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The Narrative Voice of Sita in Contemporary Re-tellings of *The Ramayana*

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Abstract

The Ramayana has endured through time as a leading South Asian epic which defines feminine values through Sita's character. Throughout centuries Sita has received praise for her chastity and obedience yet her personal voice remains suppressed by patriarchal interpretations. This paper analyzes Sita's first-person narrative in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Sitayana* by Amit Majmudar to show how she uses her voice to challenge and reinterpret her story in contemporary re-tellings. The canonical Ramayana presents a predominantly patriarchal structure which frequently hides or removes Sita's direct voice. The study bases its analysis on the female and revisionist perspectives which appear in these contemporary works. The authors use different narrative approaches to create Sita's voice in their works. Divakaruni uses a confessional first-person perspective to create an emotionally powerful Sita who expresses her silenced emotions and experiences. Majmudar uses a performative and folkloric narrative style to present Sita's suffering and moral strength through a polyphonic structure that de-centered Rama's heroism. The two narratives work together to give Sita control over her voice which enables her to express her feelings, mental and emotional power against the traditional moral code of the epic.

Sita's narrative voice in these reinterpretations serves as a cultural tool for negotiating traditional values. The research demonstrates how contemporary Ramayana reinterpretations create a continuous dialogue between mythological traditions and feminist perspectives and traditional beliefs and contemporary values and suppressed voices and vocal expressions.

Keywords: Sita's Narrative Voice, Feminist Retellings of the Ramayana, Patriarchal Interpretation, Myth Reinterpretation in Contemporary Literature, Female Agency in Epic Literature

Introduction:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amit Majmudar use their works *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Sitayana* to depict Sita as a forceful storyteller who fights against the conventional image

of a submissive dutiful wife. The Ramayana's original versions deny Sita a powerful voice because they depict her suffering as the perfect wife's sacrifice yet hide her actual emotions and decisions from view. The authors Divakaruni and Majmudar use their writing to bring Sita forward so she can express her feelings while fighting against unfair situations and gaining control over her life. The reinterpretations of the traditional "ideal Indian woman" stereotype present active independent actions against suffering which do not require silence within the boundaries of the original text. The Sita characters in these works show both inner strength and self-reflection instead of following the traditional path of silence and obedience.

An Understanding of *The Forest of Enchantments*:

The Forest of Enchantments (2019) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni functions as a strong feminist interpretation of the Ramayana through Sita's personal account. The author uses Sita as the central character in her novel to fight against the male-centered story which has neglected Sita throughout classical literature. The central theme of this book focuses on delivering a feminist reading of Sita. The novel shows Sita as an exceptional woman who combines personal strength with independence while being both self-aware and taking charge of her life story. The story shows Sita as a person who heals others and studies plants and demonstrates intellectual abilities and possesses an inner power to confront divine and royal authority.

An Understanding of *Sitayana*:

Amit Majmudar presents a new poetic interpretation of the Ramayana through female character perspectives starting with Sita in his book. The story uses dramatic monologues to shift its focus from Rama to Sita as the main character. The female characters Sita, Urmila, Mandodari, Surpanakha and Ahalya gain space to present their life experiences and emotional responses and their critiques toward patriarchal systems. Through her character Sita shows both wisdom and intellectual thinking while she examines the ethical system of dharma which supports male actions while requiring her to endure. The title 'Sitayana' serves as a deliberate inversion of Ramayana to demonstrate Sita's newfound mastery of the story. Majmudar unites traditional religious devotion with contemporary awareness through his poetic and novelistic approach and his employment of contemporary language to convey both intellectual ideas and poetic beauty. The book presents its story to reveal dharma's moral flaws while uncovering concealed female suffering to create a feminist reinterpretation of the original tale. Sita's portrayal in *The Forest of Enchantments* and *Sitayana* presents a different character than the traditional passive selfless Sita from traditional adaptations.

Sita transforms into a complete woman through her new status which grants her self-assurance and enables her to fight against injustice. *The Forest of Enchantments* presents Sita's innermost thoughts and doubts and secret acts of defiance through her direct storytelling to readers. The main character of Divakaruni's novel evolves into a self-aware individual through her experiences of being held captive and exiled or abandoned in the story. The main character of Divakaruni's novel fights against destiny while fighting for her choices and love and care-giving for Rama and the societal rules that seek to silence her. The Sita of *Sitayana* by Amit Majmudar presents a character who keeps her emotions stable while maintaining an unbreakable intellectual strength. Majmudar uses Sita to present a dual identity as an individual voice and philosophical voice when she discusses dharma and morality and autonomy. Sita confronts Rama about his decisions while she examines the

moral aspects of the epic before declaring her independence as a self-governing individual who rejects traditional wifely obedience.

Sita's Narrative Voice in *The Forest of Enchantments*:

The story unfolds through Sita's direct first-person account. The author presents the Ramayana through Sita's personal voice in this novel which traditional adaptations had excluded from the narrative. Sita's voice reveals deep emotions which blend her pain with inner turmoil to create a powerful yet controlled personality. The protagonist Sita presents as a complete conscious human being who understands love and duty and betrayal and freedom. Through her storytelling voice Sita alternates between poetic speech and grief while expressing both anger and resilience. The storytelling approach presents Sita as a complete human being who expresses multiple complex emotions instead of showing only virtuous behavior. Through her storytelling Divakaruni shows how Sita fights against patriarchal systems by questioning authority while showing her pain about the unfair treatment she receives. Through her storytelling Sita demonstrates empathy by showing how Rama and Kaikeyi treated her harshly while her complex characterizations of others enhance the story's moral depth. The main objective of this story is to present her personal account instead of blaming others for their involvement in her final decision. The story aims to establish her personal story while presenting authentic truth to create a completely feminist and human epic.

The Narrative Role and Narrator's Dialogue:

The Forest of Enchantments features Sita as its narrator who drives the entire novel toward its goal of presenting the Ramayana through a female perspective. The narrative functions as a tool to reclaim the Ramayana through Sita because Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses Sita as the narrator to transform her from an ideal mythical figure into a fully human character with personal desires and beliefs and fears. Sita narrates every experience from her Mithila childhood through her forest stay and Rama's desertion of her while explaining all the reasons behind what happened. Through her narrative Sita provides a witness-like perspective while using her experiences of patriarchal suppression to establish her own identity. Through her storytelling voice Sita develops alternative life stories and reveals the stories of other female characters from the epic including Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Surpanakha, Mandodari and the Rakshashi Trijata, the daughter of Vibhishana who protected Sita in the Ashok Vatika. Sita noticed that enemy women endured the same amount of suffering because they shared common experiences as wives and mothers and daughters and women. Sita uses her narrative function to serve both personal and political purposes. The main character Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni undergoes a major transformation throughout the story. The novel begins with Sita showing her youthful romantic nature as a princess who dreams about her royal life with Rama. Sita dedicates herself fully to her new duties because she believes in the power of love and dharma and the justice that exists in both the external world and its inhabitants. The story ends with Sita experiencing exile and abduction and facing judgment from villagers and Rama's abandonment. The events Sita experiences throughout the story help her develop a more sophisticated understanding of her world. Sita faces multiple tests which include Ravana's seizure and the fire test and Rama's dismissal of her pregnancy and his court banishment that make her question traditional gender norms and religious teachings. Sita develops from a broken angry woman into a woman who demonstrates inner strength and moral direction

and subtle resistance against societal expectations. She learns to see her strength beyond social limits before choosing to establish a new life outside Ayodhya's ruling power. She establishes her independence by choosing Rama before choosing to join the Earth which represents her maternal origins. The novel concludes with Sita evolving from a romantic obedient figure into an independent woman who controls her life story. Sita's transformation reveals both personal empowerment and feminist awareness because she evolved from a mythological object into a voice for women who have endured silence and oppression.

Authorial Intention:

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita through a unique narrative voice which creates a compassionate feminist interpretation of the Ramayana. Divakaruni seeks to establish Sita as the main character of her own story instead of keeping her in a secondary position defined by Rama. The first-person narrative voice in the text adds emotional depth and psychological complexity to Sita's character because she remains an idealized figure of sacrifice yet authors rarely show her inner thoughts. The author uses Sita's story to expose the hidden obstacles women face in their families and marriages and social environments while showing their ability to overcome these challenges. The narrative expands through Sita's meetings with Surpanakha, Ahalya and Mandodari to show that women share common experiences which break free from traditional social and moral restrictions.

Character Analysis of Sita in Sitayana:

Amit Majmudar uses *Sitayana* to present Sita as an empowered woman who speaks out against the traditional male-dominated view of female characters in the text. The character of Sita extends past her traditional depiction as a passive victim or flawless character. She fights an inner struggle about the multiple ethical and emotional aspects of her present situation. Majmudar gives Sita a strong voice through his writing as she examines dharma alongside her personal identity and her commitment to justice and loyalty. Sita participates in discussions about Rama and Ravana's conduct while presenting multiple personas that stop others from viewing her as only a wife or queen. The human Sita in *Sitayana* transforms her feelings of anger root from loss and betrayal and longing into a source of clarity and strength. Majmudar presents Sita as a strong moral figure through her monologues and social interactions which break free from conventional moral standards.

Growth Of the Character:

Sita's journey in *Sitayana* leads her through three stages of development which start with her youthful optimism before she discovers herself and finally emerges as a determined and powerful woman. The story introduces Sita as a devoted wife who shows gentleness and complete loyalty to Rama and his dharma principles. The story presents three major tests which start with Ravana's seizure of her and continue through the fire test until Rama rejects her. The process develops her inner character strength. The experiences she faces lead her to discover that being a wife and queen no longer defines her existence. The roles of wife and queen lose their connection to her inner self and emotional nature. She upholds her duties yet recognizes she contains attributes which transcend their definitions. She shows compassion instead of fighting against Rama's dismissal. Sita recognizes throughout the story that she has developed into a different person. The story ends with Sita refusing to reconcile because she wants to maintain her status as wife and queen and mother without

seeking validation from anyone. She decides to return to the earth with dignity. Sita demonstrates her strength through her refusal to diminish her true self rather than through enduring pain in Sitayana. Sita's path of resistance unfolds through her ability to find power in enduring challenges while maintaining her independence as a sovereign individual. Majmudar presents Sita as a character who possesses inner strength emerges from her refusal to let suffering diminish her identity.

Authorial Intention:

Through his retelling Amit Majmudar transforms Sita from a passive character into an independent woman who takes control of her own narrative. The traditional Ramayana portrays Sita as a devoted wife who exists in a state of suffering while being forced to make sacrifices. The author uses monologues to create intellectual and emotional depth by showing Sita's inner thoughts through deliberation. The monologues in this work present multiple layers which expose Sita's inner doubts and weaknesses through private reflections and challenge patriarchal norms through questioning and create direct confrontations with oppressive systems through interactive monologues that address absent figures. Majmudar uses resistant monologues to show Sita's voice evolving from sorrowful expressions into assertive statements which establish her moral independence. The retelling achieves feminist expression through Sita's autonomy instead of eliminating traditional elements because it reveals their discriminatory aspects. Through this transformation Sita evolves from being "Rama's consort" into a woman who thinks for herself while fighting against her circumstances to find her own path of memory.

The Forest of Enchantment:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni shows in *The Forest of Enchantments* that Sita maintains a deep spiritual bond with nature which represents her mental state. The Earth gives birth to Sita and she finds solace and assistance in nature while nature remains her constant companion throughout her life. Nature serves as a powerful link between Sita's feelings because it provides her peace during her time in exile and strength during captivity before accepting her back into its embrace when human bonds fail her.

Sita experiences her greatest sense of freedom and vitality during her time in the forest exile. Sita breaks free from palace constraints when she steps into nature's fluid world to listen to birds and experience the earth beneath her bare feet while observing how everything follows the earth's seasonal patterns. The forest provides Sita with a sanctuary where she can exist without royal or marital titles because she remains a woman who responds to the world. The forest receives Sita with peaceful acceptance. The natural world accepts Sita without criticism or expectation for her to use her titles because these belong to men and others who enforce their own rules upon her in Ayodhya. The forest provides Sita with complete liberty and she appreciates both its natural freedom and its structured patterns of time and space which enable her to understand her true self. Through natural imagery Sita frequently communicates her inner thoughts and emotions. The emotional language of Sita consists of flowers and trees and rivers and animals. During her time as a captive in Lanka she finds occasional strength through remembering and feeling the presence of nature. During her imprisonment she keeps the Ashok trees from the garden constantly in her thoughts. The ancient and massive trees function as silent guardians who understand her pain while providing her with gentle compassion which sustains her hope and life continuity.

Through her bond with nature Divakaruni establishes Janaki as Sita's true identity because she is the daughter of the Earth. Nature remains faithful to Sita throughout all times when others turn their backs on her. Her return to the Earth marks her recovery of her authentic self because the Earth remains the only entity that has never let her down. The final act represents her strongest moment because she chooses to return to the natural world that nourished her existence. *The Forest of Enchantments* presents Sita's bond with nature as a symbol of her strength and spiritual connection and feminine power. The story demonstrates her power to survive and heal and develop through all emotional challenges. Nature functions as her sanctuary and reveals her authentic self in this version of the story.

Sitayana:

The spiritual connection between Sita and nature in *Sitayana* presents itself through spiritual means as she finds strength and identity within this nurturing environment. Nature in *Sitayana* functions as Sita's supportive companion and observer and peaceful refuge. The story takes place within a natural environment which extends beyond being a mere backdrop. The natural bond between Sita and Earth exists because she was born from the ploughed earth. Sita's bond with nature reveals her pure character and strong will yet extends beyond cultural expectations to show her fundamental values. During her forest exile Sita found peace in nature which became both her sanctuary and her maternal source of comfort.

Sita finds joy in the basic way of life that exists in the forest during her time there. Sita spent her days with trees and rivers and animals and seasons because she recognized her place in a vast interconnected world beyond the palace's artificial environment. The forest received her without criticism while demanding nothing from her. The forest received her with complete understanding through its peaceful silence. Sita achieves her most genuine self when she escapes from royal life and social gender norms during these moments. Majmudar uses nature imagery in Sita's thoughts to show that her power stems from the peaceful and lovely atmosphere of the forest.

Sita discovered spiritual bonds with natural elements when she was held captive in Lanka through her connection with Ashok Vatika trees and flowers which silently observed her suffering while becoming her companions. The natural world brings life and beauty to her desolate situation even though her circumstances appear without hope. Nature functions as a symbol for Sita's determination because it flexes yet remains unbroken. The bond Sita shares with nature in *Sitayana* proves to be equal to her ability to endure and her power of renewal and strength. The Earth welcomes Sita back to its embrace at the story's conclusion because she returns to her natural origins rather than surrendering to anything. Majmudar uses this technique to show Sita's ecological understanding of the Earth while giving the Earth's authority a sacred feminine power that supports her dual nature as human and divine.

Analysis Of the Forest of Enchantments and Sitayana:

The two authors present different storytelling approaches in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Sitayana* by Amit Majmudar yet they create separate yet connected feminist interpretations of the Ramayana. The two versions of Sita's story follow different paths in their portrayal of the character.

Through *The Forest of Enchantments* Divakaruni presents Sita's narrative exclusively from her first-person perspective to let her reclaim her story from patriarchal control while

sharing her emotional depth and personal experiences. Through her choices including the Agni pariksha rejection Sita develops her own identity in Divakaruni's version of the story. Majmudar uses a third-person omniscient verse structure in *Sitayana* to shift between all characters while incorporating philosophical elements and witty dialogue and ironic commentary. Through his distant perspective Majmudar presents Sita as a complex observer who watches love and dharma and justice while being the central emotional and moral force of the story. The narrative of Divakaruni presents an experiential and embodied perspective which explores female survival and sisterhood and domestic politics. Majmudar presents a wide-ranging and playful interpretation of epic traditions while he celebrates Sita's agency and intelligence and dignity through his retelling. The paper shows how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amit Majmudar transform the Ramayana through their individual storytelling methods of storytelling which center Sita as an independent character instead of treating her as a secondary figure. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Divakaruni uses a personal storytelling approach to let Sita tell her own story which enables her to regain her lost voice and share her experiences as a woman who faces love loss and exile and motherhood and betrayal. Through her depiction of Mandodari and other female characters Divakaruni shows Sita as a powerful figure who breaks free from patriarchal limitations in the epic tradition.

The lyrical and performative style of *Sitayana* by Majmudar transforms Sita's story into a narrative of survival and personal empowerment. The author presents Sita as an active participant who makes deliberate choices about her life path in his version of the story. Majmudar uses his distinctive writing approach to showcase various Ramayana voices but he dedicates the most attention to Sita's narrative. The author presents a fresh perspective that reveals how women must bear the weight of dharma according to the original male-focused narrative.

The modern re-tellings of the Ramayana represent a major change in how people understand the epic because authors use feminist interpretations to question traditional female stereo-types. The character of Sita evolves from a traditional symbol of chastity and sacrifice into a powerful figure who demonstrates resilience and self-determination and ecological balance through her natural connection and her support of women and her return to the Earth. The two texts present Sita as a living voice which connects ancient mythology to present-day Indian women's experiences through powerful storytelling.

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