

Re-engaging with the Ramayana: A Comparative Guide to Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* and Chitra Banerjee Divakurani's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract:

This paper, while tracing the evolution of *myth*, sincerely attempts to draw the comparison between Devdutt Pattanaik's *Sita* (2013) and Chitra Banerjee's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). While depicting just and an unbiased version of the Ramayana, Devdutt Pattanaik and Chitra Banerjee Divakurani have profusely contributed in transforming Indian fiction by efficaciously blending mystery, mythology, religious symbolism and philosophy. Through their works they have wilfully remonstrated to the century old rigidly myopic versions of Indian mythologies; thereby re-illustrating its mythical relevance in modern India. However, this paper re-engages with the Ramayana endeavouring to compare the afresh version of the Ramayana in the two landmark books. While featuring the comparison, this paper not only discusses at length the origin of the term 'myth' but also juxtaposes the two basic nuances; character and theme of fiction out of the remaining five; plot, setting, point of view, style/form and tone.

Key terms: The Ramayana, Sita, myth, mythos, logos, Ram, mythology, comparative literature.

Introduction

Devdutt Pattanaik (b.1970), a renowned Indian mythologist formidably elaborates in his speech titled, "Devdutt Pattanaik's Talk on Science and Mythology at the Space Applications Centre, ISRO," about the evolution of the term myth ranging from its Greek origin to its pervasively unbiased nineteenth century meaning to its afresh twenty first century connotation. The term myth is said to have originated from the Greek word *mythos*, that meant a story, studied in contrast to *logos*, that meant logic/rational. Apparently, the

Greek literature while studying mythos and logos, recognized myth/mythos as a philosophy of stories and logos as a philosophy of logic. Describing the historical roots of mythological literature an article named "Mythology in Literature," states:

since the Golden Age of the Greek and Roman empires, literature has been a tool used to tell stories about gods and how our world came to be what it is now. Throughout history, cultures from around the world have distinct characteristics, values and events that reflect and make their culture special. Mythology in general has been one of the most used sources for various productions and literary works, including novels (Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians, which is a modern take on classical greek mythology), encyclopedias and poems (Homer's The Illiad). (n.pag.)

Furthermore, with the rise of colonial power successfully colonizing Asia, America and Africa, the European orientalist established themselves as real/logical/rational. Exonerating their stance on colonizing the colonized, they prepared a binary of refined and absurd, real and unreal, fact and fiction, logical and irrational, derivatively, redefining myth as an irrationally absurd unreal irrational fiction. Palpably, situating their ruling philosophy as scientifically measurable they thrust everything opposite as immeasurable thus amounting to myth. The nineteenth century oriental philosophers like Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin etc., made several progressive inventions and discoveries however, reluctantly grounded themselves in the totalitarian set up of the society. The society that enmeshed in the draconian institution of religion and state referring to church and king respectively, concocted the freshly advancing theories as per its retarding tendencies of religion and state. Palpably, their inventions and discoveries were limited to science; measurable/logical/proved/rational consequently, dragging the understanding of the universe in between logos and mythos as measurable and immeasurable respectively. Apparently, the massive shift from Greek literature to nineteenth century literature marks the confounding shift of myth as the philosophy of story to myth as a piece of falsehood only.

While rupturing the nineteenth century binary of logos and myth as fact and fiction respectively, this paper situates myth in between the fact and the fiction. Fact; sun rises from the east and sets in the west, two plus two equals four etc., being measurable referring to as universal truth and fiction; unicorn, mermaid, Harry Potter etc., being immeasurable referring to as universal falsehood are binary opposites, however, myth is located in between these two

defined as subjective truth. Various religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism adhering to one god Allah, various gods, no god respectively refer to neither universal truth nor universal falsehood rather subjective truth (someone's truth). These subjective truths/myths responding to questions pertaining to why rather than how are transferred generation to generation via divergent medium: symbols, traditions, folklore, images, stories, rituals, languages etc. Contemporarily, mythology refers to the study of myths; tales of subjective truth.

Devdutt Pattanaik and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b. 1956), an Indian-American author, have collectively contributed in reviving Indian mythological literature, however through *Sita* (2013) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) respectively, they particularly tend to bestow afresh version of Sita's Ramayana. Arundhati Venkatesh, while reviewing Pattanaik's *Sita* prudently states, "What was the Ramayana before politicians appropriated Ram, and western thought process discredited him? Devdutt Pattanaik takes us through the twists and turns of the timeless tale that has evolved over thousands of years, embellished by regional retellings" (n.pag.). The multiple depiction of the Ramayana centralizing Ram's heroism has been cemented through Valmiki's *Ramayana*, various school plays, excerpts from *puranas* and its infinite regional talebearer versions hitherto. Sanelly, *Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments* revisit and redefine the marginalized characters in the Ramayana, predominantly Sita, whose story of rebelliousness and assertion stand fervently antithetical to her socio-historical insular representation of an epitome; passive, submissive, obedient, and sacrificial woman. This is further claimed in an article named "Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni," where *The Wire* in its review of *The Forest of Enchantments*, describes it as, " 'A work...of pluralities and possibilities...This is the Sitayan we will give to our daughters, that they may imbibe Sita's strength, and even more proudly to our sons, who will learn how a woman is to be treated' [SIC]" (n.pag.). While featuring the Ramayana as Sita's heroism, the selected novels also chart out the lesser-known back stories– Kaikeyi; a brave queen serving as the king's charioteer and eventually saving his life; Manthara, a wet-nurse to Kaikeyi in present birth while to Gandharvi in her previous birth. Vivek Tejuja while reviewing *The Forest of Enchantments*, cogently states it is "Sita's story. But not just Sita's, this is the story of the women of the Ramayana, and Divakaruni does more than enough justice to them in her retelling" (n.pag.).

Through the endless narrations of the Ramayana so far, the human psyche is established in a particular manner, ranging from Valmiki projecting Ram as hero and Sita its heroine, to Tulsidas projecting Ram as god and Sita its goddess, to Adbhuta Ramayanat

projecting Sita as a wild form of Kali, to a very recent Nina Paley's animated feature film, "Sita Sings the Blues" projecting Ram as an abuser hero and Sita an abused heroine. However, Pattanaik and Divakaruni through their works have tried reshaping the twentieth-century commentators who see Sita as a victim and a symbol of oppression. Derivatively, the key concern of the paper is to juxtapose *Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments* to critically analyse them based on the two major elements, character and theme. Therefore, this paper interestingly studies its comparison, by featuring the similarities and dissimilarities while building on same subject matter, derivatively encompassing the discourse of the comparative literature. The phrase Comparative literature was first coined by Matthew Arnold, an English poet and critic in 1848. Elmas Sahin in a journal article named, "On Comparative Literature," while tracing the origin of the phrase 'comparative literature' states, "Arnold defines the term in a conference . . . 'Everywhere there is connexion, everywhere there is illustration: no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures'"(10). However, the current connotation of comparative literature refers to the process of critically comparing two or more than two pieces of literature across boundaries.

Thematic Analysis

Character

The novel as a genre is composed of seven basic nuanced elements: character, plot, setting, theme, point of view, style/form and tone. However, limiting the domain this paper examines the comparison on the basis of character and theme in the selected novels. Incepting with character, defined as an element developed from beginning to the end based on its action, speech and appearance, it is categorized into main character; prime holders, dynamic character; actively honing the prime characters, round character; the character that surprisingly transforms affecting the plot and flat character; the two dimensional characters having limited appearance and thus remaining unchanged throughout. Pattanaik's *Sita* displays Ram and Sita as the main characters, expressing the Ramayana as a love story of two birds, such that one is a caged bird, Ram and other a free bird, Sita. The character of Ram is representative of a scion of *Raghu* clan whose journey from childhood to adulthood is such that he is bound between the rules in so far that he is looked up as an epitome of perfection. Pattanaik's *Sita* sagaciously projects Ram's conformity on exile and Raghukul throne, "Ayodhya is not mine to give or Bharata's to take; Ayodhya is the responsibility of the Raghu

clan, not our property . . . We cannot choose the circumstances of our life, but we can make our choices. I have chosen to be true to my clan” (85). Furthermore, the character of Sita, representative of the daughter of the earth, “Bhumija, Maithili, princess of Mithila or Videhi, lady from Videha, or Janaki . . .” (10), is an unbound character opining her views where ever necessary. Furthermore, Sita’s robust reply to Ram’s advice to not take her [Sita] along to exile she states, “I do not need your permission. I am your wife and I am supposed to accompany you, to the throne, into war and to the forest. What you eat, I shall taste. Where you sleep, I shall rest. You are the shaft of the bow that is our marriage; you need the string to complete it. My place is beside you, nowhere else” (82). Besides, Sita’s choice to transgress the *lakshman rekha* despite knowing that “as long as she stayed inside the line, she was safe. Outside she was vulnerable” (132), and her determination to prioritize Ram’s reputation over her security when Hanuman offers her to climb on his back to safely go back to Ram from Lanka, “Let my husband liberate me. His honour is at stake” (196), are incidents referential of Lakshman and Hanuman’s vitality in establishing the growth of the main characters, Ram and Sita. Additionally, Sita’s abduction by Raavana wherein she imperatively “refused to look at her abductor . . . [not giving him] the satisfaction of seeing her wail and whimper in fear” (134), and advertently pulling off “her armlets and anklets, the chains around her neck and earrings, and began dropping them below, hoping they would create a trail for Ram to follow” (135), derivatively, corroborates the assertiveness in the character of Sita. Ram after successfully killing Raavana, greets him:

Nobel one, son of Vishrava and Kaikesi, devote of Shiva . . . I salute you. I am Ram, who was responsible for mutilating your sister’s body, for which I have been duly punished. I am Ram, whose wife you abducted, for which you have been duly punished. We owe each other no debts. But I seek from you knowledge that you wish to leave behind as your legacy. (246)

Therefore, the dynamic characters of Lakshman and Hanuman predominantly, through their active participation in the plot chisel the main characters, infused in the unending love and respect for each other, despite their diametrically opposite nature of life. *Sita* portrays the character of Raavana as a round character for its development over the passage of time readily surprises the readers: a devout yogi worshipping Shiva to arrogantly misusing his powers to sacrificing Khumbkaran, his brother; Indrajit, his son and his massive army to fight Ram for Sita in Lanka. However, the abrupt transformation found in his character as he states while dying from the brahmastra; the greatest arrow in the world

charged with the powers of Brahma, “I realize I never saw you Ram. I just saw the man who my sister hated, my brothers respected, my queens admired and Sita loved. In seeking knowledge from me, you are hoping that I will finally expand my mind and discover the essence of the Vedas You are the ideal student whose curiosity makes the teacher wise” (247). Encyclopaedia Britannica in an article named, “Round Character,” defines flat character as “two-dimensional in that they are relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of a work” (n.pag.). Pattanaik further illustrates Shanta, Dashratha's only daughter, Kaikeyi, Dashratha's second wife after Kaushalya and Sarupnakha, Raavana's sister as flat characters for their limited portrayal of character traits remaining static throughout the story. Shanta despite unwelcomed by Dashratha, is represented as the one behind the birth of her four brothers. Shanta's victorious attempt to lure Rishyashringa (as was foretold to Dashratha by Yogi Anga, that the only way to have sons will be a yagna offered in the presence of Rishyashringa) and unabated congeniality towards her brothers reflected in jungle where she is portrayed alarming Sita of the wild terrors, decorative appearance and her beaming youth, are limited instances that illustrate Shanta as a well-wisher of Raghu clan throughout the plot. Kaikeyi, who not just shielded Dashratha from arrows and motivated him verbally on the battlefield when he was invited to fight the asura by Indra, but was also promised on marriage by Dashratha to make her his true princess and her son the scion of Raghu clan. However, denial of vows foments Kaikeyi to demand her only wish from Dashratha; send Ram on exile for fourteen years while enthrone Bharat in Raghukul. Furthermore, Sarupnakha is quintessentially illustrated as a nomadic demon who envious of Ram's love for Sita gets her nose mutilated by Lakshman, and is thus, expressed as one fixed character avenging her insult throughout the plot. Consequently, *Sita* represents Ram and Sita as the main characters, Lakshman, Hanuman and Raavana as the round characters and Shanta, Kaikeyi and Sarupnakha as flat characters, such that all these characters together propel the plot.

Contrastively, Banerjee examines *The Forest of Enchantments* as a beautifully intense love story of the main characters Ram, bound by duties and Sita, bound by self-esteem. Banerjee, unlike Pattanaik portrays Urmila, Koshalya, Kaikeyi, Mandodri as dynamic characters, assisting Sita in composing sitayan; Sita's version of the Ramayana. Banerjee explicitly plans to narrate the story from Sita's perspective because she represents Sita as one who feels, “what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt – first

in the forest and then in Ayodhya- when I was the most beloved woman in creation” (*TFOE* 2). Like Pattanaik, Banerjee skilfully projects Ram as one confined majorly within his duties however his timely expression of love and care for Sita continues from their marriage expressing, “Sita will be my only consort and beloved, all the days of my life” (*TFOE* 56) to assuring her comfort in exile [as stated by Siat] “he massaged my tired feet and wept when he saw their state. He padded the hard ground extra-thick with sweet-smelling rushes so that I’d be able to sleep better at night” (*TFOE* 119) to reverberating her post exile “you are my Lakshmi! I couldn’t rule this land without you” (*TFOE* 354). Furthermore, Ram’s invariable attempts to be a perfect king; “one who rules not by force but by example. One who follows the laws perfectly, even when his heart might beg him to do otherwise” (*TFOE* 66) make his character equally dedicated in Banerjee’s work also. However, the secondary dynamic characters largely Urmila, Kaikeyi and Mandodari carve a difference in the two works, wherein Pattanaik’s emphasis on Shanta is replaced with Banerjee’s emphasis on Urmila. Urmila; Lakshman’s wife and Sita’s younger sister, Kaikeyi; Ram’s stepmother, Dasharath’s most beloved second queen and Bharat’s mother, and Mandodri, Raavan’s wife play a significant role in Sita’s life in Mithila and Ayodhya, in Ayodhya and forest and in Lanka respectively. Banerjee projects Urmila mostly as a solacing younger sister to Sita in Mithila, comfortable sister-in-law to Sita in Ayodhya and a well-managed queen in Ayodhya post Sita’s exile. Furthermore, Banerjee strikingly mentions Kaikeyi as dynamically dominant character, such that Sitayan throughout reflects Kaikeyi’s tendencies ranging from applauding Sita, “Tell Ram he’s made a great choice. You’ll be the perfect helpmate for him- and a perfect queen” (*TFOE* 84) to repeatedly inviting Sita to her chamber to offer expensive wedding gifts “for it was her way of asserting her power, especially as she knew that her importance would diminish once Kaushalya became queen-mother” (*TFOE* 102) to finally fomenting Dasharath to reciprocate to her much deserved two boons. Kaikeyi overbearingly says, “years ago, I saved his [Dasharath] life twice, and he promised me two boon. Today I’ve claimed them . . . when we [Dasharath and Kaikeyi] were married, Dasharath promised my father that my son would sit on the throne of Ayodhya. And here’s the second boon: that you [Ram] be banished to the forest for fourteen years” (*TFOE* 104). Apparently, Banerjee portrays Kaikeyi as a dynamic character reflecting love for Ram and Sita initially while finally dooming their fate. Mandodri, “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” (*TFOE* 4) presents her as a dynamic character both in *Sita* and *Forest of Enchantments*. Banerjee further portrays Mandavi; Shatrugan’s wife and Mandavi; Bharat’s

wife as flat characters with not much description in Sitayan than minute, while Pattanaik doesn't talk of them at all.

Theme

Theme, yet another pivotal element in apprehending the structure of fiction, is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work, which may be stated directly or indirectly. It is specifically segregated into two main categories, major and minor themes. A major theme is an idea that a writer repeats in his literary work, making it the most significant idea in the work. A minor theme contrastively, refers to an idea that appears in a work briefly, giving way to another minor theme ("Literary Devices"). Pattanaik's *Sita* displays unfathomable love as the main theme while field and forest as a topoi abounding in ruled cage and an unruly space respectively, as minor themes. Pattanaik uncurls the Ramayana from a modern angle describing it to be an interesting love story between the two birds, one bound by rules of the field/nagar/town projecting Ram as not only a Raghu scion but also a faithful husband and another bird unbound by rules of the forest/jungle projecting Sita as not only an eldest daughter-in-law of Raghu clan but also as a passionate wife. Despite several fomentations to remarry post Sita's departure, he overbearingly refuses to re-marry rather rules the throne placing the golden effigy of Sita symbolizing purity, beside him. Likewise Sita's determination to not open her hairpin, for unbound hair symbolized wilderness and disrespect to husband, instills in her the intense zeal of love. Additionally, while behaving clandestinely behaving strong against Raavana's tormenting moves, she was bothered with questions: "Who was feeding them [Ram and Lakshman]? Who was taking care of them? She felt miserable at the thought of their anguish" (139).

Furthermore, the consistent shift of the story from field to forest and vice-versa plays a significant role in tracing the Ramayana as a love story. The field representing the Raghu clan highlights its boundaries set through certain strict rules which are to be respected every way, "I am not a bee. Neither am I a butterfly. I am a human, scion of the Raghu clan, who has to live as a hermit in the forest for fourteen years. Nothing will make my mind waver" (107). Apparently, Ram as the king of field is looked up to as a perfect scion beyond imperfections, however his dedication to keeping up with the rules of Raghu clan is such that he is forced to wilfully sacrifice his personal happiness over his kingdom's happiness. Based on the pervasive gossips terming Sita as a blemish to Raghu clan, Ram finally spoke to Sita after killing Raavana, "I, scion of the Raghu clan, have killed Raavana, the man who

abducted you . . . Let it be known that your presence before me does not bring me any joy; you are like a grit in my eye, a blot on my family name, for you have chosen to live under the roof of another man through the rainy seasons instead of killing yourself” (251) and conclusively requested Laksham, “take her to the forest on some pretext and leave her there. Let her not know of my decision until she is far away in the forest, far away from me . . . (273).

Besides, forest representing Sita is unbound, unlimitedly unconfined, wherefore, she is observed as a peacemaker between the field and the forest; cage and open, close and free. In an article by Pattanaik titled, “Sita, Wild yet Demure,” defines her:

When a daughter steps out of her father’s house after marriage, the father is supposed to say, May you find happiness wherever you go.” But Janaka told Sita something else, “May you bring happiness wherever you go.” Perhaps because Janaka was a good father who had brought up his daughter to be autonomous and responsible for her life and those around her or perhaps because Janaka knew his daughter was a goddess — the earth itself. The earth can be wild or domesticated. Wild, she is the forest. Domesticated, she is the field. Wild, she is a woman. Domesticated, she is the wife. (n.pag.)

Thus, Pattanaik’s *Sita* while displaying intense love story as a main theme in the Ramayana, formidably displays the metaphorical connotation of the field and the forest as minor themes. Pattanaik lucidly uses words and lines to illustrate the Ramayana, while also using various literary devices like metaphors, similes, dialogues, pictures, personifications etc., to evoke the sense of modernity; a newness in love otherwise concocted through centuries old narrations of the Ramayana.

Comparatively, Banerjee’s *Sita* introduces love as a conflicting surge as an important theme well intensified using various literary devices. The feeling of love is seen tormenting the subject for its conflicting nature such that it alarms its divisiveness in the process. *Sita* efficaciously portrays the conflicting nature of love, Ram dedicated to his love for duty of Raghukul stands stoic sabotaging the emotional angles. Ram’s acceptance to go in exile torments him making him select love for his father, Dasharath over love for his family/Raghukul. Learning the vow-bound demand of Dasharath, Ram takes up his journey to forest, “there were tears in Ram’s eyes. He gripped the edge of the chariot, but he continued staring ahead. Love and duty battled on his face. Then duty won” (118).

Additionally, Sita's needs to accompany Ram in exile torments her in so far that she is making her select love for her husband, Ram over love for her sister, Urmila. Sita is observed as one torned in between her love lives, while leaving for exile she perspicuously states, "I could hear Ram calling me, his tones impatient. I felt torn in two. Was this a woman's predicament, always to be pulled between conflicting loves? . . . forgive me sister you are the unsung heroine of this tale, the one who has the tougher role: to wait and to worry" (*TFOE* 115-117). Furthermore, Kaikeyi's demand to enthrone Bharat and banish Ram introduces Bharat as a tormented character who chooses love for his dear elder brother, Ram over his mother, Kaikeyi, as he says, "I'm sorry, brother, but I'll never forgive her [Kaikeyi] for how she destroyed our entire family" (*TFOE* 123). Besides, Lakshman's desire to accompany Ram and Sita in exile staggeringly torments him for torned love between his wife, Urmila and his elder brother, Ram. Thus, Banerjee reflects love as a conflicting surge as an important theme, wherein she meticulously uses various literary devices: personification; "the evening flew by"(95), metaphor; "a tigress protects its young, not caring if her claws slash anyone in the process . . ." (123) and dream as a majorly recurrent symbol/motif; dream, "another dream came to me . . ." (*TFOE* 126) etc., to augment the effectiveness in the concurrent theme.

Thus, this paper on comparative study of Pattanaik's *Sita* and Banerjee's *The Forest of Enchantments* while representing the modern version of classic epic, the Ramayana scrupulously juxtaposes its narrative in terms of characters and themes. This paper draws the similarity and dissimilarity while confining to the classical story, represented through lines and words/pictures and words in Pattanaik's *Sita* and Banerjee's *The Forest of Enchantments* respectively. Subsequently, the purpose of comparative literature; to delve deep into the origin and the rise of literary genres (novel in this case) is successfully catered and therefore, this paper helps in the study of relationships between two or more literatures.

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