

Gender, Voice, and Resistance: Re-visioning Sita in Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

Gender is socially produced through culture and power instead of being a purely biological fact. Simone de Beauvoir's remark, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 14), reflects how gender roles are socially imposed. In contemporary literature, the reinterpretation or reshaping of earlier texts has become common to give them a modern outlook. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is one such work, offering a re-visioning of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. The author portrays Sita as the protagonist and empowers her to speak out against patriarchy. Sita is depicted as a strong woman who not only stands for herself but also for other marginalized and silenced characters. Divakaruni transforms Sita from an idealized figure into a self-aware woman who articulates her experiences of banishment, suffering, and resistance. The present paper attempts to investigate the novel by exploring how Divakaruni reshapes the character of Sita as a symbol of gender consciousness within literary discourse. It also aims to examine how voice functions as a significant tool of agency, enabling Sita to question a society in which patriarchal values are deeply embedded in the notions of dharma, purity, and wifely duty.

Keywords: Myth, Retelling, Divakaruni, The Forest of Enchantments, Female voice

1. Introduction

The present paper discusses how the author has revisited the famous Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, through Sita's eyes, where she becomes the storyteller of her own life, and how Divakaruni shifted the gender focus from a male-centered narrative to a sidelined female character who is a significant contributor to shaping the story of the *Ramayana*. In ancient history, women were not just silent figures; they played pivotal roles in shaping historical and mythological events, more than they are described in traditional writings. Women had equally contributed to shaping mythology with their courage, wisdom, and resilience. In her work *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shifts readers' attention toward female authority, focusing on the characters who have woven the narrative of the *Ramayana*. The author revisits the Treta Yuga, where the story of the *Ramayana* begins. In there, she made a few changes. First, the author experimented with the narrative style by changing the perspective in which the story is told. The plot begins in the female voice, where Divakaruni modifies the existing *Ramayana*, using flashbacks, foreshadowing, conversations among characters, stream of consciousness, and, most importantly, symbolism. In the novel, Divakaruni has experimented with the prototype of the *Ramayana*

by retelling it, giving Sita a chance to speak for herself, and other women how they feel or desire in situations where patriarchy suppresses their voices. Women in history hold significant roles, but they are not portrayed as prominently; their existence and contributions are often seen only in relation to male authority, and their appearance in the story is less visible and heard than that of male characters in other versions of the *Ramayana*. In her latest novel, Divakaruni shifts the narrative voice to show how men and women feel in situations of conflict. Like any other mythological story, the man is always the central figure—heroic and considered most suitable to narrate and write the story from his point of view, which shuts female agency. Thus, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, the novelist rewrites mythology by reversing traditional gender roles and revealing how patriarchy shapes ideology and authority in the name of tradition and culture. Through Sita’s narration, the novel highlights the circumstances of women, their struggles, and the suppressed voices of characters such as Kaikeyi, Urmila, Surpanakha, Ahalya, and Mandodari.

In the novel, Sita is the mouthpiece of all the women. She is a beautiful incarnation of the goddess Laxmi—a bold, resilient, and confident transformation of Laxmi in human form. Sita’s voice and resistance can be seen when Sage Valmiki gives Sita his lifetime’s work to read before he gives it to her sons to sing; after all, the work is based on her life. She stayed up two nights in the hut reading the work thoroughly at the edge of the ashram. And after two days, when Valmiki visits Sita to know her views on the work, first she responds positively, appreciating the poetry, the histories of earth and heaven both, the weddings and the deaths, the betrayals and farewells, and the palace and the forest. But then she couldn’t control her inner voice to come out and express her disappointment when she saw the title of the work *Ramayana*, how her life could have the title *Ram*, how her life’s struggle can be told through *Ram*’s identity, the challenges she faced first in Lanka, then in the forest raising two sons alone without their father. Sita does not consent to approve of Valmiki’s biography written on her, which basically serves her husband’s story; the warrior *Ram*, not her. She gets infuriated and tells Valmiki, ‘What occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don’t know. You don’t know my despair. You don’t even know my exhilaration, how it felt— first in the forest and then in Ayodhya—when I was the most beloved woman in creation.’ Divakaruni (2) In her reply, the sage says I wrote what I foresee in the present. The Sage’s reply makes Sita more anxious, and she says:

‘It must have been a god that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess,’ I said drily. ‘For you haven’t understood a woman’s life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another.’ I expected anger, for he’d lavished a lifetime on this book. But not for nothing, he called maharishi, a great sage. Divakaruni (2-3)

The above paragraph reveals Sita at the height of her resilience, which even leads Valmiki to surrender his text into Sita’s hand so that she may rewrite the story of her life, as she is the one who has seen and lived close to everyone whose voices never came out loud and whose presence is always sidelined from the central narrative. Some are forgotten by their husbands, and others are forced to live a life of misery. Sita becomes their mouthpiece and begins to think of writing her autobiography in red ink, chosen by Valmiki. She closes her eyes and feels some voices emerging within her, asking her to share their pain as well, as they are always shown through the eyes of outsiders who are not aware of their situations or

what they have endured all these years. Here, Divakaruni associates voices with power; she shows that only Sita gets the privilege to speak for herself and for them as well in her composition. The voices approach her, whispering, clamouring, and demanding that she write their story as well. Therefore, Sita says:

That I had to still my breath to hear them. Kaikeyi, the second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealousy fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband. (4)

All the voices from sufferers gather and request Sita to raise awareness in the coming generation about their distressful lives. They say, "*write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten, or maligned and used as cautionary tales.*" (4) Sita replies yes and assures the Voices that she will write their story as hers isn't complete without them.

Before the novel begins, Divakaruni, in the prologue section, foregrounds the setting of Sita's life by giving the pen into Sita's hand, and she composes it as Sitayan, giving it a feminine touch. The novel begins in King Janak's palace, picturing Sita's birth, how she comes into the life of her father, and why she is called earth-born. Her secret power or a gift with plants also shows her connection with the earth. The novel starts in the garden where Sita is walking barefoot, accompanied by the chief gardeners, who are telling Sita about the problem with plants that they are not able to cure. Then Sita pats the leaves softly, digs some soil around the roots, and seems to whisper something in their wellness, and soon the gardeners start talking, "Amazing; miraculous; look, they are already healing; I tell you, she's the earth goddess herself, appeared straight out of the ground just to bless us." (5)

Further, the novel discusses the story of how she is acknowledged as the Earth goddess. Seeing the servants overstate the matter, she tells them it is not miraculous; she only treats plants with her best knowledge, as any other human being would. These sayings are always connected with her past, or we could say that this is how she appears on earth, because she is found in the field when her father tills it to level the surface for the yajna, and he sees the infant covered in a gold fabric which is finer than anything the Mithilian weavers could weave or had seen. The king is delighted because he has been childless until now. He gives Sita the virtues of a princess, the name, and the status of an elder daughter of the house of Mithila. At a young age, Sita learns a lesson about the nature of love from her father, who is so kind, compassionate, and generous that he holds her up and always keeps her in his heart with love. In this way, King Janak's nurturing personality nourishes Sita with love and care, which shapes her understanding of love.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, the author reignites Sita's character by highlighting her strange gifts, her knowledge of plants, her ability to cure the sick and dying using herbs, and her resilience, which eventually takes her back to the earth, connecting the dots as to why Sita is called the daughter of the earth.

Continuing with voices, Sita's response to Ahalya's situation is very humane and realistic. When she encounters Ahalya, her story shrinks Sita's heart at the wrongdoing by her husband, Gautam, as well

as lord Indira. Sita's heart overflows with feminine compassion, which ultimately bursts forth in female outrage. Sita connects herself with Ahalya's story, which she finds thought-provoking:

“..., the beautiful, was created by Brahma himself, who then gave her in marriage to Gautam, the ascetic. Things went well—Gautam busy with his austerities, Ahalya devoted to taking care of him—until she came to the notice of Indra. As king of the gods, Indra believed that such a beautiful woman should belong to him. He approached Ahalya, promising her luxuries and pleasures beyond imagining, but she was a virtuous wife and rebuffed him. Indra wasn't ready to give up, however. He waited until a day when the sage went deep into the forest to perform a special yagna. Then he transformed himself magically and, in the guise of Gautam, came to the ashram and took Ahalya to bed. Returning late at night, Gautam ... realized what had happened. In his fury, he cursed Indra...(and)...Ahalya ...For betraying her sacred marital vows for the sake of bodily pleasure, she would be turned into stone.” (129)

The reckless deeds of an educated rishi such as Gautam upset Sita. After hearing the story, Sita is taken aback by Ahalya's forgiveness of her husband and asks Ahalya how it is possible to love someone after they have been distrusted, despite their loyalty and love. “Your husband—he condemned you even before he gave you a chance to speak. You'd been his faithful wife for many years. ...I understand that he did it in anger, that in anger we can lose ourselves. But you—when you were turned back into a woman, you forgave him. ... And do you still love him?” (134). Ahalya looks at Sita mysteriously when she tells Sita that she will find the answer herself, saying something unexpected would happen to her, too. That day, Sita learns an important lesson about love—that once it is wounded, it can never be fully healed. Similarly, Sita loves Rama with the same devotion that Ahalya shows toward her husband. Ahalya's words remain in Sita's heart and later guide her when she goes through the same fate, which helps Sita to make a crucial decision.

The author has portrayed Sita as a feminist. Divakaruni presented how patriarchy is an obstacle to women's liberation. When Ram asks Sita to return to Ayodhya after she is asked to prove her purity again through Agnipariksha. She refuses to accept the same humiliation again and also refuses to compromise her independence to satisfy the male ego, and rejects male support. She calls upon Mother Earth and walks away proudly to the origin from which she was found, withdrawing herself from the role of wife and mother. The final goodbye of Sita is highly appreciated through a feminist lens, in which she chooses her self-respect and dignity over her husband's acceptance. Before her final exit, Sita advises Ram that: “I accept your priorities, and understand why they are so important to you...But I don't agree with you that the private life must be sacrificed for the public one. And that is the final advice that I leave for my children... balance duty with love.” (356)

Conclusion:

By exploring Sita's inner existence- her emotions, ethical struggles, and quiet defiance against injustice- this feminist reinterpretation questions traditional, androcentric readings of the epic narratives. Divakaruni's re-visioning of the Ramayana presents Sita not merely as the perfect wife and mother, but as a layered and thoughtful individual negotiating her independence, responsibilities, and personal desires within a deeply patriarchal society. Through key moments such as her birth, exile, abduction, trial by fire,

and final withdrawal, the narrative highlights her agency, ethical strength, and resistance to unjust expectations imposed upon her. Divakaruni's retelling plays an important role in contemporary debates on gender roles and power by situating *The Forest of Enchantments* within the framework of feminist literary discourse.

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