

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments: Revisiting the Epic from Sita's Perspective"

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Abstract:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest OF Enchantments* is about the retelling of our ancient prestigious epic of Ramayan from Sita's perspective. As an Indian diasporic writer Divakaruni has nostalgia about Indian culture and tradition. The word culture comprises of behaviours and institutions, for its attempts at retelling an ancient epic through the female's perspective. This novel focuses on the self discovery of Sita who is a celebrated female character of ancient India. So, Divakaruni has changed her way of thinking from traditional portrayal of simple and selfless women into modern female characters who is searching for their identity in the patriarchal world.

Keywords: Cultural, Embodiment, Identity, Desire, Courage.

Chitra Banerjee divakaruni is an Indian American author , poet , activist. she received many awards and published 50 magazines including the Atlantic Monthly , New yorker. Her books have been translated into 29 languages including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. She has judged several prestigious awards such as the National Book

Award and the Pen Faulkner Award. The setting of Divakaruni's novels mostly in India and the United States, and often focus on the experiences of South Asian immigrants.

India is a land of culture and strong beliefs in superstition, preserving and praising the culture is a prestige of all countries. Indian Literature is a full of depiction of the myths and legends, myths are one of the segments which serves to determine the Indianness in Indian Literature. Divakaruni uses various techniques in her novels like dream, myth, magic realism, culture. As a woman novelist she has added a new dimension to Indian English novel. Her novel reflects the changing role of Indian women from the traditional mythicised one to the new one of emancipation, modernity and the resultant changes in the social set up.

Divakaruni's major theme centred on her desire to investigate the identity of South Asian women so she has created a new strong woman in her novels. As an Indian woman she has highly influenced by Indian mythology particularly Indian epic Ramayan and Mahabharat. A study of fascinating world of myth gives knowledge to the roots of society and it makes people aware of their religion, social customs, and rituals way of life.

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* is about retelling of Ramayan from Sita's perspective. She clearly portrays the character of Sita as a contemporary woman. Sita is a protagonist of Ramayan. The Indian popular culture showed Sita as a meek, docile, soft, tender, long suffering, self-sacrifice, who is bearing misfortune but Divakaruni's *The Forest OF Enchantment* placed Sita into a different light. She deploys the narratorial voice which has retold the story of Sita in different way as to one closer to the modern times.

The novel focuses on the self-identity of Sita. The self-discovery or self-identity is inevitable as breathing in contemporary Indian fiction. The modern writers have changed the way from the depiction of traditional portrayal of women but they are searching their identity. Divakaruni gives us an unusual interpretations and new exposition about the Indian women's identity.

This study attempts to analyse the self-identity of Sita from Sita's perspective. *The Forest of Enchantment* gives an insight into what happened through the eyes of strong protagonist Sita who is a daughter of earth, later adopted by king Janaka, Sita is a wife of Ram and princess of Ayodhya. In this novel Divakaruni introduces Sita, who lost everything except her babies.

Sita has been living in Valmiki's hermitage with her children, there she eagerly sees a manuscript of Ramayan which has given by Valmiki, she praised Valmiki who clearly captured the description of histories, adventures, weddings, betrayals, death, farewells. Valmiki got all those things from his divine vision. Sita strives hard to make her voice so she asked Valmiki about her part, which no one knows

“When I was alone in the darkness, under a 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 women in creation”. (FOE 2)

Author clearly justifies about Sita's narration of her tale herself; this narration of the protagonist reconstructs the traditional Ramayan into modern Sitayan.

Sita has a knowledge of different subjects, she is an expert in marital arts because her mother queen Sunaina feels that every girl should learn. Sita is entirely different from her sister Urmila. Urmila always wants to play with toys and fond of jewellery but Sita is a keen observer of her father's ruling, her mother who is a counsellor to her father. So, Sita learned how to deal with the troublesome circumstance, from watching the decision of her father. Sita enjoyed the journey with nature, she wanted to feel the plants when she touched the plants, she can feel the healing properties of that plant even she can hear the sounds of plants.

Sita's life after marriage is not a happy one. In Ayodhya Kaikeyi who is the dearest wife of king Dhasaradha, she got boons from her husband that is Ram should go to the forest

where he has to live as hermit for fourteen years and Bharata will be a king of Ayodhya. Being a new bride, this makes her life complicated, Ram agreed to go to the forest he insisted Sita to stay with her mother in law because he felt it is too dangerous for women to live in forest but unexpectedly Sita raised her voice,

“I wanted to say not all women are weak and helpless like you think, for all you know, I might be of help to you”. (FOE 111).

This decision taken by Sita without consulting anyone in the palace, the words of a young woman stunned everyone in the palace, then she accompanies her lord to the forest. By projecting this fact Divakaruni breaks the stereotype and shows the spunky performance of Sita.

During the journey in the forest, Sita was abducted by Ravan a demon king of Lanka. She was dropped under Ashoka tree, he deploys many demonesses to guard the area and prevent Sita from escaping. Sita refuses to need his advances and maintains her chastity. There are so many women some spoke kindly; some spoke to her rudely. Sita knew that her Ram will come to rescue her, she maintains her faith and confidence in the palace. Under the Ashoka tree Sita is exercising about face Ravan, she acknowledges,

“Allow him to pursue you and at the last moment, step sideways and bring up a knee in a sudden movement to the opponent’s groin; when he doubles over, press your thumbs into his eyes to blind him. Or step back as though retreating, and when the opponent lunges at you hit his wind pipe with your hand, held straight as a knife, At the right angle, the impact will break his neck” (FOE 188).

Divakaruni shows Sita as quite courageous who can survive any difficult circumstance, she can easily move forward in spite of obstacles who never give up, the courage that speaks in her journey no matter what the cost our Indian women are doing.

After many adventures, the story leads up to the battle between Ram and Ravan. Finally, Sita is rescued. Ram summons his wife but instead of being blissful at seeing Sita, he feels guilty and shame because his wife has lived in the palace of another man, her purity has been called into question. Sita broken up by his words, she undertakes an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity to Ram and his people. Sita calls upon Agni (the god of fire) to testify her loyal and purity. She said,

“Build me a fire. There’s nothing left for me on this earth now that my husband, Who I love more than my own self”. (FOE 245)

Agni god recognizing Sita’s chastity refuses to consume her. Sita suffered numerous horrors for no other reason than that she is Ram’s wife but Divakaruni’s Sita strikes hard to make her voice in which time to stand up and say enough. She has presented Sita’s agnipariksha episode is a moment of feminist brilliance.

As a part of demolishing the stereotypes, Divakaruni added many new dimensions in the novel which add new features in Sita’s character. When the battle between Ram and Ravan is over, finally fourteen years after Dashrath’s declaration, Ram sat on the throne with his wife Sita. The gossips starting over there in Ayodhya which spoils the reputation of Ram, so he gave order to his brother Lakshman to drop Sita in the forest, near sage Valmiki’s hermitage without informing Sita. Ayodhya again banished Sita into the forest, Sita knows the injustice so, she raised her voice once again. Sita ordered Lakshman,

“You go back and tell him this, Lakshman. He sentenced me to banishment because people were whispering that I might have betrayed him. But he’s the real betrayer, who’s going to sentenced him.” (FOE 317)

Sita walked into the forest, she observed the absence of boundaries and felt for her babies who are the most innocent creatures in the world. Later Sita realises the fact she will

be a single person to raise her children. During the difficult journey she is emotionally strong and positive her mental strength should be praised. She reflects,

“I’ll teach you what you need to know be good human beings, so that you’ll never do to a woman what your father has done to me”. (FOE 317)

Sita and her sons Lav and Kush lives in the shadows of the forest. Sita never rested always smiled with her son’s life which was not easy for her but she handled her difficult situation with hope. This shows that Sita is a female counterpart of supreme being, she is an embodiment of courage, spirit, wisdom, compassion, and endurance. We can thus see Sita will resonance in today’s time.

Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantment* shows Sita as a strong, resilient, positive, symbol of love, courageous. This courage that has been reflected for centuries in the lives of women. Divakaruni’s protagonists not only searching for their identity but they create self-identity. This novel chooses as its medium one of the most extra ordinary woman character of Indian Mythologies, Sita creates everlasting impression in the minds of the readers and showing the path for all women.

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