

A Decolonial Feminist Reading in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

The paper analyses the epitome of Sita's character, her societal challenges, and her identity within the constraints of a patriarchal setting in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*. The plot has stood the test of time and become a symbol of female empowerment. It also challenges nationalist appropriations of myth, upends patriarchy, and elevates women by emphasising Sita's subjectivity, emotional complexity and political awareness. Moreover, it demonstrates Sita's ability to heal both the natural environment and herself. From a feminist standpoint, Divakaruni presents Sita as a strong, independent woman, challenging conventional representations of her as submissive. Thereby, the plot serves as a decolonial feminist approach that reclaims mythic space as a site of resistance, rewriting cultural memory from the margins. The paper presents Sita as a symbol of dignity and the centre of a woman's existential crisis. Therefore, it also argues that Divakaruni's work significantly contributes to contemporary conversations on gender, power and moral consciousness by rejecting unjust norms.

Keywords: Women, patriarchy, empowerment, epitome. decolonial feminism

Introduction

The epic Ramayana has long served as a cultural, moral, and political text. It is often told from a male point of view, but subsequent versions present Sita as the epitome of virginity and selfless virtue. Nonetheless, contemporary retellings have attempted to challenge and update these patriarchal structures. By allowing Sita to tell her own tale, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* presents a bold reimagining. The plot questions the patriarchal organisations that have influenced Indian gender thinking. The remarkable journey of women in a patriarchal culture shows the struggle of contemporary women to establish their identities within their families and in society at large. Sita reflects modern women in her ability and in her monumental endeavour, and is exalted beyond measure. This study examines how Divakaruni reclaims mythological space to express oppressed female subjectivities and challenges overlapping patriarchal, nationalist, and cultural orthodoxy systems through a decolonial feminist perspective.

Chitra Banerjee examines the personalities of women, highlighting their moral fortitude and inspiring them to achieve their goals. According to Divakaruni, Sita is a strong woman who can endure any trying situation, proceed without difficulty, and never give up. The author portrays Sita as the epitome of courage and self-respect. The significance of women's roles in their families and in society is highlighted in the book. According to María Lugones' theory of the coloniality of gender, colonised nations are subjected to inflexible gender binary classifications and patriarchal structures as a result of colonial modernity. In this setting, Divakaruni, by giving Sita, a traditionally suppressed character in retellings, narrative agency, performs epistemic resistance in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Reclaiming Sita's Voice: Narrative Authority and Subaltern Speech

In patriarchal societies, the function that women play is limited to taking care of the home. This quality inhibits her uniqueness and undermines her identity. The primary female character, Sita, is portrayed as the epitome of the ideal Hindu woman: a devoted and selfless wife who is both oppressed and a voice for women. To elaborate, Sita states at the opening of Divakaruni's book that she intends to tell her tale before others do. This

action is a statement of epistemic sovereignty and a decolonial gesture. To counter this, Sita shifts from a stereotypical example of passive suffering to a thoughtful, inquisitive, and politically conscious character through the first-person narrative. She questions Rama's devotion to royal dharma at the expense of individual justice and criticises the demands society places on women. On the other hand, Divakaruni gives Sita the symbolic ability to speak, not as a subject of nationalist reverence but as a resisting being. Sukanya Saha in *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments: A Saga of Duty, Betrayal, Integrity and Honour* (2019) reveals: Sita's life oscillates between two extremes, royalty and wilderness, emanating many-hued emotions and impulses. Sita is the emergence of an independent voice, unabashed of social inhibitions, voicing a modest protest which never turns into a tirade. (5)

Another pivotal moment in the book that strengthens this idea occurs when Sita chooses to accompany Ram but remains silent to contest Ram's assertion that not all women are weak and helpless. When Sita is exiled to the forest once again, nature gives her a renewed feeling of strength and authority, allowing her to rise in contrast to the others who mistreat her. Sita's refusal to submit to subjugation strengthens her and inspires other women to resist such treatment. At this point, Sita recognises that it is time for her to achieve self-actualisation and makes the decision to immediately stop letting other people run her life. The plot reveals that a woman caught up in extreme and rebellious activity as a result of her husband's and society's negligence also embarks on a personal voyage of self-discovery. Furthermore, Sita demonstrates bravery and power, that she is not weak and submissive as the Vedas have long portrayed her.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines the location, often portrayed as a place of exile and sorrow, as a site of ecological knowledge, sisterhood, and self-discovery. According to decolonial feminist theory, alternative epistemologies often emerge in marginalised settings. Sita can communicate with women and indigenous people outside of royal hierarchies because of the forest. The epic's caste-based power systems and patriarchy are challenged by these exchanges. The forest becomes a transitional space in which women's solidarity thrives and hierarchical conventions are disrupted. It stands for epistemic plurality and a rejection of the strict order of imperial Ayodhya. Ravan, the Lankan demon king, kidnapped Sita in the jungle. Unfortunately, he sent forth several demons to protect the location and stop Sita from fleeing when she was put under an Ashoka tree. Sita keeps her virginity and refuses to accept his advances.

Sita kept her trust and belief in the palace because she believed that beloved Ram would come to her aid. Sita admits as she exercises her face against Ravan under the Ashoka tree. According to Divakaruni, Sita is a very brave woman who can endure any trying situation, go on without difficulty, and never give up. Her bravery speaks for her on her path, regardless of the price our Indian women pay. The way that Sita's pain is portrayed not as a test of virtue but rather as a profoundly human experience is among its most remarkable features. Her suffering is psychological and emotional in nature rather than just physical or contextual. She struggles with yearning and disappointment, loyalty and self-respect, and love and treachery. Sita endures a great deal of suffering, including her kidnapping, public humiliation, exile while pregnant, and eventual separation from Rama, yet she refuses to give up. Rather than allowing society to determine her value, she turns her pain into strength by parenting her boys on her own. Because of her tenacity, she is a representation of silent but unquestionable strength, demonstrating that perseverance does not imply surrender but rather the capacity to overcome hardship on one's own terms.

Contesting Nationalist Appropriation and Patriarchy

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work explores the patriarchal norms of Indian society as depicted in the ancient epic. The novel questions the authority of male-authored literature over women by exposing the mechanisms of power and establishing a new reality and truth in which even women have a voice through ongoing questioning or dialogism. In nationalist rhetoric, the Ramayana has often been used to create idealised representations of women. Expectations of female sacrifice are further reinforced by Sita's purity testing (agnipariksha) and subsequent banishment while pregnant. Divakaruni critically examines these occurrences. Sita reveals the brutality ingrained in public morals and challenges the justice of a trial by fire. The plot opposes nationalist myth-making that minimises hardship and exalts female persistence. The given statement by the queen reveals that a kingdom required a male leader, and for a long time, patriarchy has been deeply ingrained in the culture. She says:

Even if you were a goddess among women, it wouldn't be possible. The kingdom of Mithila can be ruled only by a man. Because it's built upon an age-old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough – or wise enough – to guide them. (28)

Here, decolonial feminism exposes the relationship between cultural nationalism and patriarchal authority. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita's ultimate refusal to return to Rama as a gesture of extreme autonomy, undermining the idea that she is subservient. In this manner, Sita's decision to leave the mortal world underscores her rejection of patriarchal domination and celebrates her autonomy and integrity. In fact, her fall into the ground becomes resistance rather than defeat.

However, Sita was banished from the kingdom without cause. The way society treats Sita is quite cruel. She was taken into the jungle because of rumours spreading across society. Ram yielded to societal portrayals of Sita, even though he knew she was innocent. During her exile, she became pregnant. Even though Sita was a queen with a lot of power, she didn't do anything that would contradict her banishment. When Sita was sent to the forest by her husband, she experienced marginalisation. With her words:

And then he'd sent me away without even having the courage or the consideration to tell me to my face what he was doing to me and why. Without asking me, his helpmate and queen, what I thought should be done, he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people. (320)

The Forest of Enchantments functions as a feminist reworking of the epic by examining significant facets of Sita's characterisation, including her agency, emotional complexity, and eventual self-liberation. In addition to reclaiming Sita's perspective, the book challenges the strict gender norms imposed by the original story. This retelling encourages us to consider mythology from a more inclusive and nuanced perspective, highlighting the value of re-examining old writings in order to find long-silenced voices. The plot urges investigation of oppressive customs rather than acceptance of them as destiny, challenging readers to reevaluate deeply held ideas about sacrifice, responsibility, and love.

Sita is portrayed in a way that defies stereotypes, and she speaks forth and confronts obstacles. For instance, Sita comes to Ayodhya, where she is ecstatic to be reunited with her beloved Ram, but when she finds out that Ram has planned another "agni-pariksha" (fire-test) to appease the gossiping residents of Ayodhya, Sita stands up not only for herself, but for all women worldwide. When Ram calls Sita to an agni-pariksha (trial by fire) at Ayodhya, she declines in a final act of rebellion. She openly challenges him, casting doubt on his fairness and justice as a spouse and king, and she denounces the social mores that unfairly penalise women. Hence, Divakaruni enables readers to view mythology as a living text subject to reinterpretation, rather than a strict, unalterable narrative, by humanising Sita and presenting her as a powerful, self-aware woman.

O king of Ayodhya, you know I'm innocent, and yet, unfairly, you're asking me to step into the fire. You offer me a tempting prize indeed to live in happiness with you and my children. But I must refuse. Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. I can't do that to them. (356)

It can be observed that Sita's rejection is a rejection of patriarchy that disregards the sacrifices made by women. Here, Sita's position represents the epitome of women. She transcends the role of a mere beneficiary and becomes a potent symbol of resistance. Sita has "the fortitude to not beg for mercy" (168). In fact, she endeavours to set herself free, "I struggled mightily... I kicked and clawed and bit at the rakshasa... My nails raised welts on his dark, smooth skin, and my teeth drew blood. Even for a rakshasa, it must have hurt." (169)

Sita used to think about the word "endure" during her wild days and question whether it meant to give up. Also, it meant to accept the challenges that are thrown at them and handle them as wisely. Women who are in relationships with other women are able to overcome isolation and mistreatment without becoming equal to any structures. Divakaruni's characters embrace diverse body types, as they are not constrained by the mindset of these developments; they exhibit a unified sisterhood without succumbing to any women's activist agenda.

Conclusion

Women have endured centuries of silence, oppression, and subjugation as voiceless victims. The lack of relevance and emphasis placed on women's voices is so great that defying patriarchy is seen as undesirable and

abhorrent. Despite having the same potential, characteristics, and skills as men, women are not regarded as on par with men. The plot re-centres Sita as a speaking subject and reveals the gendered coloniality ingrained in epic traditions through a decolonial feminist paradigm. Resilience is embodied in Divakaruni's Sita through narrative assertion and ethical inquiry rather than mute endurance. Here, the power systems are challenged as the woodland transforms into a tangible and symbolic place of liberty. The book shows that re-examining myth is crucial to cultural change. Therefore, in postcolonial settings, decolonial feminist retellings of *The Forest of Enchantments* pave the way for gendered autonomy and epistemic justice by recovering silenced voices. Figuratively speaking, the paper emphasises the importance of treating women with the self-respect and dignity they deserve.

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