
Chitra Divakaruni's Daughters of the Earth (Goddess Sita) and the Empire (Rani Jindan Kaur): Reset and Reloaded.

Ms Smita MenonResearch Scholar, English Department, SNTD, Mumbai
C313, Dheeraj Kirti, Evershine Nagar, Link Road, Malad (west), Mumbai

Article Received: 02/03/2026**Article Accepted:** 05/04/2026**Published Online:** 07/04/2026**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.04.27

Abstract

The time tested and popular art of storytelling has been a fundamental human skill to connect and engage generations together. It binds people by blending history, mythology, fables, fairy tales where the fantastic and the real evoke emotions, challenge perceptions and inspire societies. This paper seeks to explore the retelling and re-narration of stories when characters are forgotten or so vulnerable that their voices unheard and muted. The novels selected for this study are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, '*The Forest of Enchantments*' (2019) and '*The Last Queen*' (2021). '*The Forest of Enchantments*' re-imagines Ramayana through Sita's perspective and '*The Last Queen*' is a retelling of the magnificent history of the Sikh empire through the eyes of a fearless woman who played a major part in many of its events. The writer gives a fresh perspective on gender roles in mythology and history and seeks to highlight the voices of women long over shadowed in the predominant narrative. The reader witnesses Jindal and Sita navigating through love, exile, captivity, motherhood and separation. They make a transformation from being a sheltered women to fierce women who dare to stand against the norms prescribed to them. The retelling of their stories is an experience of courage, resilience and resistance. The narrations transform them from traditional passive figures to active courageous and complex characters. They are presented as today's contemporary women who take control of the narrative by struggling against societal norms.

Key words: Mythology, History, story- telling, retelling, gender roles**Introduction:**

A well woven narrative lingers in a reader's mind filling it with intense emotions- one that stays long after the story ends. It links a mother to a child, a teacher to a student, a

brand to a consumer and a nation to its past. Storytelling derives from the human impulse to connect, draw, scratch, click and record man's journey and lessons learned on this planet. It blends history with mythology, fables, nature tales, fairy tales, whisking the fantastic with the real. It evokes emotions, challenges perceptions and inspires a nation to rise while providing societal values, a sense of identity and a cultural perspective that aides cultural cohesion.

History and Mythology collaborate in defining the culture of a land and her people. They are a treasure trove of stories and narratives on which is build the dignity, values and ethics of a nation. Ancient cultures and nations take pride in the contribution their narratives make in chronicling the history of humankind, and to their own identity, culture and perspective to world events. Margret Atwood opines the relevance of myths in any given society, "Myths are universal and timeless stories that reflect and shape our lives- they explore our desires, fears and moral dilemmas." (2005) It is then, but natural that these domains remain contentious and open to interpretations and reinterpretations with passage of time. Added to these, are narratives, events and characters who have slipped through to the cracks of time, because their vulnerable positions did not give them the opportunity to reveal their stories/narratives and experiences.

This paper explores the narratives of women (mythical and real) who were denied opportunity and remained in the margins unable to narrate their versions of the events. This paper seeks to understand their battles of resilience and courage and resolve to restore their stories and experiences and their navigation paths as they stride the most difficult path of their lives. The texts selected are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's (CBD) '*The Forests of Enchantments*' (2019) and '*The Last Queen*' (2021). The characters in focus are 'Sita' from '*The Forests of Enchantments*' and Rani Jindan Kaur from '*The Last Queen*'.

Both are stories of strength, courage, resilience and resistance. The author clarifies her need to write these stories, "As a young woman I wasn't particularly fond of Sita... But inspite of, my teenage dismissal of her, I couldn't forget Sita. There was something mysterious and slippery about her which I couldn't quite grasp but which fascinated me. What was it exactly". She adds:

"I thought I heard her whisper. Tell my story again. Tell it in a different way. Tell it your way. For the great and timeless stories of a culture must be recreated over and over so that they may remain relevant to the times." (Indian Express, November 4, 2018)

Retelling stories from a perspective never heard before or from supporting/marginal characters, gives us a better grasp of the socio-political climate of those times, cultural influences and key figures involved in the understanding of how the event is perceived through history. The voices of the ignored and the marginalized add depth and nuance towards understanding of history. Characters are central to any story, hence while writing fiction, or retelling historical events writers insist on developing characters and narratives which are relatable and have the ability to be seen as protagonist or antagonist in a given conflict. Experiences of multiple individuals from a time gone by gives us a more layered narrative and often these narratives play crucial roles in embodying universal themes of resilience, courage and in doing so make stories and events more compelling. The past has much to teach us and by retelling and breathing life into new voices and marginalized people the writer contributes to a richer understanding of our culture and history.

In their article, ‘A Study on the liberation of selected Female Characters In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s, “*The Mistress of Spices*”’ Dr. M.Kavitha and Dr. J Karthika elucidate the writer’s perfection in style and influence on her readers:

“Divakaruni's writings undoubtedly have an impact on every age. In order for change to occur, she uses literature as a tool. She makes an effort to enhance the complexity of women's sensibility. She aspires to break down barriers between individuals from various communities, age groups, and worldviews through her writing. Her writings have a strong female effect on the characters. Her popularity is attributed to her ability to accurately portray the restless mindset of Indian women residing in a sophisticated culture. We can see that Divakaruni is reshaping her reader's mindset and forging a distinctive identity. She concentrates on presenting the related subjects. The hardships that every woman faced are described for the readers, along with how they eventually overcame them to live happy, contented lives of their own. The paper depicts the emotions and struggles that women in society experience. Divakaruni uses these characters to highlight the negative effects of isolation. She depicts the psychological and social transformation, and in the end, they discover their own identities.” (2023)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “*The Forest of Enchantments*” is a story unveiled from Sita’s point of view and is referred to as- “*Sitayan.*” *Sitayan*, is not confined to Sita alone, but also a medium for the other marginalised female characters from the *Ramayana* to make themselves heard. The book describes Sita’s struggles and how she learned to cope with them. In most versions of the *Ramayana*, the focus is on extolling Ram as he faces one predicament after another, they fail to empathise with the horrors Sita endured. In the popular depiction—Sita is portrayed in relation to Rama and any retelling invites new versions and perspectives making it inclusive and is an effort to uncover voices long silenced.

There is also a resurgence to the narratives of Ahalya, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Mandodari and Surpanakha: “Write our story too, for always we have been pushed into corners trivialized, misunderstood, blamed forgotten or maligned and used as cautionary tales.” (*The Forests..4*) By recasting the supporting women characters not in a one -dimensional framework the writer has portrayed women as being driven by complex motivations, ambitions, desires and pain. The narratives are interconnected and one strongly feels the importance of one woman over the life of other woman as the novel demonstrates a shared burden of patriarchal expectations and its consequences: “Meeting Ahalya I realized how starved I was for female companionship.” (*The forests..,133*)

CBD reimagines the Ramayana through Sita’s perspective. She transforms her from a traditionally passive figure to an active participant- courageous and complex figure. She takes control of the narrative by struggling against the patriarchal norms, presenting her as today’s contemporary women. The author gives her depth and autonomy offering a fresh perspective on gender roles in mythology and history and seek to highlight the voices of women long overshadowed by history. They move beyond devotion and endurance to empowered individuals in their own right navigating the difficulties of their lives. Sita is presented as a living breathing women, dealing with love, duty and self -respect and not merely a passive victim around whom wars were fought. She takes up Ahalya’s cause and expects her husband to question sage Gautam. Though Ram politely refuses to judge the sage and consoles her that he had done the needful, she struggles with a sense of injustice, “But he never gave her a chance to tell her own story before he punished her.” (135)

Divakaruni’s Sita is not afraid to give her opinion even when she disagrees with her husband or when she voices her dissent against the expected norms of the society. She intervenes when after the war, it is decided to execute the *rakshasis* who guarded her. This is revealed in the conversation she has with Vibheeshan and Lord Ram:

“Lord Ram”, Vibheeshan asked, “what should we do with the rakshasa who guarded Lady Sita? Your monkey soldiers want to slaughter them for the pain they caused. They must indeed be punished ram started but I interrupted quickly. They too were only doing their duty- no different from Ravana’s armies on the battlefield. There was nothing personal in their mistreatment of me. Please pardon them Lord especially Trijata who often sheltered me from harm. For the rest of my stay in Lanka I would like her to be my attendant.” (*The Forests..250*) She later added, “Revenge doesn’t help anyone” (*The Forests..251*)

Her approach to scenarios and events seem more logical and rational. In hindsight she feels they could have handled the Surpanakha episode more maturely so that the war

could have been averted: “I couldn’t shake off the thought that if my husband and brother-in law had been kinder and more forgiving off her innocent overtures on that day - or if I ‘d protested more quickly and loudly and stop them from injuring her- all the tragedies that followed could have been everted” (*The Forests..252*)

On her return to Ayodhya after fourteen years in exile, she takes up responsibility of a Queen shouldering the duties and assisting her husband in his royal duties; “His passion infected me. Suddenly, I was ready to return and be his helpmate and queen. It was time to put my house in order. To make my own mark on Ayodhya. Change a few things.” (*The Forests..253*)

Sita’s view of how a kingdom should be, captures the idea of the present- day world – of inclusiveness, tolerance and acceptance of differences. This is visible as she prepares the contingent to bring Lord Ram and Sita to Ayodhya:

“Let the citizens of Ayodhya, whose minds are filled with prejudices- as were ours when we lived within the tight boundaries of what we believe to be the sole civilized world- see beings of other races.’ I said. “Let them realize that these beings, though different, aren’t necessarily even or stupid or dangerous. That many are noble and admirable. Let there be goodwill between all creatures in Ram Rajya. Then at least our fourteen years of suffering will have wrought some good.” (*The Forests..257*)

The Last Queen is a retelling of the magnificent history of the Sikh empire through the eyes of a fearless women who played a major part in many of its events. The book follows the life of Jindan Kaur the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and her transformation from a sheltered girl to a fierce Queen who dares to stand against the British Empire. Following the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, she contemplates becoming ‘Sati’ to immortalize herself but a voice stops her, “Surely I have taught you better than to run away from problems exclamatory mark if it’s fame you crave instead of killing yourself why not live in a way that people will remember” (*The Last..169*) Soon she becomes regent when her son Dalip barely six years old unexpectedly inherits the throne. She then transforms herself from being a pampered queen to a warrior ruler determined to protect her son’s interests and her people from the encroaching British Empire. The novel is divided into 4 sections: Girl, Bride, Queen and Rebel. We witness her journey from being the daughter of a royal canal keeper to her becoming a queen and a warrior fighting to protect her kingdom from British invasion. It is historical fiction, focusing on a lesser known but incredible figure.

After Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s death, she defies tradition and steps out of the zenana, casting aside the veil and conducting state business in public. Addressing her Khalsa troops

herself, she inspires her men in two wars against the 'firangs'. She feels free to articulate her need for a companion and the need to be loved, even at the risk of being ostracised. She voices her thoughts freely when she confides in her brother and her trusted aide:

“I value your love and loyalty more than my pride so I will speak my mind. I have been a widow since I was twenty- one. I found love again but I cannot marry Lal. If I do, I must give up being regent I cannot abandon delete like that. But should I be sentenced to loneliness just because I wish to protect my son? Many of the nobles have several wives- and mistresses too their liaisons are accepted. Am I a sinner just because I am a woman?” (*The Last..242*) The consequence of unburdening her mind and of her relationship with Lal Singh result in the army losing faith in her ability to lead and the Britishers naming her “Messalina of Punjab” (263) Lal Singh offers her marriage but her refusal results in his betraying her. He abandons the army mid -way during the war and absconds. Rani Jindan stays with her army, but it’s too late.

Even after the Khalsa armies are defeated, the Britishers feared her ability to amass people together and staging an uprising. They denied her of everything she had, including her son. She was imprisoned and exiled. But that did not crush her indomitable will. Rani Jindan rose from being a commoner to the last reigning queen of India Sikh compare horse is a 19th century Punjab a world of opulence, betrayal, rebellion and an empire. Chitra Divakaruni does not just chronicle Jindan’s story, but breathes life and passion into her.

Both Sita and Jindan marry men who write the destinies of their kingdom, on whom depend the prosperity and security of the people and the land. As Jindan realises early in her marriage, “This is the life of a queen. You will always be second to Punjab. Get used to it.” (*The Last...87*). Sita too is made aware of Ram’s priorities when she says, “Filial duty was important to Ram. Good. But what of his duty towards me.” (*The Forest..35*)

The narratives reveal the transformation of these two women characters as they experience and grow in life. The experience societal norm, ideologies and search for their identity and remain transformed in their struggles for survival in a world where rules and norms are set for them. These female characters are not rebellious by nature but the circumstances they face and live through, and the problems that they solve, lead them to question to some of the existing norms in order to overcome the challenge that they face in life. This strength of questioning and living life on their own terms and conditions may have resulted in their developing new qualities of self -dependence and diverse perspectives and understanding themselves and the world they live in. The protagonists Sita and Jindan show courage to abandon their ideal lives in pursuit of greater good. They acknowledge that the

world around them is not perfect, make an attempt to stabilize things and walk away after their work is done.

Though their stories reverberate in different timelines, one cannot miss the similarities in their trajectories. Both Sita and Jindan marry into power and opulence, but lose it to be exiled and banished from their homes. While Sita chooses to follow Ram into the forest for fourteen years, Jindan's is a lone journey of imprisonment, escape and exile till her son who is taken to London and brought up by a British family wishes to meet her. She travels to London to meet her son who is then a grown man and is 'British' in his lifestyle and thoughts. The last stage of her life is spent in bringing him back and reconnecting him to his forgotten history, roots and religion and making him aware of what his father sacrificed his life for: "I realize now. This has been a longing deep in his heart: to have a home of his own, a piece of land with boundaries of which he is truly the king." (*The Last..339*)

Sita and Jindan are disappointed with the world around them which fails to acknowledge their suffering, effort and their silent contribution to the destinies of their land and people. Sita witnesses Ram's inability to protect her as she is forced to prove her purity to satisfy the demands of the society. Her unwavering love is repeatedly tested by the societal demands placed upon her as a woman and queen. The novel builds tension through key moments where Ram's kingly duty (rajdharm) clashes with his personal love (premdharma): first, with his famous insistence on the Agni Pariksha (trial by fire), and later, with her second, silent banishment to the forest based on the gossip of a single subject. Even after going through the ordeal of proving her innocence and purity, once she is abandoned into the forest when pregnant. Her sons Luv and Kush on meeting Ram conspire to sing the songs of their mother's days in exile. She is elated and hopes to meet her Lord, but his words cut through her heart:

"I would like you to come back to Ayodhya and live with us so that we can be a complete family... but there is one thing you must do first- you must go through a test by fire here in the court room, so that the sages and attending kings and ministers of the court can witness the fire-God vouching for your innocence and purity. In this way, the citizens of Ayodhya will be satisfied for good." (*The Forest..355*)

Her eventual choice to remain in exile rather than return to a husband who prioritizes public opinion over her dignity represents her final, transformative act of self-assertion, replacing the ideal of the "perfect wife" with that of a woman who demands self-respect: "I accept your priorities, and I understand why they are so important to you. But I don't agree with you that the private life must be sacrificed for the public one. And that is the final advice

that I leave for my children: my dearest boys, balance duty with love. Trust me, it can be done.”(*The Forest*..356) The last scene echoes her pain and her protest at the betrayal she experiences time and again from the man she loved and worshipped as she rejects his offer: “O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those when a woman must stand up and say, *No more!* She hopes that her choice would be understood by Ram and become an inspiration to the unborn daughters of this land that they need to stand tall in their beliefs.” Rani Jindan makes a similar expectation from her son, “Take my body to Hindustan. I came to this land out of love for you, but my soul will never find rest here.” (*The Last* 345)

In their ordeal of life both women understand the qualities of duty, sacrifice, compassion and love in all forms as Sita explains “I learn about love: it’s found in its purest form, on this imperfect Earth, between mother and young children because there’s nothing they want except to make each other happy.” (*The Forest*..354)

The two novels from different realms intersect when Dalip is asked to scatter Rani Jindan’s ashes in the Godavari. Understanding Dalip’s anxiety, the priest reassures him, “The Godavari is not as holy as the Ganga, but it is too blessed. Ram, hero of the ancient epic, had lived here for some time, along with his wife Sita, after he had been unfairly exiled from his kingdom.”(*The Last*..349)

The final impact which these novels leave the reader with are the voices that inspire Sita,

“Endure, they seemed to say. Endure as we do. Endure your challenges.” “It meant taking the challenge thrown at us and dealing with them as intelligently as we knew until we grew stronger than them.” (*The Forest* 322) And the lasting image Dalip has of his mother, “he remembered her standing up in durbar; a lone woman among all those men, the last queen of Punjab.” (*The Last* ..350)

References

Atwood Margaret :*The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*. Canongate Books, 2005.

Amutha, L. “A Study of Environmental Psychology: Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.” *Research Journal of English (RJOE)*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2026, pp. 439–445.

Divakaruni Chitra : Interview with the Indian Express, November 4,2018.

The Forest of Enchantments, HarperCollins (2019)

The Last Queen, HarperCollins (2021)

Dr. M.Kavitha and Dr. J Karthika ‘A Study on the liberation of selected Female Characters In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s, “*The Mistress of Spices*, IJNRD, VOL8, June 6,2023. IJNRD.ORG

Biaggio Maryka: The Ethics of Writing About Real People in Historical Fiction, December 3,2025. booksbywomen.org

Dr. Zade Manoj C: Myth and History, Literary Endeavour (ISSN 0976-299X) vol IX: Issue 3 July,2018.

Dr Kumar Ashok & Dr Ranjan Piyush: Indian Mythology: A Revisionist Approach in Contemporary Retellings. The Academic ISSN:2583-973X (online). Vol2: Issue 12 December 2024.

Singh Vikram: Modern Retelling of Indian Myths: A study of Rehashing Mythology through popular fiction, IMPACT: IJRHAL, ISSN(P):2347-4564; ISSN(E):2321-8878. VOL5 Issues October 2017,171-176.

Sharma Prachi: Blurring the boundary between fact and fiction in The Last Queen by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni: A study. Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal ISSN 2278-9529 Vol 15, Issue III, June 2024.

Writribe.com: Creating Stories from Forgotten Historical Events