

RECLAIMING THE SELF: CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*

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Abstract:

The paper discusses Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Forest of Enchantments' to study the 21st century trend of re-telling the story in an attempt to re-claim the Self. It traces, to a limited extent, the various modes in which writers have approached the ancient epic, Ramayana, and the feminist reading of Sita's story. In light of these, it reads Divakaruni's work as a text that re-claims the identity of the 'Self' without disparaging the 'other', as the writer takes on the onerous task of bringing "new meaning to the old blessing: May you be like Sita."

Keywords: *Ramayana, Rewriting Sita, Gender Studies, Self, Identity, Diaspora, Post-Millennial.*

Ramayana, one of the two great Indian epics, the story of Ram, the king of Ayodhya, has for centuries epitomised the gender binaries, and lent itself time and again to interpretations that acknowledged or questioned the ideals of human behaviour and the social system laid down by it. Every girl growing up in the Indian ethos, whether within the geographical boundaries of the sub-continent or beyond, has at some point or the other questioned, rejected or resigned herself to Sita's fate. The 20th century India witnessed a repeated questioning of the fate conferred upon Sita as the epic celebrated the heroism of Ram and his righteousness.

For more than two decades, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has been mirroring the plight of women caught at the cusp of cultures. Their existence is marked by hyphenated identities, fractured psyche and divided roles as they make their way through the two cultures, the one they have inherited and the one they find themselves in. There is a continuous struggle to either assimilate or reject.

The cultural shock, the racial prejudices and the struggle to maintain individual identity while consciously attempting to become an indistinct part of the alien culture leads to a duality in the lives of Indians in America (Rathor, *Ethnic Literatures*, 168).

In this conflict, woman is the necessary upholder of 'culture', and the burden of its preservation lies on her. Diaspora writings have repeatedly explored how this affects the lives of women in diaspora, a marginalized self within a marginalized community. As the story of a woman who first leaves her father's home, then accompanies her husband to the forest for fourteen years, goes through the horror and pain of abduction, and, later, is again uprooted to spend a life alone, seeking a place to call her own away from home, Sita's story lends itself beautifully to the situation of women in diaspora. Sita as the archetype of the ideal woman, pure, unquestioning and completely devoted to her husband's will and a willing 'victim' of it, epitomises India which is perceived as an abode of purity, chastity and spirituality. Bhattacharjee believes that woman becomes the metaphor for this spirit of India. It is the

woman who pays the price for the preservation of the essential (nationalist) spirit, always a woman who must keep smiling and hide her pain so as not to betray the fragility of this spiritual heritage, the high cost of its maintenance, and the euphoric security of its myth (*Ex-Nomination*).

Sita as the ideal of endurance, and complete devotion to her husband and acceptance of his dictates,

is the one that women down the generations are expected to emulate. Partha Chatterjee contends that the idea of embodying the attributes of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion and religiosity, stands as a sign for nation. So in the struggle to build a 'nation' beyond a 'nation' women are once again expected to go through the 'burden' of being the 'Sita'.

It is no wonder that Divakaruni goes back to *Ramayana* as she continues in work after work to depict the Indian woman's dilemma and her continuous struggle to reclaim her Self. Writers, folk lore, movie makers have time and again explored the story of Sita. There have been two major trends His story and Her story. Ram's story depicts him as *Maryada Puroshottam*, the embodiment of perfection, righteousness and the upholder of dharma; while Sita is presented as the docile, devoted wife who needs to be protected, and ultimately has to endure suffering with no fault of hers. On the other hand, the texts or the versions that tell Sita's story depict Ram as a weak individual who did not take wise decisions and deserted his wife just when she needed him the most. *Chandrabati Ramayana* is a woman's re-telling of the *Rama's* tale. Retold by a Bengali Hindu woman who suffered under patriarchal structure in the sixteenth century rural East Bengal it does not sing of Rama's glory. The text did not find favour with the "male urban custodians of literary history" and was simply dismissed as a woman's story narrated by a village woman. Iyenger sees Chandrabati's version of *Ramayana* as "one of the early - possibly one of the first - examples of feminist literature."

Chandrabati Ramayana signifies a complete expression of a woman's sufferings and experiences in a patriarchal society. It narrates the story of Sita, her biological life-cycle birth, childhood, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and maturity her abduction and suffering, betrayal, humiliation, exile and death. In this version of *Ramayana*, Rama is a lover presented as an insensitive, merciless coward who unjustly banishes his pregnant wife. He is a poor husband, a poor king, a poor brother and a poor father. But even as Chandrabati lashes out at Ram, Sita remains a docile wife. "Sita is the one with infinite forbearance and thus a winner even when she loses. She lends dignity to suffering, makes forbearance a heroic quality. This is what makes her a role model for Indian women" (Sen, Nabaneeta Dev).

Divakaruni very early confessed that she is inspired by the epics, and as a child she had heard stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. While presenting the dilemmas of humans who have lost faith in religion and constantly feel the pangs of cultural uprooted-ness and social alienation, Divakaruni surprisingly draws her strength from her cultural heritage. After decades of writing about situations that reflect the predicament of the India woman caught in the vortex of multiculturalism, and the struggle to maintain identity while surrendering to the process of assimilation, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits the Indian epic in her attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable. Marie Josephine Aruna believes

"The discourse of mythology is male-centered...mythological stories have represented feats of masculine prowess. Women, on the other hand, remained as docile puppets with their roles being confined in as much as playing victims, gorgons, or mute observers, with no representation of feminine prowess or female heroism or even female nature as such."

The modern day interpretation of *Ramayan* has time and again rejected the wisdom of Ram, and the story has become symbolic of marginalization of women and 'femininity' in a patriarchal structure promoted by the Brahmanical ideology. It was seen as a tool to further the social dictates which completely undermined the female while celebrating male heroism. Sen believes that the world over the epics sing the glory of men, and have little to showcase about women who are either on the periphery or are just there to be abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other. Both male and female writers reinterpreted *Ramayana*. Maithili Sharan Gupta drew attention to the plight of Urmila, the one ignored in the tale of heroism, in his *Saket*, and set a sort of trend. Urmila became a symbol of endless waiting against all odds, of neglected valour. Sita and all the terms associated with her -- Janaki, Vaidehi, Maithili, Ramdulari -- came to be associated with the victimised woman at the hands of the male-centred

society that refused to give her any space or voice. So much so that Rajkumar Santoshi's film *Lajja* (2001) satirises this code of honour thrust upon the female by a society completely unjustified in taking such a holier-than-thou position.

In the past two decades Divakaruni has travelled the entire path from feminism to humanism to realize that gender differences need not be placed in a hierarchical sequence but can have equal importance. This is visible in her retelling of Draupadi's story in *The Palace of Illusions*. She gives her a voice in a patriarchal set up, and presents her as a woman whose life is driven by the conscious choices she makes, one who could express anger, nurture hatred, thirst for vengeance, and entertain an inexplicable fascination for Karna, without losing her dignity and stature. Divakaruni's humanistic interpretations continue in her much awaited retelling of *Ramayana*. For her it proves to be 'a tragic love story' as she unfolds the *Sitayana*. Her Sita, as she makes her her own, tells her own story to "fill the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their vices and *defeats* (emphasis mine)." (*Forest* vi). As in the case of Draupadi, Sita is presented as a woman who makes her own choices, as she emerges as a character who is more human and relatable with her interests, beliefs, fears and the courage to overcome them.

The writer's research made her aware of the share of human frailties that both Ram and Sita are beset with. They exhibit human emotions as they "love, they grow angry or confused, they weep, they miss each other to the point of heartbreak, they are afraid." (ix). Divakaruni underlines Sita's courage which is often mistaken as her meekness and in the final moments Sita displays this courage as she "refuses to compromise, no matter how much is at stake". The writer is also aware of the challenge that she faces. She herself has to go beyond what most of the modern day interpretations of the epic fall prey to, that "in order to care for Sita, the reader must end up hating Ram".

Divakaruni's exploration of the Self in her writings on diaspora, have made her realize that re-positioning of the Self does not rely on pulling down the 'other'. A woman's reading of mythology, history or any situation does not really mean disparaging the 'male'. It is neither akin to highlighting the 'maleness' of the female nor undermining it in the 'male'. This is true not just about the gender discourse but also about any writing dealing with the marginalized 'other' and the attempt of the marginalized to reclaim the Self. The subversion need not be an assault; the binaries can co-exist. For one to be re-claimed does not presuppose the annihilation of the 'other'. Divakaruni's text poses the question, and answers it too, whether the defining of the Self can be independent of reducing the 'other' or not; if it could be free from emphasizing the 'otherness' of the 'other', and would, rather, establish the 'Self-ness' of the 'other' too. It also reflects her own maturation resulting from her years of experiencing the doubly-marginalized identity as an Indian woman in diaspora.

In *The Forests of Enchantment* Divakaruni seems to have struck Aristotle's *golden mean*. The novel is able to achieve the blending of the identities that a modern day woman struggles with in her attempts to hold on to the roots as she strives to gain wings, and assimilate in a culture, in a space, that is not her own. The *Sitayana* reclaims the identity of Sita who could not only speak out her desires, become aware of the mistakes she makes due to her impassioned outbursts and cravings, and can stand up to not just her husband but also the Maharishi, but is also capable of acknowledging Ram's courage, his devotion to his ideals, his generosity, his overwhelming love for her that must suffer a heartbreak due to his sense of duty, his vulnerabilities and his heroism, as well as the Maharshi's wisdom as Valmiki tells her, "You must write that story yourself, Ma... for only you know it."(3)

The novel reclaims the space for the characters on the periphery, Urmila and Sunaina, as much as it attempts to understand the beliefs and situations that drive Kaikeyi, Manthara and Surupnakha. It creates space for these much hated characters to commit their follies. It also reveals the predicament of Mandodari, the demon queen who has to suffer the death of her son as she painfully witnesses her husband's obsession with another woman.

In its presentations of various shades of love that could make Kaikeyi blind to the interests of others, or help Ram surmount the worst situations, or could drive Laxman to complete self-effacement, and love that could 'fulfil the cravings of a lifetime' in a single moment(6); and in voicing the age-old wisdom "if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride. You will have a better chance of success"(46), the novel could well be read as a manual on how to respond to people and situations.

The post-millennial women's writing present the female centred texts as in Advait Kala's *Almost Single* and Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti: Not This, Not This*, where the women not just make choices but also take the responsibility for the outcome, and no longer feel 'lost' in the world. Varughese believes that "the narratives of these post-millennial female protagonists dismantle traditional hierarchies, both in literature and in life" (336). Similarly, Divakaruni's Sita is no longer the weak, submissive woman with unquestioning allegiance, nor is she an angry one at war with the world. She is dignified and courageous in her forbearance; while Ram remains noble, earnest, and devoted to his wife, "beset by challenges of his own and forced to choose between his public role of king and the private role of husband and lover."(*Forest* ix). The novel reflects the 21st century trends to re-tell stories, situations and explore the modern day challenges by going beyond the anger and frustration of the marginalized, visible in the post-colonial texts of the earlier century, and seek an attempt to draw out the strengths of the situation without undermining the negatives. Divakaruni's *Sitayana* finds the ephemeral peace that had hitherto evaded the writings of the marginalized in the attempt to re-claim the Self.

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