



2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

## Intersection of Gender and Caste in Chitra Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

Abhabya Ratnam<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Samir Kumar Sharma<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Patna University

Email - [abhabya.ratnam@gmail.com](mailto:abhabya.ratnam@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor & Professor, Department of English, Patna University

Email - [sharmasamir75@yahoo.com](mailto:sharmasamir75@yahoo.com)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.336](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.336)



### Article info

Article Received: 20/07/2025

Article Accepted: 24/08/2025

Published online: 30/08/2025

### Abstract

Deeply rooted in traditions, Indian myths and legends have successfully propounded a holistic and philosophical approach to lead one's life, within this mortal and physical world, in accordance with the "Jeevan Darshan" philosophy as per the Indic Knowledge System. However, the twenty-first century India is a witness to a rise in feminist retellings of these ancient myths and legends. These retellings often prioritise the story's peripheral voices, too, while identifying the gender-based presumptions and an evident intersection of gender and caste ingrained in ancient texts. One such retelling is *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which attempts to bridge the gaps left by a male-centric interpretation of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*. Sensitive to the slightest detail, Divakaruni skilfully creates her vivid descriptions which serve as a documentation of the aforementioned intersection. Sita, the protagonist, receives enough of inner monologues that help her character to grow deeper. Even the other female characters are also given ample room to reveal their own untold tales. A reader familiar with the *Ramayana* may find the novel's narrative redundant; it following the same important events in the original epic. Nonetheless, this paper attempts to find out how, as a work of feminist fiction, *The Forest of Enchantments* does voice opposition to the unfair laws that force women to defend their innocence in an epic which, in fact, is an integral part of the Indic Knowledge System.

**Keywords:** Jeevan Darshan, Indic Knowledge System, Myths & Legends, Gender-Caste Intersection, Retellings.

## 1. Introduction

This particular research paper humbly focusses on a particular retelling of the *Ramayana* in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, and how caste and gender concerns are portrayed through its multitude of characters. The study is set to achieve the justification of its title by analysing current caste and gender theories to see what has changed over the centuries; and also, whether the Indian societal framework has evolved or transformed in relation to these two parameters. Gender and caste concerns are prevalent in Indian society and are reflected in Indian literature in a variety of ways. It is fascinating to examine how twenty first-century writers illustrate these societal shifts by retelling epics like the *Ramayana*.

However, because the *Ramayana* is frequently seen as part of Indian mythology, myth theories must be connected to it. The myth theories of Mircea Eliade and Bronislaw Malinowski, who discuss the impact of myth on society, are specifically attempted to be used in this study.

In her book *The Forest of Enchantments*, renowned author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni bridges the gaps in a male-centric adaptation of the Indian-Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. Her adaptation of the ancient epic demonstrates the core ideas that underpin life in general while also recounting the well-known tale through a feminist perspective with sufficient sensitivity and iconoclasm of its own. In the story, the intersections of gender and caste are carefully interwoven with this intellectual pursuit, which is commonly referred to as the "Jeevan-darshan" in the Indic knowledge system. In the twenty-first century, feminist retellings of archaic myths and stories have gained popularity, inspiring a wealth of writing from authors worldwide. Divakaruni departs from this clichéd interpretation of Sita, which has been upheld by the public discourse surrounding the *Ramayana* in all artistic mediums, rather than viewing her

as the "all good and meek and long-suffering" woman as is commonly held. These retellings highlight the story's supporting voices while identifying the patriarchal presumptions present in ancient texts. Divakaruni is familiar with this discussion, having recounted Draupadi's tale in the wildly successful novel *The Palace of Illusions*. However, Divakaruni attempts a much more challenging task in *The Forest of Enchantments*. She attempts to rectify the hagiographic portrayal of the character that is common in Indian culture in addition to framing the story via Sita. She even mentions this intention in her author's note; "I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her" (viii).

Sita is portrayed in the book as a complex individual with sufficient autonomy to make her own decisions free from patriarchal influence. After Sage Valmiki finished writing the epic *Ramayana*, or "the story of the glorious king Ram," the novel's story starts in *medias res*. (1). Despite being moved by the poetry, Sita is clearly offended that the epic does not mention her story. She grumbles to Valmiki about his ignorance of the epic's female characters. Using a sheaf of leaves and the symbolic colour red to frame her own epic, the "Sitayana," Valmiki calmly counsels Sita to write her own story and fill in the gaps left by the *Ramayana*. By starting the book with the writing process itself, Divakaruni subtly emphasizes over the importance of female authors in challenging the dominant narrative that is dominated by men. Furthermore, as Sita starts writing her own epic, she understands that if she only tells a self-centred story and ignores the voices of other women in her life who have also been "pushed into corners, trivialised, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten," her objective would be unfulfilled (4). The highlight of Divakaruni's retelling of the *Ramayana* is the inclusion of the stories of other female characters, which emphasises how women's writing is by definition a communal endeavour.

## 2. Rationale and Research Questions

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* offers a gendered and nuanced interpretation of the Sita story from the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Divakaruni subverts conventional depictions of Sita as passive and subservient by emphasising her voice and instead shows her as an active actor negotiating the difficulties of identity, duty, and desire. In addition to discussing gender dynamics, the book considers caste and social hierarchies and how these interact to influence women's lives. Examining how Divakaruni's retelling challenges the social institutions that restrict women's autonomy and marginalised caste identities is the justification for examining the confluence of gender and caste in this context. Investigating how Divakaruni's retelling challenges the social institutions that restrict women's autonomy and marginalised caste identities is the justification for examining the confluence of gender and caste in this setting. By re-examining this work, the study hopes to clarify how gender and caste operate together to support or challenge power structures in literature and society and also aims at answering some pertinent questions such as how is caste a factor in the ways that Sita's portrayal in *The Forest of Enchantments* questions conventional gender roles; and how does the novel's depiction of the junction of caste and gender relate to larger societal issues in modern-day India? This paper also discusses the shifting role of caste and gender in postcolonial literature which sets in as a result of mythological and historical retellings.

## 3. Roadmap of the paper

The gender-based identity and agency of women in the Indian myths/epics are the main topics of this paper's first half. In addition, the paper also discusses these issues by relating them to the original text, the epic itself, which originally discusses gender, individual identity, caste, and community-based discourses as well as the sociopolitical context of ancient times.

Using feminist critical studies as a guide, the final line of investigation would examine the women's posture and underplay throughout the book. In addition to that, myth theories of Mircea Eliade and Bronislaw Malinowski, who discuss the impact of myth on society, are also to be used in this study. Discourses by Uma Chakravarti and other contemporary critics have also been implemented.

This is accomplished keeping in mind other Divakaruni works, including *The Palace of Illusions*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Queen of My Dreams*, *Sister of My Heart*, *The Last Queen*, *Independence* etc., as well as other works by contemporary authors that feature female characters.

### 3.1 Gender and individual identity in Indian myths

Dowden comments, "... mythology is by and large a man's mythology, describing a world from a man's point of view. Women are seldom considered in isolation from men and seldom have scope for action on their own initiative". (161).

There are stories, anecdotes, and myths in almost every culture and civilisation across the globe that depict men as the defenders of humanity who strike the ideal balance between authority and responsibilities, thus serving the world and its people. On the other hand, women were typically depicted as the ones bearing negative traits, frequently coming across as impulsive, seductive, or overly sentimental individuals. As Eve, Penelope, Sita, Draupadi,

Kunti, Gandhari, or Helen, they are always portrayed as the lesser "other" who required the masculine protective ring to preserve their honour.

In *The Myth of Women's Masochism*, Paula Caplan has suggested how this stereotypical prejudice can be tackled by shattering the the ancient/archetypal image of women who are seen flaunting the tendency to derive gratification from their own pain, sacrifices or humiliation:

"This is a common pattern for women: blaming themselves rather than other people . . . because that is the „feminine“ thing to do . . . Like the concept of original sin, the concept of woman's innate masochism limits the definition of who we are and what we can become and makes us feel ashamed and self-blaming. Only by understanding how the myth grew and what perpetuates it now, only by learning to recognise the numerous forms it takes in our lives, can we demolish the myth and open wide the possibilities for women freely to be and to do what they want . . . To protect ourselves and others from destructive self-blame and unnecessary acceptance of a harmful status quo, we need to recognise the various guises the myth takes in our society." (6)

Indian myths and epics, especially the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are full with nuanced depictions of gender and personal identity. In addition to influencing cultural standards, these works also capture the complex conflicts between gender roles, individual agency, and social expectations.

Characters like Sita in the *Ramayana* subvert conventional ideas of what it means to be a woman. Sita's identity is constrained by her responsibilities as a mother, wife, and daughter, but her story makes these roles more difficult to understand. Although she is frequently presented as the model of purity, the strict rules placed on women are called into doubt by her forced exile and fire trial. Sita's story highlights the conflict between individual identity and social obligation, posing issues of female independence, selflessness, and fortitude in the face of patriarchal norms.

Similarly, Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*, is a strong, independent woman who experiences both victimisation and triumph in her own tale. Her trials provide nuanced depictions of gender in the said epic. Despite her public humiliation, Draupadi continues to be a pivotal figure of defiance and resistance, which shapes her identity. Her five marriages defy

traditional gender standards and are a source of both strength and humiliation. She stands out as the strongest advocate of individual identity.

The conflict between personal identity and social norms in both the epics emphasises how gender is malleable and subject to change. In strict, patriarchal frameworks, female characters frequently represent fights for autonomy, identity, and dignity. As such, they provide a critical prism through which to analyse gender dynamics in mythical stories and their ongoing significance in issues of gender and identity today. Thus, both these epics offer a rich environment for examining the relationship between gender, power, and identity, demonstrating how mythological characters simultaneously uphold and subvert the traditional norms of their era.

### 3.2 Portrayal of caste & communities in Indian myths

Caste and community are frequently deeply entwined into the social order in Indian myths and epics, mirroring the hierarchical patterns of ancient civilisation. Though not necessarily in an overt or clear fashion, caste dynamics are highlighted in both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In the *Ramayana*, for example, Shabari, a woman from a lower caste, exemplifies devotion and spiritual purity in spite of her social standing. Her narrative shows how divine grace can transcend societal hierarchies and overcomes prejudice based on caste. In a similar fashion, the strict caste system appears to obstruct the selflessness, loyalty, and innocence of Hidimba, a forest-dwelling woman featured in the *Mahabharata*. She never did anything except love Bheema unconditionally. Her experience serves as a reminder of how caste often restricts people's potential. These epics frequently show the relationship between caste and morality, fate, and identity. While some characters question the constraints imposed by caste, others uphold its influence, demonstrating the intricate and ubiquitous character of caste throughout legendary stories.



### 3.3 The Ramayana, The Forest of Enchantments and the intersection of caste and gender

As per Bronislaw Malinowski. "Myths deal even more with social phenomena-marriage, taxes...ritual." He also mentions how "Myth persuades denizens to defer to, say, ranks in society by pronouncing those ranks long-standing and in that sense observed." (126) Later in *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, he further comments "There is a close relationship between the word, the mythos, the sacred stories of a tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organisation, and even their practical activities, on the other," (74). Applying this to Indian mythology, particularly the *Ramayana*, would imply that the customs and society it depicts are representative of the society of the period.

Thus, the concepts of gender and caste as they are presented in the epic can be compared to those found in real society. A particular civilisation is reflected in the retellings taken into consideration in this study, and Malinowski's theory can be applied to comprehend how this occurs. Additionally, in *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade states that "man constructs according to an archetype" (25). An archetype is "an original which has been imitated, a prototype," according to the Online Oxford Dictionary. Thus, myths are archetypes that men emulate and follow, according to Eliade. Myths are inextricably linked to human beliefs and traditions. This is how he explains the "mythicization of historical prototypes".

For many years, caste has been a dividing element in Indian society. The caste system is viewed as "(i) a ritual system; (ii) a system of marriage; and (iii) a political and economic system," according to Uma Chakravarti in *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (56). "A form of differentiation wherein the constituent units of the system justify endogamy on the basis of putative biological differences which are semaphored by

the ritualization of multiple social practices," that is how Dipankar Gupta defines the caste system in *Interrogating Caste*.

Gender has long been a significant topic of discussion and contention. It is theoretically required to differentiate between gender and sex. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir states that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (Quotd. Butler 35)

By linking gender to the sociological self and sex to the biological self, she is blatantly distinguishing between the two. "Sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation," Judith Butler comments on de Beauvoir's book. Butler claims that de Beauvoir rejects the idea that gender is innate. "We never know our sex outside of its expression as gender," (39), she claims. The fact that we never comprehend ourselves in relation to our sex but rather in relation to our gender results in the truth that gender and culture cannot be examined separately. In modern India, gender concerns play a significant role in social discussions. In her book *Gendering Caste*, Uma Chakravarti discusses some of the major gender-related challenges in India. Through the book, she explores the history of gender in India, focussing on topics like marriage, widowhood, controlling the sexuality etc. For centuries, in our country, a woman's primary role was that of the "reproducer," and as a result, women's sexuality was heavily regulated by patriarchy. The emergence of social stratification and the custom of intra-clan marriage, or the system of endogamy, were credited with establishing this control. As per Chakravarti, the Manusmriti emerged as the main source for establishing gender and caste roles in society during the second century A.D. Marriage and the practice of endogamy were given a lot of weight. During this time, the 'anulomic' and 'pratilomic' marriages were defined, and Varnasamkara (the philosophy of mixed unions) was introduced.

Additionally, ideas like the 'strisvabhava' (women-their innate nature as sexual beings-) being in conflict with their stridharma (fidelity to the husband) was also something that the patriarchal culture promoted. Consequently, the idea of the 'pativrata' became the standard that women were encouraged to strive for in order to maintain their stridharma. The "pativrata ideal" gained popularity and got its place in epics like the *Ramayana*. In addition to becoming Rama's "long-suffering, patient, loving, and faithful wife," Sita also became the model for Indian women for decades to come.

Indian myths, or the "collective unconscious" of the Indian people, have mostly inspired the epics. "Images drawn from them permeate written and oral cultures, political interpretations, man-woman relationships, and perpetuate role models of every kind of human behaviour – father-son, husband-wife, brother-brother, mother-son," states Jain. (29)

As a result, these epics have been crucial in shaping Indian society and the values it upholds, notably those related to gender. And thus, Sita's agnipariksha, test of Shabari's patience, abandonment of Hidimba, Draupadi's chirharan, and Damayanti's adherence to the pativrata code became the foundation of gender and caste based societal construction in India. This is what Divakaruni has portrayed in her writings but in a reimagined form.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has concentrated on caste and gender-related concerns in Divakaruni's mythological fiction based on the retelling of the *Ramayana*. The foundation of gender and caste-based issues such as hierarchy, individuality, mobility, and discrimination are among some of the concerns that have been examined. Among the gender concerns covered are women's agency in patriarchal societies, their roles as wives and mothers, and their place in the patriarchy, particularly in relation to other women. Based on the discussions in the

previous sections of the paper, the study has tried to ascertain whether the epic and its characters have been shaped by the novelist in issue to reflect modern reality.

"A quick reflection will at once reveal how much at odds the conceptual view is with the dynamics of contemporary Indian reality," writes Dipankar Gupta in his article on the caste system. One may say the same thing about societal gender norms. Gender roles have changed and continue to change as well. As a result, caste and gender boundaries have also changed. Divakaruni has been more than successful in portraying these changes by reconstructing the mythical women characters in her mythological adaptations of both the Indian epics. 'Sitayana' or *The Forest of Enchantments* is unquestionably Divakaruni's masterwork since, rather than offering a discourse focused on women, she describes both sides with their own unique set of problems and responsibilities. To paint her picture of 'Sitayana' she uses references that were already present in the original epic but were somehow interpreted under the guise of patriarchal glory. She hasn't even attempted to offer a different ending to Sita's dangerous journey, nor does she portray Ram negatively as a controlling or oppressive husband. This study has tried to investigate the journey of Sita and other characters through Divakaruni's lens and has come to a conclusion that the novelist has attempted a mythical reconstruction of Sita's character in the *Ramayana*; all the while discussing gender and caste discourses inherent in its narrative framework.

#### References

- Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The second sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage International. (Original work published 1949)
- Butler, J. (1986). Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies*, 72, 35–49. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2930225>

- Caplan, P. (1985). *The myth of women's masochism*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Chakravarti, U. (2018). *Gendering caste: Through a feminist lens*. New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd.
- Divakaruni, C. B. (2019). *The forest of enchantments*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Dowden, K. (1992). *The uses of Greek mythology*. London: Routledge.
- Gupta, D. (2000). *Interrogating caste*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Jain, J. (2005). *Women in patriarchy: Cross-cultural readings*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Malinowski, B. (1948). *Magic, science and religion and other essays*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Eliade, M. (1959). *Cosmos and history: The myth of the eternal return*. New York: Harper & Brothers. <https://doi.org/> (If citing PDF, insert link if available)
- Sen, N. D. (1998). When women retell the Ramayan. *Manushi*, 108(Sept-Oct), 18-27. (Original work published 2011 lecture version)