



Exploring the Complexities of Contemporary Women's Lives: Duty, Betrayal, Integrity, and Honor in The Forest of Enchantments

Dr. Veer Singh

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Himalayan Garhwal University, Pokhra, District Pauri Garhwal, Uttarakhand

‘This was exactly my hope in writing The Forest of Enchantments-let’s truly see the women of our epics for the strong, complex beings they are..’

(Divakaruni, Twitter, Dec 1,2019)

ABSTRACT

Indian sages used to write great poetry and drama etc. on almost all aspects of human life. To name a few, mysticism, spirituality, warfare, social structure, human behaviour, and whatnot, they delved deep on everything related to mankind and blended them with amazing stories. Vikramōrvaśīyam, Abhijñānaśākuntalam, Ratnavali are prime examples to prove that gender and related issues have always been central to storytelling in Indian literature. The Rāmāyaṇa traditions of South India and Southeast Asia are the matter of discussion and examination at multiple levels. Chitra Banerjee’s Divakaruni weaves the fabric of her Sitayan with strings essentially pulled out from Sage Valmiki’s Ramayan. She skilfully achieves the twofold task of adhering to the originality of this ancient text and introducing a renewed perception through which this epic could be reconsidered as base for moral standings. The present novel aims at depicting feminist perspective of the present era where a woman is expressive and represents peripheral voices. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has revealed that Sita is a strong lady and through all her choices she has empowered Rama in one way or the other. She is the real protagonist who has made her decisions with mindfulness. Sita is portrayed as a complete woman of 21st century who is full of self-confidence, resilience, self-esteem and bravery. The present paper focuses on challenges and assumptions faced by Sita during her journey. She is a reflection of contemporary women as well as artefact of intellectual self-confrontation.

Keywords: Sita, feminist, Empowerment, resilience, self-confrontation

Introduction

The sacred epic had been written ages ago yet the legendary tale continues to find prominence in every form of art, and continues to overwhelm us even today. The deeply philosophical ideas that perpetuate throughout the epic have a lot to teach us about the art of living. Chitra Banerjee 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, reflecting 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.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American author, poet, activist who received many awards, her books have been translated into 29 languages, and 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. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has used feminist approach to represent Sita's world where she is being presented as a modest compromiser.

With this aspiration Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni sat down to rewrite a story. Instead of repeating the Ramayana, the much sung saga of Rama's heroism, she decides to write the Sitayan, the untold story of Sita. Acclaimed as one of the memorable books of 2019, *The Forest of Enchantments* is called 'A sita's version of Ramayan...'. Divakaruni, an Indian-American poet and writer says her novel about Sita was in planning for almost ten years after the publication of her novel on the Mahabharat, *The Palace of Illusions*. She says it was the longest time she had ever spent 'obsessing over a book' and also that she has worked the hardest on these two novels. *The Palace of Illusions* was the telling of the Mahabharat from Draupadi's perspective and Divakaruni expressed hope that that her labour of (love) would not go in vain, for her intention was 'to make Sita and Draupadi human, brave and inspiring at the same time. In the Author's Note, Divakaruni writes:

I'm going to write the story of Sita, I said, because I've always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just like Panchaali, my undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats. She'll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them."

The images, characters, facts, and ideals of Ramayana are deep-seated in Indian consciousness and Banerjee infuses with it the enchanting quality of her storytelling to recreate them from Sita's perspective. Her motifs are familiar yet molded to reverberate her stance. *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), is a re-telling of the most eminent epic of Hindu mythology Ramayana, written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She is an Indian-American author, poet and the Professor of Writing at the University of Houston. She is a versatile writer who aims at portraying present day conditions widespread in the world. Her narration have made her a social revolutionary who depicts women as strong and thoughtful and also discusses about famous female characters of Indian mythology and writes about them with empathy. The novel begins with Sita's idyllic life in Mithila as the favourite daughter of king Janak, who is trained in the martial arts and also confesses to have miraculous healing powers over Nature. Her days pass merrily gambolling around the palace and extensive gardens with her younger sister Urmila. They are soon married off to the young princes of Ayodhya after which they enter a phase of life fraught with palace intrigues and jealous politics between the three queens of Dashrath, king of Ayodhya. The plight of Draupadi depicted in *The palace of Illusion* and Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Her works shows real depiction of humanist disapproval against magnificent avarice at large and in particular against the patriarchal culture. In Ramayana Lord Rama is presented as yug purush. Lord Rama is instilled with all the powers related to mind as well as body whereas Sita is presented as follower of Lord Rama. She is devotee wife, an epitome of womanhood with all traits of modern women who supports her husband in all the decisions and conditions. In the present work, Sita narrates her own story in her own voice and also exhibits her ecstasy as a royal woman who confronts, joy as well as sorrow with spirit and resilience. If Rama is a yug purush in Ramayana so Sita is a yug stree in Sitayan. Sita is a true protagonist of the novel. Though she shares a marginal position in a patriarchal yet she confronts the pain of herself as well as others who have suffered oppression. She is a royal member but she also has an insider's knowledge of how coercion functions. When she calls mother Earth to absorb her, she affirms- "Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, NO MORE!" (TFE)

Swami Vivekananda was right when he observed that the story of Sita will be present in the mind of Indians especially Hindus even if all our mythology may vanish and the Vedas depart because 'Sita has gone into the very vitals of our race...we are all children of Sita'. This justifies the interest in the life and history of Sita in all succeeding ages after Valmiki wrote about her in his epic, but very few have been able to delve deeper into the psyche of Sita. She is a true embodiment who loves to celebrate independence of 21st century. In the beginning of the novel we find that Sita is not satisfied with Valmiki's version of Ramayana . She says

"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" (TFE).

At this Valmiki answers you should write your own version. As a result she becomes a story teller and narrates her own story. She has a purpose to narrate her own story as she doesn't want to look a marginalised character who has leaded a miserable life. Through her voice Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tries to reveal the regal past. She gives voice to those who have been silenced and marginalised throughout mythology, including women. Contemporary women reflect wisdom, understanding, intelligence and self confidence. Though It becomes difficult for Sita to Write her own narrative as moment she starts writing she feels that they are too confusing yet she holds her breath and tries to comprehend them :

"Voices. Some clamouring, some tentative, some whispering, so that I had to still my breath to hear them (TFE).

Sita has suffered pain of exile throughout her life as first she left her father's home, and then accompanied her husband in forest for fourteen long years; she has been uprooted again from her home as she was considered impure. She has to endure the pain of abduction with no fault of hers. Though she is not as great as her husband, who is considered as Maryada Purshottam yet she is embodiment of perfection. Sita while 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)

Sita has accepted abduction, humiliation, exile and death as a winner. Nabneeta Dev Sen; “Sita...lends dignity to suffering makes forbearance a heroic quality. This is what makes a role model for Indian women.”

Like modern women Sita tries to create her own identity. She has the capacity to take her own decisions and so, when Rama declined her offer to accompany him in forest during exile as it could not be safe for woman she thought; “not all woman out there are weak and helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you.” (TFE).

Her understanding of self is more important and she knows that she is a warrior and can safeguard her dignity. She has learnt martial art from her mother in Mithila. She has also lifted up the Bow of Shivdhanush many times and that too with ease, though no one else was able to lift the same except Rama. There is an interesting observation made by Dinesh Prasad Saklani in his essay, Valmiki Ramayana and the Case of Sita in the Historical Context. He says that the original Ramayana could not have had the instances of cruelty and injustice shown by Ram towards Sita, such as the Agnipariksha or her banishment and these incidents are clearly interpolations.. Saklani writes,

Valmiki, author of the Ramayana, composed his work on the basis of ancient stories current in the society.....If Valmiki was a contemporary of Rama, as goes the Indian tradition, then the oldest Ramayana was sung in Vedic dialect, for Rama belonged to Vedic age”

Sita was ostracized by Rama though she was pregnant at that time and also devastated by the banishment as she has never expected that she could face exile that too when her husband is the king. Rama has fulfilled her duty as king and sacrificed his personal life for the sake of people. She has not accepted his decision, as a citizen of Ayodhya. She loves her self –esteem and when Indira, sage Valmiki’s wife, counsels her to,

“Remember all that you’ve survived. Behave like the queen you are. No one can take your dignity away from you. You lose it only by your own actions”

She tries to understand and accept the things the way they are and she does not want to live in fantasy and imagination. She desires to know herself from her own situation. Thus she is the

author of her own story. As Alice Walker has stated In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, "The writer—like the musician or painter—must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will never discover what is needed (by everyone) to be known. Yet the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account"

Sita too finds her true personality and explore her own self. At the end of the novel Sita has been asked again to prove her purity by giving fire test. She is not a woman who doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. She asks: "for I have been a citizen of Ayodhya too: did you act justly when you sent me away to forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered?" Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness?"

She declines the offer and declares that she doesn't want to set a wrong example as people will use this action forever to judge other innocent woman. She doesn't want that the contemporary women succumb to prove their innocence and purity every time the society demands. She states;

"For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!"

The issue of patriarchy vs. women's liberation features strongly in Divakaruni's presentation. Sita's rejection of Ram's appeal to come back to Ayodhya after she has been subjected to the humiliation of the agnipariksha and final banishment from the kingdom touches the highest point of feminist independence where there is no compromise in the refusal to appease the male ego and where there is a complete rejection of the need for male support. Ahalya's decision to adopt silence for the rest of her life is small compared to that of Sita to subsume herself into the lap of her mother earth and walk proudly away from her role of wife and mother.

Thus to conclude Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has given a new narrative and possibilities through Sita. She has represented her as a wise woman who assumes in the very beginning that Valmiki's narrative must have been told by a masculine power. She states,

"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."

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has successfully captured the richness as well as the complexities of life woven in the social fabric. We knew Sita as devotee wife of Lord Rama wife and queen of Ayodhya but Chitra's version has presented her as reflection of contemporary women. She is a woman who stands for her self – esteem and endures the entire struggle that life offers with unattainable vigour. As Amrita Satapathy in book review states, "In fact the beauty of the book lies in the fact that the author cleverly and subtly shows that all of Sita's decisions- be it her

choices or her sacrifices or her resentments, were instrumental in building Lord Ram's political, spiritual and social abilities". Thus Sita is an incarnation of patience that is associated with spiritual, psychological, strength, bravery, heroism and self-discipline that every contemporary woman possesses. Her plight in this mortal plane has left many questions unresolved and would serve as an intense point of contention.

Works Cited:

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. Harper Collins, 2019. *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel*. Picador India, 2008

Sen, Nabaneeta Dev. *Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla*, India International Centre Quarterly Vol. 24, No. 2/3, pp. 163-177.

Saklani, Dinesh Prasad. *Valmiki Ramayan and the Case of Sita in Historical Context*. Spring Magazine on English Literature, Vol 4, Number, 2018. ISSN (Online): 2455-4715. 20,2018

Satapathy, Amrita. *The Forest of Enchantments: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sitayan*. International Journal of English :Literature, Language and Skills. Vol.8, no.2, July 2019. Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. 1983. London: Phoenix, 2005. www.chitradivakaruni.com