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**Reclaiming Narratives: A Feminist Reinterpretation of Sita in Namita Gokhale's *In Search of Sita*
and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments***

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Abstract

Sita, a strong, resilient, and fierce female figure of Indian mythology, also known as *Bhumija*, the daughter of earth, is thus closely related to nature, environment and the feminine. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *In Search of Sita* by Namita Gokhale places Sita at the center of the narrative and the forest, making her an important feminist and ecofeminist figure. This paper attempts to investigate how this unique narrative showcases Sita's side of the story, transcending the boundaries of patriarchy and the anthropocentric approach. The paper applies Vandana Shiva's framework of ecofeminism (1993), examining how the book portrays the intersectionality between gender and ecology. The intersection arises from the point that both women and nature are exploited under patriarchal and anthropocentric ideologies, respectively. The paper analyses Divakaruni's reimagination of Sita in the lap of nature. Both Mother Earth and Sita fit perfectly into the role of nurturer and caretaker, having immense power and fertility yet suffering in the hands of patriarchy. The destruction of Lanka, presented as an act of patriarchal invasion, serves as a metaphor for ecological catastrophe produced by domination and unbridled power. Furthermore, the paper critically analyses the destruction of Lanka as a metaphor caused by unrestrained patriarchal aggression, proving Shiva's claim that the otherization of women and nature is rooted in the same cultural ideology. This paper shows that Divakaruni's representation of Sita not only restores her agency from patriarchal myths but also establishes her as a voice of ecological and feminist opposition.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Patriarchy, Anthropocentric, Sita, Gender, Ecology, Agency

Chapter 1 Introduction

“Mythology is not just a story of the past; it is a living tradition that must be reexamined through the lens of our present realities.” (Gokhale and Lal)

Sita, being an important female figure of the Indian myth, the female protagonist of the Ramayana, considered as the daughter of Mother Earth, becomes a figure of resilience and strength. In a post-modernist world reclaiming narratives against patriarchy has become an important literary discourse. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian born American novelist and poet writing in the post – modern era. By focusing on Sita's point of view, Divakaruni liberates her voice from decades of patriarchal interpretations, depicting her as a multifaceted woman who represents perseverance, compassion, and wisdom. Aside from its feminist implications, the work emphasizes Sita's deep relationship with nature, giving a critique of the connected oppressions of women and the environment. By giving the narrative voice to Sita her voice is directly presented in front of the readers. The work has tried to give representation to a woman by reimagining a historical and mythological happening, in the process of idolizing Ram Sita's strength has been ignored instead what is highlighted is her endurance and sacrificing image. The same expectations kept from all Indian woman. This notion of idealism associated to Sita's personality and image gives way to patriarchal thinking and anthropocentric practices. Chitra Banerjee through *The Forest of Enchantments* has tried to break this image and tried to present Sita's side of the story through reimagination. Her depiction of Sita presents her as a woman, an individual not as a daughter, wife, sister, or mother. The novel goes deep into the psyche of Sita presents to the readers her conflicting mindset and her struggles. This internal world of Sita not only portrays her but actually the reality of almost every woman in India. The patriarchal gaze of society has interpreted Sita mainly as Lord Ram's wife but literature has tried to change this attitude and break this archetype.

1.1 About the Authors

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a celebrated Indian-American novelist, poet, and educator renowned for her works of literature that delve into gender, identity, mythology, and the immigrant experience. Born on July 29, 1956, in Kolkata, India, she immigrated to the United States for further studies, obtaining a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley. She is presently a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston.

Divakaruni's works often reimagine female figures from Indian epics, placing them at the center of their narratives. Her 2008 novel, *The Palace of Illusions* retells the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, while *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) reinterprets the Ramayana through Sita's voice. By giving these mythological women their own perspectives, she challenges male-centric retellings and reclaims female agency. Her works have been awarded a number of awards, among which are the American Book Award and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award. She is best known for her skill in bringing together mythology and modern feminist thought, making ancient myths relatable for contemporary readers.

Namita Gokhale is a successful Indian author, publisher, and literary curator, known for her work in the fields of contemporary feminist and mythological writing. Born in 1956 in Lucknow, India, Namita studied at the University of Delhi and started her writing career with the satirical novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984). She writes in several genres, ranging from historical novels, mythology, to feminist writing.

Gokhale is also a prominent figure in India's literary landscape as the co-founder and co-director of the Jaipur Literature Festival, which is one of the world's largest literary festivals. She has also examined, in her books such as *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2005) and *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (2009, revised 2018, co-edited with Malashri Lal), how mythology informs cultural memory, with special emphasis on women's roles. Her Sita anthology collates several understandings of the goddess by various historical, literary, and regional traditions and asserts that mythology is not rigid but needs to be reimagined in current contexts. She was given the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2021 for her work on Indian literature.

Malashri Lal is a renowned Indian academic, critic, and editor, with a specialization in literature, gender studies, and mythology. She was a Professor of English at the University of Delhi and has

researched feminist literary criticism comprehensively. Her area of research centers on reinterpretation of mythology and literature using a gender perspective, underlining the necessity to recover women's narratives from patriarchal formations. She co-edited, with Namita Gokhale, *In Search of Sita*, a pathbreaking anthology that charts Sita's presence in cultural, literary, and regional traditions. Through this, she has contributed towards redefining the study of mythology from static interpretations to more universal and feminist readings. Her research work also contributes to various discussions in literature, where she pleads for the hearing of women's voices within mythological narratives.

Together, these three writers have contributed substantially to changing the perception of Indian mythology, and more specifically, the Ramayana, today. Through fiction, critical essays, and literary scholarship, they have deconstructed the conventional depictions of women and presented new readings that honor female agency, resistance, and complexity.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Mani, Jessy. “Rewriting Sita: Re-constructing Archetypes.” *Research Scholar*, vol. 1, no.

2, 2013, pp. 174-177. Mani critiques traditional portrayals of Sita and highlights feminist retellings that reconstruct her as a figure of quiet resistance and courage. She explores how creative narratives challenge patriarchal archetypes and reframe Sita’s trials.

Rich, Adrienne. “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.” *College English*, vol.

34, no. 1, 1972, pp. 18-30. Rich introduces the concept of “re-vision,” advocating for revisiting and reinterpreting old texts through a feminist lens. Her framework aligns with the efforts to reclaim Sita’s narrative from patriarchal perspectives

Sen, Sharmila. “Cultural Memory and the Feminist Retelling of Mythology.” *South Asian Literary Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2018, pp. 62-78. Sen explores the feminist retelling of Sita’s story as a bridge between ancient mythology and contemporary gender discourse. She emphasizes the role of such narratives in shaping cultural memory and highlighting women’s struggle

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313. Spivak examines the silencing of marginalized voices, paralleling the exclusion of

Sita in traditional narratives. Her theories support feminist reinterpretations that amplify Sita's agency and voice.

Tripathy, Anjali. "Re-visioning Sita: Rewriting Mythology." *New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2019, pp. 5-9. Tripathy focuses on feminist retellings that reconstruct Sita's character as a strong and independent figure. She highlights works that amplify Sita's voice and give agency to overlooked female characters in the Ramayana.

Variyar, Suvarna. *Saving Sita: The Ramayana and Gender Narratives in Postcolonial Hindu Nationalism*. M.Phil. thesis, University of Sydney, 2018. Variyar critiques how the Ramayana has been manipulated to support patriarchal and political agendas. Her work underscores the importance of feminist retellings in countering these narratives and reclaiming Sita's story.

Volga. *The Liberation of Sita*. Translated by V. Ramaswamy, Harper Perennial, 2016.

This collection of interconnected stories portrays Sita's journey to self-realization after her abandonment. Volga uses Sita's interactions with other women from the Ramayana to explore solidarity and resistance against patriarchal norms.

Naidu, Vayu. *Sita's Ascent*. Penguin Books, 2012. Naidu offers a multi-voiced retelling of the Ramayana, focusing on Sita's emotional and spiritual journey. The novel highlights her strength and agency, providing alternative perspectives on her trials.

Deshpande, Shashi. "The Day of the Golden Deer." *The Stone Women and Other Stories*, Writers Workshop, 2000. In this monologue, Deshpande gives voice to Sita, challenging Rama's ethical decisions and societal expectations. The story reframes Sita as a courageous and assertive character, moving beyond patriarchal ideals.

Kishwar, Madhu. "Yes, to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India." *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*, vol. 4, 1986, pp. 25-30. Kishwar examines the

cultural and religious significance of Sita in India, highlighting her as a symbol of resilience and moral strength. The essay critiques the patriarchal framing of Sita's story while exploring her enduring appeal.

2.1 Research Gaps

Restricted Scope of Regional and Folktale Narratives

Although *In Search of Sita* recognizes various telling of Sita's narrative across regions, the present work largely deals with the mainstream feminist versions by Divakaruni and Gokhale. Future work might examine lesser-known regional folk traditions, for example, Sita's representation in Tamil, Bengali, and Southeast Asian versions of the *Ramayana*, which frequently offer alternative accounts of her power and agency.

Exclusion of Dalit and Intersectional Perspectives

The study concentrates on mainstream feminist thought but fails to address how Sita's narrative is understood through Dalit feminism or other intersectional frameworks. Because caste, class, and religion shape how Sita's story is understood and used, a further study could explore how marginalized groups interpret Sita's strength and agency.

Sita's Representation in Contemporary Media and Popular Culture

The research involves literary reinterpretations, it does not explore Sita's representation in modern visual media, including TV shows, movies, or online storytelling. Investigating how new adaptations, such as the *Ramayana* based TV series or comic books, represent Sita might give insight into the changing view of her character in popular culture.

Feminist Narratives Beyond Sita: Reimagining Other Women in the Ramayana

Although this study concentrates on Sita, other women in the Ramayana, like Urmila, Mandodari, and Surpanakha, also come under intense patriarchal scrutiny. Future research might investigate how feminist retellings reclaim not only Sita, but these underappreciated characters, and how their narratives feed into a larger discussion of

Chapter 3 Sita the daughter of Mithila

“A baby lay in his path, naked and newborn, glistening in the young sun as though it was a mirage” (Divakaruni 6). Devi Sita's birth is associated with a supernatural and holy narrative as described in Valmiki's Ramayana. In the kingdom Mithila, an ancient Indian state in late Vedic India, she magically appeared in a furrow as King Janaka was ploughing the field as part of a Vedic ceremony. She did not come from a mother's womb. Today, this location is in the Indian state of Bihar. She was discovered and raised by King Janaka of Mithila and his wife Sunaina (Kaushal). What Chitra Banerjee had done through the narrative in the novel is representing Sita not just as Lord Rama's wife instead as the daughter of Mithila, the goddess and the earth born attributing her with a lot of power this is something very similar what Banerjee does with the character Draupadi in *Palace of Illusions* portraying her as the fire child reclaiming her voice, thoughts and identity. Portraying Sita as the daughter of Mithila and not just the daughter in law of Ayodhya Banerjee breaks away the patriarchal notion of associating a married woman's identity only with her husband something which most of the popular media has done with Sita. This cultural dogma has a link to the much-popularized Hindi phrase *paraya dhan* considering the daughters to be someone else's property as they go away to their husband's house after marriage in the patriarchal system of societies. This has its roots from ancient manuscripts like *Manu smriti*. But in the novel Sita says “Though by virtue of my upbringing I was a princess, Sita, eldest daughter of the house of Mithila, in the kingdom of Videha, no one knew who I was by birth” (Divakaruni 6) this statement reasserts her belongingness with her hometown Mithila and the description of her identity. Though this identity of hers gets questioned several times through several tests in the course of the epic but the novel

has worked in giving her an important and independent figure. Chitra Banerjee through Sita's reimagined portrayal breaks away patriarchal boundaries and rewrite mythology through a feminist lens.

Sita's association to her paternal homeland is something very mainstream in the post-modernist discourses as an attempt to showcase her individuality. Sita's deep connection with Mithila is also narrated in Amish Tripathi's *Sita: The Warrior of Mithila* where he has completely focused on Sita's life from Sita's eyes. This way Sita becomes an important feminist figure rather than her stereotypical portrayal of being a submissive woman. In spite of her esteemed position, Sita's life in Mithila is influenced by the standards expected of her as a woman. Despite her brilliance and independence, marriage and her capacity to maintain social standards are her main values. "Shiva has sent this divine mandate—you can give your daughter in marriage only to the man who can string his great bow, the Haradhanu" (Divakaruni 7) is how Parashuram essentially takes away Sita's autonomy when he delivers Shiva's bow to Mithila and foretells her final marriage. This order perpetuates the patriarchal belief that a woman's value is derived on her status as a wife by treating Sita like a prize to be acquired. In contrast to conventional depictions that highlight her compliance, *The Forest of Enchantments* shows Sita as reflective and conscious of the injustices in her environment, challenging her fate but ultimately deciding to accept it on her own terms, reflecting the ecofeminist critique of imposed gender roles.

3.1 Sita at the center of Forest an ecofeminist critique

Reflecting ecofeminist principles that criticize the patriarchal dominance of both women and environment, Sita's exile in *The Forest of Enchantments* illustrates a deep connection between the feminine and the natural world. According to Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist theory, patriarchal and capitalist systems reduce women and the environment to nothing more than commodities. Because of her connection to the forest, Sita is able to defy this dominance and establish herself as a symbol of the holy and cyclical relationship between nature and femininity. Both a haven and a place of pain may be found in the Dandaka jungle, where Sita spends her exile. She finds comfort and has a close bond with the trees, rivers, and wildlife here. "I thought, this forest is my true home," she said. Here, there is no royal court where I have to consider every word carefully before speaking, nor is there a castle where I have to pretend to be the ideal queen (Divakaruni 92). The forest

provides her with an alternative to the strict demands that patriarchal society places on woman, as this scene illustrates. Ravana's interference, however, breaks this equilibrium and shows how the exploitation of women and nature are linked. According to Shiva's Ecofeminism, where she states that "the conquest of women and nature is at the core of capitalist patriarchy," Ravana's kidnapping of Sita is comparable to the devastation of the environment for selfish ends (Shiva 45). The violent removal of Sita from the forest by Ravana is a metaphor for the historical colonization of land, in which native ecosystems and cultures are uprooted for the sake of progress and conquest. Sita manages to endure her hardships by finding strength in her relationship with nature. Despite being in captive during her time in Lanka, her connection to nature remains intact. She remembers, "The trees in Ashoka Vatika whispered to me and gave me little consolation. As if to remind me that I was not alone, the blossoms wavered in the wind" (Divakaruni 215). Shiva's contention that advancement and development frequently result in the displacement of both women and the natural world is further supported by the way that Sita's presence in the forest is finally tainted by patriarchal rule. After Ravana's invasion and Rama's forced abandoning of Sita, the forest—once a place of nurturing—becomes a scene of carnage. This is similar to how deforestation and the eviction of rural populations in India gave rise to ecofeminist movements like Chipko. As Sita is banished to the ashram once more after being sent away by Rama, Shiva observes that "development has meant the ecological and cultural rupture of bonds with nature" (Shiva 101). In contrast to the males in the Ramayana, who use hunting, battle, or territorial expansion to try to dominate or control nature, Sita is an example of the ecofeminist concept of guardianship. She approaches the forest as a living, breathing creature rather than as a resource. "Every tree seemed to whisper to me, every breeze carried a message, and the flowers bloomed as if welcoming me into their world" (Divakaruni 105). Her capacity to hear and comprehend nature supports Vandana Shiva's contention that traditional knowledge systems held by women provide viable substitutes for industrial exploitation (Shiva 87). Sita honors nature's cycles and returns the favors, in contrast to the prevailing male mentality that aims to control and take from it. Sita's existence in the jungle is an act of intentional interaction with the environment rather than merely survival. She respects the natural cycles around her, grows plants, and gathers therapeutic herbs. This is consistent with the critique of modernity's rejection of traditional ecological knowledge, which is frequently passed down through indigenous groups and women, by ecofeminists. Sita's second exile following her return to Ayodhya is very important. She is banished due to social pressures and the

fears of a patriarchal society that sees women as emblems of innocence, not because of what she did. Sita is punished for events beyond her control, just like nature is frequently held responsible for calamities brought on by human carelessness, such as deforestation resulting in floods. She makes a strong show of opposition with her last act of going back to earth. She says, "I'm from the soil, and I'm going back to it. I no longer belong in this realm of mankind, therefore let the ground engulf me" (Divakaruni 370). In this moment, agency is both reclaimed and surrendered. Instead of letting herself be constantly taken advantage of, Sita turns to the same power that gave her life as a haven. Shiva's ecofeminist thesis that women, like nature, must regain their independence from repressive systems is supported by this action (Shiva 134). The novel portrays nature as a nourishing but contentious domain, challenging patriarchal and anthropocentric notions via Sita's interaction with the forest. From an ecofeminist perspective, Sita's exile and subsequent return to the ground represent the dominance and tenacity of women and the environment. Her narrative reminds us that nature is an active force that supports life, wisdom, and resistance rather than a passive thing that may be dominated. By connecting Sita's destiny with the forest's, Divakaruni offers a radical retelling of the Ramayana that is consistent with feminist and ecological discourses of the modern era. Through its advocacy for a more sustainable and equitable society, the book challenges readers to see the connections between gender inequality and environmental degradation.

3.2 Methodology

Textual Analysis

Close reading of the primary texts is the basis of this study. Close reading is utilized to analyze the changes in narrative structure, character, and theme that redefine Sita's endurance, voice, and autonomy. Special care is taken to consider how *The Forest of Enchantments* employs a first-person narrative to make Sita's voice the center, rendering her the author of her own life instead of an inactive object of Rama's quest (Divakaruni 3). Likewise, *In Search of Sita*, with its anthology of essays and imaginative readings, shows a more pluralized Sita, illustrating the versatility of her character across cultures and historical periods (Gokhale and Lal 15). It also examines how both

books represent Sita's suffering, whether this is presented as submission or as a deliberate act of defiance. Moreover, Sita's interactions with other women characters in the *Ramayana*, such as Ahalya, Surpanakha, and Mandodari, are examined to bring out themes of female solidarity and common oppression.

Feminist Theoretical Frameworks

The study is informed by feminist theoretical frameworks, specifically Simone de Beauvoir's theory of "the Other" and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory. Beauvoir's contention that women have always been defined through reference to men as opposed to standing on their own is apt when considering the manner in which Sita has long been presented in a stereotypical way as an extension of the virtue of Rama instead of as an equally complex figure (Beauvoir 267). This analysis investigates the way such feminist adaptations upend this framing by granting Sita autonomy through voice, choice, and ethical agency. Spivak's subaltern theory is used to examine whether Sita, as a silenced woman in history, acquires the power to "speak" in these retellings. The critique examines if these retellings enable Sita to take back her agency, challenge patriarchal systems, and make self-determined choices instead of being a symbol of passive endurance. *In Search of Sita* brings out this conflict by presenting various readings of Sita's voice, showing the conflict between tradition and reinterpretation (Gokhale and Lal 27).

Ecofeminist Approach

Apart from feminist reading, ecofeminist theory is employed to study Sita's relationship with nature and its symbolic value throughout her journey. Classical texts tend to show exile in the forest as punishment, reifying the idea of civilization (the city of Ayodhya) being greater than the wild. But *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagines the forest as a place of freedom and empowerment for Sita. This research examines how her connection to nature subverts the hierarchical paradigms that connect nature and womanhood with vulnerability and oppression. In addition, Sita's ultimate return to Earth Mother is deconstructed as an act of resistance on a symbolic level, whereby she elects to abandon a culture that has continually let her down (Divakaruni 359). This recovery of nature and self resonates with ecofeminist principles, which contend that the subordination of women and the domination of nature are mutually entailed battles against patriarchal dominance (Shiva and Mies 14).

Comparative Analysis

A comparison between the two primary texts helps to identify the distinct ways in which these authors engage with feminist mythmaking. While Divakaruni's novel is a deeply personal retelling that allows Sita to narrate her own experiences, Gokhale and Lal's anthology compiles various perspectives that demonstrate the multiplicity of Sita's identity across different literary, historical, and cultural traditions. This research explores how both texts redefine Sita's resilience, transforming it from a sign of submission to a declaration of inner strength and resistance. Furthermore, the portrayal of other female characters in these texts is explored to see how their narratives intersect with Sita's and add to a larger discourse on gender and power in mythology.

Contextual and Societal Analysis

This study also includes a contextual and societal analysis, examining how feminist retellings of Sita's story affect gender discussion in the contemporary world. This research places these texts within the broader context of feminist activism in India, considering how myth has traditionally been utilized to support gender norms and how its reinterpretation can be employed as an agent for social transformation. The study takes into account the impact of these retellings on popular culture and scholarship, examining if they subvert mainstream understandings of Sita and provide new models of feminine agency. The study also examines how these texts speak to contemporary feminist resistance against moral policing, victim-blaming, and social expectations of female purity and resilience (Kishwar 28).

Chapter 4 Identity and Suffering – Sita’s ‘Otherization’

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (Beauvoir 330).” This statement taken from Simone De Beauvoir’s 1949 book *The Second Sex* where she highlights women’s otherization, their treatment as the literal “Second Sex”. This shows how gender as a framework works as a social construct deeply rooted in the culture, religion and society. This idea is what explored through the retelling of Sita in both the works.

The novel’s narrative critiques how Sita’s identity as a woman is described by her suffering. The imposed identity of hers is an archetype of suffering, sacrifice and endurance giving way to patriarchal agency over her own. Sita's identity has been formed by circumstances outside of her control since she was born. King Janaka discovers her in a furrow, reinforcing the idea that she belongs to others rather than herself. Her life in Mithila is tranquil, but it is clear that her destiny is related to her function as a wife. According to *In Search of Sita*, Sita has always been a paradox—revered as a deity yet regarded as a mortal woman who must experience hardship to show her value. "Sita's suffering is not just personal but symbolic; it represents the suffering of all

women who are expected to endure silently, to sacrifice without question" (Gokhale and Lal 116). Divakaruni builds on this concept by showing Sita as self-aware, seeing the limitations put on her even as she seeks to overcome them. She considers the assumption that she should always be the ideal wife, even if it means denying her own impulses and agency: "I was Sita, the earth's daughter, and I was also a wife. And as a wife, I had to follow norms that were not my own" (Divakaruni 145). These lines emphasize Sita's identity as molded by patriarchal traditions that require submission and sacrifice. She is never fully free, even in exile, since she is continually defined by her connection with men—first as a daughter, then as a bride, and last as a mother. There are several ways to view Sita's ultimate decision of returning to earth. It is frequently presented in traditional traditions as a moment of heavenly acceptance, in which Mother Earth reclaims her daughter. Modern versions contemporary to , such those seen in *Sita: A Poem* and *In Search of Sita*, portray it as a last act of defiance as well as a submission. One of the pieces in *In Search of Sita* explores how this particular moment is both sorrowful and potent: Sita exercises her last agency by deciding to go. She refuses to let society's expectations or Rama's misgivings define her. Even when she vanishes from history, she regains her place of origin (Gokhale 198). Divakaruni reflects this notion in *The Forest of Enchantments*, as Sita says her parting words: "I came from the ground, and I shall return. "Let the ground swallow me, because I no longer belong in this world of men" (Divakaruni 370). While this moment is frequently seen as a return to tranquilly, it also raises the issue of why a woman's only escape from misery is vanishing. This is consistent with Nandini Sahu's lyrical perspective on Sita's destiny. "What is left for a woman who has given all, but to fade into the dust from which she came?" (Sahu 102).

According to legend and contemporary literature, Sita's identity is one of hardship, selflessness, and perseverance. She is granted a voice that questions these narratives in *The Forest of Enchantments*, yet she is still constrained by the expectations that are put on her. Through the perspectives of *Sita: A Poem* by Nandini Sahu and *In Search of Sita* by Namita Gokhale, we may observe how Sita's narrative endures as a symbol of women's struggles across time. The way she is portrayed as the "Other"—a woman who must go into exile, demonstrate her innocence, and then vanish—reflects the ingrained patriarchal systems that define women by their pain. Sita, on the other hand, opposes these systems in her own unique manner by taking back control of her own destiny, whether verbally or physically.

Chapter 5 Sita as the Subversive Subaltern

Sita's life as other, full of exile and tests for chastity still becomes a tale of resistance. Her final act of defiance by submerging into the lap of Mother Earth makes a subversive character rather than a submissive one. Sita's silent resistance to the patriarchal advances of society towards her piousness makes her what one can call a "Subversive Subaltern". Sita's power to raise her two sons Luv and Kush without any support of Rama and again her decision to go back to mother earth shows the reclamation of her own identity, voice and agency. This persona of Sita's character is portrayed artistically through Gokhale's and Divakaruni's modern narratives. The novels rather than showcasing Sita merely as a victim of the hegemonic social structure shape her Infront of the readers as a figure full of resilience and fierceness. However, on the contrary Sita's abduction, her *agni pariksha*, following Rama into the exile reestablish her identity as an archetypal Subaltern woman. Through this lens of Spivak's theory the importance of power dynamics also come into the narrative and plot. The direct addressing of issues by Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* like

the condemnation of patriarchy she says “The problem with being ideal is that it makes you invisible. People see the ideal and not the women behind it” (Divakaruni 247). This statement immediately makes the reader realize that even though Sita is a Subaltern figure she knows how to voice out her opinions.

Both Gokhale and Divakaruni have tried to retell Sita’s story in a way that it breaks the systemic archetype of oppressing women in the name of idealism. This attempt to reimagine Sita transforms her from a mirror image of submission to that of subversion. The narrative takes in social mobility for restructuring women’s position in the hierarchy. Sita in *the Forest of Enchantments* states “Why is it that women are always made to bear the brunt of men’s action?” (Divakaruni 134). Showing how women and their bodies get commodified in the name of uplifting family honor and prestige. Sita’s power like all other Indian woman gets overshadowed by patriarchal influences of their, father, brother, husband, and even their sons later in life. Their significance is considered negligible without their association to a male primarily their father before marriage and their husband after marriage. The subalternization of women is thus, a cyclic system of violence.

The ecofeminist vision is also paired with Spivak's own denunciation of the confluence of patriarchal and colonial domination, with Sita as a subject who resists both through identification with the earth. Through this recovery of Sita's voice and assertion of agency, these feminist reinterpretations counter the conventional image of her as one who complies with patriarchy. Sita's conduct, from journeying with Rama into the wilderness to defying the second fire test, is choreographed as self-directed actions of assertiveness, not deference. Her discussions with women and enjoyment of nature equally attest to her subversive potential, noting her capability of resisting and judging the power systems which would seek to silence her. From the subalternity view of Spivak, Sita becomes a multifaceted and problematic figure whose narrative transcends the patriarchal boundaries. Through the writings of Gokhale and Divakaruni, it is revealed how Sita is not a mere victim of her circumstances but a subversive figure who regains her story and asserts her agency.

In the process, they present a compelling denunciation of such systems as have prevailed over women and created space for those that have long remained marginalized. Sita's history, as retrieved here, is testament to the living power of subaltern counter-strategies and to the power of recovering speech.

Chapter 6 The Women of Ramayana

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagines not just the story of Sita, but also the histories of other significant female characters in the Ramayana. By focusing on these women—Kaikeyi, Urmila, Mandodari, Surpanakha, and Ahalya—Divakaruni challenges the patriarchal systems that have historically restricted their tales. These women, who have historically been represented via the restricted views of male characters, are given voice, depth, and agency in Divakaruni's narrative. This chapter will look at how Divakaruni's reshaping violates existing conventions and why she decided to represent them in this way, eventually adding to the greater feminist discourse of recovering repressed voices. Kaikeyi, who is frequently blamed for starting Rama's exile, has historically been seen as a cunning stepmother motivated by self-interest. But

Divakaruni presents a more complex picture in the novel, showing that Kaikeyi's objectives are mostly based on parental love and survival rather than ambition. Her strong awareness of the vulnerability of women's authority in a patriarchal culture motivates her call for Bharata's elevation. Kaikeyi displays her fragility by confiding in Sita: "I did what I thought was right. A mother's love can make her do terrible things, Sita. You might understand that one day" (Divakaruni 69). This reinterpretation presents Kaikeyi as a woman negotiating the perilous waters of royal politics, where a woman's power is ephemeral and unstable, rather than as a villain. Although her acts appear cruel, they are motivated by a desperate attempt to ensure her son's future in a society that prioritizes male heirs above the knowledge of women. By portraying Kaikeyi in this manner, Divakaruni pushes the reader to go past the simple dichotomy of right and wrong and see the complexity of women's decisions inside repressive structures. In most Ramayana retellings, Urmila, Lakshmana's wife, is a figure who seldom gets any attention. But hers is a tale of great perseverance. Urmila stays behind, her life on hold, as Lakshmana goes into exile with Rama. This passive waiting turns into a silent act of defiance against the idea that women are valued more for their outward deeds than for their unseen sacrifices. Urmila expresses her suffering in her chat with Sita: "I too walked the path of exile, though no one saw it. In the empty corridors of this palace, I waited, a widow in all but name" (Divakaruni 157). Divakaruni addresses the often-overlooked emotional labor women undergo by giving voice to Urmila's quiet pain, demonstrating how patriarchal myths obscure their sacrifices. Urmila's narrative is a critique of how women's achievements are not given enough credit and are only acknowledged in the background of men's valiant actions. Ravana's wife, Mandodari, is usually portrayed as a quiet victim who is stuck in her allegiance to a despotic husband. She is a morally upright character in Divakaruni's recounting, acknowledging Ravana's transgressions but being helpless to alter them. Her suffering stems from her knowledge that Ravana's arrogance would ultimately bring about their whole kingdom's destruction, not just his own. Throughout the story, Mandodari's entreaty to Ravana is repeated: "You think power will shield you from the gods' wrath, but power without righteousness is a curse upon all it touches"(Divakaruni 278). Through Mandodari, Divakaruni exposes how women are frequently the victims of men's power struggles and criticizes the destructive nature of unbridled masculine ambition. The disregard for Mandodari's insight and wisdom demonstrates how patriarchal cultures restrict women's voices, even when they express realities that may avert catastrophe. While Reflecting on Surpanakha's fate, Sita ponders:

“Did she deserve such cruelty for wanting what men want without consequence?”(Divakaruni 202). Suparnakha’s representation questions why a woman’s desire is frequently greeted with violence and repression, criticizing the disparities in treatment between male and female sexuality. Divakaruni challenges the reader to reevaluate the prejudices present in conventional tales that stigmatize women who don’t conform to patriarchal norms by giving her character a human face. One of the saddest tales in the Ramayana is perhaps that of Ahalya. Her punishment—cursed into stone for a violation motivated by a god’s deceit—reflects the severe penalties meted out to women for men’s shortcomings. Ahalya is given a voice by Divakaruni that directly addresses this injustice. Ahalya’s pain and lamentation is presented through these lines aptly

“I was desired by a god and cursed by a man. In this world, it seems, a woman is always at fault” (Divakaruni 49). Divakaruni criticizes the propensity to hold women accountable for men’s whims and errors through Ahalya. By showing Ahalya’s calm power even throughout her curse, Divakaruni implicitly attacks the idea that a woman’s redemption depends on male approbation. Her transition back into a woman, only made possible by Rama’s favor, emphasizes this point. By giving these female figures voice and dimension, Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* becomes a kind of resistance to the erasure and vilification of women in patriarchal mythology. Each character—whether it’s Kaikeyi’s calculating defiance, Urmila’s silent power, Mandodari’s unheeded wisdom, Surpanakha’s unashamed yearning, or Ahalya’s unfair suffering—represents the various ways in which women traverse a world that strives to define them by their interactions with men.

Chapter 7 Modern Relevance: Sita and the Feminist Cause of Modern Women

The political use of Sita's reinterpretation transcends the realm of literature into that of modern-day feminist politics. Feminist women's movements in India regularly tap mythic woman as a

political critique of gender subordination. The reinterpretation of Sita as a transformation agent, rather than an effaced sufferer, echoes debates regarding violence against women, women's marital subjection, and state surveillance over feminine sexuality. Sita's refusal of the second trial by fire in *The Forest of Enchantments* is a potent symbol for women who resist being controlled and constrained by societal demands requiring them to prove their virtue and worthiness. Such an act resonates with contemporary movements in which women resist purity culture, victim-blaming, and institutional misogyny. As Kishwar notes, "Sita's story remains significant not because she adhered to societal norms but because, in the end, she rejected them" (Kishwar 28). Furthermore, the ecofeminist dimensions of Sita's narrative hold relevance in contemporary environmental discourse. Sita's deep connection to the earth, particularly in Divakaruni's retelling, aligns with movements advocating for ecological sustainability and indigenous knowledge systems. By reimagining her last act as one of returning to Mother Earth, these adaptations place Sita in the role of an icon for resistance against environmental and gender-based exploitation.

Reclaiming Sita for Future Generations

The feminist reinterpretation of Sita is not merely about rewriting mythology but about reclaiming agency in how women's stories are told and remembered. In *Search of Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments* exemplify how mythology can be a site of contestation, where dominant narratives are challenged and alternative possibilities are imagined. By shifting Sita from a passive icon to an active voice, these works contribute to a broader feminist project of historical reclamation. They demonstrate that mythology is not static but a living tradition that evolves alongside social progress. As new generations of readers engage with these texts, they will find in Sita not just an exemplar of endurance but an inspiration for resistance, agency, and self-definition. The reimagining of Sita is an ongoing process, reflecting the ever-changing landscape of feminist discourse. Future scholarship and creative works will continue to challenge, reinterpret, and expand her story, ensuring that Sita remains not just a symbol of the past but a beacon for the future.

The books are an act of reclaiming and reinterpreting history from the viewpoint of its marginalized female protagonists; it is not just a retelling of the *Ramayana*. Divakaruni and Gokhale challenges the reader to reevaluate the epic's conventional moral framework by reorienting the narrative from Rama, the perfect monarch, to Sita, the lady who has suffered from exile, captivity, betrayal, and erasure. The novel challenges the way women have historically been

seen, mythologized, and constrained inside patriarchal myths by presenting a very personal and political story. The book challenges readers to view the *Ramayana* a dynamic, changing narrative that merits examination and rewriting, breaking the mold of traditional retellings through Sita's perspective and the reimagining of other female characters. At the heart of *The Forest of Enchantments* is Sita's transformation from a woman who accepts her fate to one who questions, resists, and ultimately reclaims her identity. She begins her journey as the devoted wife, the embodiment of dharma, willing to follow her husband into exile, believing in the righteousness of his path. But exile, captivity, and abandonment reveal to her a deeper truth—that no amount of sacrifice can ever be enough in a world governed by patriarchal norms. Her exile, though imposed upon her, becomes a space of self-realization. The forest, often a symbol of chaos and danger in epics, becomes her refuge, a space where she rediscovers her strength, drawing power from her connection with nature. Her final act—returning to the earth—is both surrender and defiance, a statement that she will no longer participate in a world that continuously demands her suffering without offering justice.

“I came from the earth, and to the earth I will return. Let the ground swallow me, for I no longer belong in this world of men”(Divakaruni 370). This is not only a farewell; rather, it is a critique of a system that has let her down. It serves as a reminder that injustice exists even in the most celebrated literature and that it is the responsibility of people who narrate and repeat stories to unearth hidden realities. Sita's ultimate act of self-reclamation demonstrates that resistance can manifest in a variety of ways, including refusing to submit to authority and leaving a society that expects suffering as evidence of virtue.

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