

"Becoming Sita: Identity, Autonomy, and the Female Self in The Forest of Enchantments"

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Abstract—Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “The Forest of Enchantments” provides a revisionist perspective of the mythology Ramayana by foregrounding Sita’s voice, thereby challenging canonical representations of femininity, duty, and virtue within the epic tradition. This article, entitled “Becoming Sita: Identity, Autonomy, and the Female Self in The Forest of Enchantments,” interrogates the processes through which Sita negotiates and reconstructs her identity in a patriarchal socio-cultural milieu. Drawing upon feminist literary theory and narratological approaches, the research examines how Divakaruni’s narrative deconstructs the archetype of the self-effacing, sacrificial heroine and reconstitutes her as a complex subject endowed with agency, self-awareness, and ethical autonomy. The analysis further investigates how the novel employs act of narration, memory, and self-articulation as strategies of resistance, enabling Sita to transcend prescribed roles and re-inscribe her place within the cultural imagination. By situating the text within broader discourses on gender, mythology, and retellings, this study demonstrates how *The Forest of Enchantments* functions as a site of feminist reclamation, transforming a mythic figure into a dynamic representation of womanhood that interrogates and redefines the boundaries of identity and selfhood. Ultimately, the paper argues that Divakaruni’s re-visioning not only restores agency to a silenced figure but also exemplifies the transformative potential of literary re-narration in challenging hegemonic gendered narratives.

Index Terms—Sita, Forest of Enchantments, Feminist Theory, Retelling, Mythology

I. AUTHOR INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an acclaimed Indian-American author, poet, and academic whose works have significantly contributed to contemporary diasporic and feminist literature. Born in Kolkata, India, in 1956, Divakaruni pursued her higher education in the United States, earning a Master’s

degree from Wright State University and a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley. Currently a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston, she is known for her nuanced portrayals of South Asian women’s experiences, particularly their struggles with identity, displacement, and empowerment within both traditional and transnational contexts.

Divakaruni’s literary oeuvre spans novels, short stories, poetry, and essays, with many of her works foregrounding female subjectivity and interrogating patriarchal structures. Her major works include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), among others. Through these narratives, she frequently engages with Indian mythology, folklore, and cultural memory, reimagining canonical texts to highlight marginalized voices, especially those of women who have been historically silenced or misrepresented.

Her writing is celebrated for its lyrical prose, cultural authenticity, and feminist sensibility. Critics have noted Divakaruni’s skilful negotiation of dual cultural spaces, which allows her to explore themes of migration, hybridity, gender roles, and identity formation with remarkable depth and empathy. *The Forest of Enchantments*, a retelling of the Ramayana from Sita’s perspective, exemplifies her literary project of reclaiming and reinterpreting women’s stories, transforming myth into a medium for feminist resistance and re-visioning. Through her body of work, Divakaruni has emerged as a pivotal voice in contemporary literature, bridging the gap between myth and modernity, tradition and transformation.

II. INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana has traditionally centred on the heroism of Rama, relegating Sita to the periphery as

an emblem of chastity, patience, and obedience. Indian subcontinent as a whole worships Ram as the Lord Supreme, who stands as the testament of ultimate devotion, justice and dharma. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* revisits this ancient epic from a revisionist perspective, placing Sita's voice at the narrative core. This reinterpretation reclaims the female gaze within a text historically shaped by patriarchal ideals. By doing so, she not only challenges the male-dominated mythological tradition but also situates Sita within a broader feminist discourse that seeks to humanize and diversify the representation of women in mythology.

Sita, in Divakaruni's retelling, is not a one-dimensional or passive character. Rather, she emerges as a woman with profound emotional depth, complex motivations, and a fierce sense of selfhood. This Sita from Mithila is not a damsel in distress; she is a dynamic protagonist, who is a trained fighter, seasoned healer and a smart princess with a diplomatic brain. She is an individual with her own inner dilemmas and complex emotions. The novel attributes to her layers of humanity often denied in earlier versions of the Ramayana, thus transforming her into a narrative consciousness through which themes of identity, duty, and resistance are explored (Divakaruni 45).

III. RETELLING THE RAMAYANA: A FEMINIST IMPERATIVE

Divakaruni's act of retelling functions as both reclamation and resistance. The Ramayana, composed within a patriarchal framework, often depicts women as secondary to divine or heroic male figures. By reinterpreting the epic from Sita's perspective, *The Forest of Enchantments* foregrounds the silenced female voice, offering what Adrienne Rich termed "revision", "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 18).

Sita, the princess of Mithila has been brought up with a peculiar sense of identity. She grew up with an unknown connection leading her to a life grounded with nature. She is attracted to the forests outside her kingdom which are usually considered dangerous. She finds solace among her tiny garden, both in Mithila and Ayodhya. In usual narratives, the birth of Sita is considered a miracle and brushed aside. The root of

her identity being entangled with the core of the Earth finds a relative plot space in this retelling narrative. She is not only a part of the mighty Ram, but a person with a mind, soul and purpose. She is very intuitive and uses it to navigate the profound troubles thrown in her way.

This feminist retelling transforms Sita from a symbol of suffering into a subject of self-definition. The narrative underscores her emotional and moral agency; her choices to love, to question, and ultimately to walk away. The traditional literature portrays Sita as a scorned wife, who dwells in the love of her husband, who chose the country over her in every turn. Her own solitude during her pregnancy is never shown in this narration. Whereas, Divakaruni's Sita does not whisper her grief, she screams into air. She wraps her wrath in her work titled 'Sitayan', pointing out a lot of incidents missed out in the grand tale. She would rather jump to the core of the Earth than jumping into fire to prove her chastity again. In doing so, Divakaruni situates Sita as a figure who negotiates between devotion and defiance, illustrating that faith and freedom are not mutually exclusive in the female experience (Thakur 62).

IV. THE REVISIONIST PERSPECTIVE OF MYTHOLOGY

Reimagining myth is a political act. Myths serve as cultural blueprints that shape societal perceptions of gender and virtue. In a religiously vibrant country like India, mythological epics like Ramayana become the standard for men and women. The unrealistic portraits of one-dimensional woman in such patriarchal epics make life hard for a specific gender. Divakaruni's revisionist approach redefines mythology as a living discourse rather than a static tradition. By imbuing Sita with introspection and individuality, she dismantles the rigid binaries of purity and sin, obedience and rebellion, which have long constrained women's narratives (Krishnan 204).

Through Sita's first-person narration, Divakaruni allows the reader to access the emotional truth of a woman historically portrayed only in relation to men, Rama, Ravana, or her sons. The narrator is not a sage who was blessed with the story, it is the woman who battled through literal and metaphorical *agni parikshas* in her lifetime. She is no more the devoted wife who followed her husband to the wilderness as duty but as

an intentional choice of love. Sita's self-narration thus becomes an assertion of autonomy, a rewriting of myth from within. The forest itself often a site of exile and trial becomes a metaphor for inner awakening and self-discovery (Divakaruni 112).

V. THE GAZE AND GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

One of the most compelling aspects of *The Forest of Enchantments* is its inversion of the male gaze that dominates classical mythology. By granting narrative authority to Sita, Divakaruni introduces a female gaze, a perspective grounded in empathy, reflection, and emotional truth.

This narrative shift invites a deeper probing of how gendered gazes construct meaning in myth. Sita, who was once observed and judged through patriarchal eyes, now becomes the observer. In this way, Sita not only narrates her story but redefines the ethical parameters of heroism and sacrifice from a woman's standpoint. The usual narrative only portrays how it was inherent for Ram to make Sita go through fire to prove her chastity during her stay (forced) in Lanka. The emotional expanse of such pivotal moment is shown from the eyes of a man. But Divakaruni's Sita expresses the enormous amount of pain she experiences when her husband, whom she trusted and loved more than herself, whose memories kept her alive during her captivity, asks her to jump into fire to prove that she indeed kept her chastity untouched. Ram is shown to become a distant person as soon as the dharma of a King is placed on his shoulders. He is the best ruler for Ayodhya, bringer of peace and harmony, but as a husband he failed at various levels. Her re-telling transforms Rama's divinity into humanity, questioning his moral absolutism and exposing the emotional costs of his adherence to dharma (Mukherjee 91).

VI. SITA AS A COMPLEX AND AUTONOMOUS SELF

Divakaruni's Sita resists reduction to an archetype. She is not confined to the role of the ideal wife or the dutiful mother; rather, she embodies contradictions, strength and tenderness, love and indignation, devotion and rebellion. Her decisions particularly her refusal to return to Rama after the fire ordeal and her

final act of self-withdrawal into the earth reflect an assertion of ethical and emotional autonomy.

By humanizing Sita, Divakaruni aligns her with contemporary notions of female selfhood. Her journey of becoming transcends mythic boundaries, illustrating a universal struggle for identity and dignity within restrictive social frameworks (Sarkar 133). Thus, *The Forest of Enchantments* transforms the mythic into the personal and the divine into the human.

VII. CONCLUSION

The Forest of Enchantments stands as a feminist reimagining of the Ramayana that transforms Sita from a peripheral figure into the central consciousness of her own narrative. Through a revisionist lens, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni interrogates traditional constructions of femininity, autonomy, and virtue, offering a portrait of womanhood that is both introspective and revolutionary. Sita's journey from silence to self-articulation embodies the reclaiming of female identity within myth, asserting that even sacred narratives can be rewritten to reflect women's truths. Ultimately, Divakaruni's Sita is not merely a retold character but a redefined consciousness, one that embodies the resilience, complexity, and autonomy of the modern female self.

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