



DIVINITY AND THE FEMINIST INDIAN WOMAN IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S NOVEL *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS*

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Abstract : Sita is a much loved character in the Hindu epic, Ramayana. She is an epitome of an ideal Hindu woman but with a mind of her own. Her character highlights the struggles and difficulties faced by a woman not just during her times but, to some extent, even now. She is rightfully referred to as a Goddess because of her extraordinary potential and calibre of carving her own way in a patriarchal world. This paper aims to study the character of Sita, her remarkable individuality, feminism and crisis in the life of India woman through the eyes of the central protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Forest of Enchantments*.

Keywords- Novel, Divinity, Feminism, Indian epic, Womanhood

Sita is said to be the ideal representation who possesses the best traditional qualities of an Indian woman. She is an ideal daughter, an ideal wife to her husband Rama and an ideal mother to Luv and Kush. She had to struggle and undergo a lot of difficulties in order to carve a niche in the history of Hindu mythology. Gaining a name as a woman and earning recognition was not easy for her as she was put through several trials and tribulations that proved her mettle not just as a woman but also as a Goddess. She is the epitome of beauty, grace, intelligence and also a woman of substance. Her life is an example of how she always followed her instincts and never gave up on her principles. Her birth on the earth as a human form was an example for all Indian women. She fought for her rights which gave her such a strong voice that it echoes even after ages that the epic was written. Divakaruni's novel highlights the protagonist Sita who was also popularly known as 'Vaidehi.' The novel is the bildungsroman of the Hindu epic and describes the life of Sita from childhood to her end. It is a moral lesson for the human society and also highlights the discrimination between the First and the Second Sex.

Philip Lutgendorf states, "Among the many, many Ramayana there are now even-thankfully-some 'Sitayanas', but I know of none with the special magic that Chitra Divakaruni...brings to the telling."

In the beginning of the novel, sage Valmiki wants Sita to write her own story- Sitayana so that the raw form of emotions, struggles, pain, dejection and hopelessness that Sita felt would be told from her point of view. And that would be the truest portrayal of her life.

"Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialised, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten-or maligned and used as cautionary tales." (Divakaruni, 4)

The story of Sita before Sitayana had been told only from men's point of view which have not justified Sita's character and her life and if she herself narrated the story things would stay closest to reality.

In the novel we find that Sita grows up in her palace which is surrounded by an enchanted forest therefore she knows the herbs and medications that can be obtained from the healing trees. Her bond with the nature is highlighted since the very beginning. She has the capability to study each and every plant and knows their herbal properties. She is seen to fall in love with Ram at first sight and is shy to confess it at first, but she silently prays that she gets Rama as her husband in her 'Swayamvara.' Her father King Janaka wanted Sita to choose her own husband among a group of men in their main palatial hall. Rama arrives with his brother Lakshmana and also sage Vishwamitra. Even Ravana participates in Sita's 'Swayamvar.' The mighty bow is broken by Rama and the rest of the princes and kings of the other kingdoms are forced to accept defeat. Even though Ravana puts in all his strength yet he fails before the divine Rama. Sita is silently happy that her prayers were answered and she returns to Ayodhya with her husband. When we reach the middle of the novel, we see that Sita was ill treated by her step mother-in-law Kaikeyi and her wicked confidant Manthara. She, along with her husband and brother-in-law are sent to exile as per the boon given to Kaikeyi by her husband Dashrath. Interestingly, Sita gives up the luxuries and extravagance of the palace and happily renounces her materialistic life to join her husband in his exile. Not for once do we find that she questions the discomfort or difficulties that she might end up facing in the wild forest. Probably because we already knew that she was so close to Mother Nature that she was sure that the forest trees and its enchantment would keep her safe, far away from any worldly desires or expectations. Even though Sita as a child is used to a life of luxury and is persuaded by Ram to not join him for exile, she chooses to loyally join her husband and follow her own principles.

Sita knew, since childhood that girls were expected to live a conventional life.

"But we both knew that was a wishful thinking. Girlhood was an ephemeral as a drop of water on a lily pad. Soon I'd have to leave all that I loved-parents, sister, palace, garden, the healing house-to take my place in another family, which I must then call mine. That's the lot of daughters, commoner or princess." (Divakaruni, 10)

Arshia Sattar remarks, "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni turns the Ramayana around by telling it in the voice of Sita...This inversion is a gift-it presents us with a way to know an already well-known story better and to love an already beloved story more."

Eventually, Sita is attracted to a golden deer called Mareecha. Rama and Sita spend some wonderful days in the forest and even though from time to time there are a few monsters and devils that try to disrupt their peaceful exile, Rama and Lakshmana fight them off and bravely live their difficult life in the forest, but it was Mareecha who actually brings about a plot twist. He was actually Ravana's uncle who was previously an ascetic living in the forest and was called upon to divert Ram from his regular duties so that Ravana can kidnap Sita. Before leaving Lakshmana draws a line and tells Sita not to proceed in order to be protected and safe. This also symbolically reflects the Indian mentality and society where the Indian women are kept in domestic confines and are meant to be protected by the men and are limited to just household duties. They are expected to follow orders and commands and obey as per the husband or the father.

Even though we have come a long way and achieved a lot in terms of women empowerment, a lot more has to be achieved. The societal rules, norms and conventions are applicable mostly to women simply because of their gender. They are expected to behave, act and speak in a certain manner. Lakshman Rekha also denotes how India needs to grow and spread awareness in terms of women gaining financial independence. Many women in suburban and rural areas are still in the confines of their houses and are not allowed to decide for themselves with a free mind. Sita is eventually captured by Ravana and taken to Ashoka Van, but as a woman of substance she maintains her chastity and fights back with full courage and vigour against the advances of Ravana. The men in the novel have a second opinion and are portrayed as secondary characters while the women including Sita, Kaikeyi, Mandodari have been given their due. Sita is the primary character of the novel who speaks for herself and the novel is told from her point of view.

Sita is asked to give her 'Agni Pareeksha' and she voluntarily enters the fire in order to cleanse herself. As she steps in the fire we find that the fire turns into soft lotus petals. She takes the punishment in her stride even after knowing that she was a pure soul. Her character justified both her words and actions. Time and again she's made to face such ordeal which compels her to leave the palace and her husband and stay away from the materialistic world in search for peace.

Sita is the epitome of everything in a woman. She knows the good and righteous aspects. She is a virtuous lady with a strong temperament. She stays away from evil and Ravana's advances and if we look closely we find that her life resembles the day to day struggles of an Indian woman and how they strive to maintain

their sanctity and dignity in spite of men objectifying them from time to time. Sita has virtues of kindness, compassion and loves her children under all circumstances including Hanuman whom she considered as her own child.

She was a symbol of the cosmic energy and sustenance that bring creativity and life into the world. She is, therefore, as per the Hindu mythology the cause of all creation. She lives a life on her own terms and knows that self-respect and self dignity is of the utmost importance for a woman. So, her glory is solely her own credit. She is adorned by the three worlds simply because she did not bow in front of the patriarchal male dominance. She is a woman who can be studied in context with feminism and how a woman can emerge victorious in spite of living a tragic life. Even if her freedom cost her life she chose her peace of mind and disappeared in the lap of Mother Earth. The novel beautifully portrays her mindset, her thoughts and the innermost feelings of Sita's character and it strikes a chord with the readers and touches their inner soul simply because they can still relate it after all these years. This is the reason why Ramayana is proved to be a classic in world literature and has been translated in more than 300 languages.

The meaning of Sita's name is 'Farrow' that symbolises her birthplace and the place that her father found her on. As per the Hindu Mythology, Rama and Sita are eternally connected by a string of love because they were the reincarnation of God Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi. But after being born as a woman on the earth she still chose to abide by the principles, even if she had to give away everything including her life. Her story is an example for the Indian women to raise their voice whenever they face injustice and to deal with it in a manner that sustains their dignity. She died in the same place that she originated from. She had immense love for the Mother Earth and her beauty also reflected the beauty of the forest. The novel highlights her simplicity and her seamless sync with the forest, the lakes, animals and birds. From the very beginning we find that Sita's character has a strong connection with nature. She is a woman whose soul is in complete harmony and her self-belief and confidence is her weapon against all odds. She is forgiving and generous and is forever grateful for what ever she has received in life even if it was pain. In spite of all odds she had the attitude of 'never giving up.'

"It was my time to put my house in order. To make my own mark on Ayodhya. Change a few things..I'd been afraid that one more sorrow placed on top of all others I bore would break me." (Divakaruni, 253)

She is a symbol of feminine spontaneity and her life is a representation of the crisis that the women have to go through even today. Sita considered forests as life-giving and something that nurtured and taught her. There is a sharp contrast with men. Men consider forest as something wild and uncultured. The novel is therefore a feminist work of Sita's character and highlights her struggles and trials and the drastic changes of her life that prove her worth as a goddess. She knew what she had to do when she was faced with the same situation twice- especially when it was about questioning her chastity. Luv and Kush were brought up well and she knew they were warriors who could succeed their father. Having fulfilled her responsibilities and her purpose in life, she chooses herself. And even after been subjected to trails and tribulations, she chooses to forgive her husband, Rama in the end.

"I forgave you a long time ago,' I say to Ram. 'Though I didn't know it until now. Because this is the most important aspect of love, whose other fate is compassion. It isn't doled out, drop by drop. It doesn't measure who is worthy and who isn't. It is like the ocean. Unfathomable. Astonishing. Measureless.'" (Divakaruni, 358).

Her life is extraordinary. And she is a true motivation of fighting back all difficulties with perseverance and courage. The novel therefore substantially remarks on Sita's feminist nature- one who is born from nature and powerfully and chooses to die of her own free will.

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