

Reimagining ‘mythological’ and ‘historical’ narratives in *Forest of Enchantments* and *Palace of Illusions* through the lens of its female protagonists.

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions* offer fresh perspectives on ancient Indian epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, through the lens of their female protagonists, Sita and Draupadi. These retellings challenge patriarchal interpretations of mythological narratives, by giving voice to the inner lives and struggles of these iconic women. This article explores how Divakaruni’s feminist reimagining of these epics, reinterprets the roles of Sita and Draupadi, and by offering a nuanced understanding of their identities as individuals and as women in a patriarchal society. It illustrates how Divakaruni’s re-telling contribute to a broader discourse on gender, power, and the reinterpretation of Indian cultural heritage.

Keywords: Feminism, Mythology, History, Revisionist myth-making, Gender, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Myths hold profound importance as they form an essential component of a society. They serve as a means through which a culture legitimizes its traditions, ceremonies, and convictions. The social, cultural frameworks and belief systems of a community are all founded upon its myths. These narratives influence the way individuals perceive themselves and the world around them: “A myth is a way of making sense in a senseless world. Myths are narrative patterns that give significance to our existence.” (May, Rollo. *The Cry for Myth*).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novels, *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions*, serve as quintessential examples of ‘revisionist myth-making’, where ancient narratives from the Indian epics, like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are reinterpreted through the perspectives of their female protagonists, Sita and Draupadi. Reimagining mythological and historical stories in modern literature frequently provides new insights into long-established narratives. By exploring the inner turmoil and challenges faced by these women, the novels present a nuanced interpretation that challenges conventional gender norms and promotes a more comprehensive interpretation of these legendary tales.

Sita’s Perspective: A Voice Reclaimed in *The Forest of Enchantments*

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni restores Sita’s narrative agency by depicting her as a complex figure, by surpassing traditional roles of wife and mother. Sita

emerges as a formidable figure embodying strength, resilience, and empathy. This reinterpretation, known as "Sitayan" redirects attention from the Ramayana's androcentric viewpoint to explore the inner world of Sita and other female characters. Traditionally, Sita has been illustrated as pleasant, modest, forbearing and submissive. She serves as a model that women are often encouraged to emulate without question. Namita Gokhale, in her book *In Search Of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* appropriately posits

“Sita, in our prevalent idiom, is weak, oppressed, a natural victim. Considering that Sri Rama’s wife—Vaidehi, Sita, Ramaa, call her what you will—is the primary archetype for all Indian women, a role model pushed and perpetuated by a predominantly patriarchal society, it is no wonder that she is someone the modern emancipated consciousness prefers to banish into yet another exile.”

Divakaruni's novel not only presents a gynocentric interpretation of the epic, but also reimagines the societal perception of Sita. The author articulates,

“I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her. I sensed that Sita was more than what we took her to be” (viii).

In *The Forest of Enchantments* Valmiki presents his Ramayana to Sita for her assessment and validation. On close inspection, Sita notices a lack of her own lived experiences, ambitions, happiness, and heartaches within the account. On being questioned, Valmiki inspires Sita to write her own story, “You must write that story yourself, Ma,” he says, “for only you know it” (3). Sita composes her Sitayan in red ink. Red being a symbolic colour, that holds high significance for any woman, as it is “the colour of menstruation and childbirth...” (3). For Indian women it is also “the colour of the marriage mark that changes women’s lives...” (4). Additionally, it reminds Sita “of the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity in the palace of the demon king?” (4). The significance of the colour red also lies in its utilization by feminists worldwide as a symbol to establish a space for women's literature.

Sita’s origin story is one of mystery and divine intervention. She is discovered by King Janaka while he is ploughing a field, which emphasizes her connection to the earth and nature. This birth narrative sets her apart from other characters in the Ramayana and underscores her unique identity- “Though by virtue of my upbringing I was a princess, Sita, eldest daughter of the house of Mithila, in the kingdom of Vaideha, no one knew who I was by birth” (6). Raised as a princess, Sita matures into adulthood, in a royal household, but her upbringing is not limited to the luxuries of palace life. She is depicted as a curious and intelligent child who questions the world around her and seeks to understand her place within it. When Ram is banished to the forest, Sita insists on accompanying him, despite his initial refusal on the grounds of safety and traditional gender roles.

“What folly is this? You can’t possibly come with me. You’re a woman. It’s too dangerous. I won’t allow it” (111). Her response is compelling and rooted in the vows and duties of a spouse, displaying her determination and equality in partnership. She says, "You’re a fine one to talk of duty!...If I’m not misremembering my wedding vows, didn’t I state that my foremost duty as your faithful spouse was to follow you, even to the ends of the earth? To be with you in riches and poverty? To take care of you the best I can? Isn’t that what you just told your mother to do for her husband? You can’t deprive me of my wifely right." (112)

Sita's encounter with Surpanakha further illustrates her strength and independence. Unlike Ram and Lakshman, who mock Surpanakha, Sita understands the cultural differences and prepares to defend herself when attacked. Her reaction to the mutilation of Surpanakha also highlights her sense of justice and empathy, criticizing the brutality of Lakshman's actions. Sita says,

“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.”

Sita's abduction by Ravana tests her resilience and courage. She fights back vigorously and, even in captivity, remains determined not to succumb to despair “Each morning I told myself, I will not give up” (188). Her steadfastness and mental strength during this ordeal reflect her inner strength and unwavering spirit. After Ravana's defeat, Sita faces a significant challenge when Ram questions her purity and refuses to accept her, without the test of fire. Her response is one of dignity and self-respect, choosing to end her life rather than submit to unjust demands, “Therefore, I’ve decided to end my life today” (245). The fire-god’s intervention to declare her innocence transforms her, signifying her ultimate endurance and inner strength.

“By the time the gods intervened, I was no longer just the Sita of old: daughter of earth, strong and silent, patient and deep, forbearing and forgiving. I was something else, too” (246).

In a final act of defiance, Sita refuses to undergo another agni-pariksha (trial by fire) when summoned by Ram at Ayodhya. She confronts him publicly, questioning his justice and fairness as a husband and king, and condemns the societal norms that punish women unjustly.

“O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you’ve always placed your role as king ahead of your role as husband. In this court, which has been set up to dispense justice to all citizens, I ask you this, for I’ve been a citizen of Ayodhya too: Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossipmongers whispered? Did you stop to think—as a wise king would—that

there would always be people who gossip, even in the best-run kingdoms, for it's their nature? Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny? Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness?" (356)

Finally, Sita's decision to leave the mortal world underlines her rejection of the patriarchal dominance and affirms her autonomy and integrity "O Mother, O Father, all my life I've suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign" (357).

Draupadi's Perspective: A Voice Reclaimed in The *Palace of Illusions*

The Mahabharata, one of the oldest and most significant epics in Indian literature, offers a complex web of characters and themes that continue to inspire contemporary retellings. A common trait among various versions of the Mahabharata is the dominance of patriarchy, where male heroes are the central figures and women are significant only when they affect men's lives. Divakaruni criticizes this portrayal, stating, "But somehow all these women remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions described only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (xv).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* presents the story of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the epic's most intriguing female characters. This retelling brings forth themes of 'gender', 'identity', and 'feminism', challenging the traditional patriarchal narratives of the original text. In the novel Draupadi, also known as Panchaali, is portrayed as a strong, determined woman, breaking free from the shadows of male characters. Divakaruni provides a voice to Draupadi, exploring her thoughts, emotions, and motivations, which were often sidelined in the original epic. This narrative shift highlights her struggles against suppression and her quest for identity and individualism in a patriarchal society.

Draupadi, a woman characterized by her beauty, intellect, and righteousness, stands out in Hindu mythology as a rare individual who fearlessly displayed her intelligence in a society predominantly controlled by men. She welcomes her pivotal role in historical events as prophesied at her birth, demonstrating a persistent fascination with her life's story. DhaiMa, a maternal figure, narrates the story of Draupadi's birth, unveiling her disposition for leadership and discerning evaluation of others' reactions to the circumstances of her life.

"The voices said, —Here is the son you asked for he'll bring you the vengeance you desire, but it will break your life in two...They said, Behold, we give you this girl,... she will change the course of history" (4).

Draupadi's inquiry serves to unveil social injustices, bringing awareness to the limitations imposed on women by societal norms. Despite being discouraged, she challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in a patriarchal society. When Dhristadyumna's tutor suggests that a woman of the Kshatriya class should prioritize supporting the warriors in her life, Draupadi opposes the notion by saying

“And who decided that a woman’s highest purpose was to support men?...A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life” (26)

The marriage of Draupadi was not merely a union of love but a political arrangement. Initially married to Arjuna, due to his triumph in a challenge, she was subsequently compelled to marry his four brothers, adhering to Kunti's instructions. This practice of polyandry was unconventional and frowned upon by her society. Hence, to “foster harmony in the Pandava house-hold, [sage] Vyasa designed a special code of marital conduct for us.

I would be wife to each brother for a year at a time, from oldest to youngest, consecutively.Each time I went to a new brother, I'd be a virgin again.” (119) Draupadi sarcastically remarks on the peculiar code of conduct imposed upon her: “[M]y situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not.” (120)

When the Pandavas were defeated by the Kauravas in a game of dice, resulting in the loss of their palace and kingdom, Draupadi is shocked at the notion of being wagered away by her husbands. Her immediate response:

" I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad, sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of the greatest palace on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl." (190)

Facing public disgrace, Draupadi's perspective shifts, realizing the limitations of her influence over her husbands:

"Their notions of honor, of loyalty toward each other, of reputation were more important to them than my suffering. They would avenge me later, yes, but only when they felt the circumstances would bring them heroic fame. A woman doesn't think that way.” (195)

The conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas ends in a bloody battle. The Kurukshetra war is portrayed as a brutal and chaotic affair, with scenes of heroism and

tragedy playing out amidst the clash of armies. Draupadi's perspective offers a unique vantage point to witness the devastation of battle, as she struggles to reconcile her own desires with the demands of fate. Throughout the conflict, Draupadi's strength and resilience are put to the test as she confronts the harsh realities of war. Her unwavering support for the Pandavas serves as a source of inspiration and guidance despite her internal struggles with uncertainties regarding what lies ahead.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* and Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions* offer a compelling exploration of the resilience and agency of these iconic female characters from Indian mythology. Through meticulous attention to detail and rich character development, Divakaruni breathes new life into these age-old narratives, presenting Sita and Draupadi as strong, independent women with voices of their own. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita emerges as a figure of quiet strength and unwavering determination, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations with her courage and conviction. Similarly, in *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi's character is imbued with a fierce sense of agency and self-determination, as she navigates the complexities of her fate with resilience and grace. Through their journeys, Divakaruni underscores the enduring relevance of these timeless tales, offering readers a fresh perspective on the enduring power of female autonomy and empowerment within the framework of ancient mythology.

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