita felt comfortable when she was allowed to walk sometimes by her guard, Trijata. Those walks brought her solace. Even there, Sita began curing the plants; her touch healed them. Hence, their love for each other grew. Sita particularly loved the Ashoka tree under which she slept. She placed her palms around it for comfort. She did it in secrecy so as not to let her guards know about it.

Sita has endured a lot silently, which is also a symptom of trauma, according to Caruth. One such incident was when her own husband had decided to banish her to the woods despite knowing that she was pregnant. Guilt engulfed Lakshman, who revealed the truth, which added to the next list of traumas for Sita, the trauma of abandonment during pregnancy. “A huge boulder pressed down on my chest. I had difficulty speaking, even breathing.” (Divakaruni 315). Again, when humans deceived her, nature became her confidant. She made Valmiki's heritage her home. No amount of consoling from the people living there could pacify her, but the comforting hands of nature. She went into the forest for a walk and found happiness in eating the fruits there and sucking the honey directly from the honeycomb. For the first time after her banishment, she found her food satisfying. This reveals the extent to which nature can become one's solace during times of distress. She next decided to take comfort in Mother Earth's lap. “I lay down, pressing my cheek to the earth. Help me, I whispered. You are my first mother. You kept me safe when there was no one to take care of me. Help my babies now.” (Divakaruni 321). Sita eventually adapted to life in the forest. She helped Dharani-Ma, the medicine woman and took care of her herbs. She enjoyed going to the forest to collect the medicinal herbs. She admired the hermitage lifestyle, waking up early, spending hours in study or prayer, daily chores, simple meals, storytelling and early sleep. Sita was into healing patients and was relieved seeing the sick turning healthy again. Sita gave birth to two boys in the ashram, and Valmiki named them Lav and Kush. Even though she silently endured her trauma, nature helped her find peace within and with the outer world.

Trauma persists through repeated emotional suffering, as said by Caruth. Ram once traumatised Sita by banishing her to the forest. She had to go through another one when Ram expected her to walk through the fire to prove her chastity when she returned to the palace with her sons. Sita decides to dress as herself, the forest-dweller, the daughter of earth and the daughter of fire, leaving all the ornaments selected by her sister, Urmila. She rejects

Ram's orders to walk into the fire for his acceptance and once again calls nature for her help. When her beloved left her hand, she decided to hold the hand of nature tightly.

'I call on my mother earth and my father fire – for both have shaped me into the woman I am today – to come to my aid. O Mother, O Father, all my life I've suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign.' (Divakaruni 357)

Underneath Sita's feet, the earth crack opens with a roar. There were leaping flames around her forming a protective barrier. A golden chariot arises from beneath, and Sita steps forward. Around her, there were celestial flowers showering their blessings, and she went to her birthplace, the Earth. Sita ultimately returns to Earth for comfort, showing ecological healing and liberation. When no human stepped forward to support Sita, fire validated her innocence. Towards the end, it is noticed that Sita went through repeated emotional suffering, her pains were unresolved, people betrayed her and she had to go through everything silently. Finally, nature decided to step up. When humans were absent, it was only nature that gave the warmth of comfort to Sita.

**Conclusion:**

Sita experiences trauma throughout her life as she was exiled, abducted, humiliated publicly and was abandoned by her husband when she was pregnant. These events created a psychological wound in her identity and caused trauma as defined by Cathy Caruth in her Trauma Theory. But Sita relied upon nature as the source of healing. Through plants, forests, rivers and Earth, Sita was able to restore her emotional balance, resilience and selfhood during traumatic times. Hence, even though humans are unreliable, it is seen that nature can always be trusted upon as sources of comfort and happiness.

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