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Punctuated Margins and Womanist Valences in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract:

The author telegraphs the readers into a literary cosmos where the retelling of Sita's woeful, yet all-embracing and fascinating tale lends voice to the deliberately silenced female characters. These women have been misrepresented in the official historical accounts and a never-ending stigma has been affixed to their names. They have been pushed to the margins and obliterated from all narratives. Their womanhood has been ridiculed, and their flaws have been duly celebrated.

Sita in her literary voyage called *Sitayan* gives literary space and rehabilitates these women, who have since ages faced condemnation and humiliation. This paper aims to study *Sitayan* as a womanist treatise that cherishes sisterly bonds, encourages gender equality, promotes empathy and subverts the relationship between the margin and the mainstream.

Divakaruni's *Sitayan* in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) is a promising piece of literature that is soaked in Sita's search for selfhood. This work is distinct from other retellings of Sita's narrative because it is indiscriminatory in nature when it comes to the representation of peripheral voices. Aiming for collective good and empowerment of women on a massive scale makes this literary venture an exceptional discourse. The relevance of *Sitayan*'s womanist perspective coupled with its primal focus on the legitimacy of the marginalised characters to shift towards the centre makes this narrative all the more relevant in contemporary terms.

Keywords: Womanist, Margins, Empowerment, Selfhood, Empathy, Mainstream.

In search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

— Alice Walker

The avant-garde retelling of the Indian mythological literature has altered the international literary climate profoundly. The complex nuances and aesthetic subtleties of the

mythological literature that were beyond the reach of popular masses have been made accessible by contemporary writers of Indian origin. The fascinating, relatable, modern and eloquent retellings have revived popular fiction to a great degree. These writers have authored such pieces of literature that celebrate the Indian ethos and open avenues of cultural exchange with an international audience. Some such authors include Ashwin Sanghi, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manini J. Anandani, Pratibha Ray, Kavita Kane, Umesh Kotru, Aditya Iyengar, and Anand Neelakantan. However, the retellings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni permeate the hegemony of male-centric approach to create a modest female-friendly perspective. *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008) recollects the radical views of Draupadi who believes to have been misrepresented and deliberately marginalized. In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) Divakaruni takes on Sita's stance by writing Sitayan that voices the grievances of Sita and other ostracized women characters. She marvels in creating humane and relatable renditions of the mythological stories.

The Forest of Enchantments is a novel that telegraphs the readers into the aesthetic retelling of Ramayana with primal focus on Sita's narrative, or her side of the story in the form of Sitayan. Sitayan is Sita's therapeutic project of storytelling that acknowledges the unofficial details of her tryst with her fate. As she embarks on this aesthetic venture she also pledges to record the unrecorded historical accounts of women who had been deliberately silenced and transported to the margins of literary expression. The prologue of the novel opens with Valmiki's desire for approbation of his lifelong treatise entitled Ramayana. However, on the contrary Sita betrays his quest for approbation and draws his attention towards the lack of sentimentality in his work with regard to a woman's life. She tells him that, ". . . you haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another" (*TFE* 2). As Sita's creative lens shifts from the sublime nature of Valmiki's work to the empty spaces in his narration she is advised by him to pen her own story. He cautions her saying, "Time grows short" (3).

The counter-narrative of Sita begins after a deep study of sage Valmiki's magnum opus. Her writerly skills are ignited by his repeated pleas. He convinced her to speak for her own self if she felt that she had not been adequately represented in his epic. Sita transformed from a reader to a writer at this juncture with the aim of articulating the intricacies of her life that were

conveniently overlooked, or disregarded by the sage. She did not indulge in literary envy, but could not restrict herself from criticizing his epic as andro-centric in nature. The dark recesses, the silences, the pauses and the memories of her life fill the literary crevices of the Ramayana. Sitayan complements Ramayana in a way that no other text can. It celebrates the subversion it presents, and the challenges it throws for the readers to access the depth of the narrative from multiple perspectives. Sitayan does not have a one-dimensional approach. This composition of Sita is polyvocal and deconstructive in nature. The strange nature of the sorrows and challenges that she faced could only be curated by her.

The sage provides her with quills, ink, a writing table and pounded leaves to set the stage for her internalized journey into the past with a retrospective scale. The first thought that passed Sita's mind when she saw the colour of the ink was not of surprise, but of familiarity. The red ink was according to Sita best-suited for her tale as she asserts that, "How else could I write my story except in the colour of menstruation and childbirth, the colour of the marriage mark that changes women's lives, the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity..." (3-4). The red ink also symbolised the colour of the blood that ran in Sita's body soaked in undying love for her husband that she seemed to pour in her writing. She knew that a dialogue with her past had the power of awakening her sorrow. She believed that the past that she was about to exhume would surely hurt her, but it would also heal her forever. The moment Sita begins to write there are voices that crowd her mind. She states:

Voices. Some clamouring, some tentative, some whispering, so that I had to still my breath to hear them. Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband. (4)

The voices that surfaced were all connected to Sita in one or the other way. She is made to rehabilitate the stories of the female characters that have been silenced and forgotten. The voices believe that as a woman of profound wisdom and power to empathize Sita will not judge

them on account of their misdeeds or failings, but give them a chance to be aptly represented. The voices populating her mind remarked, "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten—or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (4). Sita had to restore the lost dignity of these women by means of her narrative. The motivation behind her writing is enlightening and redemptive.

Sita's womanist zeal to fetch aesthetic respite for the disregarded women in Valmiki's narrative and her ardent effort to integrate them into the fabric of her narrative makes her the novelistic daughter of all the women she represents. Womanism though oft-referred to as a concept propounded by Afro-American poet, novelist and social activist Alice Walker is now a global phenomenon. The concept holds women-empowerment and peaceful co-existence of the sexes in our society as its most powerful instrument. Integration of the neglected and the marginalized into the mainstream is the ultimate aim of womanism. It does not believe in demonizing the other by deepening the rift between the genders and believes in universalism. The fatal silences and deliberate marginalization is detrimental to the growth of ethical narration, and this is the reason why Divakaruni by means of Sita's narration offers asylum to all the unheard voices. Sitayan backtalks without apprehension because it celebrates womanhood. This retelling brims with self-awareness that is an essential tool in the hands of contemporary women. Sita gives voice to the voiceless as a liberatory gesture. When she stands for other women she in a way legitimizes her own judgments. The womanist ethos of Sitayan in *The Forest of Enchantments* reverberates with an unflinching hope of reconstructing the relationship between the sexes by voicing the deeply disturbing issues, confusing emotions, human failings and divergent views of women who have been misrepresented in history. The ramification of Sita's resistance is inspiring as it has helped in expelling the negativity and monotony often attached to a woman's writing that tries to rehabilitate other women. She has a vision that seems promising for not only the female characters in her story, but also for contemporary women who need encouragement. Sitayan illuminates the dark corners of our psyche by making logical assertions that are humane and relatable. In this regard Melanie L. Harris contends that, "Womanist story not only reveals the necessity for womanist themes such as self-love to combat the existence of self-hate, but also provides road maps for living whole and free" (140).

Jacques Derrida, an Algerian-born French-Jewish philosopher in his acclaimed work *The Truth in Painting* that was originally published in 1978 and later translated to English from

French in the year 1987, accentuated his celebrated theory of deconstruction by adding to it the ancient Greek philosophical concept of *parergon*. It is the external, peripheral, or additional to the centre it borders. To draw attention to the periphery or the margin is to legitimize its presence and in a way challenge the centre. The margins are visible, yet invisible, as they are allowed to fall into the abyss of anonymity. The feminist texts have a tendency to subvert the hierarchy of an andro-centric centre to a gender-sensitive order. This novel of Divakaruni gives power of articulation to the margins; hence the margins gradually evolve into the centre of the narrative. The margins are punctuated in Sitayan and are given an audible voice. It can be rightly stated that Sita's search for selfhood finds holistic expression in her storytelling. Her narrative is not absorbed in lobotomized nostalgia, but on the contrary it is radical, fascinating and relevant for contemporary and future women.

This paper delves into Sita's creative lens that gives an unbiased account of the peripheral characters. To begin with Sita's mother Sunaina will be an apt choice. An epitome of grace, royalty and sensibility she possessed utmost prudence in matters of domesticity and state. She mentored the kingdom by assisting her husband, the king of Mithila, but never superseded him. She was well aware of the fact that the people of her kingdom laid their trust in a male ruler. Sunaina secretly trained Sita in martial arts under the guidance of skilled female warriors. She knew Sita's future would be challenging and unlike that of the other girls. When her daughters Sita and Urmila are on the verge of matrimony she advises them about many things, but for Sita she reserves some exclusive words of wisdom. She states, "If you want to stand up against wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride. You'll have a better chance of success" (46). This womanist idea of maintaining peace between the sexes is focused upon at this point. As the sisters enter conjugal life and bid farewell to their paternal kingdom their mother gives them another piece of advice that would anchor them during tough times. A maternal concern is clearly visible in her words:

Pull yourselves together. . . . We come into the world alone, and we leave it alone.
And in between, too, if it is destined, we'll be alone. Draw on your inner strength.
Remember, you can be your own worst enemy—or your best friend. It's up to
you. And also this: what you can't change, you must endure. (54)

Sita lays primal emphasis on the word endure that her mother conveyed. She knew that the key to a blissful conjugal life and success was hidden in the idea of endurance that women

had devotedly followed since ages. Sita's mother inculcated in her a regard for traditions, a deep sense of empathy, courage and fairness. Sita knew that a peaceful life called for unconditional sacrifices between the partners united by the vows of matrimony.

Sita's mother-in-law Kaushalya was also a conventional and docile woman. She was not favoured much by king Dasharath. She welcomed Sita with traditional gifts of jewels and clothes that were passed down from one generation to the other. Though she felt a bit awkward as the gifts were not new, Sita reduced her regret by gladly accepting her endowments and valuing them deeply. At this moment Sita pledged to win over her family by reigniting and cementing the fractured bond of love between Kaushalya and Dasharath. Kaushalya also had a daughter Shanta who was given away by the king to his friend king Romapad. Kaushalya's devotion and affection towards her husband was marred by his love for the other two queens Sumitra and Kaikeyi, specifically Kaikeyi. Ram pledged never to marry anyone else in order to stand against his father's polygamist choices. Ram declares, "Some people are born unlucky, possessing so much externally, yet destitute within. My mother is one of them" (70). Sita decided to enlighten Kaushalya's life as a womanist gesture of one woman towards another woman. She occasionally initiated to cook for the king and arranged for meeting between Kaushalya and the king in her chamber over dinner. These amorous encounters were orchestrated by Sita with Ram's help. As a result of this routine the relationship between the king and the queen greatly improved and they gained a fine balance that nourished their marital relationship. Sita's comradeship stitched together the scattered life of Ram's mother and made it more meaningful. Her empathy towards the pain of other women enhanced her womanist perspective as she tried to add colour to their lives without envying them, or competing with them.

The women whose voices reverberated in Sita's mind were headed by the second queen of Ayodhya, Kaikeyi, who belonged to the kingdom of Kekaya. She was Bharat's mother and popularly known as the bringer of calamity to the kingdom. An eminent herbologist and warrior with expertise in stately affairs she was an astonishing woman. She was charismatic and courageous. Kaikeyi's closest accomplice was Manthara, who was her advisor and nursemaid. Manthara finds mention in *Sitayan* because of her treacherous ways and iniquity. She is initially pitied by Sita for being a disfigured hunchback. It was due to Manthara's trickery that Ram was banished for fourteen years to a life of hardship and seclusion away from his kingdom. Kaikeyi had always wanted Bharat to be coroneted as the king and her whimsical and arrogant choices

were encouraged by Manthara all the while. When the king decided to transfer his crown to Ram, Kaikeyi locked herself in her anger chamber (kop Bhawan), in order to manipulate the decision of the king. It must be noted at this juncture that the anger chamber of Kaikeyi though, “barbaric and unwomanly” (88), yet symbolises aggressive feminism. The queen locked herself in order to gratify her ambitions by toying with the decisions of her husband. She radicalized her arrogance and resisted male authority by denying surrendering before him. This is the reason why the historical representations of Kaikeyi are loathsome and she has been severely ostracized on account of her transgressions. Her son imprisoned her in her palace, Manthara was casted out of the palace, the kingdom plunged into an epoch of darkness as the king passed away and Ram along with Sita and Lakshman went away to the forest.

As Sita recounts the atrocities committed by Kaikeyi she brings to surface the true reason behind Kaikeyi’s decision of sending Ram to exile and coronating Bharat. It was blind maternal love that coaxed Kaikeyi to sow the seeds of conflict. She was eventually a loser, and as witnessed later in the narrative she took the vow of silence and begged for mercy from those she had wronged. Reflecting on one of the most appalling aspects of love, Sita affirms that:

I was looking at another of love’s many faces. It made us ready to wreak havoc—even on people we cared for—in order to protect those whom we cherished more. Wasn’t it the same force that impelled Kaikeyi to turn on Ram in order to guard her own son’s interest? Wasn’t it the same force that led Manthara— for the hunchback, I suspected, was the orchestrator of this entire disaster—to whisper directives to Kaikeyi, whom she still saw as the innocent child to whom she’d devoted her entire misshapen life? (107)

Sita meditates over the fact that it is not enough for us to love someone injudiciously. It is equally significant that, “We must understand and respect the values that drive them. We must want what they want, not what we want for them” (126).

Sitayan exhumes the tale of a wronged woman Ahalya, wife of sage Gautam who had been cursed by her husband and turned into a stone. She regains her human body when Ram touches the stone with his feet. Indra had tricked her in the guise of Gautam and seduced her. She lost respect in the eyes of Gautam and was discarded as a disgraced woman. Her story needed proper interpretation to purge her of the shame that had been poured on her since ages. Sita observes that Ahalya was endowed with extraordinary beauty and that her aloofness seemed to

be yoked in layers of mystery. Gautam was content with Ahalya's vow of silence (maun vrat), but Sita could feel the underlying pain and turmoil that lay concealed in her. The subtext that surrounds Ahalya's vow of silence is disturbing and eloquent in its own unique way. Ahalya spoke to Sita and agreed to answer only a single question. Sita wanted to know why Ahalya was reprimanded for the crime that she did not commit deliberately. She was a victim, yet she was stigmatized and punished as a culprit. Ahalya retorted to Sita's query by telling her that:

I tortured myself with these same thoughts many times as I lay stone-bound. Yes, that was part of the curse—that I should feel every moment of my interment. Finally, an answer came. When you put your hand in the fire, knowingly or unknowingly, do you not get burned? Such is the ancient law of the universe. Of karma and its fruit. The idea of motive is irrelevant to it. (134)

Sita wanted answers to other queries that surfaced in her mind primarily focusing on the idea of justice, fairplay and nature of forgiveness. Ahalya refused to reply, but later Sita in her dreams configured answers to her queries. She came to the conclusion that Ahalya had a fractured world before her; hence the safest choice was to return to her husband in order to avoid further humiliation. She had decided to punish her husband for accusing her without a fair trial and lobotomizing her life by turning her into a stone. She never spoke to him and punished him by means of her vow of silence. She did not want to waste her words on him, or legitimize his injustice by returning to him with zeal and love that she had previously nurtured for him. Sita at this juncture comes to believe that in love if, "Once mistrust has wounded it morally, love can't be fully healed again" (136). The delicate nuances of heterosexual love are genuinely studied by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She portrays the ephemeral nature of trust, the profound depth of a woman's love, the excruciating pangs of anxiety on being misunderstood and the anguish of being misrepresented. The wronged women vent their sentiments by means of Sitayan. It is an anchorage that is promising and redemptive for all women.

The next is the case of Kaamarupini, also known as Surpanakha. She belonged to a regal asura (rakshasas) family and was Ravan's sister. She was attracted towards Ram while he stayed with Sita and Lakshman in that part of the forest which she claimed to be under her dominion. She proposed to marry Ram and offered him several magical powers as gifts if he agrees to marry her. She boasts about her nomadic spirit and her quest for exploring the surroundings without any supervision. She had already met Sita, but this did not deter her aspiration. Ram and

his brother ridiculed her obsession and her audacity as a maiden to seek an already married man for herself. She was infuriated by Sita's presence as she was the one because of whom Ram declined to accept her proposal. She attacked Sita, but Lakshman instantly shot an arrow that mutilated Surpanakha and chopped off her nose and ears. She stared shockingly, "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" (149). Though Sita disapproved of Surpanakha's candid proposal, yet she did not favour Lakshman's decision to mutilate her. Sita viewed her as a love-lorn maiden who did not deserve such a harsh punishment. She attacked the three of them after mutilation, but fled while her soldiers died fighting. Sita could not find her body even though she tried to find it so as to pay her proper cremation rights. Sita's awakened sense of empathy made her think about Surpanakha's unreciprocated love and her eloquence that was castrated by male authority. She opined, "I didn't think that living with a mutilated face was any easier than a clean death, especially for a woman who had so badly wanted a mate" (151). However, Surpanakha did play a vital role in inflaming Ravan's quest for revenge after listening to his sister's mournful tale. She did meet Sita again in the ashoka garden where Sita was imprisoned by Ravan. Later, Surpanakha disguised herself as Ram's sister Shanta and toyed with Sita's mind in her chamber after Sita returned with Ram to his kingdom. She manipulated Sita to describe the demon-king Ravan to her and made her sketch his portrait on the floor next to her unknowingly. She then showed Sita her true self, tried to intimidate her with magic and when Sita tried to wipe off the life-like portrait with the edge of her saree it got glued to the portrait somehow. Surpanakha had trapped Sita in her demonic mischief as she proclaimed, "Live on Sita. Live without love, as I've been forced to. See how it feels to lose everything you cherish" (295). It was on account of this anti-heroine that Sita faced immense torment, but she with her undying womanist zeal verbalizes her side of the story and gives her ample literary space. As a womanist gesture Sitayan looks beyond good and evil, subverts binaries, deconstructs paradigms of judgment and creates a common ground where all kinds of people can peacefully co-exist.

The character of Mandodari, Ravan's wife, has often been tarnished on account of her asura lineage and the transgressions of her husband. She witnessed the fall of Lanka, the death of her son Angad and her husband Ravan in the battle. She knew that the calamity that befell her kingdom was because of Ravan's obsession with Sita, whom he abducted by means of trickery. Initially she could not connect with Sita because she knew that her husband's fixation would

surely ruin her kingdom, and push the people towards a self-inflicted and inevitable catastrophe. As the plot progresses she feels a deep connection with Sita. When Sita in a customary way addresses Mandodari as mother, her conviction that Sita is her abandoned daughter is reignited. Though Sita negated this belief of Mandodari, yet she continued to please herself with this illusion. She sheltered Sita from Ravan's wrath in the ashoka garden, and tried to offer her as much comfort as she could afford under Ravan's panoptic surveillance. Though not profoundly visible, yet the sorority between Sita and Mandodari is fascinating. Sitayan articulates the plight of a queen who failed to save her people and her family from a tragic end. She was a rakshasi, but a rakshasi with a heart that valued human emotions. Other two characters that Sita met in Lanka were Lady Sarama and Trijata. Lady Sarama was wife of Vibheeshan, Ravan's brother and Trijata was the chief of guards. Lady Sarama harboured deep reverence and affection for Sita as she firmly believed that Ravan had wronged Sita by separating her from Ram. She and her husband Vibheeshan were against Ravan, but when Vibheeshan tried to register his dissent, he was silenced by Ravan. Vibheeshan pledged to help Ram as he wanted to stand with the righteous even if that meant revolting against his own people. Lady Sarama also feared losing her son Taranisen in the battle. She offers Sita sisterly comfort and helps reduce her agony. Trijata, though a lesser known character, yet finds mention in Sitayan because she often controlled the monstrous asura guards in the ashoka garden and saw to it that they did not harm Sita.

Another least celebrated female character is that of Sita's sister Urmila who was married to Lakshman. Her sacrifices and unbending devotion towards her husband is seldom recounted. Sitayan cherishes her patience and her loyalty. Urmila was abandoned by Lakshman when he accompanied his banished brother for a period of fourteen years. She felt unworthy and lonely because of Lakshman's decision to leave her in the palace while Sita accompanied Ram. She bartered with Nidra (sleep), and agreed to take her husband's sleep for next fourteen years while he guarded Ram and Sita, so that when he returns from exile he will not be bothered to pay Nidra's debt by sleeping for another fourteen years. She enforced such a severe trial on herself, so as to protect her conjugal life from turning into a wasteland. She hoped to cherish his affection without hindrance when he returned after completing the term of banishment. When Sita saw her she was lying like a corpse. She had to sing a childhood song to her soul to bring it back from the recesses of remoteness to which it had receded. Urmila's revival reignited the deep bond of

female sorority between the sisters. Her sacrifices have been preserved in Sita's narrative to inspire women.

The mention of sage Valmiki's wife Indira is obligatory when sisterly bonds are being discussed. Indira nursed and sheltered Sita when she was banished by Ram irrespective of her pregnancy. Sita was shattered by his decision to abandon her without giving her an appropriate reason for it. She questions his verdicts, his sense of fairplay and her rights as a citizen in Sitayan. She registers her disagreement, and till the end of her narrative she does not surrender her self-esteem. Indira anchored Sita when she was severely distressed she advised her to, "Remember all that you've survived. Behave like the queen you are. No one can take your dignity away from you. You lose it only by your own actions" (320-321). She provided Sita a safe asylum in her ashram with women to befriend her, nurse her and support her emotionally. Her comradeship and protection helped Sita to recuperate and lead a normal life.

Alice Walker in her notable work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* affirms that, "The writer—like the musician or painter—must be free to explore, otherwise she or he will never discover what is needed (by everyone) to be known. . . . Yet the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision of society or one's people that has not previously been taken into account" (264). Walker as an ardent social activist and candid writer attaches utmost significance to an author's intellectual liberty. Divakaruni's Sitayan echoes with Walker's spirit of intellectual freedom as it conveys the unsung acts of female valour with a conviction that most contemporary narrations lack. Divakaruni's storytelling in the voice of Sita is indiscriminatory in nature because she gives significance to all the female characters. She bleeds with her characters emotionally in order to be one with the humiliation and marginalization that they have endured since ages. Her narrative reintegrates the peripheral female characters into the mainstream by articulating their voices. Narratives coming from diverse female characters merge into a unified whole in Sitayan and create a sense of interconnectedness. The margins are given an eloquent voice and punctuated so as to initiate a dialogue with the mainstream. *The Forest of Enchantments* accommodates the poignant Sitayan which addresses and inspires the contemporary and future women. It instructs women to safeguard their self-esteem, to be steadfast, and selective when compromising for the sake of those they love. The womanist perspective of Divakaruni creates an apparatus of women's writing that is dialectically thought-provoking and promising.

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