

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*: 'SITAYAN': VOICE OF MODERN WOMEN

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Literature is a great tool for expressing ideas, raising questions and building a public opinion for betterment of society. It reflects the changing trends, views, perceptions prevalent in society. Apart from enhancing the aesthetic beauty it also strives to bring paradigm shift in thoughts and ideas about certain perceptions which are prevalent in society. Dealing with the most sensitive issue of gender disparity we witness that patriarchy runs deep in society as well as in literature. Sita's ordeal of *Agni-pariksha* in the epic the *Ramayana* or Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharata* is a cruel reflection of the patriarchal culture in practice. Post-Colonial Indian writing has embarked on a new journey to bring radical changes in society particularly regarding the status of women. In the natural course of development, the recent Indian fiction has taken the task of becoming the spokesperson of society enlightening the minds of Indian women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most confident voices who analyses the psyche and predicament of modern Indian women. With great panache she explores new dimensions in the Indian epics. Her previous book *The Palace of Illusions* based on the *Mahabharata* speaks through Draupadi. Her latest novel *The Forest of Enchantments (2019)* offers a new perception to the *Ramayana*. The book raises the sensitivity of the readers as she attempts to decipher new meanings in the character of Sita. For the cause of women's emancipation, she challenges the traditional image of Sita as portrayed in mythology and offers different facets of her character.

Philip Lulgendorf comments 'Among the many many Ramayanas, there are now even-thankfully –some “*Sitayans*”, but I know of none with the special magic that Chitra Divakaruni.... brings to the telling.’¹ With amazing details she unlocks the psyche of Sita

through Sita's lens. 'May you be like Sita?' always disturbed the author that culminated into taking up this challenging project. The author, therefore, rewrites the story from Sita's understanding and not with patriarchal notion. In her prologue she speaks her intention to remove the arch stereo-typed 'good and meek, long-suffering, bearing her misfortunes with silent stoicism' image of Sita. Chitra Banerjee understands the already known fact that Sita is considered to be the incarnation of the goddess Laxmi. Nevertheless, after taking birth as a human being, she seems to possess the frailties and failings as well. Her longing to have that golden deer in the forest, or Ram's obsession to be an ideal king at the cost of losing his wife is a manifestation of human emotions. As per author Sita is mistaken to be a docile, submissive woman, she is, however, strong-headed. She dauntlessly refuses to perform *Agnipariksha* understanding that onus of responsibility falls on her to represent Indian women. She chooses to sacrifice her happiness and addresses at the Royal court "If I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it." (Divakaruni: 356-357) She proved her mettle earlier also when she brought her sons Luv and Kush as a single mother. She also exemplified her determination and patience during her captivity in Lanka bearing the hardships inflicted by the cruel Ravana for a long period.

In the process of digging out new interpretations and many hidden layers in Sita's character the author's depiction of Ram doesn't lead us to 'hating Ram'. He too relinquishes his private life for the sake of public role of a king. We know that he is a good human being. Sita understands his carving for perfection, for setting up high standards in society, a 'Ramrajya' in true sense. In the process he falters at times but she cannot displease him. At the outset she, however, raises a very pertinent question that the *Ramayana* was written by a male writer-Valmiki on the behest of divine vision of a male god and not a goddess. Valmiki could have never understood her emotions of fire and rages, tears and tortures, humiliations and helplessness when she was alone under the Ashoka tree waiting desperately to be freed from captivity. In the book Sita asks Valmiki

“For you haven’t understood a woman’s life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another.” (Divakaruni: 2)

Sita had the fire within and she articulated it many a times. For instance, when Shiva’s bow was strung Sita was to be officially Ram’s wife. Ram’s promise, however, to his brothers that they would get married at the same time and into a same family, put their marriage on hold. Hurt by this gesture she confidently questions Ram “You should have informed us of this vow before you strung Shiva’s bow? Surely you knew that once her bride –price is paid, a woman can’t marry anyone else.” (Divakaruni: 2)

We find parallels between *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* as both the books retell the two great epics through the eyes of the female protagonists. It is a great feat to understand the *Ramayana* through *Sitayan* through Sita’s psyche. In the process of depiction of trial and tribulations of Sita’s life, the author justifies some women characters i.e., Urmila, Laxman’s wife, Ahilya, sage Gautam’s unfortunate wife, Kaikeyi, the queen of Ayodha, Ravan’s sister Surpanakha and Mandodari, the queen of Lanka. It is, therefore, amazingly interesting as the author traces the inner processes of some underplayed rather unaddressed female characters who contributed significantly in the saga of tragic love story of Ram and Sita. The author offers a new shape to these characters, their trauma and tortures through Sita’s eyes. We hardly know anything of Sita’s sister Urmila, ‘the most unsung heroine of this tale. Urmila sailed through hard times devoid of her husband’s company for fourteen years. We also get to know Sita’s pangs of guilt for not able to persuade Laxmana to take his wife also in the forest. Torn between duty for Ram and love for her sister she departs the palace with heavy heart. It, however, always disturbed her mind that ‘I could not reach her, my sister whom I’d failed in her hour of need.’ (Divakaruni: 125) It is really pathetic to experience her sacrifice left with her predicament ‘to wait and to worry.’

The 'silence of Ahilya' also pricked Sita's heart with dissatisfaction when she met her during their exile period. She could sense that Ahilya was made to suffer for no fault of her own. The story goes that enamored of the beauty of Ahilya, the king of gods, Indra transformed himself magically into her husband sage Gautam and betrayed her. She begged for her innocence, for her pure intentions but her husband turned her into a stone in fury until Ram transformed her back into a human being. The author offers her frame of mind to other women Surpanakha and Kaikey as well. Sita questions whether it was justified to insult Surpanakha in this undignified manner for loving Ram. She backed up Surpanakha's heroism to display her love for Ram. The renowned Indian English author Shashi Deshpande in her book *The Stone Age* also supports Surpanakh's hidden desire to love and to be loved. Kaikeyi's love for her son Bharat was suffocating to the extent that it brought havoc to the entire family as well as to her. She grabbed and gambled the kingdom for the sake of her doting son not realizing "even if we love them with our entire being, even if we're willing to commit the most heinous sin for their well-being. We must understand and respect the values that drive them. We must want what they want, not what we want for them." (Divakaruni: 126) That is the crux of her discovery. Interestingly we also come to know in this book about Kaushalya's struggles and her inner conflicts, her pangs of sorrow for being neglected by her husband king Dashratha. The author gives space to Mandodari also. During her captivity Sita experiences Mandodri's intellect and wisdom. She however, could not bridle her husband Ravana's desires. The relationship between Sita and Mandodari is simply lovable.

Since the book is *Sitayan* we come across many other facets of her personality. In the kingdom of Vaideha everyone revered her and was wonderstruck by her astonishing skill in martial arts and her commendable knowledge of plants and herbs. Her obsession with nature, bonding with her mother and sister and many other details are thematically developed in the book, these narratives nevertheless are not out of place since she was the 'daughter of the earth'. The author beautifully captures the growth of Sita as a wife, as a daughter-in-law and later adapting a humble lifestyle in the forest. Her love for Ram is supreme. So long as she is going to be with her Ram she can live anywhere, giving up luxuries

of life. The author also refers to her ability to have premonitions, her chasing dreams about forest, roaring winds whispering '*sacrifice, sacrifice*' and amphibious monsters waiting under water in the ocean that was going to be her destiny. It is really pathetic to note her life in abduction. She battled, nevertheless, her predicament with great endurance and patience. Her deep love for Ram and perhaps her mother's advice helped her "we come into the world alone, and we leave it alone. And in between too, if it is destined, we'll be alone. 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)

The book beautifully illustrates Sita's varied emotions, her rising hopes and disappointments, her anxieties and apprehensions mounting manifold with Ravan's frequent visits. Nevertheless, she shows her brave face when there seems to be no ray of hope. She musters courage and consoles herself "let them do their worst. Death only comes once. It might as well be now." (Divakaruni: 214) At the same time the destruction and carnage, hatred and suffering at the battlefield fills her with pangs of guilt that 'all scarified for me who did not deserve it' The whole Lanka became 'a charnel house'. Vibhishan's wife Sarama was her only friend in Lanka. Sadly, she lost it. The trauma of Sarama is palpable as she knows that who so ever wins the battle her husband would be considered as a traitor. Sarama could never forgive her husband for the betrayal as only Vibhishan knew the secret of his son's death. Another thing that pricks her conscience that if her husband and brother-in law 'had been kinder and more forgiving of Surpanakha's overtures' or if she had protested and forbidden them from mutilating her, all the tragedies could have been avoided.

The major theme of this book is love. Sita seems to examine the meaning of love throughout the book. She understands the actions of those around her that changed the course of her life. In her father's home Sita felt that 'love flowed like a calm river, nourishing but predictable.' She was a free bird basking in the lap of nature. As soon as she wore different roles of wife, daughter-in law in her armour she experienced different shades of love not realizing that she 'was about to be sucked into the whirlpool of palace politics.' Her mother Sunaina got wind of the complicated relationships that she was going to witness and advised her to handle it diligently. Nevertheless, her greatest solace was that everyone

adored Ram “what enchantment did my betrothed possess that made even enemies forget their ancient rivalries in their desire to make him happy?” (Divakaruni: 50) She also understood that it was her deep love for her husband that prepared her to face any kind of hardships that came in the forest. It was enriching to note that love and sorrow bind people together. The sudden realization for Urmila ‘was this a woman’s predicament, always to be pulled between conflicting loves?’ was disheartening. She also witnessed that love could bring havoc in the lives of the people. It was his deep love for his Ram that king Dashratha collapsed after Ram’s departure from Ayodhya. Or Kaikeyi’s love for her son Bharat that made her life a living hell. Not to forget the deep love for Kaikeyi that her servant Manthara, ‘the orchestrator of this entire disaster’ went to the extent of making everyone’s life miserable. For Sita love was powerful and everlasting. She, however, also experienced Bharata’s love for her mother turning into hatred that compelled her to think that ‘love could be frail as well.’ We also come across the unconditional love of Urmila and Mandodari for their respective husbands. After experiencing motherhood, she realizes a new shade of love “the one relationship where you gave everything you had and then wished you had more to give.” (Divakaruni: 332)

The author brings out the theme of tragic love story of Ram and Sita. Love is dynamic and it’s ever changing. It is powerful but at the same time it makes her fragile and helpless. She did nothing wrong. She, however, could never articulate against injustice. Her love for Ram was ‘Unfathomable. Astonishing. Measureless’ and therefore she could forgive him easily. Nevertheless at the end when she is asked to do *agni pariksha* the author questions Ram on behalf of Sita for not balancing his roles of king and husband. She addresses Ram “Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered? ---Where 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?” (Divakaruni: 356) For the first time in her life she disagrees with her husband that the private life need not be sacrificed for the sake of public one. She offers a final advice for her children to

“balance duty with love.’ Ram’s penance “Forgive me, dearest. No matter what I did, no matter what I prioritized, through everything, I’ve always loved you” (Divakaruni: 358) shows his deep love for her.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s flair for chiseling out new dimensions to the mythical women and their agonizing experiences in male dominated society finds its exceptionally accomplished expression in her latest work. The book raises some relevant questions regarding women’s place in society, their rights and their courage to rule out the imposed standards on their conducts. In the process of questioning the patriarchal system in the book the author never seems to deviate from history. She rather presents new insights from the point of view of modern women. Sita’s inner conflicts seem to resemble the struggles of modern women and her solutions may give courage to them that every individual has her own understanding of dharma. While exploring the inner journey of Sita the author does not, however, forget to do justice with other women in the book. Coincidentally the other women find their salvation through Ram.

Works Cited:

1 Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. Harper Collins Publishers, India. 2019.

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