DISENTHRALLING SITA: A STUDY OF FEMALE AGENCY IN "THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS"

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ABSTRACT

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) offers a compelling feminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*, retold through the voice of Sita. Traditionally depicted as the epitome of obedience and virtue, Sita has long remained confined within patriarchal expectations that glorify her silence and suffering. Divakaruni's novel breaks this narrative confinement by granting Sita a voice, inner depth, and autonomy. This paper argues that the novel "disenthralls" Sita from cultural and ideological constraints by reimagining her as a figure of moral strength, emotional intelligence, resistance, and self-determination. Through narrative agency, reinterpretation of suffering, redefinition of motherhood, critique of patriarchal authority, and solidarity with other female characters, Divakaruni constructs a Sita who speaks, questions, chooses, and rejects injustice. The paper demonstrates how this feminist retelling challenges traditional frameworks and repositions Sita as a symbol of empowerment and selfhood in contemporary literature.

Keywords: disenthrallment, patriarchal, mythology, spiritual

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* provides a transformative retelling of the *Ramayana*, one of India's most influential epics, by shifting its central narrative focus from Rama to Sita. Historically portrayed as a paragon of virtue, chastity, and loyalty, Sita has often been understood through patriarchal lenses that privilege male experience and reinforce idealized female suffering. In most traditional versions of the epic, Sita's voice remains muted, limited by the narrative authority of men like Valmiki, Rama, and other patriarchal figures who determine the course of her life. Divakaruni challenges this deeply entrenched narrative structure by offering Sita as the narrator of her own story. Through this narrative shift, the novel not only gives Sita a voice but empowers her to challenge, critique, and redefine the world around her. This paper argues that *The Forest of Enchantments* "disenthralls" Sita by removing the ideological chains imposed by traditional mythology and reconstructing her as a woman of agency, resistance, introspection, and moral autonomy.

One of the most significant ways Divakaruni liberates Sita is by granting her narrative voice. In the opening pages, Sita

states, "If I don't tell my story, it will be told by others by men who will shape it according to their needs" (Divakaruni 3). This assertion foregrounds the importance of self-narration as a form of agency. By reclaiming authorship, Sita breaks free from centuries of patriarchal storytelling that glorified her silence. Divakaruni's Sita is no longer a passive subject but an active storyteller who reflects, analyses, and critiques her experiences. The first-person narrative helps readers witness her internal struggles and her evolving understanding of duty, love, justice, and dignity. It humanizes her far beyond the divine or symbolically idealized figure of earlier texts. Instead of being defined solely by her roles as daughter, wife, or mother, she emerges as a woman with complex emotions, strong convictions, and a fierce sense of identity. Through her voice, Sita claims authority not only over her story but over how she is remembered by future generations.

Divakaruni also highlights Sita's agency through the choices she makes, even when bound by restrictive circumstances. Although Sita's life is shaped by events beyond her control her birth, her marriage, her exile, and her captivity she consistently asserts autonomy within these limitations. For instance, she chooses Rama as her husband not out of duty but admiration for his compassion and fairness. During Rama's exile, Sita chooses to accompany him, not because tradition demands it but because her emotional truth compels her. She explains that her decision comes not from submissive obedience but from love and loyalty rooted in her personal values. Divakaruni frames this decision not as an act of subservience but as a conscious assertion of agency. Similarly, during her years in the forest, Sita develops inner strength, spiritual resilience, and deep relationships with nature and the sages. Exile becomes a period of self-discovery where she learns about herbs, healing, and the natural world, demonstrating that physical hardship can also cultivate intellectual and emotional growth.

One of the strongest demonstrations of Sita's agency lies in her acts of resistance. Even when she is abducted by Ravana and held captive in Lanka, Sita firmly resists his threats and temptations. Her statement "You may imprison my body, but not my mind" encapsulates her unwavering spirit (Divakaruni 112). She refuses to succumb to fear or coercion, asserting her dignity even in powerlessness. This resistance reflects her inner strength, which transcends the physical world. Another moment where her resistance becomes apparent is during the infamous trial by fire. Traditional interpretations glorify the *agnipariksha* as proof of Sita's purity, portraying her suffering as noble and necessary. Divakaruni rejects this glorification by presenting Sita's emotional and psychological turmoil. Sita knows the demand is unfair and deeply humiliating, yet she chooses to undergo the trial to uphold her dignity rather than to justify her purity. This reinterpretation destabilizes patriarchal assumptions and exposes the cruelty embedded in cultural expectations of female virtue.

Sita's ultimate act of resistance and perhaps the most powerful symbol of her disenthrallment comes at the conclusion of the novel, when Rama asks her to prove her purity once again before returning to Ayodhya. After enduring abandonment, humiliation, and loneliness, Sita refuses to submit to another test. She rejects Rama's request and chooses to return to her mother, Earth. Her declaration, "I have

nothing left to prove," (Divakaruni 350) signifies her final assertion of autonomy. This decision reframes Sita not as a tragic figure but as a woman who prioritizes self-respect over societal expectations. Her final act is not an escape but a conscious rejection of injustice, a refusal to remain entangled in patriarchal ideals that have repeatedly marginalized her dignity. By choosing her own end, Sita gains absolute agency, redefining her legacy beyond suffering and sacrifice.

Divakaruni's novel also liberates Sita through female solidarity, highlighting the shared experiences of women across the epic. Characters such as Urmila, Mandodari, and Surpanakha are reimagined with profound empathy, illustrating how patriarchy affects women of all classes and backgrounds. Urmila, who is left alone for fourteen years while Lakshman accompanies Rama, becomes a symbol of silent sacrifice. Traditional retellings rarely acknowledge her suffering, but Divakaruni portrays her as one of the strongest characters, whose endurance is overshadowed by male heroism. Sita's empathy for Urmila emphasizes the importance of recognizing invisible female suffering. Mandodari, Ravana's queen, is depicted as a wise, compassionate woman trapped in a marriage to a man she cannot change. Through conversations between Sita and Mandodari, Divakaruni explores the shared emotional burdens carried by women even in positions of privilege. Surpanakha, often demonized in traditional versions, is humanized in the novel as a woman seeking affection and respect. Her humiliation becomes a critique of how society punishes women who express desire. Through these portrayals, the novel builds a broader feminist framework,

recognizing that Sita's struggle is part of a larger pattern of patriarchal oppression.

Motherhood serves as another important site of Sita's agency. While traditional texts often portray motherhood as a woman's primary duty, Divakaruni reframes it as a space of empowerment. After being exiled while pregnant, Sita raises her sons, Luv and Kush, independently. As their sole caregiver, teacher, spiritual guide, and protector, she raises them according to her values rather than societal expectations. Her decision to raise them away from the toxic political environment of Ayodhya reflects her desire to create a world where respect for women is foundational. She states, "I wanted my sons to grow in a world where a woman need not beg for respect" (Divakaruni 279). Through motherhood, Sita becomes a leader shaping the next generation, proving that maternal love and feminist consciousness can coexist powerfully. Motherhood thus becomes not a limiting role but an affirmation of Sita's autonomy and moral vision.

Divakaruni also reinterprets Sita's suffering, transforming it from passive endurance into moral strength. Earlier texts often glorify Sita's suffering as a necessary element of her divine character, reinforcing ideals of female sacrifice. Divakaruni, however, portrays Sita's pain as real, emotional, and deeply unjust. She does not suffer silently; instead, she reflects, questions, and vocalizes her pain. This narrative strategy rejects the idealization of suffering and presents it as a human experience shaped by societal failures rather than divine destiny. By acknowledging her emotions, Sita gains psychological strength. Her suffering becomes a catalyst for growth, awareness, and eventual resistance. Divakaruni thus

humanizes Sita, freeing her from the symbolic burdens placed upon her by tradition.

Another significant aspect of Sita's disenthrallment emerges through Divakaruni's critique of patriarchal heroism. Rama, revered as a perfect king and ideal man, is portrayed with nuance and humanity. While he is virtuous in many ways, his decisions especially those concerning Sita—are depicted as deeply flawed. Sita recognizes this conflict, stating that "A king must be just, but a husband must be humane" (Divakaruni 245). This line encapsulates her critique of Rama's prioritization of public duty over personal compassion. By exposing Rama's limitations, Divakaruni dismantles the unquestioned reverence that has historically surrounded him. The shift of moral centre from Rama to Sita reframes the epic as a story of female endurance, moral clarity, and strength rather than male heroism.

Finally, the act of myth revision itself becomes a form of feminist resistance. By rewriting the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective, Divakaruni challenges centuries of patriarchal mythology that silenced women. Her retelling asserts that myth is not static but adaptable and capable of reflecting contemporary understandings of gender and justice. The process of rewriting is political it empowers women by reclaiming a narrative historically used to define and confine them. Through this revision, Divakaruni transforms Sita into a modern feminist icon whose struggle resonates with women across generations.

In conclusion, *The Forest of Enchantments* powerfully disenthralls Sita from the patriarchal frameworks that confined her for centuries. Through narrative voice, conscious choice, resistance, solidarity, motherhood, critique of patriarchal authority, and feminist myth revision, Divakaruni constructs a Sita who is not a passive goddess but a woman of agency, dignity, and self-defined identity. Sita's final refusal to accept injustice symbolizes her ultimate liberation. Divakaruni's retelling is not merely a reinterpretation of mythology; it is a profound feminist intervention that restores to Sita her rightful voice and humanity. In doing so, the novel invites readers to question traditional ideals, recognize the injustices embedded within cultural narratives, and celebrate women's resilience and autonomy.

References:

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