

Agency In Resistance and Renunciation: Re-Reading Sita's Choices in Contemporary Retellings

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Abstract—This paper offers a comparative feminist reading of *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The Renunciation* by Pragya Agrawal, examining how these texts reconfigure Sita's agency within the framework of contemporary feminist discourse. Moving beyond the traditional portrayal of Sita as an epitome of passive virtue, these retellings foreground her subjectivity, ethical reasoning, and autonomy. The paper argues that agency is articulated through two distinct yet interconnected modes: resistance and renunciation. While Divakaruni's Sita resists through articulation, emotional assertion, and moral questioning, Agrawal's Sita enacts agency through introspection, withdrawal, and self-definition. By situating these representations within broader debates on gender, myth, and narrative authority, the study demonstrates how modern reinterpretations transform Sita into a complex agent negotiating identity, duty, and selfhood.

Index Terms—Sita, agency, feminist retellings, Ramayana, resistance, renunciation, mythology, gender studies

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana, one of the foundational epics of South Asian literary and cultural tradition, has historically shaped ideals of gender, morality, and social conduct. Within this framework, Sita has been venerated as the ideal woman—devoted wife, self-sacrificing mother, and embodiment of purity. However, such idealization has often resulted in the erasure of her individuality and agency.

In recent decades, there has been a surge in mythological retellings that revisit canonical narratives from marginalized perspectives. These retellings seek not merely to retell but to reinterpret, interrogate, and reclaim. Among these, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Renunciation* stand out for their focus on Sita's interiority and autonomy.

This paper examines how these texts challenge the traditional construction of Sita by presenting her as a figure of conscious choice. It asks:

How do these narratives redefine agency?

In what ways do resistance and renunciation function as forms of empowerment?

How do narrative strategies shape the reader's understanding of Sita's subjectivity?

By addressing these questions, the study situates Sita within contemporary feminist discourse, highlighting the evolving nature of myth in modern literature.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist reinterpretations of myth have long sought to recover silenced voices and challenge patriarchal narratives. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize the importance of allowing the "subaltern" to speak, a concept particularly relevant to mythological women like Sita.

Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a framework for understanding how identities are constructed and contested. Sita's traditional role can be seen as a performance dictated by societal norms, which contemporary retellings seek to disrupt.

Adrienne Rich's exploration of motherhood further informs this analysis, particularly in understanding Sita's dual identity as mother and autonomous individual.

Existing scholarship on Divakaruni highlights her emphasis on female voice and narrative reclamation, while studies on Agrawal focus on psychological depth and introspection. However, there remains a gap in comparative analyses that examine how these two texts together redefine agency through contrasting yet complementary approaches.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a feminist literary framework, drawing on:

Agency Theory:

Understanding agency as the capacity for self-determined action within constraints.

Narrative Theory:

Examining how storytelling techniques shape subjectivity.

Postcolonial Feminism:

Addressing how cultural narratives intersect with gendered power structures.

Agency is not viewed as absolute freedom but as negotiation within limitations. This perspective is crucial in analyzing Sita, whose choices are shaped by social, familial, and moral expectations.

IV. RESISTANCE AS AGENCY IN THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS

Divakaruni's novel reclaims Sita's voice through first-person narration, transforming her from an object of narration into its subject.

4.1 Narrative Authority and Voice

By allowing Sita to narrate her own story, the text disrupts the authoritative voice of the traditional epic. This shift repositions Sita as an active participant in her narrative.

4.2 Emotional and Moral Resistance

Sita's questioning of Rama's decisions and societal expectations reflects a form of resistance grounded in ethical reasoning. Her refusal to accept injustice silently challenges patriarchal authority.

4.3 Reclaiming Female Relationships

The novel foregrounds interactions with other women, creating a collective narrative that counters the isolation often imposed on female characters.

4.4 Resistance within Constraint

Importantly, Sita's resistance operates within the boundaries of her context. She does not reject her role entirely but redefines it, demonstrating that agency can coexist with duty.

V. RENUNCIATION AS AGENCY IN THE RENUNCIATION

Agrawal's narrative offers a quieter but equally powerful portrayal of agency.

5.1 Interiorization of Agency

Unlike Divakaruni's expressive Sita, Agrawal's protagonist embodies introspection. Her thoughts become the primary site of resistance.

5.2 Renunciation as Choice

The act of renunciation is reframed as a deliberate decision rather than a forced outcome. Sita's withdrawal signifies autonomy and self-respect.

5.3 Psychological Complexity

The novel delves into trauma, memory, and healing, presenting Sita as a deeply human figure navigating emotional conflict.

5.4 Motherhood Reimagined

Sita's role as a mother is portrayed not as self-erasure but as a space for asserting independence and nurturing resilience.

VI. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY

The two texts present contrasting yet complementary visions of agency:

Resistance (Divakaruni) → outward, vocal, relational
Renunciation (Agrawal) → inward, reflective, individual

Together, they challenge the binary between action and passivity. Renunciation, often misread as submission, emerges as a powerful act of refusal.

VII. REINTERPRETING DHARMA AND JUSTICE

Both novels question the concept of dharma, traditionally seen as absolute. Sita's experiences reveal its limitations, particularly when it conflicts with justice and dignity.

Her choices expose the gendered nature of moral expectations, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of duty.

VIII. SITA'S FINAL ACT: AGENCY IN REFUSAL

Sita's return to the earth serves as the culmination of her journey. In these retellings, it is not an escape but a declaration—a refusal to continue within an unjust system.

This act aligns with contemporary feminist ideas of reclaiming power through withdrawal and self-definition.

IX. CONCLUSION

The reinterpretation of Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Renunciation* reflects a broader cultural shift toward recognizing female agency in mythological narratives. By presenting resistance and renunciation as equally valid forms of empowerment, these texts expand the understanding of agency beyond conventional definitions.

Sita emerges as a dynamic figure who negotiates identity, duty, and autonomy, challenging readers to reconsider long-held assumptions about gender and power.

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