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CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF MARGINALIZED INTO MAINSTREAM

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the most notable Indian American writer, has penned down the story of Sita, taken up from the Indian mythological pantheon, from a feminist perspective. Chitra Banerjee is quite dexterous in the retelling of epics. She has woven her *Sitayana* by pulling the strings from the great epic *The Ramayana*. The retelling subverts the hegemony of the male-centric approach and brings forth the repudiated female characters by throwing light, particularly on the character of Sita. The author takes the readers into the flight of Sita's woeful journey that she has experienced in Lanka under the sorrow tree and also gives voices to other subjugated and subdued female characters like Urmila, Ahilya, Surpankha, Mandodari, Kaikeyi etc. These characters are often neglected and are effaced from all narratives. It is not only the tale of Sita but other overlooked characters also. The aim of this paper is to encourage gender equality and to depict the transformation of the marginalized into the mainstream.

Key-Words: Sitayana, hegemony, repudiated, woeful, marginalized, subdued.

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Introduction

Indian mythology, embedded in the Indian ethos and its cultural fabric, has become the centrepiece for scholars and writers across the globe for centuries. Over the ages, it has made its place in different genres—be it plays, films, poems, novels, songs, folklore, performing arts or paintings. A plethora of evidence shows a great deal of interest in mythology through having different dialects, staying in diverse nations and having distinctive religions. But now in the contemporary era, these ancient texts have been presented from different perspectives with new vitality. It has become a common practice among writers to revisit, retell, rewrite and re-vision these texts with unreserved vigour and novel insights. Mythology, being an inseparable part of Indian culture, traditions and ethos has distinctive perspectives and the re-narrations have been done with a specific approach and agenda. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are the two foundational mythological texts that keep on cherishing India's age-old culture and traditions. These re-writings have become a tool for extracting new meanings and of course paving the path of re-investigations. The magnanimous character of Rama and the demure, docile, devotional character of Sita has a deep impact on the psyche of Indians that portrays it as a great epic. We encounter the subversion of hierarchies where the major character is replaced by a minor one. Among all prestigious rewritings, the feminist rewritings have carved a niche by offering a fresh perspective to the traditional portrayal of the gendered subject. Some of the feminist writers include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manini J. Anandani, Pratibha Ray, and Kavita Kane and there are some famous male writers also engaged in rewritings like Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Umesh Kotru, Aditya Iyengar, and Anand Neelakantan. They have portrayed these epics from a different angle. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most influential writers of South-Asian

descent. Her magnanimous novel *The Place of Illusion* brings forth the character of Draupadi from Mahabharata and now her current novel *The Forest of Enchantments* exhibits the sufferings of Sita under the shadow tree in Lanka when she was abducted by Ravana. Sita is the embodiment of endurance, fidelity, sacrifice, love, humanity, and truthfulness explicitly displaying an ideal woman to be emulated. She boldly faces the bizarre circumstances and strives hard to subvert patriarchy to gain identity in society. She also gives voices to other subjugated and subdued female characters like Urmila, Ahilya, Surpankha, Mandodari, Kaikeyi etc. These characters are often neglected and are effaced from all narratives. It is not only the tale of Sita but other overlooked characters also. She has excelled in comparing a genuine picture of the character of Sita from the perennial epic *The Ramayana*.

Objectives:

The present study concentrates on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and it defines how it has rejected the common and traditional notions of the ancient text *The Ramayana*. As the ancient text shows the journey of Ram; this *Sitayana* shows the journey of Sita. The novel focuses on the trials and tribulations that come between Sita's journey during her stay in Lanka under the tree of sorrow. It is the tale of Sita and other ostracized characters who are often rejected and considered a stigma in society. The purpose of writing this paper is to show how the writer has presented marginalized people in the mainstream.

Methodology:

Retelling or reviewing the myths has become a common practice in today's world and especially feminist re-writings put emphasis on the status of women and strengthen the female characters not only from mythological texts but from the entire society. Derrida's theory of Deconstruction paves the way to answer the question of

male hegemony. Because this theory emphasizes on to move from the traditional meaning and giving voice to voiceless persons. Any work of art has no final meaning and it leads to numerous possibilities to read a single text from different perspectives. Feminist rewritings have taken a tremendous shift and offer new meaning to the texts. Rewritings mean reviewing or retelling and deconstructing the previous notions and establishing a new scheme of the meaning of the text. The feminist rewritings focus on the shifting centre from male to female, transporting the term from negative to positive and accepting the minor characters to tell their story boldly.

The world-renowned feminist critic and writer Helene Cixous says that one can trace man's dominance over society for ages and it is not possible to conceive the world in a different way. As per Cixous, women are represented in the epics as the sufferers and oppressed rather than presenting them as Goddesses or powerful women. The strategy that she has posed, is based on the reading of writers like William Shakespeare and Heinrich Von Kleist which are not dependent on opposition. Cixous' essay depends on the work of contemporary critics such as Jacques Derrida- a French philosopher. Derrida propounded a term- phallogocentrism that indicates the inseparable link between phallus and logos. Man has been placed at the top level of society but women become the sacrificial victim of it. So, reviewing or revisioning the texts presents new possibilities and adds fresh hues to the existing ones. (Sellers, 23)

Analysis:

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an exceptional novel based on the modern-day re-telling of the great epic *The Ramayana* and explores the character of Sita from a different perspective. It is written in first person pronoun i.e., from the standpoint of Sita. It makes the reader familiar with the

untouched part of her stay in Lanka all alone under the sorrow tree. It is not the tale of Sita alone but of other minor female characters like Sunayna, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Shanta, Mandodari, Surpankha and Sarama who are often belittled. All the characters are enlivened by Sita, considering it as her duty, in the novel as her thoughts are replete with the voices of these marginalized characters, 'Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten-or maligned and used as cautionary tales.' (Banerjee, 4)

The story is based on Valmiki's *Ramayana* but keeping Sita as the major character that's why it is also called 'Sitayana'. But the motive behind is not to depict male characters as tortured ones rather they are respected equally. The writer has delineated the character of Ram with all-pervasive majesty and Laxman as respectful as portrayed earlier. The writer has depicted Sita as a lover of nature and healer, an expert in martial arts, courageous, with strong willpower stripping off the garb of a meek and submissive woman. Different moods and shades of her character are portrayed with the use of simple words. The realistic rendition of Sita connects her to every woman as she is a dutiful daughter, a loyal wife, and a caring sister. The story presents the atrocities faced by Sita during her stay in Ashoka Vatika which is often neglected by the common reader.

The writer has made the marginalized speak and expresses their views. She has presented Queen Sunaina in all her grace, royalty and prudence. She keeps a check on the kingdom and gives assistance to her husband in his courtly matters. She very well knows that the people of her kingdom Mithila have unflinching faith in its Leader, in its King- Janak so she never tries to supersede him. She is presented as a visionary; hence she starts secret training in martial arts to Sita. She is thoughtful in a way as when she comes to know about their

daughters are at the verge of matrimony, she guides them in a way so that nobody can overpower them and take advantage. She tells them about male ego, politics within the palace and other certain rules of the kingdom. She says:

If you want to stand up against wrongdoing if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride. (Divakaruni, 46)

She also taught them the idea of Endurance that Sita keeps remembering throughout the novel:

'Draw on your inner strength. Remember, you can be your own worst enemy—or your best friend. It's up to you. And also this: what you can't change, you must endure. (Divakaruni, 54)

She orders to construct a healing house for Sita so that she can utilize her healing powers and make the people of Mithila happy and healthy. As a mother, she advises both her daughters that the secret of blissful and happy life lies in the idea of Endurance that women had been practising for ages. Her maternal concerns have been depicted here.

The less favoured queen of king Dashrath and the real mother-in-law of Sita is queen Kaushlaya who has been portrayed as a very docile character. Her pain and agony caused being ignored by her husband, have been duly felt by Sita. As she was less favoured so she doesn't have anything in abundance but she welcomes Sita with great vigour and presents her own traditional jewellery and clothes that are being passed on from one generation to another. She feels hesitant in offering them to Sita. Chitra Banerjee's depiction of the psyche of Sita is quite mature and she deftly handles all the odd situations. Ram was well aware of the plight of his mother when he says, *some people are born unlucky, possessing so much externally, yet destitute within. My mother is one of them,* (Divakaruni, 70) and adds how she has been deprived of her motherhood as King

Dashrath loves Ram very much and takes him to his chambers; how her daughter Shanta has been given to his friend Ramapada and how she is deprived of the status of an elderly queen. But Sita plays an important role in patching up the fractured bond of love between Kaushlaya and King Dashrath and making it more meaningful.

The next character in the novel is Ahalya who is misinterpreted and is cursed by her husband sage Gautam. With the adverse effect of the curse, she turns into a stone. Ahalya possesses extreme beauty that captivates Indra who comes to her in the garb of her husband and seduces her. The pain suffered by Ahlaya needs to be reinterpreted to purge her of shame that she is experiencing since ages without any fault of hers. Ahlaya's Maunvrata or silence is disturbing as she becomes a victim at the hands of Indra. Sita wants to know the answer why she is suffering the pains and then she says, *When you put your hand in the fire, knowingly or unknowingly, do you not get burned? Such is the ancient law of the universe. Of karma and its fruit. The idea of motive is irrelevant to it* (Divakaruni, 134) through the episode of Ahlaya the writer wants to convey the message of helplessness of a woman who has nothing to do but to accept the wishes of her husband. Sita comes to a conclusion that once mistrust prevail over the relationship, love can't heal it.

Surpanakha has been given due space to present her circumstances from the perspective of Sita. She was the sister of King Ravana and was in search of a mate. Her name was Kaamarupini and she made advances towards Ram and Laxmana to fetch love. Though she didn't like the presence of Sita and wanted to attack her. In her pursuit of finding love, she became a victim of mutilation. Laxmana chopped off her ears and nose when she tried to attack Sita and forcefully tried to make advances to Ram and Laxmana. But at this juncture also, Sita has great sympathy towards her. She thinks that how can a person be so rude

to someone who has come to find love. She also has of the view, *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.* (Divakaruni, 151) People make derogatory remarks to Surpankha but she, too, is endowed with human emotions and was in search of a mate. But her emotions and desires are badly misinterpreted. In the next phase, Surpanakha also played a trick with Sita when she was in Ayodhya and wanted to create a rift of disbelief between Ram and Sita by making a picture of glued Ravana on the floor. From the episode of Surpankha the writer wants to show the kind hearted attitude of Sita who has equally treated everyone and also deconstructing the gender binaries.

Lankan Queen Mandodari has been portrayed as the most poignant lady who at the core of her heart was not able to protect her husband, son and kingdom from the terrible doom knowingly. She knew that the abduction of Sita would bring calamity to her kingdom but she failed to save it from inevitable catastrophe. As the novel proceeds, we come to know that Mandodari is Sita's mother. Sita is her abandoned daughter. She shows unconditional love towards her and reveals to her the secret of her birth. She inquires about the cloth that was used to swaddle her. She keeps on sheltering Sita in Ashoka Vatika. She persuades the guards by offering them some valuable gifts and orders them to be humble and kind towards Sita. But Sita rejects her false love and abruptly tells her that she has no relation to her hateful husband. More precisely, she exhorts her that she cannot lessen her guilt by her mad fantasy. Being the dignified queen of Lanka, she has never approached Sita. She has been portrayed as a fierce lady who is shedding tears at the death of her husband and cursing Sita for this. The writer has given space to Mandodari to express her sorrows and griefs and brings her into the mainstream.

Another least mentioned character is Sita's sister Urmila. She draws maximum sympathy among all the characters. She is the consort of Laxmana and is known for her patience, loyalty, sacrifice and love. She becomes a victim of her husband's loyalty to his brother who abandoned her for fourteen years in her very youth. She waited for fourteen years to meet her husband and also sacrificed her whole life. She bartered with Nidra Devi and went into a deep slumber for such a long time so that her husband would not have to pay for it so that her conjugal life would not turn infertile. Sita got astonished to see her lying like a corpse and also repented over her loneliness during her stay with her husband. She asks a thought-provoking question to Sita- *Ram took you with him. Why then did Lakshman refuse to take me? Was I so unworthy?* (Divakaruni, 281) She is affectionately attached to her sister- Sita. They both share their feelings and emotions of love in the earlier part of the novel. She feels comfortable in the company of her confidante-Sita. In the later part of the novel, she tells lie to her husband Laxman and meets Sita at Valmiki's ashram with her maidservant. Urmila's character is not given its due share in Valmiki's Ramayana, but Divakaruni has aptly justified her status in her novel. Her unsung sacrifice has been preserved by the author in the novel.

Kaikeyi has been presented as an evil incarnate in Valmiki's Ramayana. People make disparaging remarks on her. But Chitra Banerjee has portrayed her as a great warrior, an accomplished charioteer, a counsellor, a comforter to king and the most powerful woman in the palace. Having protected the life of King Dashrath, she becomes the favourite consort among all. Initially, Sita is drawn to her as her mother tells her about Kaikeyi's healing abilities. She possesses beauty, intelligence, valour and shrewdness. It is due to her cunning temperament that Ram, Sita and Laxman have to face hardships. The writer has given her due reverence and has presented her in the mainstream.

Conclusion:

Thus, *The Forest of Enchantments* is a saga of Sita's journey along with other minor characters in which much literary space has been given to marginalized characters. It exhibits the unsung stories of female personas who have toiled very hard but are often ostracized and belittled. The voiceless characters have been given voice to come into the mainstream. The novel presents the deconstruction of gender binaries, equality, fraternity and also has presented the characters as a unified whole against the discrimination and humiliation experiencing since ages.

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