

# EXPLORING MARGINAL CHARACTERS IN PALACE OF ILLUSION AND THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENT BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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## ABSTRACT

The legendary Helene Cixous advised women to write to express themselves. This technique allows women to discuss their unique experiences and gain a better knowledge of the female perspective. Cixous adds that women must choose to write, just like they do in the world and history. This idea is even more essential when you consider how long mythical stories have been part of history and culture. Because women made these stories, they shaped modern culture. India's deep literature, including The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, explores complex themes and complexities of gender politics, motherhood, transgenerance, and marriage, which fascinates researchers. profound stories are now part of modern literature and require profound investigation and explanation. Modern writers, especially women, aim to retell these stories from new perspectives. They use the best literary skills to highlight women's silenced voices and significant impact in a sexist world. This breaks down cultural notions that were hard-wired in the original texts. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an outstanding Indian American author, has expertly written a feminist story about Sita, a prominent figure in Indian mythology. Chitra Banerjee is talented in rewriting and telling classic epics. She developed Sitayana, her masterpiece, by merging storylines from The Ramayana. With Sita as the main character, retelling defies the male-centered paradigm and highlights undervalued female figures. The author skillfully takes readers on a poignant journey with Sita as she struggles in Lanka under the grief tree. The author also gives abused and disadvantaged female characters like Urmila, Ahilya, Surpankha, Mandodari, and Kaikeyi a voice. Most stories about these folks are uninteresting or don't mention them. This novella tells the story of Sita and some of the book's lesser-known characters.

**KEY WORDS:** CULTURAL FLUX, MARGINALISM, DIASPORA.

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution from the epic to the novelized rendition of mythic narratives has garnered considerable prominence and persists in rejuvenating itself, thereby altering, undermining, and even deconstructing the preceding myths. According to the esteemed scholar Mircea Eliade, the act of rewriting and reinventing the narratives and characters found within grand constructs such as myths or history serves to reestablish the original moment, the state of complete fullness within a present devoid of any historical remnants (76). The genre of mythological fiction has garnered considerable attention in the modern Indian literary landscape, particularly with regards to women authors exploring the lives of women from a mythical era. These narratives shed light on a previously unexplored or unrecorded history, challenging the dominant narratives that have traditionally shaped our understanding of the past. In doing so, they occupy a distinct sociopolitical position within a culture that is increasingly embracing cosmopolitan ideals.

There exists a revitalised fascination with the historical contributions of women in the realm of literature. The contemporary resurgence of feminist thought prompts a reevaluation, reimagining, and rearticulation of literary works, with a particular focus on intersectionality. This approach encourages an examination of the intricate interplay between race and gender, caste and gender, and religion and gender. It recognises the significance of narratives that centre around women, embracing a diverse range of issues within the realms of fiction, history, and the broader literary canon. The scholarly examination of the literary works from the epic era in India, spanning from approximately 2000 to 700 BCE, necessitates a fresh analysis in consideration of the existing historiography that has significantly influenced cultural norms and the binary perception of gender roles within society. Furthermore, it is imperative to critically assess the overarching narratives that persistently endure, undergo repeated scrutiny, and undergo reinterpretation. This rigorous examination aims to discern the prevailing ideologies, power dynamics, and patriarchal frameworks that exert their dominance within these literary compositions. In the preface of her erudite opus on Hindu mythology titled "Yuganta: The End of an Epoch" (1969), Iravati Karve posits that the Mahabharata, a revered epic, fails to exhibit any discernible inclination towards chivalry when it comes to the treatment of women. The concept of "rehistoricizing" presents a certain degree of ambiguity when examined through the lens of mythological origins. However, within the scope of this current investigation, it shall be approached within the framework of

exploring the impact of women in mythic literature and contemporary mytho-fictional narratives. Specifically, this inquiry aims to examine how these women have shaped the prevailing gender values, feminist ideologies, and societal perceptions of women throughout the annals of literary history. Moreover, it seeks to elucidate the transformative influence of these narratives on socio-cultural norms pertaining to sexuality, power dynamics, and the overall concept of womanhood. One notable facet of the current surge in revisiting these grand narratives lies in the authors' deliberate focus on subjecting their literary analysis to the lesser-known female figures, who have long been eclipsed by their more illustrious counterparts.

The personas of Suparnakha, Mandodari, Urmila, Amba, Menaka, Ahalya, and the illustrious figures such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari are presently undergoing a process of reimagining, wherein these women are being portrayed as individuals who have deftly etched their names in the annals of mythical chronicles that have predominantly been dominated by their male counterparts. The articulations of these women serve as a conduit for contemporary female authors to offer a fresh vantage point on the intricate intricacies of the epic narrative, thereby questioning the preconceived notions and inflexible societal norms that were once unquestionably accepted as veritable verities across the annals of time. The fundamental aim of these rephrasings and narrations in a fictionalised manner is to assert the presence of women within a distinct female dialogue, rather than being relegated to the realm of men's discourse. This endeavour aligns with the concept of "écriture féminine" in the realm of literature. In her introductory remarks on "The Newly Born Woman," Sandra Gilbert delves into the novel position that the emerging woman occupies. Gilbert posits that this nascent figure, surpassing the transgressions of bygone eras and the chronicles of hysteria, must embark on a journey to a novel realm of her own creation, transcending the confines of conventional paradigms.

The literary works of esteemed female authors such as Kavita Kane, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Saiswaroopaa Iyer delve into the realm of mythological tales, offering a refreshing and empowering feminist lens. These writers skillfully challenge the prevailing male-centric nature of epic narratives, effectively subverting conventional tropes associated with female characters, including the femme-fatale, the wife, and the mother. In doing so, they

present alternative perspectives that embolden notions of love, desire, sexuality, and freedom of choice. These perspectives, previously overshadowed or frowned upon due to ethical, theological, or moral considerations within the rich cultural and traditional fabric of ancient India, are now brought to the forefront. Kavita Kane's inaugural literary work, "Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen" (2014), presents a narrative that delves into the existence of Karna and his consequential involvement in the war, as perceived through the lens of his spouse, Uruvi. It is noteworthy to mention that Uruvi is a wholly fabricated persona, conspicuously absent from the annals of the epic. Kane delves into the oft-overlooked personages of the Ramayana within her literary oeuvre, including notable works such as "Sita's Sister" (2014) and "Lanka's Princess" (2017). These narratives intricately unravel the tales of Urmila and Suparnakha, two characters who occupy contrasting roles within the epic. Urmila, portrayed as a paragon of unwavering devotion, assumes the mantle of a devoted wife, while Suparnakha, in stark contrast, embodies a promiscuous and lustful demoness. Kane adeptly reshapes the marginalised personas of these two female protagonists, effectively dismantling the deeply ingrained misogyny and chauvinism that prescribes the societal roles and inherent limitations imposed upon women.

The rich tapestry of Indian mythology, intricately woven into the very essence of the Indian ethos and cultural landscape, has consistently captivated the attention and intellectual pursuits of scholars and writers worldwide throughout the annals of time. Throughout the annals of time, it has firmly established its presence within a myriad of artistic genres, spanning the realms of plays, films, poems, novels, songs, folklore, performing arts, and paintings. There exists a copious amount of evidence that unequivocally demonstrates a profound level of fascination and engagement with mythology, as evidenced by the presence of varying dialects, the dispersion across diverse nations, and the adherence to distinct religious beliefs. In the present epoch, the ancient texts have undergone a reevaluation, wherein they have been approached from diverse vantage points, thereby imbuing them with a renewed sense of vigour and relevance. It has become a prevailing custom among literary individuals to engage in the act of revisiting, retelling, rewriting, and re-envisioning these written works with an unwavering fervour and fresh perspectives. Mythology, being an integral facet of Indian culture, traditions, and ethos, possesses discernible perspectives, and the subsequent retellings have been undertaken with a deliberate approach and underlying purpose. The Ramayana and

The Mahabharata serve as the two seminal mythological texts that continue to uphold and nurture India's venerable culture and traditions. These reconfigurations have evolved into a mechanism for extracting novel significations and, undoubtedly, charting the course of re-examinations. The profound impact of Rama's magnanimous nature and Sita's demure, docile, and devotional character resonates deeply within the collective psyche of the Indian populace, thereby elevating it to the status of a truly remarkable epic. We are confronted with the phenomenon of hierarchies being subverted, wherein the central protagonist is supplanted by a character of lesser significance. Amidst the pantheon of esteemed literary reconfigurations, the feminist rewritings have deftly etched out a distinct space by proffering a novel vantage point to the conventional depiction of the gendered individual. Among the esteemed literary figures who have contributed to the discourse of feminism, one may find the notable names of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manini J. Anandani, Pratibha Ray, and Kavita Kane. It is worth mentioning that the realm of literary reimagination has also attracted the attention of renowned male authors, such as Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Umesh Kotru, Aditya Iyengar, and Anand Neelakantan. They have depicted these epics from an alternative perspective. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands as a prominent figure within the literary realm, wielding considerable influence as an esteemed writer hailing from the rich tapestry of South-Asian heritage. The illustrious literary work titled *The Place of Illusion* showcases the profound portrayal of Draupadi, a prominent character derived from the epic Mahabharata. Similarly, the author's latest opus, *The Forest of Enchantments*, delves into the poignant narrative of Sita's tribulations while held captive beneath the shade of a tree in Lanka, following her abduction by the formidable Ravana. Sita epitomises the virtues of fortitude, loyalty, selflessness, affection, compassion, and veracity, thereby exemplifying a paragon of femininity to be emulated. With unwavering courage, she fearlessly confronts the perplexing circumstances that surround her, diligently endeavouring to dismantle the oppressive forces of patriarchy in order to establish her own sense of self within the intricate fabric of society. In addition, she adeptly amplifies the narratives of various marginalised and oppressed female personas such as Urmila, Ahilya, Surpankha, Mandodari, Kaikeyi, and others. These characters frequently endure neglect and are systematically erased from the fabric of all narratives. Not only does it encompass the narrative of Sita, but it also sheds light upon other oft-neglected characters. Her prowess lies in the astute analysis and discernment exhibited in her meticulous examination of

an authentic portrayal capturing the essence of the illustrious persona of Sita, as depicted in the timeless epic, The Ramayana.

The literary work entitled "The Forest of Enchantments" authored by the esteemed Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni stands as a remarkable piece of prose. This novel, rooted in the contemporary era, presents a captivating reinterpretation of the illustrious epic, The Ramayana, delving into the multifaceted persona of Sita from an alternative vantage point. The narrative is composed in the first-person perspective, specifically from the vantage point of Sita. The aforementioned passage serves to acquaint the reader with the unexplored aspect of the protagonist's solitary sojourn in Lanka, wherein she sought solace beneath the sorrowful tree. The narrative at hand does not solely revolve around the protagonist Sita, but rather encompasses a cohort of lesser-known female characters such as Sunayna, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Shanta, Mandodari, Surpankha, and Sarama, who are frequently subjected to marginalisation and underestimation. The various personages within the narrative find themselves invigorated by the presence of Sita, who, in her unwavering commitment, perceives it as her solemn obligation to amplify the voices of these socially disadvantaged individuals. Their impassioned plea resonates within her consciousness, compelling her to inscribe their narratives alongside her own. Throughout the course of our existence, we have consistently found ourselves confined to the periphery, belittled, misconstrued, held accountable without justification, and either neglected or subjected to unjust criticism, all while being exploited as mere cautionary anecdotes. In accordance with the scholarly work of Banerjee (4), it is evident that...

The narrative is derived from the esteemed literary work of Valmiki, namely the Ramayana. However, it is noteworthy that this particular rendition places a significant emphasis on the character of Sita, hence earning the epithet of 'Sitayana'. However, the underlying intention is not to portray male characters as tormented individuals, but rather to afford them equal reverence. The author has masterfully depicted the character of Ram with an omnipresent sense of grandeur, while Laxman remains as reverential as previously portrayed. The author has portrayed Sita as an ardent admirer of the natural world, possessing a profound affinity for its wonders and a remarkable ability to mend and restore. Furthermore, she is depicted as a highly skilled practitioner of martial arts, displaying a remarkable level of expertise in combat techniques. Her character is characterised by unwavering bravery and an indomitable

spirit, shedding the facade of a docile and subservient woman. The multifarious moods and nuanced

facets of her character are deftly depicted through the utilisation of unadorned vocabulary. The verisimilar portrayal of Sita establishes a profound connection with the female demographic, as she embodies the virtues of filial piety, spousal fidelity, and fraternal compassion. The narrative elucidates the abhorrent experiences endured by Sita during her sojourn in Ashoka Vatika, a facet that is frequently overlooked by the lay reader.

The author has effectively given voice to the marginalised and adeptly articulates their perspectives. She has exhibited Queen Sunaina in her entirety, showcasing her elegance, regality, and sagacity. She diligently monitors the affairs of the kingdom and provides invaluable aid to her spouse in matters pertaining to the court. She possesses a profound understanding that the denizens of her dominion, Mithila, harbour unwavering trust in their esteemed Leader, none other than the illustrious King Janak. Consequently, she refrains from attempting to surpass his authority. She is portrayed as a visionary, thus commencing clandestine tutelage in the martial arts for Sita. She exhibits a profound level of introspection, whereby she demonstrates a keen awareness upon acquiring knowledge pertaining to their circumstances. The literary work entitled "The Forest of Enchantments" authored by the esteemed Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a remarkable piece of prose that delves into the realm of contemporary storytelling, drawing inspiration from the illustrious epic known as "The Ramayana." This novel, with its unique narrative approach, endeavours to unravel the multifaceted persona of Sita, a central figure within the aforementioned epic, from an alternative and thought-provoking vantage point. The narrative is composed in the first-person perspective, specifically from the vantage point of Sita. The text serves to acquaint the reader with the unexplored aspect of her solitary sojourn in Lanka beneath the melancholic arboreal entity. The narrative at hand does not solely revolve around the protagonist, Sita, but also encompasses the presence of several peripheral female personas, namely Sunayna, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Shanta, Mandodari, Surpankha, and Sarama, who are frequently subjected to marginalisation and underestimation. The various characters within the novel find their vitality enhanced through the influence of Sita, who perceives it as her moral obligation. Her contemplations are abundant with the perspectives and narratives of these marginalised individuals. Kindly compose a narrative that encompasses our collective experiences.

Throughout the course of our existence, we have consistently found ourselves confined to unfavourable circumstances, belittled, misconstrued, unjustly accused, and either neglected or subjected to defamation and exploitation, all while being utilised as cautionary examples. According to Banerjee's scholarly work, as referenced in the fourth citation, it can be inferred that...

The narrative is derived from the renowned epic Ramayana authored by Valmiki, with a notable emphasis on the character of Sita, thus earning it the epithet of 'Sitayana'. However, the underlying intention is not to portray male characters as individuals plagued by suffering, but rather to accord them equal levels of reverence and admiration. The author has artfully depicted the persona of Ram with an omnipresent grandeur, while Laxman remains portrayed as reverential, as previously established. The author has portrayed Sita as an ardent admirer of the natural world, possessing a profound affinity for its wonders, as well as a skilled practitioner of the healing arts. Furthermore, she exhibits a remarkable proficiency in the martial disciplines, showcasing her bravery and resolute determination, thereby shedding the facade of a docile and subservient female persona. The multifarious moods and nuanced facets of her character are deftly depicted through the utilisation of unadorned lexicons. The verisimilitude of Sita's portrayal establishes a profound connection between her and the collective feminine consciousness, for she embodies the archetypal roles of a filial daughter, a devoted spouse, and a compassionate sibling. The narrative elucidates the abhorrent experiences endured by Sita during her sojourn in Ashoka Vatika, a facet that is frequently overlooked by the average reader.

The author has effectively provided a platform for the voices of the marginalised, thereby allowing for the articulation and representation of their perspectives. She has exhibited Queen Sunaina in her entirety, showcasing her elegance, regality, and sagacity. She diligently monitors the affairs of the kingdom and provides aid to her spouse in matters pertaining to the court. She possesses a profound understanding that the denizens of her realm, Mithila, harbour unwavering trust in their esteemed Leader, the King Janak. Consequently, she refrains from attempting to surpass his authority. She is portrayed as a visionary, thus commencing clandestine tutelage in the discipline of martial arts to Sita. She exhibits a profound level of contemplation, for upon discovering that her daughters are on the precipice of entering into the sacred institution of matrimony, she imparts upon them sagacious counsel, ensuring their empowerment and safeguarding them against any potential



exploitation. She imparts knowledge regarding the intricacies of the male ego, the intricate web of political dynamics within the palace, and various established protocols governing the affairs of the kingdom. She articulates: "If one desires to confront injustice, if one aspires to instigate transformation, it is imperative to execute such endeavors in a manner that does not inflict harm upon an individual's sense of self-worth." According to Divakaruni (46), Furthermore, she imparted unto them the profound concept of Endurance, a notion that Sita consistently recollects throughout the entirety of the novel. "Harness the depths of your inner fortitude," she would counsel them. One must bear in mind that an individual has the capacity to assume the role of both their most formidable adversary and their most steadfast ally. The decision lies within your purview. Furthermore, one must acknowledge that which is beyond alteration and instead persevere through it.

According to Divakaruni, in her scholarly work at the age of 54, she posits that...

She issues a directive to initiate the construction of a sanctuary, intended for the purpose of facilitating the utilisation of Sita's innate abilities in the realm of healing. The ultimate objective of this endeavour is to bring about a state of contentment and well-being among the populace of Mithila. In her maternal capacity, she imparts sagacious counsel to her two daughters, asserting that the key to a life filled with serenity and contentment resides in the timeless principle of endurance, a virtue that women have diligently cultivated throughout the annals of history. The portrayal presented here encapsulates her maternal preoccupations.

The queen who holds a lesser degree of favouritism from the esteemed king Dashrath, and also serves as the legitimate mother-in-law to the illustrious Sita, is none other than queen Kaushlaya. Throughout various portrayals, she has been depicted as a remarkably submissive and meek character. The profound anguish and torment experienced by Sita as a result of her husband's deliberate disregard have been duly acknowledged. Due to her relatively diminished status, she possesses no surplus of material possessions. However, she greets Sita with remarkable enthusiasm and bestows upon her a collection of her ancestral jewellery and garments, which have been cherished and handed down through successive generations. She experiences a sense of trepidation when contemplating the act of proffering said items to Sita. Chitra Banerjee adeptly navigates the complex intricacies of Sita's psyche, demonstrating a remarkable level of maturity in her portrayal. Ram possessed a profound understanding of his mother's predicament as he eloquently expressed his observation that certain individuals are burdened with misfortune despite their outward abundance, leaving them bereft internally.

One's maternal figure, in this case my own, falls into the category of individuals who have experienced a certain predicament. As elucidated by Divakaruni (70), my mother laments the deprivation she has endured in her role as a mother due to the profound affection exhibited by King Dashrath towards Ram, resulting in his preferential treatment and exclusive presence within the royal chambers. Furthermore, my mother bemoans the fact that her daughter, Shanta, has been bestowed upon Ramapada, a close associate of the king, thereby depriving her of the esteemed position she rightfully deserves as an esteemed queen. However, it is noteworthy that Sita assumes a pivotal role in the reconciliation of the estranged affectionate connection between Kaushlaya and King Dashrath, thereby imbuing it with a heightened sense of significance.

The subsequent persona introduced within the literary work is Ahalya, a woman whose essence is gravely misconstrued, leading to her unfortunate condemnation by her spouse, the esteemed sage Gautam. Due to the deleterious consequences of the curse, she undergoes a transformation wherein her corporeal form is transmuted into that of an inanimate mineral substance, specifically, a stone.

Ahalya, the possessor of unparalleled beauty, exerts a captivating influence upon Indra, who cunningly disguises himself as her husband and proceeds to engage her in a seductive encounter. The anguish endured by Ahlaya necessitates a reevaluation, with the aim of absolving her of the unwarranted shame that has plagued her for countless generations. Ahlaya's Maunvrata, or the practice of maintaining silence, proves to be disconcerting as she falls prey to the actions of Indra. Sita yearns to comprehend the underlying rationale behind her afflictions, pondering the profound query: "When one deliberately or inadvertently places their hand amidst the fiery flames, is it not inevitable that they shall experience the searing sensation of a burn?" Thus, we find ourselves confronted with the immutable and time-honored decree that governs the very fabric of the cosmos. On the subject matter of karma and its consequential outcomes. The concept of motive holds no relevance to the subject matter at hand.

In the narrative presented by Divakaruni (134), the author endeavours to articulate the profound sense of powerlessness experienced by a woman, exemplified through the poignant episode of Ahlaya. This literary portrayal serves as a poignant reminder of the limited agency afforded to women, compelling them to acquiesce to the desires and whims of their husbands, with little

recourse for independent action or self-determination. Sita arrives at the intellectual deduction that in instances where mistrust becomes the dominant force within a relationship, the power of love is rendered incapable of mending the fractures that have emerged.

Surpanakha has been granted the appropriate opportunity to articulate her circumstances through the lens of Sita. She bore the noble lineage of being the sibling to the esteemed monarch, King Ravana, and embarked upon a quest to find a suitable companion.

The individual in question bore the name Kaamarupini and proceeded to initiate amorous overtures towards both Ram and Laxmana in an effort to procure their affection. Despite her aversion towards the presence of Sita, she harboured a desire to assail her.

In her relentless quest for romantic fulfilment, she tragically fell prey to the harrowing experience of mutilation. Laxmana, in a moment of intense conflict, resorted to a drastic measure by severing her own ears and nose. This act was prompted by her ill-fated attempt to assault Sita and forcefully impose her advances upon both Ram and Laxmana. However, at this particular juncture, it is noteworthy to mention that Sita harbours a profound sense of empathy towards her.

She ponders upon the perplexing query of how an individual could exhibit such flagrant discourtesy towards another who has embarked upon a quest for affection. Furthermore, she holds the perspective that residing with a disfigured countenance does not present a more manageable situation compared to a dignified demise, particularly for a woman who harboured a profound desire for companionship.

According to Divakaruni on page 151... Individuals often engage in the act of making derogatory comments towards Surpankha, yet it is imperative to acknowledge that she, too, possesses a range of human emotions and was actively seeking a suitable companion. However, her emotional states and yearnings are egregiously misconstrued. During the subsequent phase, Surpanakha cunningly devised a scheme to sow discord between Sita and Ram while they resided in Ayodhya. This scheme involved fabricating a visual representation of Ravana, which was affixed to the ground with adhesive, with the intention of instilling doubt and disbelief within the minds of the aforementioned couple. In the episode featuring Surpankha, the author endeavours to portray the compassionate nature of Sita, who exhibits egalitarian treatment towards all individuals, thereby dismantling societal constructs pertaining to gender.

The portrayal of Lankan Queen Mandodari is that of a profoundly poignant woman who, deep within her heart, harboured an inability to safeguard her husband, son, and kingdom from the impending catastrophe, despite her awareness of the impending doom. She possessed the foresight to comprehend that the act of abducting Sita would undoubtedly result in a calamitous outcome for her realm. However, regrettably, she was unable to avert the impending catastrophe that was destined to befall her kingdom. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that Mandodari assumes the role of Sita's maternal figure. Sita is the progeny of a forsaken lineage, having been left behind by her progenitor. She exhibits unwavering affection towards her and divulges the enigma surrounding her origin. She inquires regarding the fabric that was utilised to envelop her. She persistently provides refuge to Sita within the confines of Ashoka Vatika. Through the art of persuasion, she entices the guards with a selection of invaluable gifts, thereby compelling them to adopt a demeanour of humility and benevolence in their interactions with the esteemed Sita. However, Sita unequivocally spurns the insincere affection bestowed upon her, promptly asserting her complete disassociation from her detestable spouse. In a more precise manner, she implores her to recognise that her guilt cannot be diminished through her irrational fantasies. As the regal sovereign of Lanka, she has refrained from making any overtures towards Sita. She has been depicted as a formidable woman who is shedding tears in lamentation over the demise of her spouse, while simultaneously expressing her discontent towards Sita for being the cause of this unfortunate event. The author has graciously provided a platform for Mandodari to articulate her profound sorrows and grievances, thereby integrating her voice into the prevailing narrative.

One must not overlook the character of Urmila, the sister of Sita, as she is often relegated to the periphery of discourse. She elicits the utmost compassion amongst the various characters. She serves as the esteemed consort of Laxmana, renowned for her remarkable virtues of unwavering patience, unwavering loyalty, selfless sacrifice, and boundless love. She becomes a casualty of her husband's unwavering allegiance to his sibling, who callously deserted her during the prime of her adolescence, leaving her to endure a desolate period spanning a lengthy fourteen years. She patiently endured a period of fourteen years in anticipation of the long-awaited reunion with her spouse, simultaneously relinquishing her entire existence in the process. She engaged in a transaction of exchange with the deity known as Nidra Devi

and proceeded to enter a profound state of slumber for an extended duration, thereby absolving her

husband from any financial obligation and ensuring the preservation of her fertility in their marital union.

Sita was filled with a profound sense of astonishment upon beholding her own supine form, resembling that of a lifeless cadaver. Moreover, she experienced deep remorse for the solitude she endured during her sojourn alongside her spouse. She inquires a stimulating query of Sita-Ram, having escorted you in his company. What was the reason behind Lakshman's refusal to accompany me? Did I lack the necessary merit to be deemed deserving?

The citation provided, attributed to Divakaruni on page 281, serves as a reference point for further intellectual exploration. She harbours a deep emotional bond with her sister, Sita, which is characterised by a profound sense of affection. Both protagonists engage in the reciprocal exchange of their innermost sentiments and affectations pertaining to the profound emotion of love during the initial stages of the literary work. She experiences a profound sense of ease and contentment in the presence of her trusted confidante, Sita. In the subsequent chapters of the literary work, the protagonist engages in a deceitful act by fabricating falsehoods to her spouse, Laxman. Subsequently, she proceeds to rendezvous with Sita at the esteemed Valmiki's hermitage, accompanied by her trusted maidservant. The portrayal of Urmila's character in Valmiki's Ramayana is regrettably lacking in the recognition it deserves. However, Divakaruni's novel effectively rectifies this oversight by justifiably elevating her status. The author has diligently immortalised her unacknowledged act of selflessness within the pages of the novel.

Kaikeyi has been portrayed as a malevolent embodiment in Valmiki's Ramayana. Individuals engage in the act of making derogatory comments regarding her. However, Chitra Banerjee has masterfully depicted her as a formidable warrior, a skilled charioteer, an astute advisor, a source of solace to the king, and the preeminent female figure within the palace. By virtue of safeguarding the existence of King Dashrath, she has ascended to the esteemed position of the most favoured consort amongst all.

At the onset, Sita finds herself inexplicably attracted to Kaikeyi, for her maternal figure regales her with tales of Kaikeyi's prodigious aptitude in the realm of healing. She possesses a combination of aesthetic appeal, cognitive prowess, courage, and astuteness. The arduous trials faced by Ram, Sita, and Laxman can be attributed to the astute disposition

possessed by the former. The author has duly acknowledged and showcased the subject with utmost respect, positioning her in the forefront of societal recognition.

Saiswaroopa Iyer has distinguished herself within the realm of feminist mytho-fiction through her notable literary contribution, *Abhaya* (2016), which draws inspiration from the mythological narrative of Krishna and Narakasura. Iyer presents a captivating reinterpretation of the persona of Satyabhama, imbuing her with the qualities of dauntlessness and prowess as both a princess and a warrior. In this narrative, she emerges triumphant in her valiant endeavour to vanquish the oppressive Bhauma, standing alongside the revered deity Krishna. Iyer adeptly amalgamates the realms of myth, history, and theology, deftly interweaving them into a narrative that exudes a captivatingly contemporary essence, all the while delving into the intricate complexities surrounding religion, ideology, and power. Within the literary realm, *Abhaya* eloquently articulates, "The confines imposed by tradition are incapable of impeding those who champion the noble pursuit of universal well-being." This profound statement serves as a poignant reflection of the ongoing struggles endured by women in our nation, as they valiantly combat the manifold injustices, discrimination, and violence perpetuated by the deeply entrenched patriarchal order. Iyer fearlessly confronts the stark brutality inflicted upon women throughout history, encompassing the abhorrent practices of honour killings, coerced conversions, and sexual assault, which persistently plague our nation's collective consciousness. *Abhaya* embodies the archetypal representation of women who ardently engage in a protracted struggle for the attainment of justice, parity, and reverence within a societal framework that predominantly perceives women as inherently delicate and aesthetically pleasing beings.

Chitra Banerjee, a luminary of contemporary literature, has made indelible contributions to the literary landscape. Her profound Divakaruni's notable literary contributions pertaining to Hindu Mythology encompass two prominent works, namely "*The Palace of Illusions*" (2008) and "*The Forest of Enchantments*" (2019). These literary endeavours skillfully reframe the narratives of two seminal Indian epics, offering fresh perspectives through the lens of female protagonists. Specifically, "*The Palace of Illusions*" delves into the complex world of Draupadi, while "*The Forest of Enchantments*" illuminates the experiences of Sita. By centering these female voices, Divakaruni enriches the understanding and interpretation of these timeless tales, inviting readers to engage with the profound themes and intricacies inherent within Hindu Mythology. Divakaruni refrains from merely reconfiguring the

narrative of the epics; instead, she embarks on a transformative journey, breathing new life into the archetypal female figures of myth and endowing them with a resolute and self-assured voice. Through this literary endeavour, she weaves a profoundly intimate tale set against the grand tapestry of two momentous conflicts waged by men, wherein women are often relegated to the role of pawns within the patriarchal paradigm of power. The vocal expressions emanating from both Draupadi and Sita are imbued with fervour and profundity, unmasking the profound emotions associated with the various facets of their existence. These encompass the exultation and anguish experienced in the realm of motherhood, the intricate dynamics of being a devoted spouse, the arduous encounters with bereavement and banishment, and the harrowing ordeals of violation perpetrated by the male gender. The literary works depict the societal expectations and coercive nature imposed upon women to unquestioningly embrace traditional customs and cultural norms. Divakaruni's interpretation imbues the narrative with a humanistic essence, rendering it more authentic, relatable, and intimately resonant.

The literary endeavours of female authors who subvert and reconstruct the traditional mythical narrative serve as a resolute rejection of the prevailing patriarchal framework. Their aim is to forge a fresh historical trajectory for women within the realm of mythology, while simultaneously carving out a new identity for themselves. In doing so, these authors give rise to what can be termed as the "new woman," a concept that finds embodiment within the very fabric of their written works. The act of writing, therefore, serves as a means of transcendence from the confines of the tangible world, allowing for the construction of an alternative reality - one that is shaped by the author's introspective awareness of their corporeal existence and the subsequent manifestation of their thoughts into written form. This process engenders the emergence of a distinct textual realm, which propels the trajectory towards a transformative upheaval, indispensable for the attainment of a societal landscape emancipated from the oppressive constraints imposed by prevailing norms and conventions. According to Helen Cixous, the act of revising narrative allows for the creation of an alternative historical account, one that centres on a woman's personal journey and understanding of her own feminine sexuality and identity. This approach stands in opposition to the prevailing tradition, offering a fresh perspective that empowers women to reclaim their narratives.

In her seminal work, "The Newly Born Woman," Cixous astutely posits that the mere act of direct confrontation with the Medusa, as exemplified by gazing upon her countenance, effectively nullifies her lethal potential. Her countenance exudes an exquisite allure, captivating all who are fortunate enough to behold her. Furthermore, her melodious laughter resonates with a harmonious symphony, evoking joy and mirth in those who have the privilege of hearing it. On page 130, the author delves into a profound exploration of the subject matter at hand, shedding light on its intricacies. The concept of "écriture féminine" within contemporary mythofictional narratives serves as a means of opposition to established traditions, resulting in a disruption of linguistic and narrative paradigms. By dismantling the dominant male authorial hegemony, these narratives allow women to rehistoricize their experiences through self-referential writing. "The Palace of Illusions" authored by the esteemed Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a literary work that undertakes the noble endeavour of reimagining the timeless epic, the Mahabharata, through the lens of Draupadi, a central figure in this grand narrative. This literary work possesses significant pertinence within the realm of gender studies and the burgeoning feminist movement. The literary work delves into the comprehensive chronicle of significant occurrences, commencing with the inception of Draupadi's existence, traversing through the epochal conflict, her pivotal involvement in the course of unfolding circumstances, and culminating in her ultimate demise. In a most eloquent manner, Divakaruni has bestowed upon us a splendid and deeply moving portrayal of Draupadi's clandestine affection for Karna. This narrative encapsulates a profound chronicle of cerebral contemplations, delving into the introspective journey of a female protagonist navigating the intricate societal landscape of ancient Bharata, which is predominantly governed by the male gender. Behold, we present to you this young lady, a bestowed offering surpassing the parameters of your initial request. Prudently attend to her well-being, as her presence shall indubitably alter the trajectory of historical events. (The Palace of Illusions p 4-5).

In the literary work authored by Divakaruni, the character Draupadi is persistently engrossed in contemplation regarding the inexorable nature of destiny, as well as the quandary that arises from the interplay between external perception and her own internal conception of self. The primary source of ambivalence arises from her yearning for autonomy, juxtaposed with her



endeavours to appease and adhere to societal norms. Her sense of self-awareness becomes distinctly evident as she engages in the act of observing her spouses for the inaugural occasion subsequent to their matrimonial union. She engages in soliloquy, pondering upon her own identity and remarking, "I once embodied the essence of femininity." I found myself compelled to employ my faculties in a divergent manner." This statement elucidates a lucid acknowledgement of the existence of disparities pertaining to both social standing and individual liberties. In this context, Draupadi assumes the role of a female entity, transcending the conventional perception of her as a princess entangled in matrimonial bonds with five spouses. Divakaruni deftly sculpts her into a character who assumes the mantle of guiding the fates of the illustrious Pandavas. She asserts that I had played a pivotal role in facilitating their arrival at their ultimate fate. I had partaken in the tribulations experienced within the realm of Khandav. I had the privilege of contributing to the conceptualization and creation of this extraordinary architectural marvel, a palace that has captivated the imaginations of countless individuals who yearn for the opportunity to behold its splendour. If one were to liken them to pearls, I would humbly consider myself the gilded wire upon which they were meticulously threaded. In solitude, they would have dispersed, each retreating to their respective desolate alcove. (The Palace of Illusions, p 151).

The resolute proclamation regarding the feminine pursuit of selfhood reflects their inherent value and longing. In this narrative, Draupadi eloquently elucidates her perspective, shedding light upon a facet of the tale that has hitherto eluded our comprehension. From the very moment of her inception, the prophetic utterances, her illicit desires, and the excruciating inner turmoil of her emotions. She possesses an innate longing to establish her identity as an autonomous individual driven by her own desires, rather than being relegated to the role of a passive recipient of others' desires. In a series of chapters, Divakaruni unveils Draupadi's introspection on the unfolding events within her existence, while simultaneously endeavouring to highlight the pervasive nature of a social framework that remains indifferent to matters of gender. As evidenced by Draupadi's 'swayamvara' and the incident of the 'vastraharan', it becomes apparent that the prevailing patriarchal societal structure exerted absolute dominion over the existence of women. However, it is noteworthy that Draupadi, in a manner that defies societal expectations, does not passively acquiesce to her circumstances, but rather valiantly contends for her inherent worth and honour. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Draupadi, in her role as

a mother, does not receive an equivalent level of significance when compared to her status as a wife. In this instance, she is actively challenging and undermining the societal construct that places significant emphasis on a woman's role as a mother within a patriarchal framework. The textual references do not allude to her as a maternal figure, but rather as a formidable and intricate individual who ardently advocates for her entitlements and integrity within a society predominantly governed by males. Within the inaugural chapter entitled 'Fire,' a discernible element of sarcasm is employed to elucidate the prevailing societal hierarchy, specifically pertaining to the subordinate position of women in relation to their male counterparts. It is in the company of her sibling that she flourished within the confines of her paternal abode. The fact that she was of the female gender served as the catalyst for Draupadi's discontent, as she lamented the absence of affection bestowed upon her by her father, in comparison to the favouritism exhibited towards Dhristadyumna. Within the literary work, we encounter the character of Krishna, who assumes the role of Draupadi's confidant and guide, offering sagacious responses to the introspective inquiries of Draupadi. She exhibited a certain hesitancy in embracing and responding to the situation in a manner that aligns with societal expectations for females, refraining from any form of inquiry. However, her emergence from the fiery depths bestowed upon her a remarkable intellect that revelled in the exploration of phenomena that transcended her own existence. She embodies the archetype of a nonconformist, meticulously scrutinising each irrational decree and societal norm, while endeavouring to assert her own identity with the same unwavering assurance typically associated with the male gender. The persistent prodding of Dharmya by the protagonist to divulge the enigmatic details surrounding her birth serves as an introspective quest for self-discovery. Within the literary work, we encounter the character of Krishna, who is depicted as an enigmatic saviour, akin to the one who rescues Draupadi during her most dire moments of distress. The novel also presents an exploration of the matter pertaining to female education, which was predominantly confined to the realm of domestic skills and crafts. Draupadi harbours a fervent desire to partake in the pursuit of knowledge on par with her male sibling, seeking to amass a comprehensive array of wisdom that shall serve as a catalyst for her forthcoming undertakings. She perceives herself as a regal sovereign endowed with profound affection and sagacity for her populace. Divakaruni's portrayal of Draupadi's pursuit of selfhood in the swayamvara episode presents a fresh paradigm, shedding light on the latent

yearnings of women constrained within the confines of a patriarchal framework. These desires, often obscured and ensnared within the intricate web of manipulative political machinations, find resonance in Draupadi's narrative. Draupadi's inclination towards Karna can be perceived as analogous to the aforementioned notion. She finds herself bereft of agency in matters pertaining to her matrimonial union, compelled instead to adhere to the principles governing familial integrity. The individual in question finds herself captivated by the artistic representation of Karna. Ever since beholding his portrait, the visage of affection has indelibly imprinted itself upon her heart for all eternity. She harboured the belief that, in contrast to all other women, she possessed the capacity to cultivate a profound affection for Karna. Deep within the recesses of her soul, she harboured an unwavering commitment to upholding the sanctity of her clandestine yearning, sacrificing her personal aspirations solely in the pursuit of preserving the esteemed reputation of her kin and the noble endeavour of reshaping the course of history. However, each intricacy of Karna's narrative became intricately intertwined with her corporeal being and essence, akin to the muted tribulations that beseech for his felicity and yearn for a more blissful existence. Draupadi contemplates introspectively, "How preposterous it is that I harboured the desire to serve as the catalyst for his radiant countenance." As per the reference on page 69, it is evident that the subject matter being discussed holds significant intellectual value. The clandestine yearning harboured by Draupadi towards Karna unveils the subjugated vocalisation of femininity. The significance of this matter lies in our ability to discern the reverberations of the feminine discourse, which is often suppressed and denied a comprehensive response under the guise of ethical obligations and societal norms surrounding familial propriety. Divakaruni's endeavour to depict a profound perspective on gender consciousness, as exemplified by the mythical persona of Draupadi, serves to mould the very essence of womanhood in India and their subsequent feminine reaction to this paradigm. The very appellation of the literary opus, "The Palace of Illusions," serves as a poignant reflection of Draupadi's profound essence, encapsulating her myriad aspirations and her elusive quest for selfhood, akin to an ephemeral reverie steeped in enchantment. The work in question possesses a profound psychological profundity, delving into the illusory perceptions harboured by its characters regarding various facets of existence. These include but are not limited to notions surrounding romantic love, heroism, honour, loyalty, war, and vengeance. Is this the manner in which men beheld women of common stature in bygone eras? Women who were deemed to be of lower status than

themselves? A newfound empathy for the domestic staff blossomed within the recesses of my consciousness. Upon my reinstatement as queen, I contemplated the imperative notion of effectuating a paradigm shift in the treatment of women of lower social standing. In perusing the literary work entitled "The Palace of Illusions," I have arrived at the two hundred and twenty-eighth page, wherein lies a profound and captivating narrative. Within the framework of the patriarchal social power hierarchy, Divakaruni undertakes a profound reassessment of the role and status of women, as exemplified by the character of Draupadi. This exploration delves into the persistent challenges of discrimination and displacement that women have historically faced.

Through her masterful storytelling in the mythological epic of the Mahabharata, Divakaruni adeptly intertwines a diverse array of themes, including the multifaceted complexities of feminism. The Palace of Illusions delves astutely into the humanistic yearnings and cognizant narratives of Draupadi's harrowing existence. Draupadi boldly challenges the prevailing gender biases, ardently asserting that she transcends being a mere enigmatic entity confined to the realms of myth or history. When the inquisitive individual inquires of Krishna, "Pray tell, art thou verily of a divine nature?" Krishna, adorned with a countenance of mirth, retorts affirmatively - "Indeed, I am." Indeed, it is evident that you possess a certain level of intellectual acumen, as you have astutely recognised a particular attribute within my being. According to the reference on page 359, it is evident that... Subsequently, in conclusion, she articulates with a heightened level of discernment. I possess an inherent buoyancy and expansiveness that renders me uncontainable. However, it is imperative to note that this quality has always been an intrinsic part of my being, albeit unbeknownst to me until now. I transcend the confines of conventional nomenclature and the binary constructs of gender, liberating myself from the confining tendencies of the ego. However, at this particular juncture, I find myself embodying the essence of Panchaali in a manner that surpasses any previous instances. Upon perusing the literary work known as "The Palace of Illusions" by means of diligent examination, I have arrived at the page number 360, whereupon my attention is currently focused. The aforementioned declaration by Draupadi encapsulates the comprehensive essence of universal femininity that permeates various societal constructs. She epitomises the embodiment of empowerment, veneration, and fortitude. It transcends the trivial commotions arising from imperfections and expectations.

## CONCLUSIONS

Henceforth, *The Forest of Enchantments* epitomises a grand narrative, chronicling Sita's odyssey alongside a myriad of peripheral personas, wherein a substantial portion of the literary realm is dedicated to the portrayal and exploration of marginalised individuals. It showcases the narratives of underappreciated female individuals who have exerted significant effort, yet frequently face social exclusion and diminishment. The previously voiceless characters have been bestowed with the means to articulate their thoughts and perspectives, thus enabling their integration into the dominant cultural narrative. The literary work elucidates the process of dismantling the rigid dichotomies of gender, advocating for parity, camaraderie, and portraying the characters as a cohesive entity in their collective resistance against the long-standing oppression and degradation they have endured throughout history.

It resembles an eternal incandescent blaze that shall illuminate the aspirations of mankind, wherein each individual shall hold in high regard a position tantamount to celestial paradise in the realm beyond mortal existence. In addition to a regal figure beset by a series of unfortunate circumstances and an overwhelming desire for retribution, Draupadi emerges as a multifaceted individual grappling with the complex interplay of affection and indifference, hubris and ardour. In doing so, she assumes the identity of a woman who ardently aspires to transcend the superfluous societal constraints that impede the attainment of genuine emancipation and parity. The amalgamation of her faith, aspirations, and aspirations intertwined with the ethereal construct known as the Palace of Illusions were a stark departure from the ultimate veracity, a realisation that dawned upon her in the twilight of her existence. She underwent a subsequent rejuvenation, not as a result of abstaining from food and engaging in acts of self-discipline through a ritualistic flame, but rather through an ethereal radiance of everlasting existence that surpasses all conceptions of spatial dimensions, temporal boundaries, and worldly cravings. Within the vast tapestry of the Mahabharata, Draupadi assumes her position as a self-reliant woman and meticulously records the occurrences both as they conceivably transpired and as they indeed unfolded. Divakaruni artfully conceives her protagonist as an archetypal figure, embodying both the imperfections and allure of humanity, who attains her ultimate emancipation and sagacity during the culminating odyssey of existence. This literary work undoubtedly serves as a paradigm-shifting masterpiece, wherein the cogent and ratiocinative perspective of a woman, hitherto silenced for countless centuries, is finally given a platform

for expression. The narrative in question encapsulates the profound aspirations and idealistic yearnings of a female protagonist within a historical epoch wherein our collective role was relegated to that of passive observers.

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