Beyond the Agni Pariksha: Reimagining Sita's Strength in Chitra Banerjee's Divakruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* as a feminist retelling of the *Ramayana*, reclaiming Sita's voice and agency. Unlike traditional versions that portray Sita as a passive symbol of virtue, Divakaruni presents her as a complex individual who questions societal norms, experiences deep emotional conflicts, and ultimately asserts her self-worth. Through a first-person narrative, the novel humanizes Sita, highlighting her struggles with love, duty, exile, and rejection. By comparing *The Forest of Enchantments* with other modern retellings, such as Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, this paper examines how Divakaruni adds emotional depth and autonomy to Sita's character. The novel critiques patriarchal structures, offering a fresh perspective on gender roles in mythology. Sita's ultimate act of self-liberation challenges the traditional portrayal of her submission, reframing her as a figure of resilience and defiance. Through this analysis, the paper argues that *The Forest of Enchantments* transforms the *Ramayana* into a contemporary feminist narrative, making Sita's story more relevant to modern readers and contributing to the ongoing reinterpretation of mythological texts.

Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is a poignant retelling of the *Ramayana*, narrated from the perspective of Sita. Unlike traditional versions that primarily focus on Rama's heroism, this novel reclaims Sita's voice, offering an intimate and emotionally resonant account of her journey. Through lyrical prose and a deeply introspective narrative, Divakaruni portrays Sita as more than just a dutiful wife and devoted queen—she is a woman of strength, agency, and resilience. Set against the backdrop of love, exile, betrayal, and self-discovery, *The Forest of Enchantments* explores themes of gender, power, and personal sacrifice. By giving Sita the space to express her joys, sorrows, and struggles, the novel challenges patriarchal interpretations of the epic and presents a nuanced, feminist reimagining of her story. With its rich storytelling and emotional depth, this novel stands as a significant contribution to the growing body of mythological retellings that seek to highlight the voices of women long overshadowed by history.

Mythological retellings serve as a bridge between ancient narratives and contemporary audiences, allowing these timeless stories to remain relevant across generations. By reinterpreting myths through different lenses, authors challenge dominant perspectives, giving voice to marginalized characters and exploring themes that resonate with modern sensibilities. As Margaret Atwood notes, *"Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives—they explore our desires, fears, and moral dilemmas."* (Atwood, 2005)

Retellings also play a crucial role in cultural evolution by adapting traditional narratives to align with contemporary social and political contexts. According to A.K. Ramanujan, myths are not static; rather, they are *"endlessly retold and reinterpreted in every generation, acquiring new meanings while retaining their core."* (Ramanujan, 1991) In this way, reinterpretations like *The Forest of Enchantments* allow for a more inclusive and diverse engagement with ancient epics, ensuring that perspectives once overlooked—such as those of women—are finally heard.

Feminist retellings of mythology also challenge patriarchal structures embedded in traditional narratives. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, *"Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."* (Beauvoir, 1949) By giving Sita her own voice, Divakaruni's novel subverts this male-centric gaze, allowing readers to experience the *Ramayana* through a deeply personal and female-centered

perspective. Through these retellings, mythology continues to evolve, allowing each generation to reinterpret the past in a way that speaks to their present realities. They are not mere repetitions of old tales but dynamic reimagining that invite critical engagement and foster a deeper understanding of cultural heritage.

This paper explores how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagines Sita's character, presenting her as an autonomous and emotionally complex figure rather than a passive symbol of virtue and devotion. Traditional versions of the *Ramayana* often portray Sita primarily in relation to Rama—depicting her as the ideal wife who endures suffering with silent resilience. However, Divakaruni's retelling gives Sita her own voice, allowing her to narrate her story, express her inner conflicts, and challenge patriarchal norms.

By analyzing key aspects of Sita's characterization—such as her agency, emotional depth, and ultimate self-liberation—this paper highlights how *The Forest of Enchantments* serves as a feminist reinterpretation of the epic. The novel not only reclaims Sita's perspective but also critiques the rigid gender roles imposed by the original narrative. As a result, this retelling invites readers to view mythology through a more inclusive and nuanced lens, demonstrating the importance of revisiting ancient texts to uncover voices that have long been silenced.

The character of Sita has been a central yet often passive figure in various tellings of the *Ramayana*. While traditionally depicted as the embodiment of ideal womanhood—devoted, self-sacrificing, and unwavering in her loyalty to Rama—this novel offers a refreshing reinterpretation. By presenting the story from Sita's perspective, the novel redefines her role, giving her agency, emotional depth, and a powerful voice.

In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed as the epitome of dharma (*righteousness*) and *pativrata* (devotion to one's husband). Her character is largely defined by her unwavering love for Rama and her endurance through trials, including her abduction by Ravana, the *Agni Pariksha* (trial by fire), and her eventual exile. Other versions, such as Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* and Kamban's Tamil *Ramavataram*, reinforce her role as a virtuous and obedient wife, often emphasizing her suffering as a testament to her purity and strength. While some regional retellings, like the *Adbhut Ramayana* and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga, offer alternate perspectives that grant Sita more autonomy, mainstream

narratives have largely focused on her as a figure of patience and sacrifice rather than as an independent individual with personal desires and agency.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni reclaims Sita's narrative, transforming her from a passive sufferer into an active, thinking, and feeling woman. Sita is not just Rama's wife; she is a warrior in her own right, a woman who questions injustice and someone who deeply experiences love, betrayal, and self-discovery. Unlike the traditional portrayals, Divakaruni's Sita exhibits a sense of agency, making conscious choices rather than merely enduring fate. She questions the rigid expectations imposed on women, challenges Rama's decisions, and ultimately chooses self-respect over societal approval. Her exile in Valmiki's ashram is not just an act of resignation but a declaration of independence, allowing her to raise her sons on her own terms.

One of the most striking elements of this novel is its first-person narrative, which allows Sita to tell her own story. Unlike earlier versions where Sita's thoughts and emotions are often interpreted by male narrators, Divakaruni places Sita at the center, enabling her to express her joys, fears, frustrations, and desires directly. This shift in perspective transforms the epic from a tale of Rama's heroism to an intimate and deeply personal exploration of Sita's journey. Through this retelling, Sita becomes a fully realized character with her own struggles and triumphs, rather than a mere symbol of virtue. By giving Sita her own voice, Divakaruni not only challenges patriarchal interpretations of the *Ramayana* but also redefines Sita as a woman of agency, intelligence, and resilience.

This novel is a deeply feminist retelling of the *Ramayana*, offering a perspective that challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms. By giving Sita agency, a voice, and emotional complexity, the novel transforms her from a passive sufferer into an empowered individual. The narrative questions societal expectations of women, redefines notions of duty and sacrifice, and highlights Sita's resilience in the face of injustice. Unlike conventional portrayals of Sita, where she is largely defined by her devotion and endurance, Divakaruni's Sita actively makes choices that shape her destiny. She does not simply follow Rama into exile out of blind obedience but sees it as an opportunity to support him and experience the world on her own terms. Even when abducted by Ravana, she refuses to be a helpless victim—she asserts her dignity, resists his advances, and relies on her own strength to survive.

Her greatest act of agency comes at the novel's end when she refuses to prove her purity again through another *Agni Pariksha*. Instead of seeking validation from Rama or the kingdom, she reclaims control over her narrative by choosing to leave the world on her own terms. This moment, where she calls upon Mother Earth to take her back, is a powerful feminist assertion of self-worth, challenging the expectation that a woman's virtue must always be proven and judged by men.

Divakaruni's retelling critically examines the patriarchal structures that govern Sita's life and the lives of other women in the epic. Through Sita's perspective, the novel highlights the injustices faced by women, not just in the royal court but in society at large. Sita questions why women must always sacrifice their desires for their husbands, why their voices are silenced, and why their suffering is glorified as virtue. The novel also portrays other women from the *Ramayana*—such as Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, and Urmila—with more depth, showing how each of them struggles within a system that limits their choices. By doing so, Divakaruni expands the feminist critique beyond Sita's personal journey, illustrating how deeply ingrained patriarchy is in both myth and history.

One of the most striking elements of this novel is its portrayal of Sita's suffering—not as a test of virtue but as a deeply human experience. Her pain is not just physical or circumstantial; it is emotional and psychological. She grapples with feelings of love and betrayal, loyalty and self-respect, longing and disillusionment. Despite enduring immense pain—her abduction, public humiliation, exile while pregnant, and ultimate separation from Rama—Sita does not succumb to despair. Instead, she transforms her suffering into strength, raising her sons independently and refusing to let society dictate her worth. This resilience makes her a symbol of quiet but undeniable power, showing that endurance does not mean submission but the ability to rise above adversity on one's own terms.

Through its feminist undertones, this novel challenges traditional interpretations of the *Ramayana* and reclaims Sita's story as one of strength and self-determination. Divakaruni's retelling not only humanizes Sita but also calls into question the cultural narratives that have long confined women to roles of sacrifice and obedience. By giving Sita her own voice and agency, the novel serves as a powerful feminist reimagining of one of the most revered epics in Indian mythology. Throughout the novel Sita grapples with profound internal conflicts, torn between her deep love for Rama and her sense of self-worth. As a woman bound by duty yet yearning for respect and autonomy, she undergoes immense emotional and psychological turmoil. Her experiences of exile, motherhood, and ultimate rejection challenge her beliefs about love and sacrifice, leading to her most defining act of self-

liberation. Sita's love for Rama is central to her character, but Divakaruni's retelling emphasizes that this love is not blind. She adores him as a husband and partner, yet she struggles with the realization that his duty to his kingdom often takes precedence over his duty to her.

Her internal conflict intensifies when Rama demands she prove her purity through the *Agni Pariksha* (trial by fire). Though she submits, her suffering is evident: *"How many times must a woman prove her worth? And to whom?"* (Divakaruni, 2019) Here, Sita's pain is not only personal but symbolic of the struggles faced by countless women whose love is tested by societal expectations.

Sita's second exile—abandoned by Rama while pregnant—is one of the most heart-wrenching moments in the novel. Unlike her first exile, which she chose to undertake with Rama out of love, this one is imposed upon her as a punishment for doubts cast by his subjects. The injustice of this moment is emphasized in her words: *"A woman's truth is never enough unless a man vouches for it."* (Divakaruni, 2019) Despite her suffering, Sita finds strength in raising her sons, Luv and Kush, as a single mother in Valmiki's ashram. Motherhood, for Sita, is both a solace and a burden. She pours her love into her children, yet she never stops longing for justice. Unlike traditional portrayals that depict Sita as enduring her exile without complaint, Divakaruni gives her a voice to express her heartbreak and righteous anger.

The climax of Sita's internal struggle culminates in her ultimate act of defiance—her decision to leave the mortal world on her own terms. When Rama, after years of separation, asks her to undergo yet another test of purity before being accepted back into the palace, she refuses. Instead of surrendering to yet another unjust trial, Sita calls upon Mother Earth, who opens up to embrace her. This act is not an escape but a final assertion of agency—she chooses her own destiny rather than allowing society or even Rama to dictate it. As Divakaruni writes, *"In the end, a woman must choose herself. Even if it means breaking the heart of the man she loves."* (Divakruni 2019) This moment redefines Sita's story, transforming her from a symbol of suffering into one of empowerment.

The *Ramayana* has been retold and reinterpreted numerous times, with each version offering a unique perspective on its characters and themes. While traditional narratives focus largely on Rama's heroism, modern retellings have sought to highlight the voices of women, particularly Sita. Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* stands out in its deeply personal, introspective portrayal of Sita, granting her agency, emotional depth, and a voice of her own. Comparing this novel with other contemporary

retellings, such as Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* and Volga's *The Liberation of Sita*, reveals how each author reimagines Sita and the larger narrative of the *Ramayana* through a feminist lens.

In *Sita's Sister* (2014), Kavita Kane shifts the focus from Sita to her lesser-known sibling, Urmila, who is often overlooked in traditional tellings of the *Ramayana*. While Sita follows Rama into exile, Urmila is left behind in Ayodhya, enduring her own silent suffering. Kane's novel presents Urmila as an intellectual, independent woman who struggles with the expectations placed upon her as Lakshmana's wife. In contrast, *The Forest of Enchantments* centers Sita's experiences, emotions, and struggles, portraying her not as a submissive wife but as an individual who questions and defies societal norms.

Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) offers a radically feminist reimagining, where Sita meets other women from the *Ramayana*—Surpanakha, Ahalya, Renuka, and Urmila—who help her break free from the patriarchal constraints imposed upon her. Each of these women shares their own experiences of suffering and resilience, allowing Sita to see her life through a different lens. Unlike *The Forest of Enchantments*, which remains largely within the framework of the epic while offering a more personal and emotional depth to Sita's character, Volga's work actively deconstructs the *Ramayana* and imagines an alternative ending where Sita achieves complete liberation from traditional roles.

In traditional *Ramayana* narratives, Sita is often portrayed as the ideal wife, whose virtue and patience define her. The focus remains on Rama's journey, his heroism, and his moral dilemmas, while Sita's experiences are largely seen through the lens of her devotion to him. In contrast, Divakaruni's novel allows Sita to be the storyteller, shifting the narrative focus entirely to her emotions, choices, and struggles. Unlike male-centric versions where Sita's suffering is depicted as a test of her virtue, this novel portrays her pain as deeply human, questioning the very idea that women must endure suffering to prove their worth.

While many retellings acknowledge Sita's trials, Divakaruni goes further by portraying her internal conflicts with depth and nuance. Instead of being a silent sufferer, this Sita expresses her doubts, desires, and frustrations. Her love for Rama is not unquestioning; she deeply feels the weight of his choices and grapples with the injustice of her exile and rejection. This emotional complexity makes her a more relatable and compelling character compared to the one-dimensional portrayals in many male-centric versions. Most *Ramayana* versions end with Sita's return to the earth, but they often depict this

moment as an act of submission or divine fate. This novel, however, frames it as an act of defiance. Sita's final departure is not an escape but a choice—an assertion of her agency in a world that repeatedly tries to silence her. This perspective sets Divakaruni's novel apart, emphasizing Sita's strength rather than her sacrifice.

Reclaiming Sita's story in contemporary literature is an essential step in challenging traditional, male-centric narratives that have long defined her character. In most versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita is depicted primarily as Rama's devoted wife, whose trials serve as a testament to her unwavering virtue. However, modern retellings, particularly this novel, shift the focus from Rama's heroism to Sita's lived experiences, giving her a voice and agency of her own. By allowing Sita to narrate her own story, Divakaruni redefines her not as a passive sufferer but as a woman of immense strength, intelligence, and resilience. This reclaiming of voice is crucial in contemporary literature, where reinterpreting mythology can offer fresh perspectives on gender, identity, and power dynamics.

Divakaruni's retelling contributes significantly to feminist readings of mythology by deconstructing the patriarchal structures embedded in traditional epics. Unlike conventional portrayals that emphasize Sita's duty and sacrifice, this work presents her as an individual with emotions, desires, and the ability to make choices independent of societal expectations. The novel also highlights the struggles of other female characters, such as Surpanakha, Ahalya, and Urmila, exposing how women across different circumstances in the epic are constrained by rigid gender roles. By questioning these norms, Divakaruni's retelling not only revisits an ancient story but also makes it relevant to contemporary discussions on feminism, justice, and autonomy.

The Forest of Enchantments resonates deeply with modern audiences, particularly women who see reflections of their own struggles in Sita's journey. The novel challenges readers to reconsider long-held beliefs about duty, love, and sacrifice, encouraging them to question oppressive traditions rather than accept them as fate. By humanizing Sita and portraying her as a strong, self-aware woman, Divakaruni empowers readers to see mythology not as a rigid, unchangeable narrative but as a living text open to reinterpretation.

Conclusion

By centering Sita's voice, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges the traditionally male-centric narrative and offers a feminist reimagining of an ancient epic. Unlike conventional portrayals that depict

Sita primarily in relation to Rama, this novel presents her as a woman with agency, intelligence, and emotional depth. Through her struggles with love, duty, and sacrifice, Sita emerges not as a passive figure of endurance but as an individual who reclaims her self-worth and autonomy. This paper has explored how Divakaruni's retelling critiques patriarchal norms, giving Sita the power to question, resist, and ultimately determine her own fate. By refusing to undergo another trial to prove her purity and choosing self-liberation instead, Sita's final act in the novel is one of defiance rather than submission. This shift in perspective not only redefines Sita's character but also reframes the *Ramayana* as a story that can be interpreted beyond its traditional moral and religious connotations. Comparisons with other contemporary retellings, such as *Sita's Sister* by Kavita Kane and *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga, highlight how different feminist perspectives enrich the understanding of Sita's character. However, *The Forest of Enchantments* stands out for its deeply personal and introspective narrative, which allows Sita to express her inner conflicts, joys, and sufferings in her own words. This novel serves as an essential contribution to feminist mythological literature, encouraging modern readers to question long-held narratives about women in mythology. By reclaiming Sita's voice, Divakaruni not only honors the legacy of the *Ramayana* but also transforms it into a tale of strength, resistance, and self-realization, ensuring that Sita's story continues to inspire generations to come.

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