A Feminist Revisionist Study of Divakaruni's Sitayan

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Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Forest of Enchantments (2019), popularly known as Sitayan revolves around the journey of Sita, the wife of epic hero Rama, who emerges as a harbinger of change, lending her voice to the muted echoes of marginalized women characters within the expanse of Indian mythology, Ramayana. The study analyzes the character of Sita with the societal challenges confronted by her and also her quest for identity and space within the constraints of a patriarchal milieu. Using the tool of feminist revisionist mythology, Divakaruni undertakes a humongous task of scrutinizing the narrative of Sita—a quintessential figure in Indian mythology. Revisionist writing, which received significant applause in recent times, presents an alternative perspective by deconstructing the age-old mythological narratives. Moreover, it highlights the adaptable quality of myths to address contemporary challenges. By employing feminist lens, this study not only unpacks the strictures of patriarchal conventions that dominate, exploit and marginalize the women characters but also establishes the fact that the age-old myths, written mostly by men, have become the victim of patriarchy. Sita's journey stands as a beacon of inspiration for women fighting for justice against the injustices perpetrated by patriarchal society. This paper delves deep into these issues, exploring how Sita navigated the patriarchal landscape while simultaneously amplifying the voices of marginalized women characters. Her story serves as a powerful catalyst for resurrecting and empowering women relegated to the periphery.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Place, Revisionist narrative, Society, Space, Women experience.

Introduction

Myths and mythology of India, establish patriarchal ideologies and tend to marginalize women within society by positioning them to inferior roles. Feminist revisionists provide a fresh perspective, specifically a female point of view that destabilizes the grand narrative and questions conventional androcentric ideology. Additionally, revisionists probe how myths have become victims of patriarchy and have been indifferent to female characters in cultural texts. Beauvoir critiques the patriarchal foundations of society and the marginalized status of women, extending her analysis to the realm of mythology. She argues that myths frequently depict women as the fundamental silence of truth, emphasizing the systematic suppression of their voices and lived experiences. According to her, myths can perpetuate patriarchal norms by presenting women as submissive figures rather than empowered individuals. This marginalization becomes apparent in the representation of female deities and the narratives involving women in Indian myths, where their unique perspectives are frequently overshadowed by their roles in relation to men. Beauvoir's insights highlight the urgent need to challenge these entrenched narratives, fostering a society where women's voices are valued, and gender inequality is dismantled (1). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, contemporary Indian author, has revived canonical texts through revision and myth-making, associating age-old epics with contemporary renderings that are imaginative and creative. The author's work covers a wide range of topics, including revisionist mythology, diasporic sensibility, and feminism. The protagonists in her novels are predominantly mythological figures, and they spring to life within the pages to narrate their long-overlooked stories to the readers. Divakaruni revisits the *Ramayana*

from *Sita's* point of view and depicts her entire journey in this universe. This article deliberates the protagonist's transformative journey from the fringes of the society to center stage, accomplished through the deconstruction of the grand narrative and the employment of a feminist revisionist approach. It also delves into *Sita's* efforts to navigate and redefine her role within a patriarchal structure, while simultaneously advocating the empowerment of other marginalized women. Throughout her journey, she upholds self-respect and dignity as her guiding principles.

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Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) through the lens of feminist revisionist mythology. The novel is the central focus of this investigation.

The analysis investigates three key aspects:

- Deconstructing the patriarchal narrative of *Sita*: The study examines how Divakaruni challenges the traditional portrayal of *Sita* as a passive and submissive victim of patriarchy. It explores how the author rewrites *Sita's* narrative to emphasize her agency, resilience, and strength.

- Unveiling the silenced voices of marginalized women: The study analyzes how Divakaruni gives voice to the often-marginalized women characters in Indian mythology. It explores how the author brings to light the experiences of these women and challenges the patriarchal structures that have silenced them.

- Empowering women through mythology: The study examines how Divakaruni's revisionist mythology empowers women by providing them with alternative narratives and role models. It explores how the novel challenges gender stereotypes and offers new possibilities for female identity.

This article examines the novel, employing a thorough analysis through close reading and incorporating additional sources on feminist theory, mythology, and literary criticism. It emphasizes the importance of incorporating feminist perspectives to encourage gender

equality, acknowledging that conventional narratives have marginalized women. The revisionist narrative aims to retain the essence of the original text while avoiding insensitive or inappropriate language and overly complex technical jargon to enhance accessibility for a broader audience.

In addition to analyzing the novel's literary merits, this research explores the historical and cultural backdrop influencing the narrative, with a specific focus on the significant impact of mythology on Indian society. It examines how Divakaruni's revisionist approach to mythology intersects with contemporary discourses on gender equality and social justice.

Through this comprehensive analysis, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Divakaruni's novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, a powerful feminist text that challenges patriarchal narratives, empowers women, and provides new perspectives on female identity and agency.

Result and Discussion

Feminism

The term 'feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'femina,' meaning 'woman.' In 1837, Charles Fourier advocated empowerment of women using the French term, *féminisme.* The Oxford English Dictionary (7th Edition) describes feminism as the women's rights movement, promoting parity between the sexes. Adhering to Encyclopedia Britannica's definition, feminism embodies the endeavor for equal opportunities and rights regardless of gender across social, economic, and political landscapes. Feminism is an extensive social and political endeavor actively promoting the cause of gender equality. It endeavors to break down the historically entrenched patriarchal systems that have marginalized women, aspiring to foster a society where both men and women share equal rights, opportunities, and mutual respect. Bell Hooks, an esteemed author, educator, and social critic, defined feminism as a movement to eradicate sexism, sexist exploitation, and the oppressive systems that perpetuate gender inequality. She emphasized that feminism is not solely focused on achieving parity for women but rather on dismantling the patriarchal structures that have marginalized and subjugated women for centuries (2). The feminist movement has undergone a remarkable transformation over time, characterized by three distinct waves. The first wave, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, championed women's access to fundamental rights, particularly in education and employment. Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal feminist philosophical work contends that women, as integral contributors to society, should receive education. She emphasizes their crucial roles in nurturing children and managing household responsibilities. Wollstonecraft advocates for women as human beings deserving equal rights to men in society, positioning them as potential "companions" rather than just wives to their husbands. Dorothy Day, Elizabeth Blackwell, Jane Addams and Sojourner Truth are a few of the eminent first wave feminists. During the 1960s-70s, the second wave of feminist movement had taken place which ultimately acknowledged that the first wave of feminist movement failed to solve the 'women's question'. Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) marks the commencement of the second wave of feminism. Apart from economic instability, this phase of feminist movement identified female oppression at various levels: personal, psychological and sexual. Moreover, it tried to bring women together overcoming various barriers such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion or sexual orientation. Gloria Steinem, and Audre Lorde are the two most influential figures of this period. The third wave of feminist movement, which began during the 1990s, focused on reclaiming femininity and female sexuality and rejected the idea of embracing feminine social norms witnessed in the second wave of feminist movement. This phase embraced the multifaceted theories, personal experiences that shaped feminism. Moreover, theories like intersectionality, ecofeminism, and postmodern feminism came into prominence during the third wave feminism. Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, and Shannon Liss are some prominent figures of the third wave of feminist movement. In her opinion, Lisa Tuttle suggests that feminist theory, when delving into literature with a gender-conscious lens, dissects and analyzes literary works, including traditional texts, from a female-centric perspective. It aims to establish and uncover a distinct female literary tradition, interpreting women's writing with a heightened

sensitivity to symbolism, devoid of a male-dominated viewpoint. By applying a feminist lens to older literary works, feminist theory broadens our understanding of literature while challenging the longstanding patriarchal narratives that have shaped it. It scrutinizes women writers and their works through a distinctly female lens, illuminating their unique voices and experiences. This critical approach also confronts and challenges instances of sexism embedded within literature, raising awareness about the gendered nuances of language and style. Ultimately, feminist theory seeks to shed light on women's experiences, perspectives, and undeniable contributions to the realm of literature and literary criticism (3). Feminist writers continuously work on asserting female identity by emphasizing on the revival of feminist literature and foreground the experiences of female characters. Kavita Kane in an interview with Sikha S. Lamba asserts that feminism, at its core, advocates recognizing women as individuals, possessing the same fundamental rights, opportunities, and choices as men. It challenges the societal and familial constructs that have confined women to predefined roles, such as daughter, wife, and mother. These roles, often imposed and limiting, have reduced women to mere stereotypes, oversimplified images that hinder their personal growth and societal contributions. Feminism seeks to dismantle these stereotypes and empower women to break free from the confines of prescribed roles. It encourages women to embrace their individuality, pursue their aspirations, and exercise autonomy without societal constraints. By recognizing women as equal individuals, feminism opens up a world of possibilities, allowing women to contribute their unique talents and perspectives to society without limitations. Feminism does not negate the significance of family relationships or the fulfillment originating from motherhood. Instead, it advocates a community where women can choose their roles freely, alongside a myriad of other fulfilling paths. It imagines a world in which women are characterized not by their connections to others but by their individual aspirations, accomplishments, and contributions. In essence, feminism is about recognizing the inherent worth and potential of every woman, regardless of her societal status or predefined roles. It is about creating a world where women are seen, heard, and valued as individuals, capable of shaping their own destinies and contributing meaningfully to society (4). Feminist revisionists argue that patriarchal myths have marginalized women by portraying them as having less potential than men and by giving them a secondary role in society.

Revisionist mythology

M.H. Abrams argues that mythology is a collection of inherited stories within a cultural group that were once believed to be true. These narratives often referred to as "myths," serve to explain the origin of the world, natural phenomena, and events through the actions and intentions of deities and supernatural beings. Additionally, myths provide a rationale for social customs, rituals, and establish the moral and behavioral rules guiding people's lives. Myths are deeply embedded in the cultures that create them, reflecting their values, beliefs, and worldview. They provide a framework for understanding the world and one's place within it, offering explanations for the mysteries of existence and guidance for navigating life's challenges. Myths often feature a cast of divine characters, including gods, goddesses, and heroes, who possess extraordinary powers and influence the course of human events. These metaphysical elements are often personifications of natural forces, celestial bodies, or abstract concepts, reflecting the cultural understanding of the world. The stories of mythology are not merely tales of gods and heroes; they also embody profound social and moral lessons. They teach about the importance of courage, loyalty, justice, and respect for the natural world. They also warn against the consequences of greed, hubris, and transgression of moral codes. Myths have played a significant role in shaping human societies throughout history. They have provided a foundation for religious beliefs, inspired artistic expression, and influenced social structures and practices. While their literal interpretation may have diminished after some time, their symbolic and metaphorical significance continues to resonate with people today (5).The age-old Indian epics served as the foundational force of Indian culture and civilization. Ramanand Sagar's epic television series–*Ramayan* aired on DD *National* channel and *Mahabharat*, which aired during the 1980s-

90s on *Doordarshan* channel, produced and directed by B. R. Chopra and Ravi Chopra respectively; bear a special place in our hearts. In the late 20th century, traditional mythological texts from Western cultures were frequently criticized for perpetuating gender discrimination and reinforcing male-centric patriarchy. In response, some authors began to revise these texts from a gynocentric perspective, highlighting the agency and strength of female characters. This act of revisionism challenged the established myth of patriarchal ideology and helped to create a more inclusive and equitable view of mythology. The same has been adopted by some of the 20th century Indian writers. Tippabhotla Vyomakesisri opines that the depiction of women in the ancient Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata mirrors the patriarchal norms of the societies that created them. While some female characters demonstrate strength, intelligence, and resilience, they also encounter significant challenges and subjugation due to their gender (6). The presentation of female characters as subservient to men foregrounds patriarchal ideology and male perspective, thereby completely repudiating the female perspective. In this regard, contemporary revisionist writers present the lesser known female characters as powerful protagonists in their novels. Ostriker characterizes feminist revisionist mythology as the active questioning and correction of gender stereotypes inherent in myths. She goes on to suggest that this form of mythmaking serves the purpose of redefining female identity and rectifying the historical narrative, working towards a more accurate portrayal of the collective and enduring struggles faced by women (7). Revisionist writers present mythological writings from feminist standpoint adding some contemporary taste into it. Speaking about the importance of 'revisionism', Kavita Kane, in a conversation to Anil Srinivasan remarks that the continued existence of the Indian epics owes itself to their frequent reimagining and retelling over time. These epics have transcended the boundaries of time and culture, not just through their original compositions, but also through the countless adaptations, interpretations, and reinventions that have enriched their narratives and expanded their reach (8). Adrienne Rich's concept of revisionism holds global recognition. The act of re-vision, involving a critical examination and reinterpretation of established narratives, emerges as a vital tool for both liberation and self-discovery. By revisiting the old texts and historical accounts, we can challenge the patriarchal norms that have influenced our comprehension of ourselves and the world. This process of re-vision is not about erasing the past but about reclaiming our own stories and experiences (9). Conscious of the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideologies on mythologies, revisionist writers strive to provide an alternative (gynocentric) perspective by foregrounding the voiceless female characters who have remained marginalized in traditional narratives.

Feminist literary criticism and myth retellings in Sitayan: An overview

Chitra Banerjee's novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, merges feminist literary analysis with the art of myth reinterpretation, crafting a story that resonates deeply with both approaches. Deviating from the traditional interpretation, she rewrites the *Ramayana* from feminist standpoint. She explores *Sita's* struggles, desires, and agency, aspects often ignored in conventional retellings. Additionally, her work criticizes how patriarchal society hinders female autonomy and controls their destiny.

As a myth retelling, Banerjee does away with the traditional interpretation of the *Ramayana* and breathes life into *Sita's* character. She breaks the age-old notion of *Sita* as a meek, docile woman who is considered to be the epitome of *pativrata* in traditional narrative. Divakaruni's *Sita* is a strong woman who upholds self-respect and dignity. *Sita*, a blind follower of her husband in conventional retellings, offers an alternative perspective through Divakaruni's *Sitayan*. By offering alternative perspectives and exploring *Sita*'s emotions and experiences, Banerjee reshapes the myth, prompting readers to question and reinterpret the traditional tale while emphasizing the relevance of mythological stories in contemporary discussions.

By combining feminist literary criticism and myth retelling, *Sitayan* provides a platform to examine power dynamics, gender roles, and the complexities of female identity within the framework of ancient myths. Chitra Banerjee, in

her retelling, foregrounds the marginalized women characters and offers a space to reimagine and reclaim agency within the expanse of Indian mythology. This convergence invites readers to engage critically with the text, sparking discussions regarding the intersection of literature, feminism, and the reimagining of ancient myths in contemporary times.

Intersectionality in the context of feminist theory

Sita's journey in *Sitayan* shines throws light on how different aspects of her identity, that of – woman, queen, high-caste, wife, etc. – combine to create unique struggles and opportunities. This 'intersectionality' lens, championed by feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, helped the researcher to see beyond just gender and understand how various social labels like race, class, and caste intertwine to shape lived experiences. *Sita's* story reveals how her societal expectations as a woman clash with her high-caste privileges and wifely duties. This complex web of identity restricts her agency and forces her to navigate power dynamics in nuanced ways. The novel also describes the diverse experiences of other women like *Kaikeyi* and *Surpanakha*, each battling their own set of challenges based on their unique intersections.

By applying this intersectional lens, Divakaruni's fiction prompts us to critically examine societal norms and power structures that benefit some while marginalizing others based on their multifaceted identities. This mosaic of viewpoints shatters the illusion of a singular truth, revealing the breathtaking tapestry of human experience. Through diverse eyes, we glimpse the hidden facets of life, transcending the limitations of single labels and embracing the kaleidoscope of stories that weave the fabric of our world. Chitra Banerjee's masterful storytelling thus emerges as a powerful tool for feminist discourse, inviting readers to delve into the intricate tapestry of societal expectations, power imbalances, and individual agency within the framework of intersectionality. The analysis offers a promising exploration of intersectionality within the context of Indian mythology. To grasp intersectionality in feminism, the researcher dives beyond singular labels, unraveling how her identity's interwoven threads shape her story

Gender: *Sita* is the protagonist in Divakaruni's *Sitayan*. Patriarchal echoes shape her lived experience and forge her emerging identity. This feminist revisionist narrative challenges the gender roles prevalent in patriarchal society. *Sita* confronts all the challenges boldly and upholds self-respect and dignity above everything else. Moreover, this retelling offers an alternative perspective by advocating female- centric narration.

Class: Divakaruni's *Sitayan* also delves into the notions of class. *Sita* experiences both privilege and hardship. She experienced certain privileges like education as she was the princess in a royal and aristocratic family. However, her post marital life was full of trials and tribulations. She had experienced the challenges of forest life twice before embracing Mother Earth as her ultimate destination.

Agency and autonomy: Within her limitations, *Sita* displays agency through her resilience, choices like exile with *Rama*, and defiance during the *agni pariksha*, questioning *Rama's* actions and thoughts and most importantly his role as a ruler and a husband, advocating empowerment of women by upholding self-respect and dignity. Analyzing her narrative through an intersectional lens illuminates how societal limitations on her agency arise from the complex interplay between her gender and other facets of her being.

Power dynamics: Exploring the power dynamics between *Sita* and *Rama* through an intersectional lens unveils the intricate tapestry of how societal expectations and norms surrounding gender interact with broader power structures, shedding light on the complexities of *Sita*'s journey. The narrative sheds light on how women can navigate and potentially influence existing power dynamics, paving the way for future shifts towards greater inclusivity and equity.

Analyzing *Sita* through an intersectional lens reveals the layered nature of her oppression and agency. It moves beyond a traditional narrative and acknowledges the complex interplay of power dynamics based on caste, class, gender, and other factors. Examining Sita through an intersectional lens unlocks a deeper, more intricate understanding of her character and the web of power dynamics that shape her journey. This

approach also addresses social inequalities and advocates for inclusive justice.

Feminist revisionist study of the forest of enchantments

The Ramayana and *The Mahabharata* are ingrained in our consciousness. Ken Dowden states that indeed, mythology often reflects a male-centric perspective, with women frequently portrayed as passive figures or objects of desire. This male-dominated narrative often overlooks the complex roles and experiences of women in ancient societies (10). Patriarchal renderings showcase men as heroes and saviors, while women are portrayed as the villains and temptresses. Moreover, women uphold virtue and tolerance and also confine their roles within the domestic spheres by associating them with the roles of wifehood and motherhood. The traditional perception of men as inherently strong, rational, and capable of maintaining order has been contrasted with the portrayal of women as weak, emotional, and disruptive. This stereotypical representation of women has been pervasive across various cultures and historical periods. Feminist writers, however, offer a counter-narrative, challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of these gender stereotypes. They argue that the subjugation and devaluation of women in mythological writings reinforces the dominance of phallogocentric language and perpetuates harmful gender norms. Men have been the producer of language relegating women to the periphery. Therefore, they established the notion that knowledge is the product of man-made language. Helene Cixous, literary critic and French writer opines that women should write with the authenticity of their embodied experiences, creating a language that defies boundaries and transcends conventional structures. This language, born from the depths of their being, will shatter the confines of societal norms and be liberated from the constraints of oppressive discourse. It will be a language of liberation, a collective of voices rising above the stifling silence that has long silenced their truths (11). The concept of "écriture féminine" gained prominence in the academic sphere, with feminists advocating for the utilization of language as a potent tool to challenge patriarchal narratives, empower women, and promote

women's writing. Paula Caplan writes that propensity of women to hold themselves accountable rather than attributing blame to others is a deeply ingrained pattern that stems from societal expectations of femininity. This notion of selflessness and self-sacrifice, akin to the concept of original sin, has limited women's self-perception and hindered their personal growth, fostering feelings of shame and guilt. In order to liberate themselves from this myth and broaden their perspectives, women must comprehend its origins and the various ways it materializes in their lives. By recognizing and dismantling these harmful beliefs, we can empower women to embrace their full potential and challenge the status quo. This change in viewpoint will not only shield women from self-destructive self-blame but also protect others from the repercussions of perpetuating this detrimental myth (12).

Revisiting and reinterpreting the mythological narratives of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is a long-standing tradition in Indian literature and art. These epics, with their complex characters, profound themes, and enduring relevance, have been continuously reimagined and adapted across various mediums, from oral storytelling to written texts, visual arts, and performing arts. This ongoing process of reinterpretation allows for fresh perspectives, diverse interpretations, and new insights into the timeless essence of these epic tales. It also serves as a powerful tool for exploring contemporary social, cultural, and political issues. Asserting the importance of revisionism, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in an interview to the fifth estate remarks that retelling of epics plays a significant role in keeping the age-old stories alive and makes them relevant (13). Divakaruni, like Helen Cixous, recognized the necessity of challenging the prevailing masculine narrative by giving *Sita* the opportunity to reclaim her own story, her *Sitayan*. *Valmiki's Ramayana*, on the other hand, largely ignores *Sita's* suffering and anguish. Rather, it revolved around *Rama*– his birth, upbringings, challenges in battlefield and statecraft. Consequently, *Sita* was overshadowed by Rama's character. As a revisionist writer, she does away with the popular belief and reimagines *Sita* as a strong character and strikes the chord of Indian women by demythologizing the *Ramayana*. The narrative of *Sita* encapsulates the resilience and strength of

women striving for their rightful place in a world that frequently and unjustly privileges men, writes Sukanya Saha in her review article on the source text (14). Divakaruni writes *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) from *Sita's* perspective and even throws light on minor women characters like *Ahalya*, *Mandodari*, *Urmila*, *Surpanakha* and *Kaikayi*. Her characters are bold, independent and assertive. Lesser known characters plead to the writer to usher some light on their life's journey, for they have been ignored by other writers (15). Using revisionism as an approach, Divakaruni questions the traditional interpretations and offers her literary oeuvre as an important means of emancipation. Furthermore, this novel breathes life into the often-overlooked minor characters, providing them with a platform to share their unique perspectives and experiences.

Sita becomes the protagonist of her story subverting the patriarchal interpretations. The novel opens up with an important interaction between *Valmiki* and *Sita*, when the former eagerly awaits the latter's opinion regarding *Ramayana*. *Sita* appreciates Sage *Valmiki's* presentation and asserts that *Valmiki* has nicely captured the essence of the story. *Valmiki* then advises *Sita* to pen down her unspoken experiences with red ink. The colour 'red' is highly symbolic– it symbolizes menstruation and childbirth, colour of Ashoka flower which also is relatable to the colour of love (15). Eminent researcher Shilpa D. Bhatt opines that feminist revisionists often employ a technique known as 'flipping the narration' where they retell traditional narratives from the perspective of marginalized characters, particularly women. Through their writings, they inject a feminine sensibility into these narratives, questioning patriarchal norms and amplifying the voices that have been silenced (16).

Divakaruni deconstructs the image of *Sita* in the subsequent chapters and concentrates on feminine renderings. As traditional epics valorize male characters, Divakaruni's *Sitayan* documents the story of every woman character whom *Sita* met in her life's journey. Though the original *Ramayana* does not showcase any significant interactions between *Sita* and her adoptive mother, *Queen Sunaina*, Divakaruni's novel presents her as integral to the kingdom. *Queen Sunaina* not only aids her husband by giving

suggestions and appropriate guidance regarding statecraft, she also empowers her daughter *Sita* by encouraging her to learn martial arts lessons. This further helped *Sita* to fulfill her dream of becoming a warrior. Operating discreetly behind the scenes, *Sunaina*, an exemplary mother, devoted wife, and astute political strategist, skillfully maneuvered her husband into the spotlight. Recognizing the trials and tribulations that would inevitably befall *Sita*, she meticulously molded her daughter into a courageous and resilient woman, capable of facing any adversity with unwavering strength. Despite *Sita's* formal education, household expertise, and formidable combat skills, *Sunaina*, cautious not to disrupt the established patriarchal order, gently discouraged her daughter's aspirations for state leadership. *Sita* realizes her mother's advice to 'endure' during her post- marital life, as women are considered as an epitome of endurance. She was concerned about the plight of *Kaushalya* and other co-wives of King *Dasharatha*, for while he remained unmoved by the emotional turmoil of his wives, *Kaikeyi* being an exception, *Sita* deeply appreciated *Rama's* steadfast devotion to their monogamous relationship. She recognized and cherished his unwavering love and respect for her (15).

In Divakaruni's captivating novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), she delves into the life of *Ahalya*, a frequently misunderstood character from the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*. Through *Sita's* encounter with *Ahalya* at *Rishi Goutam's* hermitage, the novel unveils the heartbreaking tale of *Ahalya's* victimization at the hands of *Indra*, who, disguised as her husband, *Rishi Goutam*, during his absence, exploited her trust and innocence. Later, *Goutam* catches them red handed and curses both of them– *Indra* for deception and *Ahalya* for betrayal. He punishes *Ahalya* by turning her into a lifeless stone. Later, *Rama* restores her to life and liberates her. *Ahalya's* restoration, while seemingly compassionate, underscores the imbalanced power dynamics in a patriarchal society. Rishi *Goutama* and *Rama* are the voices of patriarchy, and *Ahalya* and *Sita* represent womankind. Divakaruni's retelling challenges the traditional narrative, giving *Ahalya* a voice and exposing the patriarchal structures that have silenced and marginalized women. *Sita* realizes, from this

incident, how *Ahalya* is silenced by male atrocities and forced to accept her misfortune. *Sita*, too, is relegated to the periphery when she questions the notions of truth and infidelity. Nabaneeta Dev Sen remarks that, despite the hardships and injustices she faced throughout her life, *Sita* remains an idealized figure in Hindu mythology, often portrayed as the epitome of wifely virtue and unwavering devotion to her husband, *Rama*. Her story has been widely circulated and interpreted, often reinforcing patriarchal values that emphasize female submissiveness and silent acceptance of suffering (17). In Papuri Lalita Kumari's (popularly known as Volga) feminist revisionist narrative *The Liberation of Sita*, *Ahalya* generalizes women's predicament, asserting that they are frequently unjustly accused in the patriarchal world. Shattering the shackles of societal expectations, *Ahalya* boldly proclaims that no individual possesses the right to dictate her actions or define her morality. While society has granted husbands the authority to judge their wives, she refuses to accept this one-sided dynamic, asserting her own moral compass and challenging the patriarchal norms that have long silenced women's voices (18). In a bold act of literary subversion, contemporary revisionist writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, and Volga dismantle the traditional narratives of Indian mythology, amplifying the voices of marginalized characters long relegated to the periphery. Through their retellings, they offer a nuanced and multifaceted perspective on these ancient tales, challenging patriarchal norms and giving agency to those previously silenced.

Surpanakha is another significant character which Divakaruni takes into account. *Surpanakha*, often portrayed as a grotesque and villainous figure in the *Ramayana*, has been labeled as an embodiment of female deviance. According to Edwin M. Schur, her (Surpanakha) actions, such as her aggressive pursuit of *Rama* and her violent reaction to his rejection, have been interpreted as transgressions against societal norms and expectations of femininity (19). In contrast to *Valmiki's* portrayal of *Surpanakha* as a grotesque, villainous figure, contemporary feminist revisionist writers have challenged this stereotype, offering nuanced and multifaceted representations that re-imagine her as a complex and relatable individual. These retellings explore

Surpanakha's experiences of rejection, loss, and societal marginalization, shedding light on the patriarchal forces that shaped her actions. Writing about *Surpanakha's* character in her book, *Lanka's Princess* (2017), contemporary feminist writer Kavita Kane provides a detailed description of *Surpanakha*– her birth, childhood experiences, adulthood, marriage and her tragic death. In an interview to India Today's correspondent Karishma Kuenzang, Kane asserts that her famous novel have humanized *Meenakshi*, a character often demonized in traditional narratives, by exploring the complexities of her personality and the circumstances that transformed her into the formidable *Surpanakha* (20). Divakaruni, on the other hand presents *Surpanakha* as a victim who was punished by *Lakshmana*, a representative of patriarchal society for her frivolous and unwomanly defiant behaviour. *Sita* expressed her understanding of *Surpanakha's* suffering and offered her strength. *Surpanakha's* disfigurement is also an example of patriarchal control which condemns behaviors that pose a threat to the patriarchal society.

Divakruni's *The Forest of Enchantment* (*Sitayan*) aspires to foreground the complexity of female existence (15). By grounding *Sita* in the realm of human experience, Banerjee's *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a fresh perspective on the *Ramayana*, inviting readers to evaluate the epic from a moral standpoint. This humanization of *Sita* departs from traditional portrayals of her as a divine being, instead presenting her as a complex and relatable individual grappling with the challenges of love, loss, and societal expectations. Like any normal human being, *Sita* undergoes emotional upheavals– afraid, angry, heartbroken, disappointed and confused. *Rama* releases *Sita* from all kinds of familial bondages immediately after rescuing her from the clutches of the demon king *Ravana* (15). Enduring the fiery trial of the *agni pareeksha*, a symbolic test of purity, *Sita* emerged unscathed, her unwavering devotion to *Rama* and her unwavering commitment to patriarchal norms solidifying her status as an epitome of 'pativrata', a wife of unwavering virtue and loyalty. Indian writer, Jasbir Jain delineates that the enduring influence of the *Sita* myth can be seen in the pervasive idealization of women as selfless and devoted pativratas (wifely exemplars of virtue), an image that resonates with both men

and women, even during modern times. This notion is further reinforced by the persistent imagery of *agni pareeksha*, the trial by fire, which continues to be invoked to assess a woman's chastity and trustworthiness (21). *Rama's* justifications for leaving *Sita* are crucial to understanding the complexities of his character and the motivations behind his actions. Unlike *Valmiki's Sita*, who played the role of a mute spectator, Divakaruni's *Sita* questions this very act of *Rama* in protest of her husband's actions. Feminist literary studies advocates for a critical approach to literature that challenges patriarchal norms and power structures by highlighting the agency and autonomy of female characters, writes Soni Wadhwa in her article (22).

In a bold act of defiance against the patriarchal norms of her time, *Sita*, the protagonist of feminist revisionist narratives, strides into the Royal Court of *Ayodhya* to demand justice,serving as a powerful foil to the oppressive societal structures that seek to silence her voice. Stephen Osborne argues that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) exemplifies the distinctive perspectives and narratives that characterize female, feminine, or feminist writing (23). Subverting the grand narrative, Divakaruni's novel presents the recitation of the saga of *Sita* by her two sons, *Luva* and *Kusa*. According to Luthra, despite her longing to reunite with *Rama*, *Sita* steadfastly refused to undergo another fire ordeal, recognizing that such a practice would only perpetuate the subjugation of women under patriarchal norms (24). In contrast to Valmiki's *Ramayana*, where *Sita* unquestioningly followed *Rama's* lead and adhered to his every command, Divakaruni's *Sita* emerges as a resolute woman who, while navigating the challenges of a patriarchal society, dares to challenge the King's actions. According to Spivak, *Sita*, the marginalized and silenced woman who is removed from all lines of social mobility, is empowered with the courage and conviction to challenge the discrimination and inequality faced by women in patriarchal society (25). What the author tries to underscore is - *Sita* cannot remain silent in such a crucial situation, for She is the representative of the entire womankind. She is a self- confident woman who not only fulfilled her duty towards the marginalized women characters by foregrounding their pathetic conditions; She

also saved *Rama* from the ensuing humiliation by proving her chastity by undertaking the fire ordeal before the eyes of the society. Nabaneeta Dev Sen opines that in the same vein as the *Rama* myth is utilized to mold the ideal Hindu male, the characterization of *Sita* is crafted to represent the pinnacle of the ideal Hindu female. This sustains patriarchal norms and fortifies the idea of female subservience. (17). *Rama*, *Sita* bear positive connotations, while *Ravana*, *Kaikayee* bear negative meanings. Revisionists assert that age-old narratives are not merely the anecdotes of triumph of good over evil. Moreover, they try to humanize the Gods and Goddesses and make them relatable. The ancient epic *Ramayana* presents *Sita* as a complex and multifaceted character who navigates the challenges of her life with resilience, dignity, and a deep sense of devotion to her husband, *Rama*. However, contemporary retellings of the *Ramayana* explore the possibility that *Sita* is suffering from a psychological disorder due to her entrapment in the dharma of *pativratya*, a wife who is faithful and dutiful toward her husband upholding the notion of being an ideal wife. Contemporary Indian women writers take up the theme of mythological revisionism and attempt to construct a gynocentric perspective by incorporating a broad spectrum of themes concerning female experiences. They probe the intricacies of the mythological realm, revealing a neglected tapestry that spans generations.

Divakaruni's *Sita* is an independent and assertive voice and also highlights the loopholes of Indian patriarchal power structure. As a feminist revisionist writer, Divakaruni highlights how the age-old myths have been dominated by patriarchy and relegated the women characters to the periphery, away from the power structure. As an emancipated woman, *Sita* chooses to return to her creator, Mother Earth, and not to *Rama*. *Sita* liberates herself by giving her sons to *Rama* and finally, embraces Mother Earth as her ultimate destination. Divakaruni's *Sita*, too, is a transformed woman who is capable of taking bold decisions. Her journey is the outcome of her conscious individual choice. Moreover, she became an emblem of courage and strength by breaking the conventional representation of a meek, docile woman. She is a human being encompassing a wide range of human emotions

and establishes her identity not as Goddess or ideal wife but as bold and assertive woman who is courageous enough to fight against any kind of injustice inflicted on her. She resists patriarchal atrocities by questioning the actions of male members residing in the power structure and creates her place in the patriarchal society.

Sita's legacy and redefining of womanhood

Sita's legacy is not one of mere obedience, but a tapestry woven with agency, resilience, and emotional depth. Banerjee crafts a multifaceted Sita who challenges societal expectations and redefines womanhood itself, thereby rejecting the conventional image of Sita who questions the norms of patriarchal society and boldly fights against all kinds of adversity. Although Banerjee delves into her emotional journey, revealing vulnerabilities and struggles, Sita's unwavering spirit is a sign of women empowerment.

The author explores the concept of womanhood through *Sita's* diverse interactions with other female characters. The marginalized female characters urge *Sita* to write their stories in her *Sitayan*. From Ahalya's defiant gaze to Urmila's quiet strength, Ramayana's women whisper untold stories of female identity. Each, a tapestry woven with threads of resilience and rebellion, ready to unravel the stifling knots of patriarchy. Sita, the luminous thread, shines not just in her own defiance, but in the empathy she weaves for her ostracized sisters. Ahalya, cursed to stone for defying societal norms, finds her voice in the rustling leaves. Urmila, the silent warrior, battles loneliness with unwavering loyalty. *Surpanakha*, the scorned lover, becomes a tempestuous force challenging traditional beauty standards. And Sita, the embodiment of grace, walks through fire, not just for her husband, but for every woman ostracized by a society that demands subservience. This tapestry highlights the complexity and richness of women's experiences, transcending the limited roles often found in ancient epics. Through Banerjee's lens, Sita sheds the shackles of idealized perfection. No longer a mere symbol of chastity, she emerges as a complex tapestry woven with strength, vulnerability, and unwavering determination. Divakaruni's Sita questions, demands, and ultimately redefines the meaning of womanhood within the epic narrative.

Evaluating Sita's character growth in The Forest of Enchantments

Sitayan offers a rich tapestry to evaluate *Sita's* character, moving beyond the traditional, one-dimensional portrayal in the *Ramayana*. The novel was shortlisted for the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction. Divakaruni's stirring novel amplifies Sita's voice, transforming the Ramayana's often passive princess into a strong, loving woman. Spanning childhood, exile, and abduction, her journey unfolds in three captivating parts, offering a fresh perspective on a timeless tale. However, a detailed analysis of this novel from feminist revisionist standpoint leads to understanding and evaluating *Sita's* character in great detail.

Strength and resilience: Banerjee paints *Sita* as a beacon of strength and resilience in her novel. From navigating societal pressures to braving exile and betrayal, *Sita's* journey is a testament to unwavering inner fortitude. Even in the face of hardship, she adapts, perseveres, and holds onto her core values. Quietly determined, she refuses to let circumstance define her. *Sita's* resilience isn't just about enduring; it's about finding strength within and transforming through adversity. Like a sturdy oak weathering storms, she proves that true strength lies not in the absence of hardship, but in the ability to rise through it. This timeless portrayal reminds us that resilience is the beating heart of strength, allowing us to face any challenge with grace and integrity.

Love and devotion: Through Sita's unwavering love, Divakaruni's narrative paints a nuanced picture of devotion. Even as trials shake Rama's ground, Sita's unwavering love remains a constant, offering a powerful testament to the strength of their bond. This reminder of love's unwavering nature resonates through their journey, highlighting its ability to persevere amidst challenges.

Complexity and contradictions: Within Sita, battles rage, morals tangle, and selfhood blooms. Banerjee peels back the layers of her mind, revealing insecurities, doubts, and the crushing weight of societal expectations for a 'perfect wife.'

Her path is littered with ethical quandaries, especially the *agni pareeksha*, where her choice starkly displays the conflicting pressures on women in patriarchal societies. *Sita* transcends victimhood, wielding resilience and determination. She grows from a sheltered princess to a resilient, independent woman, challenging norms and forging her own identity beyond the confines of expectation. Banerjee's masterly portrayal unravels complexity, echoing the inner conflicts, ethical dilemmas, and transformative growth inherent in *Sita's* character.

Significance and interpretation: Sita breaks free from the silent margins of epic narratives like the Ramayana in *Sitayan*. Banerjee's bold voice gives flesh and bone to *Sita's* desires, frustrations, and vulnerabilities, shattering the rigid mould of traditional patriarchal stories. *Sita's* gaze recasts the story into a vibrant prism, illuminating contemporary issues like gender equity, societal expectations, and female empowerment. Her struggles resonate with contemporary dilemmas, prompting us to question our interpretations of history and entrenched gender roles. Banerjee does not simply resurrect *Sita's* silenced voice; she ignites a fiery dialogue, urging us to reimagine and rebuild societal frameworks with these timeless themes burning bright in our minds.

Limitations of evaluation: Sita in the *Sitayan* is a multifaceted tapestry, inviting diverse interpretations due to her complex portrayal and the influence of readers' own cultural lenses. While Banerjee crafts a nuanced narrative, her authorial voice shapes our understanding of *Sita's* complexities. Yet, she also offers space for individual interpretations and critical engagement, allowing readers to explore *Sita's* enduring significance through their own frameworks, enriching the dialogue about this iconic character.

The novel presents a multifaceted and evolving portrayal of *Sita*, enriching the reader's understanding of this iconic character. By exploring her strengths, vulnerabilities, and complexities, the novel invites us to engage in critical reflection and reimagine the Ramayana from a more nuanced and empathetic perspective.

Sitayan and conventional *Ramayana*: A comparative study
Perspective
Conventional Ramayana: Primarily narrated from Ram's perspective, with Sita's portrayal often limited to supporting his journey and fulfilling her wifely duties. The age-old epics eulogised the valour of men, thereby relegating women into periphery.

The forest of enchantments: revolves around Sita's perspective, making her thoughts, experiences, and emotions the focal point. This shift offers a deeper understanding of her motivations, struggles, and growth. Divakaruni challenges the traditional interpretation by making *Sita* the protagonist of the story. Moreover, she offers an alternative perspective.

Character Portrayal
Conventional Ramayana: Sita's image as the passive, eternally devoted wife masks her complexity, minimizing her agency and reducing her to a symbol of unquestioning obedience. Unwavering resilience defines her, navigating challenges with fortitude and grace, even within traditional notions of femininity. However, this portrayal tends to gloss over her inner conflicts, desires, and agency, relegating her to a more uni-dimensional, saintly figure.

The forest of enchantments: Presents a more nuanced and humanized *Sita*. She grapples with self-doubt, anger, and challenges social norms. Her devotion to Ram remains strong, but it's not portrayed as blind obedience. The novel explores her emotional complexity and growth throughout the narrative. Against a tide of societal expectations, this Sita's resilience rises like a beacon, showcasing her transformation from a sheltered princess to a woman who challenges and carves her own path.

Power Dynamics
Conventional Ramayana: While some interpretations of the Ramayana emphasize Sita's passivity, others delve deeper, exploring her strength, resilience, and nuanced responses to societal pressures.

The forest of enchantments: Highlights the limitations and challenges *Sita* faces due to her gender and societal expectations. The novel raises questions about power dynamics within the

narrative, prompting readers to critically examine traditional interpretations. While revealing the societal pressures Sita encounters, the story also showcases her resilience and resourcefulness as she navigates these challenges.

Themes

Conventional Ramayana: Focuses on duty, righteousness, and upholding dharma. Sita's role aligns with these themes, emphasizing her selfless support for Rama's mission. Her character navigates the expectations placed upon women while also showcasing her own agency and strength.

The forest of enchantments: Explores a range of themes, including internal conflict, female agency, societal expectations, and self-discovery. This adds depth and complexity to the narrative and allows readers to connect with Sita on a more personal level.

The traditional Ramayana tends to idealize her, focusing more on her role as an obedient wife and mother. The contrasting depictions underscore the shift from a revered, almost mythical figure to a relatable and humanized character, inviting readers to empathize with Sita's struggles and aspirations beyond the boundaries of traditional narratives. Feminist revisionist approach encourages readers to move beyond simplistic interpretations and examine the story through a lens of gender, power, and individual agency. This nuanced portrayal sheds new light on Sita's character, sparking vital conversations about gender and power dynamics even today. By disrupting conventional portrayals, Banerjee's Sita takes centre stage, prompting a broader rethinking of female roles in narratives.

Representation of Sita in contemporary revisionist mythology

Sita: an illustrated retelling of the Ramayana by Devdutt Pattanaik (2013): Pattanaik's retelling explores Sita's story through an illustrated narrative, delving into the lesser-known aspects of her life and emphasizing her strength and resilience.

The liberation of Sita (2016) by Volga: This novel presents a feminist reinterpretation of Sita's experiences during her time in captivity, highlighting her inner turmoil and quest for freedom and self-discovery.

Sita's sister (2014) by Kavita Kane: While Ramayana usually shines the spotlight on Sita, Kane boldly steers the lens towards Urmila, her oft-overlooked sister. From the shadows of Sita's epic journey, a new narrative emerges, whispering untold tales of love, sacrifice, and quiet strength.

Sita: Warrior of Mithila (2017) (Book 2 of the Ram Chandra series) by Amish Tripathi: In Tripathi's hands, Sita sheds the shackles of idealized femininity. No longer a mere symbol of devotion, she emerges as a force of nature, her leadership forged in resilience, her courage honed in the fires of adversity. This Sita strategizes battles, rallies armies, and confronts danger head-on, redefining the very meaning of a warrior princess.

Each of these retellings brings a unique perspective to Sita's character, offering readers diverse interpretations and dimensions of her story beyond the conventional portrayal in the Ramayana.

Conclusion

Thus, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a powerful feminist critique of traditional patriarchal narratives. Through her revisionist storytelling, Divakaruni challenges the marginalization of women in mythology and rewrites the story to emphasize the agency, resilience, and strength. This novel also provides a platform for the silenced voices of marginalized women, giving them the opportunity to tell their own stories and challenge the patriarchal structures that have silenced them.

Divakaruni's novel, infused with feminist revisionist mythology, boldly reimagines traditional narratives, paving the way for investigating female identity and empowerment. *Sita*, the novel's protagonist, emerges as a motivating exemplar for women seeking justice and equality. Her transformative journey of self-discovery and empowerment ignites a fire within readers, urging them to challenge societal norms and demand a world that is both just and equitable. This groundbreaking novel stands as a monumental contribution to feminist literature and mythology. It is a poignant and powerful masterpiece that challenges readers to scrutinize their presuppositions regarding gender, identity, and the very essence of power.

Abbreviation

This manuscript deliberately avoids abbreviations, preferring to present all terms and phrases in their full form for consistent clarity.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the study of this article.

Ethics approval

This qualitative research study delves into a literary analysis of Chitra Banerjee's novel The Forest of Enchantments (2019) and has received approval from the Ethics Committee of Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation. This study adheres to ethical principles governing research involving literary works and does not involve direct human or animal subjects. The analysis conducted in this study is based solely on the interpretation of publicly available literary materials, and no human participants or animal subjects were directly involved or impacted by this research. Proper citation and acknowledgment of the author's work are upheld to ensure intellectual property rights and academic integrity.

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