

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****The Manifestations of Nature in Sita Rathnamal's *Beyond the Jungle: A Tale of South India***

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**Abstract**

There is a predominant and innate bond between any Indigenous community and nature that they are often used synonymously, quintessentially representing and complementing each other. This mysterious and deep-rooted connection is often comprehended as a well-established and unbreakable knot that binds them indefinitely. Throughout centuries, Nature has been considered a manifestation of God and an elixir of life, which is capable of working its magic on creatures or beings who have the ability to fathom its indescribable and yet inexhaustible trait. The Indigenous communities around the world are conscious of the intrinsic and extrinsic power of nature that they chose to live in an environment close to nature. It is their bioregion that rejuvenates them and they draw their strength from nature. Sita Rathnamal's *Beyond the Jungle: A Tale of South India* is an Adivasi autobiography. It narrates the struggles of Sita, a young girl of the Irula Community belonging to the hills, which is the only home that she is aware of. This paper elucidates on the manifestations of nature and its rejuvenating and healing powers which provides and enhances the resilience of Sita to face any adversity.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Community, Nature, Manifestations, Elixir, Rejuvenates, Healing Power, Resilience, etc.

The Indigenous Writings have been largely influenced by marginal literature around the world. It also holds a predominant and vital position in the research conducted in terms of Subaltern Studies. But unlike the marginal literature, Indigenous writings have completely moved away from the norms and standards of the mainstream literatures and have formed a distinct methodology of their own. Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous people* classifies researchers into Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers to emphasize the need to have a unique style of Indigenous methodology to conduct research and to forgo the methodology that is framed by the colonizers.

In the chapter on "A History of the Portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in Literature," published in the text, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Gregory Younging claims that even though many non-Indigenous writers support and encourage books and research on Indigenous literature, they have failed to notice the essence of the Indigenous knowledge missing in the

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majority of the works. "...while much of this body of work has observational and analytical value, it has ultimately not expressed Indigeneity and Indigenous epistemologies, nor has it expressed Indigenous Peoples' internal unique perspectives on contemporary Indigenous political and cultural issues" (10). G. N. Devy, in his "Introduction" to the book, *Being Adivasi: Existence, Entitlements, Exclusion* briefs on how indigenous issues vary from one bioregion to another, but the majority of these writings mirror problems pertaining to "endangered identity, environment, language, gender sensitivity, belief systems, performance traditions, and human rights" (xvii).

The majority of the Adivasi literature in India exists in the oral form alone. In the recent decades, there is a slow but steady increase in the publication of books and resources. A Bhasha Centre has been established in the North (India) to work on projects related to scripting the tribal languages, which still survive in the oral form. Dr. Rajshree Trivedi and Dr. Rupalee Burke, in their "Introduction" to the book on *Contemporary Adivasi Writings in India: Shifting Paradigms*, inquire about the kind of impact in publishing such books. "The question that arises in this context is whether these publications benefitted the Adivasis as much as it did the compiler-editors? But when the Adivasis were written about in literature by non-Adivasis clearly harm was done to them" (ix).

The tribal people have a much greater understanding and bond with nature than the non-indigenous people. In the chapter on "Tribal Culture and Ecology: The Changing Dimensions," Virginius Xaxa stresses the other factors linked with this bond between tribes and nature. "The relationship between the natural environment and the tribes is not only woven around physical existence. It is evident in the cultural domain as well" (105).

Sita Rathnamal's *Beyond the Jungle* is the first Indigenous life writing penned by a tribal woman in 1968. Though the writing reflects the colonial hangover where the language is essentially British English, Sita Rathnamal affects the issues that she faced during her dream transition of moving to the plains. However, she soon realizes that she is meant to live close to nature, which protects her unconditionally like a mother. This paper highlights the various manifestations or places where Sita begins to realize and acknowledge the powerful and positive influence of nature in the various stages of her life.

Sita Rathnamal's autobiography, *Beyond the Jungle*, exemplifies the journey and struggles of a young Adivasi girl, Sita, from the high, mighty, and mysterious mountains to the noisy and chaotic life in the plains. Sita's narrative reveals her admiration and fascination for Mother Nature, where she is extremely proud of her bioregion, "the Nilgiri Mountains of Southern India" (5). It dates back to a period when the tribal people were the sole inhabitants of the mountains, untouched by "civilization" and "isolated" from the people of the plains:

So, for centuries the Nilgiri Mountains of Southern India have remained isolated, like an island amid the storm and change of Indian history; a rare and happy land in whose past wars have played no part. The tribes that dwell there have been left alone, untouched and almost unknown, to live as they have always done, even though a railway and modern roads now climb the old passes and a few small towns have been built. (5)

Sita enjoys her life in the jungles, devoid of any schedule and "time," and relishes each and every moment among the dense forest. For the natives, time neither has any significance nor any place or role in their lives, where, unlike the inhabitant of the plains, they are solely guided and led by the clocks of nature. The Irula tribe has always looked upon the Lord Rangaswami, who resides in the high crest of the hill, which opens up to a wide range of hills and luscious green and pleasantly blowing breeze, invigorating with renewed sweet fragrance intoxicating minds and hearts of the viewer. Sita seeks solace in the natural world whenever

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she has to encounter intolerable and excruciating pain caused by the realities of life. When her mother is on the deadbed, surrounded by her people with weird looks on their faces. Without truly understanding the situation, yet sensing something amiss, the young girl runs into the dense forest and reaches the Rangaswami peak and is enticed by its beauty. Suddenly remembering her mother, she runs back to the hut, only to be hit hard by the tragic death of her mother:

More by unthinking memory than by sight I went along the path to the watering place. It was lighter by the water, for the forest roof was broken by the stream and the dim light was reflected by it.

The compulsion to go upstream, against the fall of water, was always strong in me, and this time, when my thoughts were still with uneasiness of the gathering in the hut, I went further than ever before. I climbed until the trees began to thin out and the blue-grey light that comes before sunrise was reflected in the water,...the peak of Rangaswami lit by the rising sun. Ranga, the first to see the sun, was welcoming it....I walked farther and farther; the trees became more widely spaced....the forest was left behind and I stood on springy turf with ranges of hills,...I thought I had come into the land where Ranga himself lived; I wondered if my mother knew of it, and this thought brought back to my mind the happenings of the morning and filled me with a sharp longing. I turned and ran back to the forest, following the stream all the way home. (8)

She begins rambling round the edges of forest and terrains overlooking the plains far ahead. With no one to control or keep tabs on her, without her mother, she tries to seek gratification from Mother Nature by wandering aimlessly only to realize an unknown fear gripping her anew.

She is left alone to deal with the loss of her mother that she embraces and holds on to Mother Nature so hard, looking out to replace the lost love, affection, and protection, only to be engulfed by an unknown fear gripping her anew. This fear emerges from the insecurity that her mother is no longer there to protect her and grows out of the anxiety and apprehensiveness of the unknown future. However, she ardently believes that the natural world would provide her a magical solution, which results in her seeking a whole new adventure beyond the edges of the forest. She overlooks the plains from the terrains of the plateau and is clutched by a new desire to move to the plains. This desire to move to the plains is an inward, positive transformation that she gains through her journey into the jungles to move forward and not to look back into the past:

To my surprise I came to where the plateau falls steeply to the plains, and I stood looking down at that strange land, so far below, of which I had heard my father tell. It was indistinct and featureless in the haze, shimmering, reflecting an opal light, lost in the distance where it merged with the sky and the clouds, unreal. It attracted me and I had to find a way to it....I walked slower and slower, but my curiosity, a fear of the unknown that had grown since my mother's death, and I stood still and looked around. (10)

Sita is first introduced to learning other languages when she is hospitalized at Conoor. During one of her expeditions, she falls into an old "tunnel" and "great holes" dug by white men who came in search of gold. A feeling of disposition takes over Sita when she is made to lie down on the hospital bed, which terrifies and unsettles her, making her long to sleep on the floor and crave the comfort provided by the natural environment. "The bed frightened me. I did not like being so high above the floor, it gave me a sense of insecurity, and I missed the contact with the earth which gives so good a rest. I missed the dark forest of the night and the

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sound of the wind in the trees” (18). Throughout her long stay at the hospital, Doctor Rajan and the nurses inspire her to learn Tamil and English, and thus, she enthusiastically pursues imbibing basic words and sentences from both languages. Though Doctor Rajan is broad-minded enough compared to caste- and class-conscious others, he treats Sita as “a creature of India’s past.” Sita, however, does not mind his remarks offending; rather takes it in her stride as comical as she is taken over by his unusual yet amicable behaviour.

“You must teach her Tamil, Nurse. Or English, or something I can understand.”

....

“An Irula, eh? A little creature out of India’s past....”

....

“....Well she will be here for several months; it will be an interesting experience to see what we can teach her.” Then he added jocularly, “Let’s see what we can make of this little animal that falls down holes in the jungle.” (21-22)

Sita develops a sense of fascination and admiration for Doctor Rajan, and in the due course of her healing period, she learns to adapt herself to the plains, or new terrain, and equips herself with basic knowledge of the essential languages of communication. She is “perplexed” when she is informed about her discharge from the hospital. Her father, on the other hand, feels elated and exuberant at the prospect of breaking away from the clutches of being a “labour of the plantation,” and anticipates moving “back to the freedom of the forest.” The life in the plains does not suit him, and hence, he yearns to go back to the hills desperately.

On her return to the forest, Sita takes up sanctuary in the trees, where she relaxes herself in the “crooks of the bough” and practices speaking in Tamil and English. The branches of the trees are in no way lesser than her house (little hut), which is both secure and comfortable. However, her perspective of life in the jungles has unexpectedly taken a turn where she begins to contemplate and become curious about life in the plains:

It was a secure retreat that I found soon after I came back from hospital. I felt the life of the tree and accepted it as I accepted the hut where I lived; only I no longer thought of these things as the whole of life, as once I had done. At home and in the village I spoke as my father and the other Irula spoke, but in the tree-top I talked to myself, held long conversations in Tamil and in English with people half remembered and half imagined.

....

Until I went to the hospital I thought that Perangad— the abode of Ranga where I lived— was all the land that there was. Conoor was a great surprise, and now I learnt that beyond that were other lands and greater wonders and people quite different from myself. (23-24 & 26)

However, she soon realizes her dream when she helps government officials to record data on her tribe. They mention her support in their report and active participation in the completion of the project and hence, she is granted a government education scholarship to study in a school in Doda.

Sita feels insecure and odd among the other girls in the school. She desperately searches for and seeks affirmation and a hand of friendship among the other girls, but in vain. She becomes conscious of her difference in terms of class and caste. She is unable to sleep at night and stares at “the steady, pale flame of the hurricane lamp,” however she falls asleep after listening to the familiar sounds of the jackal. “Then, out of the darkness, a jackal called, and far away another answered, haunting cries that echoed over the hills; sounds that I had known since earliest childhood. Immediately I felt one with the night and, relaxing at last, was soon asleep” (35). She who has wandered around the forest freely, finds herself trapped inside school,

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where she is restricted from enjoying the natural view/nature from behind the grills of the window. She compares the arrival of dawn in the forest and in the “highest peak of Dhaulgiri,” where she states that at home, “the light always came softly, grey...but here the light was sudden and clear” (35). She feels at home when she is among nature and feels pressurized and constrained by the rules of the school, which states otherwise, i.e., to stay indoors and not to loiter around the forest. She has been so attuned to living close to nature that she could not conform to certain conventions or standards of the school, like “sitting on a chair and eating off a table. I hated the metal implements with which I had to feed myself....my toes that normally gave me such a good grip on the ground were crowded in the tips of the shoes and felt all wrong” (37).

In order to maintain a normal and smooth relationship with the rest of the girls at school and because of the growing need and wish to be accepted by all, Sita strives hard to learn the new lifestyle, manners, and etiquette set by the school. However, once she returns home during holidays, she finds a new sense of freedom and realizes that she is truly a spirit of the forest, where the jungles and their creatures were “all so much a part of my life that school seemed the unreal dream” (111). Sita fathoms that the jungle is not bound by time, which rules the roost or dominates the life of people in the plains, and the anxieties caused by the routine school life slowly leave her:

The quick forest night closed around us and we went into the hut. I lay down on the mat expecting to find the earth hard after the mattress of the bed in the dormitory. But the earth seemed to embrace me, seemed to take me into communion with it, and gave me the same sweet sleep that it enjoyed until the sun awoke us both and gave me an exhilarating feeling of freedom. Days and weeks stretched ahead and the forest and the hills were mine. I had no longer to think of the clock on the classroom wall whose hands had ruled my life: there are no clocks in the forest. (113)

Sita wins a three-mile marathon that is conducted by her school, and it is this success that motivates and encourages her to move forward in life. Sita feels rejuvenated and refreshed and natural running along the hilly routes, which she is quite comfortable with. Nature has such a soothing effect on Sita that she is able to overcome hurdles that she faces in the three-mile run in the hills. She decides to enjoy her birthday alone in the woods and hence, takes an early morning walk but is caught red-handed by the house mistress, Miss DeVaz. She is punished severely, but she leaves again to the stream to cleanse herself of all the insults hurled at her by Miss DeVaz. “I took off my clothes, slipped into a little pool and let the clear, cool water flow over me. My hands stung terribly as the water touched them, but even as I lay there it had a soothing effect, as if the stream was washing away the anger and the bitterness and the hatred of Miss DeVaz” (155).

Sita begins to work as a nurse in a hospital in Madras so as to meet Dr. Krishna Rajan regularly. They both develop a mutual affection; however, the doctor hesitates to pursue their relationship further as they both belong to different communities. In spite of his education and broad-minded attitude, Doctor Krishna Rajan feels cornered to choose between marrying Sita (an Irula Tribe) and maintaining the doctrines and orthodoxy of his caste (Brahmin). Hence, Sita walks away from this relationship and moves back to her native jungles, which remind her of her identity and rekindle the memories of “past and invoked...unremembered longings” (253).

Thus, Sita Rathnamal's life writing divulges the close bonding of the tribes with nature that they could never find solace in other aspects of materialistic urban life. Unlike the social norms practiced in the plains, Mother Nature embraces and protects her unconditionally. Sita moves beyond the jungle and learns the hard truth that she could break only the shackles of class and the inevitability of caste, which looms large in society.

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Sita achieves her dream of reaching the plains but realizes that she is meant to be among the forest and the hills. This paper highlights how the lives of Irula tribes are intricately woven with the natural world, where they could never find such a magical connection anywhere round the globe.

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