



**REPOSSESSING THE VOICES AND IDENTITIES: WOMEN’S PROTEST  
AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL POWER STRUCTURES IN CHITRA BANERJEE  
DIVAKARUNI’S THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENT**

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**Abstract**

*Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Forest of Enchantments retells the Ramayana from Sita’s perspective, reclaiming the voice of a woman historically overshadowed by patriarchy. This study explores how Divakaruni reshapes gendered narratives and positions Sita as an agent of protest against structural patriarchy. Using feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper investigates how voices and identities that were historically marginalized gain articulation through narratives strategies, character reinvention, and symbolic resistance. The research examines the text’s portrayal of systematic discrimination, performance of gender roles, and women’s struggle for identity assertion. Findings indicate that Divakaruni not only offers an alternative mythic discourse but also participates in a larger socio-cultural critique that resonates with contemporary feminist struggles in South Asia and Diaspora. The narrative enables women’s resistance against enforced silence, fractures monolithic traditions, and encourages reclamation of individual and collective voices.*

**Keywords:** *Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Feminism, The Forest of Enchantments, Patriarchy, Myth Retelling*

**Introduction**

Myths and epic narratives have long shaped societal attitudes about gender roles, power structures and cultural norms. Among the most influential of these texts is the *Ramayana*,

traditionally authored to emphasize duties (dharma), honor, and obedience, especially of women. In these timeless narratives, female characters are often depicted as symbols of virtue and obedience whose individuality is subordinated to male authority. Sita, one of the central figures in the *Ramayana*, has historically been represented as the ideal wife- chaste, obedient, and self –sacrificing. Yet, her voice is notably absent from the original epic Kathas (stories), with her character becoming a vessel for patriarchal expectations rather than an agent of her own destiny.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Forest of enchantments* (2019) disrupts this inherited paradigm by reimagining the *Ramayana* through Sita’s eyes. In reclaiming her voice, the narrative interrogates embedded patriarchal systems and challenges hegemonic narratives that silence women. Divakaruni crafts Sita not as an archetype of passive submission but as a dynamic protagonist who resists oppressive norms, questions authoritative structures, and asserts her identity through self-awareness and agency.

This paper examines how *The Forest of Enchantments* functions as a feminist reclamation of voice and identity. It analyzes the text’s narrative strategies to challenge patriarchal power structures and highlights how women’s protest is articulated through Sita and other female characters. Ultimately, the study situates Divakaruni’s work within the broader context of feminist literary retellings that seek to re-envision traditional epics from marginalized perspectives.

### **Literature Review**

Scholarly discourse on *The Forest of Enchantments* has focused on several thematic strands- mythic retellings, feminist revisionism, and postcolonial narrative strategies. While the novel is relatively recent, critical responses indicate its significance in contemporary literary and cultural studies. Smith argues that Divakaruni’s work contributes to the “feminist reclamation of myth”, where female protagonists are granted narrative centrality previously denied in traditional epics (Smith 24). Smith’s analysis highlights how Sita’s inner voice disrupts the *Ramayana*, encouraging readers to reconsider epistemological assumptions about women’s roles. In her article on gender and myth, Rao considers how retellings function as forms of cultural resistance, challenging orthodox narrative structures that reinforce patriarchal hegemony (Rao 59). Rao writes that stories like *The Forest of Enchantments* allow for the “articulation of suppressed perspectives”, thereby “reconfiguring cultural memory” (61). Srinivasan examines the diaspora aspects of Divakaruni’s narrative, suggesting that the blending of Indian mythic storytelling with contemporary feminist concerns reflects the

hybrid identity of diasporic authors and readers (Srinivasan 111). This position underscores the transnational impact of mythic revisionism beyond South Asian contexts.

Critics have noted the novel's portrayal of other female characters who resist or succumb to patriarchal pressures, including Kaikeyi and Surpanakha. For instance, Gupta's comparative study underscores how Divakaruni humanizes characters traditionally vilified in canonical texts, portraying their struggles within societal limitations (Gupta 77-79).

Despite these contributions, there remains a lacuna in exploring how Divakaruni's narrative strategies specially function to protest patriarchal structures and reframe women's voices. This study addresses that gap by offering a comprehensive analysis of narrative voice, character agency, and thematic resistance against patriarchy in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study employs feminist literary criticism and postcolonial narrative theory. Close textual analysis is used to examine narrative voice, character development, and symbolic representations of resistance. Comparative references to the Valmiki Ramayana highlight divergences that underscore feminist reinterpretation.

### **Results/ Findings**

The findings reveal that Divakaruni re-centers female subjectivity by granting Sita narrative authority. Patriarchal gender roles are questioned, female solidarity is emphasized, and sacrificial silence is rejected. The novels reconstruct myth as a site of feminist resistance. These findings reveal that Divakaruni's narrative actively engages in dismantling patriarchal discourses by empowering women with voice, autonomy and ethical authority

### **Analysis**

#### **Reclaiming Narrative Authority: Sita as Storyteller**

One of the most significant feminist interventions in *The Forest of Enchantments* is Divakaruni's decision to allow Sita to narrate her own story. In traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita exists largely as an object of narration, her experiences filtered through male perspectives and moral judgments. Divakaruni disrupts this narrative hierarchy by granting Sita narrative authority, transforming her from a silent symbol into a speaking subject. This shift destabilizes patriarchal storytelling practices in which women's identities are constructed externally rather than articulated internally.

Through first- person narration, Sita reflects on her emotions, doubts, and ethical dilemmas, thereby reclaiming interpretive power over her own life. Her voice challenges the assumptions that female virtue must be expressed through silence and endurance. By

narrating her suffering, Sita resists erasure and asserts the legitimacy of women's lived experiences. This narrative strategy aligns with feminist theoretical positions that view voice as central to identity formation and resistance against patriarchal domination.

### **Patriarchal Ideology and the Politics of female virtue**

Divakaruni's novel critically exposes how patriarchal power structures regulate women through rigid moral codes, particularly those surrounding purity, obedience, and sacrifice. Sita's repeated trials- both literal and symbolic- reveal the asymmetry of gender expectations within patriarchal society. While male honor remains unquestioned, female virtue is continuously scrutinized and tested.

Sita's questioning of these norms represents a form of ideological resistance. She interrogates why loyalty must be proven through suffering and why a woman's worth is contingent upon public validation. Divakaruni thus critiques the moral double standards embedded in epic traditions, highlighting how patriarchal systems normalize women's pain as a measure of virtue. The novel reframes endurance not as passive submission but as conscious survival within oppressive structures, thereby redefining strength from a feminist perspective.

### **Reimagining Marginalized Female Figures**

Another crucial aspect of Divakaruni's feminist interventional lies in her reconfiguration of female characters traditionally portrayed as antagonist or immoral. Characters such as Kaikeyi and Surpanakha are humanized through psychological depth and emotional complexity. Instead of reducing them to moral stereotypes, the narrative situates their actions within contexts of neglect, humiliation, and patriarchal constraint.

Kaikeyi's ambition and anger are portrayed not as inherent flaws but as responses to political marginalization and emotional abandonment. Similarly, Surpanakha's desire is not depicted as transgressive evil but as a natural human emotion punished by patriarchal violence. By reframing these women's stories, Divakaruni challenges misogynistic interpretations that vilify women who deviate from prescribed gender roles. This reimagining exposes how patriarchal narratives discipline women through moral labeling while excusing male transgressions .

### **Female Solidarity as Resistance to Patriarchal Fragmentation**

Patriarchal structures often function by isolating women from one another, fostering rivalry and silence. *The Forest of Enchantments* counters this fragmentation by foregrounding moments of female solidarity and shared understanding. Relationships between Sita and other

women-such as Mandodari, Ahalaya, and Surpanakha-are marked by empathy rather than competition.

These interactions create a collective female consciousness rooted in shared sufferings and mutual recognition. Through dialogue and emotional connection, women validate each other's experiences, thereby resisting patriarchal narratives that seek to divide them. This solidarity functions as a quiet yet powerful form of protest, emphasizing that resistance does not always manifest through open rebellion but can emerge through shared storytelling and emotional support.

### **The Forest as a Symbolic Space of Self-Realization**

The forest, traditionally depicted as a site of exile and danger, acquires new symbolic significance in Divakaruni's retelling. Rather than functioning solely as a place of punishment, the forest becomes a space of self-discovery and introspection for Sita. Removed from royal expectations and social surveillance, she engages more deeply with her inner strength and ethical autonomy.

This spatial reconfiguration challenges patriarchal associations of civilization with male authority and wilderness with chaos. The Forest emerges as a feminist space where hierarchical structures weaken, allowing alternative forms of identity and agency to surface. Sita's growth within this space underscores the novel's argument that liberation often begins at the margins of power rather than its center.

### **Feminist Myth Retelling as a Cultural Protest**

Divakaruni's rewriting of the *Ramayana* itself constitutes an act of cultural resistance. By challenging the canonical authority of epic narratives, *The Forest of Enchantments* questions whose voices are preserved in cultural memory and whose are silenced. Feminist myth retelling becomes a means of interrogating inherited values and exposing the gendered politics of traditions.

The novel demonstrates that myths are not static moral truths but evolving narratives shaped by power relations. By inserting women's perspectives into sacred stories, Divakaruni destabilizes patriarchal cultural dominance and asserts the necessity of inclusive storytelling. This act of reinterpretation aligns the novel with contemporary feminist movements that seek to recover suppressed histories and reimagining identity through narrative agency.

### **Identity, Agency, and Ethical Selfhood**

At its core, *The Forest of enchantments* presents identity as a process rather than a fixed role. Sita's journey reflects a gradual movement from externally imposed definitions toward self-  
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defined ethical agency. She learns to separate her senses of self from societal validation, asserting moral clarity independent of patriarchal approval.

This redefinition of identity challenges the notion that women's lives derive meaning solely through relational roles such as wife or queen. Divakaruni presents Sita as an ethical individual capable of reflection, dissent, and self-judgment. Her resistance lies not in rejecting relationships but in refusing to erase herself within them. This nuanced portrayal affirms feminist assertions that autonomy and relationality need not be mutually exclusive.

Through layered narrative strategies, symbolic spaces, and character reinterpretation, *The Forest of Enchantments* articulates women's protest against patriarchal power structures. Divakaruni's feminist retelling transforms myth into a site of resistance, where silenced voices reclaim agency and identity through storytelling itself.

### **Conclusion**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* exemplifies the power of feminist mythic retellings to repossess voices and identities that were suppressed by patriarchal power structures. Through narrative restructuring, character development, and thematic emphasis on resistance, the text challenges entrenched gender norms and reconstructs Sita as a woman with agency, complexity, and moral authority.

By foregrounding female perspectives, the novel redefines what it means to narrate epic history, offering a creative space where women can resist silence, challenge normative prescriptions, and assert their identities. Divakaruni's work positions mythic retellings as not only literary interventions but also cultural protests—ones that resonate with contemporary struggles for gender equity and voice. This study affirms that *The Forest of Enchantments* is a critical contribution to feminist literary discourse and a moral for reclaiming space for marginalized voices within canonical narratives.

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