

**Transfiguration of Sita—Emancipation of Women:
An Elucidation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s
Mythic Novel *The Forest of Enchantments***

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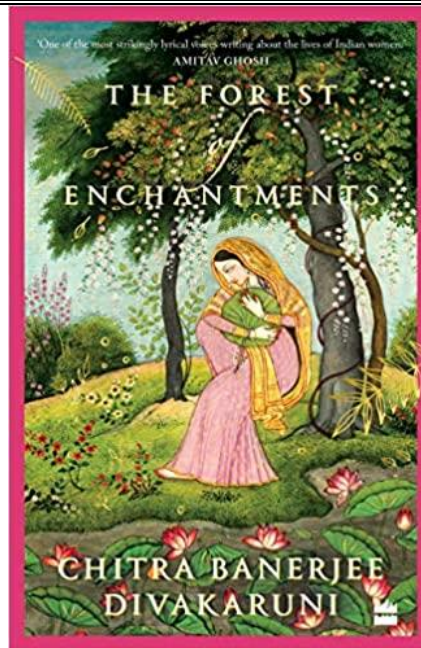
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Abstract

The dominant ideology of a society is primarily formed by its myths. The feminists maintain that myths of almost all the cultures of the world are androcentric. These myths give importance to the male point of view. The prominent ideology is thus patriarchal that neglects female standpoint and treats women as subordinate. The patriarchal ideology is responsible for discrimination against women. To transform the patriarchal ideology and give

significance to female perception, sentiments, pains and experiences the feminist writers began to retell myths. The subversion of the traditional myths and creation of new ones present perspectives that have yet remained ignored. Gynocentric revision of myths for the first time becomes apparent in the writings of second wave western feminist writers. In India the revision of patriarchal myths to present gynocentric alternatives began in 21st century. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies an esteemed position amongst the mythic feminist revisionists who have revised androcentric myths to produce alternatives that are centered on women. In her novel *The Forest of Enchantments* she has generated her own version of the epic Ramayana to impart new interpretation to Sita's story. Sita differs from Valmiki's opinion about herself in his version of Ramayana and therefore, she writes her own *Sitayan*. The intended article explicates how deftly the author, as a mythic feminist revisionist, revises the traditional image of Sita and delineates her from gynocentric point of view.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita, myth, feminist, revision, gynocentric, androcentric.

Myths are deeply significant in the sense that they are an integral part of a culture. It is through myths that a culture validates its customs, rituals, and beliefs. The socio-cultural structures and ideologies of a community are all rooted in its myths. The myths affect how human beings comprehend the world and act in a society: "Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence" (May 15). Myths are typically understood as conventional stories or narratives about social-natural phenomenon or how the world came into existence. M.H. Abrams avers:

In classical Greek, "mythos" signified any story or plot, whether true or invented. In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a **mythology**—a system of heredity stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other super-natural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (230)

They are religious in nature and hold great sacred value. Whether myths are true or not they are considered real by its believers and thus become the integral part of their intellection. Mann justly remarks, "[T]he Myth is the foundation of life..." (374). Myths control every facet of human life.

The feminists around the world claim that myths of all cultures are predominantly androcentric. These myths consign women the position of a subordinate in the society and promote notions about women that aid in the continuation of patriarchy: "Patriarchal religion controls female sexuality in order to control women. This is made possible through myth,

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which teaches submission” (Brandmaier 58).The myths represent women in a dichotomy. They are either classified as timid, compliant and inefficient or as evil and beguiling. The myths that establish these concepts about women are responsible for their oppression. The literature inspired from these myths too proliferate patriarchal ideology that regard women as inferior.

The feminist writers acknowledge the importance of myths and the role they play in establishing discriminatory practices against women in the society and seek to subvert the androcentric myths. They rewrite these myths through application of feminist literary criticism to provide versions that are gynocentric. The women-centric renderings present the female of the androcentric myths in a new light. Instead of the stereotypical portrayal of women as weak, acquiescent, or wicked they are delineated as strong, assertive and well-informed. The female figures that have been marginalized or eliminated from traditional narratives are brought to prominence in the feminist retellings. The revision of myths, by employing feminist literary criticism, helps to create a feminist literature known as feminist revisionist mythology that gives centrality to women’s experiences, sentiments, and issues. The revisionists through retelling of myths aspire to change perception of people about women.

The rewriting of myths from feminist perspective was first undertaken by writers of the west during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s.The feminist revisionists noticed that the myths and biblical narratives are androcentric and indulged in their revision from feminist point of view to bring forth a feminist literature that introduced empowered women. The most prominent contributors of the feminist revisionist mythology in the west are Adrienne Rich, Alicia Ostriker, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Carol Ann Duffy. Since it originated at the time when radical feminism was popular the impact of radical feminist scholars of the second wave like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Mary Daly and Gerda Lerner is evident.

In India the tradition of revising androcentric myths from feminist perspective started in 21st century. The Indian feminist revisionists by subverting the conventional myths that neglect, demean and stereotype women produce gynocentric alternatives in the form of retellings to establish women at the centre of the narrative. Authors like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan and Utkarsh Patel have rewritten myths from feminist perspective. The women in their rewritings are recast as independent, confident, and intellectual individuals who take decisions for themselves and occupy the central position.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Forest of Enchantments* places Sita at the centre of the narrative to retell the story of the epic *Ramayana*. In the novel Sita, the female protagonist of the great epic, composes “the Sitayan” (4) to not only “tell her own tale” (vii)

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but of those women also who are traditionally “*pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales*” (4). She shares the desires, plights, and sufferings of all the women she comes across in her life and who help to shape her. The facts that the traditional renderings have failed to convey are taken up by Divakaruni in her revised version.

Traditionally, Sita has been illustrated as pleasant, modest, forbearing, acquiescent and resigned. She is a prototype that the women are expected to follow blindly. In article “Sita: A Personal Journey” Namita Gokhale appropriately posits, “Sita, in our prevalent idiom, is weak, oppressed, a natural victim. Considering that Sri Rama’s wife—Vaidehi, Sita, Ramaa, call her what you will—is the primary archetype for all Indian women, a role model pushed and perpetuated by a predominantly patriarchal society . . .”(xiii). Sita has been portrayed and conceived from an androcentric standpoint, a view that benefits men. Divakaruni in her novel seeks to deliver not only a gynocentric version of the epic but also transforms the way Sita is perceived. The author articulates, “I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her. I sensed that Sita was more than what we took her to be” (Divakaruni viii). She has revised and recast the traditional image of Sita and presented her as an emancipated woman.

In the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* Valmiki gives his Ramayana for evaluation and approval to Sita since he believes it to be her story too. However, Sita finds the account of her experiences, desires, joys, and sorrows missing. On being questioned, Valmiki inspires her to write her own story, “‘You must write that story yourself, Ma,’ he said, ‘for only you know it’” (3). He also provides her with the things necessary to write it. Sita composes her *Sitayan* with the red ink. Red is a colour which holds high significance for any woman as it is “the colour of menstruation and childbirth...” (3). For Indian women it is also “the colour of the marriage mark that changes women’s lives...” (4). Additionally, it reminds Sita “of the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity in the palace of the demon king?” (4). The use of red ink to produce a gynocentric writing brings to mind the revisionist fiction of Anita Diamant *The Red Tent*. In it the author revises the biblical tale of Dinah and presents “a world of women, where the men fade into the background. The red tent to which women retire when they menstruate or are ill or for childbirth takes centre stage in this re-imagining. And it is in the words and memories of the women that the story unfolds” (Chacko). The colour **red** is meaningful as feminists globally employ it as a motif to create a female space and literature.

In *The Forest of Enchantments* Sita recounts the story of how she was found by King Janaka while tilling a field next to the palace to prepare it for yagna. While ploughing the land King Janaka came across a newborn baby who he brought up as his own daughter: “Though by virtue of my upbringing I was a princess, Sita, eldest daughter of the house of Mithila, in the kingdom of Vaideha, no one knew who I was by birth” (Divakaruni 6). Sita is

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well-known among people for her healing abilities. Through her touch both plants and humans seem to recover. People come to Mithila from faraway places to seek treatment from her. She has knowledge of plants and herbs which she uses to cure people and they convey their honour by calling her a goddess.

Sita is trained in martial arts, a male-dominated field and she is also proficient in weaponry. Kaikeyi who has been a fighter invites her to a duel with swords. She accepts her call for combat to magnify and vindicate the honour of her homeland and her mother who has arranged the training of self-defense for her: “I won’t give up. For the sake of my mother, who had pushed against tradition to make sure I learnt to defend myself” (82). It has been a good fight between them but ultimately Sita wins the duel. Kaikeyi, being a good warrior, admires her: “‘Finally, there is another woman in the royal family with brains and guts—and good looks, too,’ she said as we parted” (84). Divakaruni’s Sita is not meek and weak, she is skilled in martial arts and self-defense which is considered a male-centred activity in a patriarchal society.

When Ram is banished to the forest for fourteen years Lakshman successfully persuades Ram to allow him to accompany him. Sita also tries to coax Ram to allow her to give him company in the forest but he does not accede to her demand. In a patriarchal system, women are not permitted to go out of the female domain that has been prescribed for them. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* appositely comments, “A woman is shut up in a kitchen or a boudoir, and one is surprised her horizon is limited; her wings are cut, and then she is blamed for not knowing how to fly” (731). Ram asks her to take care of his parents in his absence and adds that it is her prime duty to live at home and look after his parents. When Sita intensely expresses her wish to accompany him in the forest he retorts, “What folly is this? You can’t possibly come with me. You’re a woman. It’s too dangerous. I won’t allow it” (Divakaruni 111). Divakaruni’s Sita is resolute and unswerving, she strongly contends, “[N]ot all women are weak and helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you” (111). She continues to put her arguments and raises the questions regarding the duty of a faithful spouse:

You’re a fine one to talk of duty!’ I said, allowing just enough anger into my voice, ‘If I’m not misremembering my wedding vows, didn’t I state that my foremost duty as your faithful spouse was to follow you, even to the ends of the earth? To be with you in riches and poverty? To take care of you the best I can? Isn’t that what you just told your mother to do for her husband? You can’t deprive me of my wifely right. (112)

She rightly perceives that Ram accords more significance to the concepts of duty, loyalty and right. Ram does not argue further and has to concede her wishes.

In the forest Surpanakha approaches Ram flirtatiously that, along with Sita and Lakshman, irks him increasingly. Surpanakha makes advances forthrightly, “I really like you. So, I’m asking you to be my mate” (146). Her frank love proposal enrages them. Due to cultural difference they have taken it as an indecent proposal and start mocking her but Sita does not like their making fun of her: “Admittedly, the girl had gone beyond the norms of maidenly behavior, offering herself in this manner to a man she barely knew, but perhaps the rules of conduct were different for asuras” (148). It angers Surpanakha and she rushes towards Sita who is already prepared to counterattack, “I braced myself in warrior stance, knees slightly bent, hands fisted. Asura or not, I was confident that I could handle her, turning her strength against herself” (149). Sita is not timid or weak, she is powerful enough to face any perilous situation in life. Sita does not like Surpanakha’s mutilation. Ram defends Lakshman that he has spared Surpanakha’s life because she is a woman. Sita reacts, “I didn’t think that living with a mutilated face was any easier than a clean death, especially for a woman who had so badly wanted a mate” (151). Sita considers mutilation of Surpanakha as a very harsh act on the part of Lakshman.

Sita has “the fortitude to not beg for mercy” (168) even at the time of her abduction by Ravana. She endeavours to set herself free from the grasp of Ravana by attacking him, “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). Instead of giving up and succumbing to despair she grapples with him to release herself. Even in his captivity, “Each morning I told myself, *I will not give up*” (188). She is valorous and resolute enough and always conscious of the fact that Ravana makes his sinister efforts to demoralize her “so I decided to fight it with all I had” (187). Ravana has deputed the rakshasis who apply their own menacing ways to agonise her, but Sita keeps herself calm with the help of the meditation and by focusing on the exercises of her self-defense.

After Ravana’s death Sita is carried in the palanquin to meet Ram at the seashore. She pays obeisance and “reached for his hands, he took a step back and crossed his arms” (241). He does not welcome Sita. He just informs her that they have killed Ravana and thus they have completed their duty. She is free to go anywhere she likes: “‘It was my duty to rescue you,’ Ram repeated patiently, as though speaking to a child. ‘But I cannot take you back to Ayodhya with me. Ravan abducted you from my home. You’ve lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you’ve had with him—’” (242). Sita is aware of the patriarchal system in which a woman is asked to prove her innocence and that she does not hold sway over it. She knows that no one can save a woman abandoned by her husband but in such a predicament she determines to reclaim her dignity: “Therefore, I’ve decided to end my life today” (245). With this steadfast resolution “I stepped into the blaze” (245). However, Sita is saved by fire-god himself by declaring her innocence but she has to go through a crippling trauma: “My agony was timeless—I don’t know in terms of human measurement, how long it lasted. But I do know this: in that agonizing trial, I was

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transformed” (246). This utmost endurance changed her completely into an accomplished person: “By the time the gods intervened, I was no longer just the Sita of old: daughter of earth, strong and silent, patient and deep, forbearing and forgiving. I was something else, too” (246). She has been the daughter of earth but now she is the daughter of fire-god also.

After the completion of the yagna and acceptance of Lav and Kush as the heir of kingdom of Ayodhya Sita has also been invited by Ram. She is carried in the palanquin to meet Ram, this time in the court of Ayodhya. Sita is informed “that Ram is planning another agni-pariksha for you” (352). She determines to meet Ram not only as the daughter of Earth but as the daughter of fire also. She avows, “I only know that I cannot—will not—do what he asks” (353). Divakaruni through her Sitayan elucidates the truth regarding the life of the oppressed women in a patriarchal society and gives voice to those who have been forced to the fringe. Lav and Kush, both the sons of Sita, sing Sita’s Sitayan before Ram who listens to it attentively: “They’re singing the pages I’d written in my lonely darkness, out of the need to give voice to all of us who were pushed to the edges. Misjudged, misunderstood. My truth, and the truth of the women whose lives touched mine for better or worse. Their laughter and tears, their triumph and suffering, their blessings, and curses” (353-354). Ram urges Sita to come back to Ayodhya to live with them. He appeals her to come for the completion of the family: “But there’s one thing you must do first—you must go through the test by fire here in the court room so that the sages and attending kings and ministers of the court can witness the fire-god vouching for your innocence and purity. In this way, the citizens of Ayodhya will be satisfied for good” (355).

Sita raises questions against this injustice and illuminates the issues and his duties that he could not fulfill. She alleges that he, as a husband and a king, has not discharged his duties with fairness. She further accuses that he has not deliberated about the atrocious impact on the generations to come. When his judgements would be taken as precedent and wives would be punished brutally even for their slight digressions. Sita, in the capacity of a citizen of Ayodhya raises the pertinent questions in the court of Ram:

O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you’ve always placed your role as king ahead of your role as husband. In this court, which has been set up to dispense justice to all citizens, I ask you this, for I’ve been a citizen of Ayodhya too: Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered? Did you stop to think—as a wise king would—that there would always be people who gossip, even in the best-run kingdoms, for it’s their nature? Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny? Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness? (356)

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She rejects his dictate of proving her innocence again. She appeals, “O Mother, O Father, all my life I’ve suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign” (357). She feels a powerful energy and with an ear-shattering noise, a crack under her feet. The high flames have surrounded to shield her. No one including Ram could stop her from going away from this mortal world.

The mythic feminist revisionists not only revise the traditional mythic narratives, but they also situate the overlooked characters in the centre of their retellings. Sita in the Valmiki *Ramayana* has not been provided much space in comparison to the male protagonist, Ram. Meghnad Desai in “Sita and Some Other Women from the Epics” correctly opines, “As a wife and indeed as a character in the Ramayana, Sita is strangely absent. Valmiki allows her very little space. She is barely mentioned in Bala Kanda, even when Rama wins her in the *swayamvar*, since Valmiki is more enamoured of the men in the story—Vishwamitra, Janaka, Rama—than Sita...” (3-4). There are several *Kandas* or *Sargs* where she has not been mentioned at all; more attention has been paid to other male figures in the epic: “In total, Sita appears in seventy-six sargs out of 645, accounting for barely 10 per cent of the Valmiki *Ramayana*. I may have missed out one or two of her appearances, but the sheer absence of Sita throughout the Ramayana is noteworthy” (4).

Divakaruni focuses more attention on Sita and thus brings the ignored character into limelight. In place of Ramayan she calls it Sitayan which has been written by Sita and sung by her sons before Ram in his royal court at Ayodhya. The author portrayed Sita as an accomplished and transformed figure who does not succumb to the menacing impact of the patriarchal beliefs. “In Dialogue: Sita’s Voice” Namita Gokhale rightly comments, “Sita rejects the patriarchal power system that has so devalued her” (87). She refuses to accept the test to prove her innocence and purity. She is unyielding, tenacious, strong and a decision maker as opposed to acquiescent, weak and sheeple. She is an expert in martial arts and a great healer who not only saves and heals the self but others also.

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