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**A Study of Female Characters in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni****<sup>1</sup>Kasthuri J**

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**Abstract**

A beautiful Epic Ramayana is retelling from Sita's point of view in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). The least well-known mythological women who were distorted in the original story and not even given the heft they deserved in the primary focus of the text. Through Divakaruni, these women have taken center stage and been given the opportunity to share their own narratives, which are misinterpreted and misrepresented in our historical narrative. The goal of this study is to examine the consciousness and empowering the female characters in the text: Sita, Urmila, Kaushalya, Surpankha, and Mandodari. The present research aims to discover the trauma, hardship, and internal conflicts of the female characters that experienced a great deal of sorrow and misery in their lives due to the male's dominating nature. Even while Sita serves as the story's narrator, each of these female characters has been given an equal opportunity to share their experiences, including the psychological distress and hardships they have endured throughout their lives. Examining these women's psychological struggles in a male-dominated culture, as well as their perceptions of life and self-worth, is the main objective of this study. Throughout the text, Sita has a lot of dreams that are connected to her life and the events that will happen in the future. It is evident from Sita's tremendous concern for the hardships and tribulations for other women throughout the story as only women can truly understand their pain.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, self-esteem, margins, psychological turmoil, male-dominated**Introduction**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a well-known Indian-American poet and writer who was born on July 29, 1956. She worked as a writer in three different genres: short stories, novels, and poetry. The majority of Divakaruni's works are set in India and the US. She is Indian and has been greatly impacted by Indian mythology, especially Indian epics. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Though it cannot demonstrate Lord Ram's appearance or the triumph of virtue over evil, *The Forest of Enchantments* tells Sita's untold narrative, which we learn from her point of view because she is the story's narrator. In our culture, Sita is portrayed as a calm, obedient, selfless, and loyal young lady. These traits are deeply

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ingrained in people's ideologies because they believe that these are the exact qualities that make a woman ideal. Through her portrayals of powerful, sympathetic, and inspirational women, Divakaruni consistently challenges people's preconceived notions and ideas about women. This research makes an effort to explain the female characters' consciousness as well as their development, gain knowledge and break free from patriarchal bonds. The paper is to expository the nature the female Characters in *The Forest Enchantment*.

In her work, Divakaruni has changed the perception of Sita from one of a fragile, quiet, and nearly submissive woman to one of a rebellious, brave woman who bravely faces the most dreadful circumstances. As she declares, "As I send the Forest of Enchantments out into the world, I ask for the benediction of Sita, daughter, sister, warrior, mother and a role model for women all over the world," Divakaruni has positioned Sita as a female role model.

Despite being written from Sita's point of view, every woman in the story gets an equal opportunity to express her inner struggles and pains. Urmila, Sita's younger sister, never received the kind of love she so desperately desired from her husband Lakshman. Her husband's choice to accompany his brother into exile by abandoning her in the palace broke her heart, and she wished for death. Ahalya's thoughts are wisely expressed in the text as she was chastised by her husband for the offense she had unintentionally committed. Her husband's terrible deed shocked her from the inside out, had a profound effect on her psychology, and left her feeling hopeless. She planned to never again express her disapproval with words. Every woman in the text experienced adversity that fundamentally altered who they were.

As a queen, Sita endured a lot of hardships, but she also showed a great deal of concern for other women and an understanding of their mental health, whether it was for her mother-in-law Kaushalya, who was abandoned by her husband, or for Mandodari, Ravan's wife, who needed to cope up with her husband's easy falling for other women. All of these women, including Sita, suffered enough from their partners and families to be considered victims in a culture controlled by men. These women's sufferings and traumatic experiences helped them realize who they truly were and where they were in their lives, which allowed them to break free from the constraints of patriarchy.

### **Female Characters in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

#### **Sita**

Sita is portrayed in the book *The Forest of Enchantments* as pragmatic, smart, and intelligent. The narrative begins when Sita inquires about her role in Valmiki's Ramayana, stating, "My sufferings and agonies that I experienced during the period of banishment are not mentioned anywhere in this masterpiece." In response, Valmiki suggests that Sita compose her own story which she alone is aware of her circumstances. She then begins her narrative by describing her enigmatic birth. Although she was the oldest and most beloved daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina, she was not their biological daughter because she was discovered in a field in Mithila wearing strange clothing. She grew up in Mithila with her devoted family, was skilled in martial arts, and knew how to use plants and herbs to

treat illnesses. After he bowed Shiva's bow in the hall, she wedded Ram, whom she had fallen in love with at first sight. Being disliked by her husband, King Dasharath, Sita felt the suffering of her mother-in-law, Kaushalya. She quickly became relaxed with everyone after managing herself with her in-laws. She aspired to be a good queen for her people, especially women, as the bride of Ram, the oldest brother and future ruler of Ayodhya. However, all of her dreams were dashed in an instant when Kaikeyi insisted on Ram being exiled from Ayodhya for the fourteenth year. Even yet, she refused to accept the circumstances and consciously accepted her exile in order to travel with her husband to the wilderness. She bravely assumed responsibility for accompanying her lord to the forest and spoke up to dispel gender stereotypes. "I apologize," I said quite politely. I will not be able to accomplish it. You see, I'm accompanying you to the forest. He furrowed his brows. "What is this, Folly?" There is no way you could accompany me. You're a female. It's too risky. I will not permit it. I wanted to clarify that, contrary to popular belief, not all women are weak and defenseless. You never know, I might be able to help you (111).

Sita enjoyed spending time with her spouse, whom she yearned for, throughout her woodland trek. However, she couldn't stop thinking about her devoted sister Urmila, who was abandoned in the Ayodhya castle. Later, when their years of exile were coming to an end, she was horribly kidnapped by the Lankan demon king Ravana. Numerous guards and demons were present to keep an eye on her when she was dumped beneath an Ashoka tree. She bravely acquired the strength to resist giving in to Ravan's demands while being imprisoned. She endured the most painful anguish of her life when Ram finally saved her after countless obstacles. Her husband had told her to leave the palace since she had spent so much time living in another man's castle and had refused to accept her. Distressed, she made the decision to demonstrate her chastity by enduring a fire ordeal and calling upon the god of fire, Agni, to attest to her faithfulness and virginity. Ram accepted her when she demonstrated her innocence, and when they arrived in Ayodhya, they were overcome by the enthusiastic reception they received as the city's king and queen. Ram and his wife Sita were crowned and seated on the throne. However, as rumors began to circulate about her impending pregnancy in Ayodhya, Sita had no idea that her days of suffering were about to return. Ram gave Lakshman the order to expel Sita from Ayodhya and transport her to the Ashram of Sage Valmiki without telling her because he was afraid of his reputation. Her mental health suffered greatly as a result of her love abandoning her without telling her, but she accepted this as her lord's command. Sita stayed there and gave birth to her children since she was so powerful. Once more, the day arrived when Ram summoned her to the palace, but she was heartbroken to learn of the requirements to become a queen. She was once more instructed to demonstrate her virginity in front of the gathering, but this time she turned down the opportunity to do so and made the momentous choice to enter the earth. After enduring a great deal of pain and suffering throughout her life, her sacrifice went unappreciated and she was often challenged to demonstrate her chastity. At this point, Sita made the decision to save her further humiliation.

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Despite her suffering, she felt compelled to preserve her dignity by refusing to prove her innocence in order to appease a select few. "O King of Ayodhya!" she said, reminding Ram of his duty to look after her. You've always prioritized your duty as king over your role as spouse, which is why I address you in this manner. Since I was a resident of Ayodhya as well, I ask you this in this court that was established to administer justice to all citizens: Did you behave justly when you sent me into the forest, knowing that I was innocent of the rumors that gossipers were spreading? (356)

Women are expected to be sensitive and kind, yet Sita's portrayal in the book does not fit with this expectation. She is a powerful woman who serves as an inspiration to other women. The most important lesson Sita imparted to women worldwide was to never sacrifice your dignity for the benefit of others, even your family, and to stand up for yourself when necessary. "Because this is one of those times when a woman has to say, No more!" she remarked. (357).

### **Urmila**

The least well-known female character is Urmila, who endured a lot of hardships and was constantly a victim of fate. She has made scope in the book to express her emotions and pains. Sita's youngest and most affectionate sister was Urmila. She loved to live like a girl and had an inquisitive spirit. She lived contentedly at her father's home in Mithila with her sister Sita. She had a unique link with her sister and was very connected to her. She was married to Lakshman, and like many new brides, she had a variety of goals and expectations as she moved into her new house.

But when she saw how devoted her husband was to his brother and to his royal responsibilities, all of her wishes dispersed. She occasionally confided in her sister Sita about her hardships. She yearned for her husband's affection, but he was unable to provide it. Although she was able to handle herself, she was troubled by her mother-in-law's excessive possession of her son Lakshman. When her husband abandoned her on his voyage to banishment with Ram, she was devastated and it was the most difficult moment for her to survive. She didn't even have her sister to comfort her at this difficult time. She secluded herself and wished for death when they left Ayodhya. When Urmila's husband abandoned her, Sita's heart ached and she sensed her sister's anguish. Urmila endured the suffering and did her part as a devoted wife throughout that difficult period.

### **Kaushalya**

Sita's mother-in-law was Kaushalya, the eldest queen of King Dasharath. Despite her meek and courteous disposition, her husband consistently disregarded her because of his love for another queen. Because of his husband's lack of interest in her, she suffered heartbreaks and agonies all of her life. She was a little uncomfortable since the presents she gave Sita weren't very unique or elegant. However, Sita reassured her that the blessings of the elders are brought about by the gifts that are passed down through the generations. Sita's sincere emotions drew her over. After learning from Ram about Kaushalya's suffering to win her

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husband's affection but never receiving it, Sita made the decision to improve and enlighten her life.

Kaushalya attempted to recover her lost confidence and escape her traumatic position with Sita's protection. But when she learned that Kaikeyi had decided to send Ram into exile, her days of bliss came to an end. When she learned that her daughter-in-law was also traveling with Ram, her heart fell apart. The one person who understood her suffering and showed her love and support was Sita, and now she is abandoning her. Kaushalya yearned for her husband's affection throughout her life but was never able to get it. Throughout her life, she endured hardships, but she never compromised her dignity or her marriage. She did a fantastic job fulfilling all of her responsibilities to her family. Her wonderful relationship with Sita, who not only made her happy but also gave her life a greater purpose, is praiseworthy.

### **Surpankha**

Ravan's sister Surpankha is portrayed as the antagonist and is said to be the primary reason behind Ram and Ravan's conflict. Although Surpankha was viewed as the story's antagonist and judged on humanitarian grounds, she is portrayed in the text as a young woman who aspires to find love. Kaamarupini was a stunning girl with curly hair who was wearing a pink saree that was snug around her contours. She welcomed Ram and identified herself as a member of the Asura (rakshasas) clan. "She looked at my husband, her eyes full of disbelief that someone could do such a thing to her when all she'd offered him was love," she said, after being startled by the mutilation. She then disappeared in a whirl of crimson mist while yelling her anguish and indignation (149). Even though she desired a married man, Sita felt that the brothers' mutilation of Surpankha was wrong and that her severe punishment was unfair. She argues on Surpankha's behalf that, despite being a rakshasa, she isn't worthy of this sort of mutilation.

### **Mandodari**

One of the least well-known female characters, Mandodari Ravan's wife, was present when Lankapuri fell, her husband Ravan died, and her son Angad was born. She attempted to save her family, but Ravan's passion and Sita's kidnapping made it impossible. She repeatedly attempted to preserve her family and begged Ravana to send Sita back since she would destroy our Lanka. "Send this witch, this bad-luck creature, back before she ruins us all," she asked. I never objected when you brought other ladies to Lanka, please, the husband. But I'm pleading with you this time. She knelt before him, crying" (179). Despite being from a Rakshasi family, she had a kind heart. She was Ravan's loyal and affectionate wife and the virtuous queen of Lanka. She sought to persuade Sita to accept Ravana, and she did everything she could to fulfill her responsibilities. Mandodari begged Ravana to leave Sita because she knew that his obsession with her would undoubtedly control Lanka's future. Later, wearing strange clothing, Mandodari recognized Sita as her daughter, whom she had abandoned years before. Despite not accepting her as her mother, Sita appreciated her for treating her well and providing refuge for Sita in the Ashoka garden. Sita, the daughter of

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Ravana's wrath, was repeatedly spared by Mandodari. Her heart and spirit remained pure despite being a rakshasi, yet she was unable to prevent her family from being destroyed.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we can state that these mythological women are presented in a unique way that deviates from traditional ideas and beliefs about women. The research of female characters is affluent and higher up the social structure. The queens and princesses of the royal family were not your typical women. Despite this, the power-gender hierarchy oppressed and enslaved them, and their sacrifices went unacknowledged. Even their feelings have been eliminated and given insufficient value in our historical narratives, which were also penned by patriarchal society. They are portrayed by Divakaruni as powerful women who, in spite of their numerous difficulties and sorrows, refused to give in to their circumstances and ultimately freed themselves from the bonds of male chauvinism. The emotions of these ladies are the main emphasis of this book rather than the man. It is clear from examining Sita's and the other women's psyches that they are first and foremost their own, and they will never compromise their dignity in satisfy others, even if those people of their loved ones.

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