



SITA: A VOICE OF RESISTANCE IN THE NOVEL *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*

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Abstract

In Indian mythology, Sita has been stereotypically glorified as an idol woman and a muted sufferer but never recognized as a woman of inevitable strength. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni juxtaposes in her work *The Forest of Enchantments* captured the immense glimpses of the feminine facets of Sita. In the novel, Sita is not just a character but a vigorous concept of emancipation and a woman who bestows the quality of courage. In the process of self-discovery, Sita explored the new existence of muliebrity by transforming her ductile image into an emblem of liberation. The author gives her powerful weapons in the form of a 'quill' and of 'questioning' to combat the patriarchal society. By shattering the image of a feeble mind and of a passive woman she continuously challenged the norms and convictions of the conventional society. She transgressed herself as a woman of enormous strength, undaunted, and at the end emerged as defiant. Thus, this perusal suggests Sita is a name who is valiant enough to fight for her rights to preserve her dignity and self-esteem.

Keywords: Emancipation, defiant, self-esteem, sita, valiant.

Introduction

The Indian epics such as *Ramayan* plunges deeper into the vague status of women in society. The women characters have always been presented as coy and idealistic but never glorified as the epitome of courage. *The Forest of Enchantment* is an exquisite work that reconstructed the identities of the characters taken from the ancient Indian mythology. To enlighten contemporary women, the author accommodates the character of Sita with "human emotions" and "human failings". Chitra Banerjee has amalgamated the voice of Sita along with the unheard female voices that had never been given a space to speak. The strength of endurance assisted each female character to emerge their

persona magnificently. Sita in the centre has been painted as a woman with many protesting questions and these questions portrayed her as a version of a female antagonist. When Sage Valmiki found her dissatisfied with his version of *Ramayan* he insists her to write her story on her own. The time she dipped her quill into the inkpot, the unheard voices of *Ramayan* echoed in despair "write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into the corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten— or maligned and used as cautionary tales." (04) Thus, she promised to bring light to each women character in the best possible manner. The author has attempted to alter the archetypical picture of Sita in the novel. Through her character, more focus is

given on how a woman should stand for her dignity and questions against the follies of patriarchy.

Critical Analysis

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita is a paragon of humanism, of fidelity, of grace, of sagacity, of valour, and fortitude. A woman from mythology who fights her own battles of hardship. In her single life span, she is abandoned by her parents right after her birth, is exiled with her husband, is abducted by Ravan, and later on undergoes an ordeal of fire to prove her fidelity. Her pertinent efforts to satisfy male egotism make her firmer to rescue her self-esteem by relinquishing the mortal world. *Ramayan* instructs an individual about the lessons of morality but on an ethical note, it has forgotten to do justice with the women characters. Despite having vigorous and dynamic qualities in the character of Sita, many versions of *Ramayan* have failed to glorify her as a woman of courage. As Volga said, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sita ... is an epitome of courage and self-respect, showing a path for all women. While weaving a familiar story, Chitra provides deep and surprising insights." (Volga, chitradivakaruni.com) The author has presented the dilemmas of her life which resonates with the life instances of many contemporary women. Masculine representational discourses always have excluded women from the sphere of writing and creativity. On the contrary, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives Sita a powerful weapon in the guise of a 'Quill' to fill the void of the preconceived narratives. As French feminist, Helen Cixous in her essay *Laugh of Medusa* asserts:

I shall speak about women's writing...Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text— as into the world and into history— by her own movement. (Cixous, pp.347)

Sita's urge to write her repressive desires through the 'red ink' sheds new insights. The colour red which is often associated with the menstrual

blood, is a significant mark of womanhood and an indication of fertility. But on the contrary, 'red ink' also represents power, passion, bloodshed, and the destruction of war in the novel. 'Sitayan' in particular showcases the unwavering will of the unheard women of *Ramayan*. Chitra Banerjee's Sita has filled the void by giving space to the lost female voices through illuminating their personalities in the novel. Thus, we encounter Sunaina for her sagacity, Kaikeyi for her warfare gallantry, Urmila for her stalwart stature, Kaushalya for her immense love, Ahalya for her frigid silence, Mandodari for her resolute faith, and Surpanakha for her wrath.

The novel starts with a prologue in which her disappointment for sage Valmiki's *Ramayan* comes out: "what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt— first in the forest and then in Ayodhya— when I was the most beloved woman in creation." (02) Then on his suggestion, she starts writing 'Sitayan' which captured the plight of Sita and the women at the margins. In the sphere of gender and ethnicity, she is perceived as— the purpose of her life is to serve with no complaints, as she has quietly accepted the injustices and decisions taken by the men in her life. Her character is misconceived; she is deeply rooted in traditional values and at the same time embedded along with the tenets of individuality. She is a woman who doesn't want anyone to exercise complete control over her. When king Dasharath refused Malini (nursemaid) to accompany with them and denied Sita to share her palanquin with Urmila, she got agitated with the response and promised herself "...once I was settled in Ayodhya, I'd make sure that King Dasharath didn't dictate my life." (54) She is vehemently independent and decisive who rejected the attempts of slavish subjugation delves in the deeply patriarchal society. In her whole life she took her decisions with fortitude— When Ram denied her to go for exile she declared "you can't deprive me of my wifely right" (112); In Lanka, she alone faced life threats but never weakened her resolution; In the battlefield when Ram decided to set her free from all the bonds of marriage, she protested against him by deciding stepping into the blaze; when she was

abandoned by her husband, she refuses to plead for mercy and decides to live for her children to teach them "...to be good human beings so that you'll never do to a woman what your father has done to me." (317) Amidst a hierarchical society, Sita explores her sense of individuality by asserting herself as a dexterous woman and empowers herself with the help of self-expression and self-assertion.

The women of her time were forbidden from learning warfare but Sunaina encouraged her to acquire the lessons of martial arts for self-defence. Sunaina raised her elder daughter with the skills to heal plants and humans along with the skills of martial arts. She is an inspiration for her daughter who taught her "...to be kind and courageous. To not tolerate wrongdoings." (46) In the novel, Sita's first act of resistance occurred when she suspects, that a man can only rule the kingdom of Mithila. Sita cried in outrage "why can't custom change? ... Especially ones that don't make sense?" (14) She was challenging the traditional beliefs and customs where people reckon; a woman is not sturdy and intellectual enough to enlighten the people of a kingdom. Even her jealousy is quite visible when she comprehends the freedom given to men to explore the world, "I was stung by jealousy... but mostly it was jealousy of the freedom given to men to go wherever they wanted in the wide world." (110) On the day of her swayamvar, she stunned people with her sharp tongue. When she came to know about the vows of Ram, she felt rejected. In an outburst, she speaks "your desire to avoid conflict among brothers is a good one, Prince of Ayodhya, but perhaps 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." (36) Being a liberated soul, she is substantial enough to reprehend the injustices of society. In an era, where women don't have right to speak, she was raising her voice with strong determination. Her unbreakable spirit and strong resistance remind us of the lines of the poem *Still I Rise*:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Angelou, lines 1-4)

The resonance of Sita's questions was the resistance that transfigured her ductile visage into a rebel. These questions were, "Filial duty was important to Ram. Good. But what of his duty towards me?" (35) "...where did a wife fit in among all his responsibilities to his lineage, his family and his kingdom?" (39) "What of his wife? Would he ever consider her to be as important as his dharma?" (40) "Was a man's pride more important than the truth?" (46) "...he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people. But weren't we his people, too? Didn't he have duty to us?" (320) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni exclusively depicted the hideous quandary of Sita's life through these questions. Sita was constantly searching for her place in her husband's life. The author imbibes her strength and gives her an autonomous voice which was earlier muted by the hegemonic structure. She states "My husband, to whom the gods themselves proclaimed my innocence. That husband has now discarded me like an old sandal...I might have betrayed him. But he's the real betrayer." (317) She was shattered by the decision of banishment made by her husband. As a dictator, he chooses her fate and is not has given a chance to defend her. Her protest for her self-esteem visible through the lines "love and happiness might not be in my control, but at least my dignity still remained mine." (245) His duty as a king overpowers his duty as a husband. Thus, such probation helped her to attain liberation.

Postmodern modes of narration somehow trying to exterminate the derogatory status of women from fiction. In the male representational discourse, a woman is primarily viewed as an ornament for the male gaze. In the novel, Sita is humiliated and objectified by Ravan who was enticed with her beauty "As you can see, this is Sita, my prize. I wrested her from her husband for Surpanakha's sake, but now I've decided to keep her for my own purpose." (176) This utmost cruel treatment questions the existence of Sita where male hegemony denied her the agency of being a human. Her existence matters for Ravan only because she is an object of erotic pleasure for him.

But her imperishable strength can be witnessed in Lanka how in front of Ravan she denounced to submit herself. Despite being threatened for death by Ravan, she firmly states "And you— what makes you think that I'd ever look at you willingly? That I'd endure your touch with anything other than disgust. If Ram is a lion, you're a dog." (202) In her married life, she opts for destitution over prosperity for the sake of her beloved, ironically Ram disowned her to become a King of *Dharma*. Still, the unbending volition of her inner voice "Not all women are weak and helpless like you think." (111) subverted the gender stereotypes and oscillates the pillars of dominance.

A parallel account we encountered with the character of Ahalya. Brahma had crafted Ahalya, who is the most ideal choice of a wife for sage Gautam. But Indra's infatuation for Ahalya enforced him to disguise as Gautam and made intercourse with her in the hermitage. Sage Gautam enraged at the treachery of both and wrongly cursed Ahalya who was seduced by Indra's wile deception. Chitra Banerjee in 'Sitayan' unfolds the toxic patriarchal conventions in which punishments were also gendered. The culprit Indra bestowed with the punishment of the eruption of thousand vulvas on his body but the innocent Ahalya for years was condemned as a stone with a promise of redemption by the touch of Ram's feet. Inflamed and dissatisfied with the unjust treatment with Ahalya, Sita questioned her "Doesn't it go against the dictates of dharma? You did nothing wrong. You were tricked by Indra. Why should you be made to suffer for his sin? For being a victim? It was unfair." (134) On the very same night, Ahalya appeared in her dream. The remorse on the face of sage Gautam persuades Sita; that Ahalya demands vengeance which she accomplished through the 'vow of silence'. To punish him for the rest of his life, she decided not to speak ever to him. Ahalya's stoic silence was also an answer to the double standard society who epitomized her with the two extreme identities— as a chaste maiden and an adulterous wife. Through the character of Ahalya it is clearly visible how the burden of honour is always associated with a woman and how society always blames a victim not the culprit.

Chitra Banerjee's rendition of Ramayan incorporates the challenges faced by Sita with fortitude. Ram condemns her and leaves her alone in a world full of thorns. Her inevitable anguish was "Ram: monarch, father, warrior, husband. The beloved who abandoned me when I needed him most. My greatest joy and my greatest despair." (03) In the hermitage of Valmiki; she found her strength in motherhood and accomplished her duties as a single mother. Bearing stoic misfortunes in her life, she fearlessly refused the offer to live the rest of her life with the family as in return she has to prove her sanctity again and this time in front of the citizens of Ayodhya. She retorts back by abandoning the offer "Because 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." (357) Though she forgave her beloved long years back but her assertion to herself "...though I don't deserve it" (358) firms her to renounce everything in the world. Sita's denial to perform the final fire ordeal endorses her to step out from an idealistic status and liberate her from the shackles of patriarchy. Fearlessly she took a stand to protect her womanhood and dignity. Sita is seen as determined who despite being tortured; transgressed the societal norms by emancipating herself from the mortal world. Her request from mother earth to split is an act of punishment for her husband because being a personification of justice and law he deprived his wife from justice. Thus, Sita chooses to disappear with mother earth to liberate herself "I might not be able to have the life I wanted, but I could choose the manner of my death." (245) Somehow, she has tasted the fruit of knowledge after undergoing the hardships of her life and then rediscovered her new "Self". Her awakening rejects this offer by saying 'no more!' where she puts her dignity supreme than the felicity of love.

Conclusion

Since birth, the psyche of an Indian woman is shaped with the ideals of Sita but society has misinterpreted her qualities and wisdom. She is remembered by posterity for her forbearance and ethereal nature because of which the dictums of

society expected each woman to emulate the attributes of her character. The patriarchal setup never recognized her actual strength and always assigned her ductile image to match. The author in the novel portrayed her character more convincingly. It's our society for whom a woman is ideal till the time she is suppressed beyond this her individuality and existence have no meaning. The darkness of patriarchal society failed to understand the real qualities of Sita. She is the one who raised questions not only for her own rights but for those who were the muted sufferer. In Lanka, she guarded herself against the evil eyes and break conventions to sustain her identity. She is more assertive about the decisions she made in her life. She knows how to be mild in any relationship without losing one's honour. 'Sitayan' as a whole is the poignant thread of narratives that imparts lucid magnitude into the lives of contemporary women. Her autonomous voice sheds new insight into the name "Sita". When a woman is blessed with the old saying "may you be like Sita", it reflects that a woman must possess both sides of her nature— of sublimity, of humanism and at the same time furious to preserve her honour and dignity when it's in jeopardy.

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