

## “The Forest of Enchantments”: A Feminist Interpretation of the “Ramayan” from Sita’s Perspective

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### Abstract

It is a traditional *Hindu* belief that Sita, the principal female character in the great Indian epic the *Ramayan*, is an epitome of the ideal woman: an obedient daughter, a submissive wife and a doting mother. She has always been an exemplary figure engaged exclusively in the upholding of wifely duty. It is generally viewed that the ideal qualities for which Sita is worshipped are of her unquestioning subordination to the demands of her husband. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of the *Ramayan* from Sita’s perspective. This paper will attempt to examine how Divakaruni’s retelling portrays the character of Sita as contrary to the traditional beliefs. This paper will show how the power of patriarchy tries to subjugate women in the name of *dharma* (duty). It also discusses the resistance of Sita whose voice gives vent to the unheard voices of all women subjected to many inhuman injustices in the name of culture and tradition. Divakaruni’s Sita is the writer of her own story *Sitayan*, which also depicts the story of other female characters who have been marginalized in the traditional narratives of the *Ramayan*.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Subjugation, Resistance, Identity, Gender discrimination

The *Ramayan*, an ancient Indian epic, composed by Valmiki between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, is replete with mythological stories. There are three hundred versions of the *Ramayan*, and each version tries to depict the story of the *Ramayan* in its own way. Myths have a pungent influence in shaping gender construction in which male power is prioritized and female is reduced to the status of an object only relevant so long as she panders to male ego. Ken Dowden (1992) in his book *The Uses of Greek Mythology* asserts, “Mythology is by and large a man’s mythology, describing a world from a man’s point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men [...] they seldom have scope for action on their own initiative” (p. 115). Epics are consistently phallogocentric showing men’s values as superior and women as inferior. Though there are several strong female characters in the *Ramayan* like Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari, they are portrayed in the collective consciousness as oppressed, mischievous and complicit in the violence they endure. They are the subjects of studies but never the narrators of their own story. Soumya Mohan Ghosh & Rajni Singh (2014) say that by harping on the images of women as chaste and devoted wives, models of *pativrata* (devoted to husband) who are caught up in the perpetual service of their husbands who are their guardians as well protectors- their gods in the mundane

world, myths legitimize patriarchal actions and aid in the dissemination of negative images of women. In the epical sphere they don't have heroic values. There is little they can do there. They are brought in focus only to get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other (Sen, 2016, p. 18). Walby (1989) has defined the patriarchal concept thus: "I shall define patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p. 214). Karen Leonard (1979) talks about the status of women thus "Women in India traditionally were members of a stratified society characterized by the ideology and practice of inequality" (p. 95). Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal mindset, the present paper depicts how patriarchy tries to subjugate women in the name of *dharma*. Discussing Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's famous novel *The Forest of Enchantments*, it depicts how Sita resists the stereotypical notion of patriarchy and writes her own story *Sitayan* which shatters the traditional images of Sita.

The epic, *Ramayan*, as the upholder of the great Indian cultural tradition propagates the notion of the ideal woman as devoted and submissive wife. Retelling of epics is not a new phenomenon in Indian literature. Indian writers have used myths in their writings. One can find a huge number of writers who have borrowed the theme of their work from the two epics the *Ramayan* and the *Mahabharata*. Rohit Sharma (2016) in an article says that whoever is telling the old story tends to make it new. Again Adrienne Rich (1972) in her essay *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision* says, "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (p. 18-19).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an American Award winning, internationally acclaimed writer, poet, activist and professor of creative writing at the University of Houston. Myth is interwoven in the writings of Divakaruni as her Indian heritage urges to combine history and myth in her writings. The main stimulus behind writing mythological fictions is her extreme infatuation to the epic stories and folktale tradition. In an interview, she says that in many epics, the central position was reserved for men and there was an elaborate eulogy of wars, weapons, strategies and court maneuvers. She was always concerned about all the interesting and complex female characters of the epics, and all the strong women who are never at the center of the narration. She was concerned about what they were feeling and what they were thinking. She writes with the intent to locate woman at the center of her work. According to her "placing a woman in the center of your work is radical enough" (Zupančič, 2012, p. 90). It makes her a hero because she is interpreting the world for us through her eyes. She makes an attempt to retell the *Ramayan* from Sita's perspective in *The Forest of Enchantments*, after an extensive study of folk songs about Sita and various versions of the *Ramayan* such as *Valmiki Ramayan*, *Adbhuta Ramayan*, *Kamba Ramayan*, and *Krittibasi Ramayan*. (Divakaruni, 2019, p. viii)

In *The Forest of Enchantments* Sita writes her own story as Valmiki's version of *Ramayan* could not unveil the agony and the distress she has gone through. She mentions other female characters who have been "pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten- or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (Divakaruni, 2019, p. viii). While Divakaruni remains true to the authenticity of the *Valmiki Ramayan*, she at the same time tries to change the perspective of the readers about Sita. She presents Sita as an intellectual woman adept at healing power and martial arts. She weaves the threads of the story in a way that provides Sita space to expose her hidden talents and desires. Sita generalizes the plight of women be they commoners or princesses as they suffer from existential crisis. A sense of insecurity or homelessness is always working within the heart of women. Once her marriage is fixed, Sita laments "Soon I'd have to leave all that I loved- parents, sisters, palace, garden, the healing house- to take my place in another family, which I must then call mine. That's the lot of daughters, commoner

or princess” (Divakaruni, 2019, p.10). Sita’s mother, Queen Sunaina takes part in the decision and policy making process. “She was, in some ways, the real ruler of Mithila, sharp of intellect, clear of vision, balancing kindness with justice” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 9). Sita raises a question to the age old belief that only men could rule the kingdom; “Why can’t customs change?” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 14). Sita is very assertive and conscious of her position. She bursts out in protest when Ram refuses to marry her because he has promised his brothers that they will marry at the same time and in the same family: “You should have informed us of this vow before you strung Shiva’s bow? Surely you knew that once her bride-price is paid, a woman can’t marry anyone else” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 36). Though for a woman to speak up about her marriage in this way was considered shameless, an inner voice always guides her- “It’s important to speak your mind to the man you’re going to marry. What kind of relationship would you have if you couldn’t do that?” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 36). Lakshman’s obedience to his elder brother makes Sita worried of “What kind of husband would he make Urmila? Was there any space left in his heart for a wife?” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 36). Her premonition materializes at the time when Lakshman decides to accompany Ram to the forest and refuses to take Urmila along with him. Urmila’s sacrifice is noteworthy as she has to bear the burden of separation from the two most loving persons - Sita, her elder sister and Lakshman, her husband. Though she tries her best to manipulate her husband to take her along with him into the exile, she lacks the agency that Sita has to make her husband conform to her decision. Her frustration and helplessness is evidenced as she questions Sita, “Ram took you with him. Why then did Lakshman refuse to take me? Was I so unworthy?” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 281). It is the patriarchal conditioning of mind which gives priority to the father figure rather than the mother’s wishes. In spite of Kaushalya’s heart rendering appeal to Rama to not go into exile, Ram refuses his mother’s plea in the name of his duty towards his father. Kaushalya’s cry pierces the heart of readers, “As your mother, am I not your elder too? Isn’t my request worth something? Don’t you have a duty towards me, just as you do towards Dasharath?” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 109). Ram’s reply to his mother’s question also shows the privileging of men as he says “my first duty- no matter how much I love you- must be to my father because he’s also my king. He’s your king too. That’s why you need to put aside your own sorrow and comfort him after I’m gone” (Divakaruni, 2019, p.109). The most stringent act of patriarchy is shown in the attitude of Ram’s abandoning of Sita on the basis of mere suspicion of the people about Sita’s chastity. Divakaruni delineates every aspect of Sita’s physical and emotional hardships. Ram asks Sita to prove her chastity and Sita jumps into the fire without any hesitation. This is an act of showing her power to question the blind judgment of men. She does this only to keep her dignity in high esteem. Though Ravan abducted Sita against her will, a seed of suspicion grows in the heart of Ram that Sita’s chastity might be violated by Ravan. Sita is so powerful and strong a personality that even Ravan, receiver of the boon of indestructibility was unable to intimidate and he himself became a victim of Sita’s condemnation “If Ram is a lion, you’re a dog. If Ram is fragrant sandalwood paste, you’re gutter mud” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 202). After returning to Ayodhya, Sita proves herself to be a perfect queen who asks Ram to establish some kind of law for the protection of women but ironically, she herself cannot escape from the atrocities of a male dominated society as Ram abandons Sita in the forest of wilderness when she is an expectant mother. Sita does not break down in the face of this adversity, and gives birth to her sons Lav and Kush. She brings them up in the best possible manner. Sita has to endure life-long suffering but Divakaruni alters the very meaning of “endure” implying that “It meant taking the challenges thrown at us and dealing with them as intelligently as we knew until we grew stronger than them” (Divakaruni, 2019, p. 322). Divakaruni gives a reason for Sita’s refusal to prove her chastity once again after her

return from the forest. If she does what Ram demands, society will use her action forever to judge other women even when they aren't guilty.

In the classical narrative of *Ramayana*, Sita is a meek and submissive woman who does not have her own identity or agency. She has to conform to the rigid demands of patriarchy. She has to undergo the heart wrenching suffering. But Divakaruni portrays Sita as a very strong and powerful woman who knows how to remain unperturbed in adversities. She doesn't remain silent at the atrocities which are inflicted on her. Ram, the principal male character in the *Ramayana*, is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu who steps down on the earth to redeem the sins of people. In *Hindu* society, he is always considered a 'maryada purushottam' (ideal man) who goes into exile for fourteen years only to keep his father's promise to his stepmother, Kaikeyi. He is an exemplary figure of an ideal son. He is an ideal husband who makes a bridge with the help of monkey army to go to Lanka and fights with Ravan to rescue Sita from Ravan's captivity. He is also considered as an ideal ruler who sacrifices his own happiness by abandoning his wife for the sake of people's happiness. But his act of injustice to Sita has never received critical attention. Many commentators, interpreters and authors of the retelling of the *Ramayana* have found faults in the behavior of Rama and have questioned few of his actions that are considered not convincingly ethical. We see the duality of Ram's character. On the one hand Ram is shown as the sole protector of women, yet on the other hand he is seen commanding Lakshman to abandon Sita in the wilderness of the forest. A critical examination of Sita's conduct in the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* does not give the reader an impression that she has lost her own values and individuality. Nor can a reader see Sita anywhere in the novel subjugated by the patriarchal power- be it her husband Ram, an epitome of righteousness, or Ravan, demon king of Lanka. A scathing critique and condemnation on Ram is leveled in the voice of Sita. She brings forth the voice of other marginalized characters who remain unheard in the mainstream narrative. Divakaruni's Sita is less goddess and more human with her personal anguish, emotion and desires. By giving the blessing 'to be like Sita' to newly wedded brides, society tries to ensure women follow their husbands unquestioningly. Sita remains in Ravan's custody as a captive for a year and she has to bear the murderous torture of the *rakshasi* guards, who try every means to hurt Sita. But Sita remains unperturbed. She refuses to accept any royal pleasure, even the food of the royal palace of Ravan. Divakaruni questions the authoritarian ideologies of the epic that characterized Sita as a meek, submissive, subjugated woman. Her alternative retelling of the *Ramayana* narrates the life of Sita as a strong and independent woman who is able to resist the patriarchal dominance and make her own choices and independent decisions. Though she is a victim in the hands of patriarchal dominance, she frees her from the clutches of patriarchal domination by surrendering herself to the mother earth. She does not conform to the rigid demands of patriarchy. Divakaruni contemporizes the character of Sita who stands up against this unjust action for the sake of the daughters in the centuries to come. Her solidarity with other women who are smashed in the wheel of patriarchy is an indication of her feminist awareness. She chooses to enter into the earth rather than to succumb to the patriarchal demands of proving her chastity again and again.

Literally the word 'Ramayan' means the journey of Ram. But Divakaruni shifts the focus from Ram to Sita and makes it Sita's journey from her birth to her surrendering to the earth. Sita is a character who is conscious of her choices in spite of what happens to her, and the circumstances under which she is placed. Ram's insistence on proving Sita's chastity is a patriarchal mindset which treated women as objects devoid of emotion. Most Indian women have been suffering from the lack of agency, disempowerment, gender discrimination, marginalization, domestic violence, rape, acid attack and female foeticide since time immemorial. Sita's story *Sitayan* is very relatable to the contemporary

women who are suffering from various injustices in the name of culture and tradition. Divakaruni's Sita emerges with a new voice which gives inspiration to all women about when to raise voice against injustices and when to remain silent.

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