



**Parallel Echoes of Feminism in *Sita* by Nandini Sahu and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

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**Abstract:**

The proposed paper undertakes a comparative study of *Sita* and *The Forest of Enchantments* through a feminist theoretical framework. It examines how both writers reinterpret an ancient narrative through a distinctly feminist lens, articulating similar concerns in divergent literary forms and styles. The study analyses the inner consciousness of *Sita* through her own voice, foregrounding her resilience and resistance within patriarchal structures.

As women writers, Nandini Sahu and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reconstruct *Sita* not merely as a mythological figure or divine being, but as a powerful symbol of endurance who challenges oppressive social norms and speaks for women across generations. Traditionally celebrated as an emblem of purity, motherhood and chastity, *Sita* is simultaneously shown as a woman subjected to humiliation and injustice within patriarchal codes. By bringing the two texts into dialogue, the paper highlights their points of convergence in reimagining *Sita* as a figure of feminine consciousness.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Inner Consciousness, Comparative Study, Patriarchal Norms, Feminine Sensibility.

## **Introduction**

As Chand observes, “Feminism in its most widespread connotation is a theory that challenges entrenched power relationships and seeks equality, equity, and social justice for the excluded category of women. Legal, economic, and social restrictions have existed throughout history and in all civilizations.” This formulation provides an apt theoretical foundation for reading mythological women characters through contemporary feminist discourse.

Many Indian women writers have articulated how women are deprived of their rights, dignity, and autonomy historically. Within this context, Sita may be interpreted as an early emblem of feminist resistance, for she confronts patriarchal authority with remarkable courage and moral strength. Numerous writers have reimagined her story, however, when women writers revisit her narrative, they often foreground the emotional, psychological, and experiential dimensions of her character from a distinctly feminine perspective. In this regard, the contributions of Nandini Sahu and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are particularly significant in their nuanced and holistic portrayals of Sita in *Sita and The Forest of Enchantments*.

Although the literary styles of the two authors differ considerably, both works reveal striking thematic parallels. Their ability to pursue similar feminist objectives through distinct modes of expression demonstrates their creative excellence. The present paper examines these resonances as manifestations of feminist consciousness embedded in both texts. Notably, each author adopts a first-person narrative strategy in which Sita becomes the focal consciousness around whom the entire narrative unfolds. Sahu’s work is structured as a poem in twenty-five cantos, whereas Divakaruni’s novel consists of thirty-five chapters with a Prologue and Epilogue. In both texts, Sita emerges as the protagonist and narrator, recounting her triumphs, suffering, and inner conflicts in her own voice.

These reimaginings may also be understood as a *Sitayan*—the story of Sita—wherein “her” narrative attains completeness as she rises from Mother Earth and ultimately returns to it. However, the journey she undertakes remains complex, enigmatic, and profoundly compelling.

According to Srideep Mukherjee, Sahu’s *Sita* “stands as a subversive deconstruction of the epic from the subject position of one subalterned by gender.” Likewise, Sukanya Saha describes Divakaruni’s *Sita* as “an icon of dignity... the fulcrum of a woman’s existential dilemma. She endures persistent attacks over her integrity and ultimately refuses to surrender to them.” Such critical perspectives reinforce the feminist significance of both texts and validate their importance as revisionist retellings of Sita’s story.

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#### **i. Beginning with the celebration of womanhood**

The beginning of *Sita* by Sahu makes a declaration, “Through poetry, I celebrate womanhood” (*Sita*,4). On the other hand, *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, begins with a Prologue where Sita is asked to write her story. Moreover, she feels that the vision that the Sage Valmiki was imparted to write Ramayana, was through a god and not a goddess. Divakaruni’s *Sita* too celebrates the womanhood by choosing red colour to begin as due to its deep association with woman, “How else could I write my story except in the colour of menstruation and childbirth, the colour of 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 in the palace of the demon king?” (TFoE,3-4)

Divakaruni’s *Sita* thinks of imparting space to other women like Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Surpankha, Urmila, Mandodari as she feels to voice the subaltern, “*Write our story, too.*

*For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten--or maligned and used as cautionary tales.” (TFoE,4)*

Thus, the two writers provide an ample beginning in narrating the feminine sensibility and striking at patriarchal manipulations. They bring the women of Ramayana into limelight whose stories are never highlighted, which makes it more interesting. According to Ms S.Monika, “Divakaruni is a creator of myths...It is through these subtle allusions, myths, and legends that the narrative of Divakaruni's fiction acquires the desired intensity to mirror the agony of Indian women.”

The births of Ram and Sita are mysterious in the sense as Sita is being found by King Janak in the lap of Mother Earth while a special kind of worship was being performed for the birth of Ram. It can be related to gender discrimination as people prefer sons are while daughters are considered unwanted, as their parents are unwilling to accept them. As Sunita Bose says, “Culturally, sons are preferred because of religious and social reasons...Daughters are a liability because parents incur large expenses for their marriage and do not get any financial return from their daughter's labours.” Thus, it can be called as the 'son preference syndrome' due to which there is preference of boys and rejection of girls. The discrimination in education was also visible as Sita was educated in home affairs at the same time, Ram had to go for education outside the house as a male need to be well-versed in the art of fighting while a girl is taught to be docile and submissive. It is a type of cultural conditioning which is in accordance with societal constructs. It is a generally practice that any girl whether commoner or princess has to leave her natal family and settle in another family, she is termed as 'paraya dhan'.

When Sita grew up, her Father decided the conditions for marriage stating that one who can lift the Shiva's bow will marry Sita and only Ram was capable enough for doing so due to which he

married her. When Sita was married and was leaving her mother's place, Sita's mother Sunaina got emotional like 'like a cutting of a cord 'and she advised her not to challenge the patriarchy which is how the social conditioning of girls is being done, "If you want to stand up against wrongdoing, if you want to bring about a change, do it in a way that does not bruise a man's pride."(*TFoE*,46)

When they were welcomed in Ayodhya, and after some days, when the coronation of Ram as a king was about to take place, Kaikeyi asked King Dashrath for two boons, in which she asked for Ram's exile for fourteen years and Bharat's coronation as a king and being a man of words, he was bound to do so. Ram was exiled but Sita self-exiled herself wilfully by saying, 'I'm going to forest with you.' (*TFoE*,111). While Ram told that she is a woman and it is dangerous, she talks in terms of equality as she insists on it, saying that my marriage vows say, "...my foremost duty as your faithful spouse was to follow you, even to the ends of the earth? To be with you in riches and poverty." (*TFoE*,112)

## ii. Story of Ahalya's Redemption and Questioning the Patriarchal System

On their journey, Sita came to know about the story of Ahalya, who was changed to a rock due to the curse by her husband Gautam on account of adultery, in which there was no fault of her own, but pollution of her body took place, and Ram redeemed her by converting her from stone to life again. Sahu's Sita juxtaposes two questions and leaves the reader to think :

Can the grace of a woman redeem?

only with the touch of a man? And can

the grace of woman wane only with

the fraudulent touch of a man?

(*Sita*,17)

Divakaruni's Sita questions Ahalya why she suffered on account of Indra's trickery, to which Ahalya replied that when we put hands in fire, they get burned, thus blaming the circumstance, However, Ahalya chose never to talk to the Rishi →instead of her self-respect, as she was not allowed to say anything in her self-defense and punishment was inflicted.

### iii. Confession of Sita regarding her pining for the golden deer

While they were living in their huts, a golden deer captivated the attention of Sita, who longed for it and persuaded Ram to get it for her. When Ram went, the voices of Ram made her feel perturbed that Ram is in danger. She urged Lakshman to go to Ram for help who refused. It was due to her security, but when she becomes adamant, he drew a Lakshman rekha. It was a demarcation which if crossed would lead to dire consequence. When Ravan, disguised as a sage, begged her for alms, she was in a dilemma to choose the right path and, crossing of the Lakshman Rekha was hamartia, which brought catastrophe in her life as Ravan abducted her. Then Sita feels, “The crime of the chaos/against all sanctities was done with my abduction.”(*Sita*,27) .Similarly, Divakaruni's Sita confessed, “One part was still in shock at how rapidly, because of just three wrong decisions, my life had plummeted into calamity.”( *TFoE*,174) It is thus, a man's world where a woman is unsafe without male. Moreover, Lakshman Rekha is symbolic of the invisible line that is always drawn for a woman, in order to exemplify to remain within her limits. The crossing of this rekha may bring disaster. This is a patriarchal notion conveyed through this incident.

### iv. Unflinching Faith and Unquestioning Devotion towards Husband Rama

When Ravan asked Sita to become her Queen, she refused saying she belongs only to Ram as he was 'ultimate authority of the Universe' . In addition to this, she articulated that she loved only

him which shows her piety and chastity. She was upholder of integrity which is exhibited as when Hanuman offered her to come along with him, she wanted to give the credit to Ram for saving her. She did not want any dishonor to be raised at her character. Sahu's Sita shows the glory of feminine prosperity when she says , “But husband dear!/I wanted you to come and release me.”(*Sita*,42). Similarly, Divakaruni's Sita says to Hanuman when he ask her to come along with her, “I can't accept it...And it would deprive Ram of his glory. No, Ram must come here and rescue me himself ..” (*TFoE*, 210-211)

Sita's dignity is portrayed in both the instances where she knows how to take a stand and along with that not be guided by others but her own rational thinking. Her husband means everything to her which is expected in pativrata ideology, but on the other hand, husband considers her as ‘ardhangini’ and she is always judged on the criteria of hallmark of chastity. The inner turmoils of Sita are visualized through these texts.

Sita was feeling a joyous moment as she was about to reunite and miseries would end but her heart panicked when Ram did not come to meet her. When Vibheshan was sent to bring her, she felt a pang in heart. Seeing the indifferent attitude of Ram, she was confused as he was not reciprocating the happiness that she was expecting. Instead, he hurt her dignity with the words. It shows the patriarchal mindset which considers the woman as impure, but no questions are raised on the purity of man. The superiority complex is ingrained in society when it is depicted that Ram rejoices at the victory but simultaneously also claims that it is to maintain the forefather’s prestige that he won the battle.

#### **v. Heart-piercing of Sita due to Rama’s purity-pollution debate**

It hurts Sita when Ram asks her to go anywhere, as she is now free from the clutches of Ravan,

but he cannot accept her as she might be polluted, “You 've lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you've had with him-...”(*TFoE*,242) Sahu's Ram too pierced the heart of Sita, “Ravan could not have left you unpolluted/ after all you are a fine-looking, desirable woman!/All glory and grace have left you now, you are besmirched.”(*Sita*,69) The debate of purity pollution hurts the sentiments of Sita whose pride is shaken and she stands with resolute dignity.

#### vi. Sita's questioning regarding Rama's justice

Sita admits her mistake by asserting that her pining of the golden deer which brought this devastation but it was 'a mistake, a folly, not a sin'. She tries to reason that if he punishes her without guilt of her own, his subjects will not follow the path of Dharma, and many wives will be sacrificed without any fault of their own. Divakaruni's Sita says :

If you reject me now, word will travel across Bharatvarsha, and men everywhere will feel that they, too, can reject a wife who has been abducted. Alternatively, even been touched against her will. Countless innocent women -as innocent as I am-will be shunned and punished because of your act. Is that dharma? Is that what you want? (*TFoE*,233-234)

Sahu's Sita utters a similar declaration :

Yet, you have set the prototype for the denunciation of one's wife.

From now on, men will be free to get through their envy.

They can be earthly, egoistic, derogatory,

Prejudiced, biased, ruthless to their wives. (*Sita*, 72)

She wanted to prove her innocence and for that, she asked Lakshman to prepare a pyre. She went

into the fire praying Agni God that if she is pure and without any blemish, he should protect her. She was rescued by Fire-God and baptized by immortal fire testifying her purity and removing taints, celebrating her honesty and piety. Sita reveals that her story does not encourage to accept humiliation but it is to show that the wrong conduct of Rama was, but her circumstances allowed this way to be appropriate and she stands for 'autonomy and feminine free will'.

### **vii. Depiction of Equality by Sita**

She says that she embodies the Shakti and bhakti , i.e. the power and devotion. A similar concept is evident when Divakaruni's Sita thinks in terms of equality when she sees Shiva's bow as she says, "...the relationship of Shiva and Shakti! It's the perfect connection of male and female, equal yet splendidly different. It's based on love and respect and knowing each other 's strengths and weaknesses."(*TfoE*,28)

### **viii. Concept of Endurance**

The word 'endure' plays a pivotal role in emphasizing that a female has to endure, as Sunaina was emphasising a philosophical and motivating message, "...what you can't change, you must endure." (*TfoE*,54) When Sita met Tara, she asked," Why only woman has to endure?"(*Sita*,82)

When Ram was convinced about the purity of Sita, then he accepted her and they were now heading towards Ayodhya. There was happiness all around when they returned and coronation was being conducted and Ram became a king. The concept of motherhood gained relevance as Sita became pregnant and her happiness knew no bounds, but she was oblivious to the fact that another exile was waiting for her.

A similar oppression marked the fate of Sita whose life transformed as there was an abrupt gossip by a washerman. He abandoned his wife due to a suspicion and also remarked that he is not like Ram who can accept a wife who has lived with another man. This shook the ideal of Ram rajya and his kingly responsibility overpowered his husbandly and fatherly duties in which Sita was the silent sufferer. When Lakshman declares to Sita that Ram is banishing you from his kingdom, she is heartbroken. He did not justify Sita to his subjects proclaiming her purity but instead abandoned her for a lifetime. Sita blames him for this cruel act, “Oh Rama! You stand for the justice for the universe,/ how could you succumb to this callousness dear?/ You left your pregnant wife with this insecure prospect?” (*Sita*, 88)

Sage Valmiki accepted her as daughter by becoming her father and the forest became her home and she devoted herself to ashram. The feeling of becoming a mother encouraged her to live and fertility acts as healer to her as a woman becomes complete when she gains motherhood. Her happiness knew no bounds on giving birth to Lava and Kusha and she autonomously does everything for them, and they were known by her name i.e. Sitaputra.

#### **ix. Birth of Sons and explaining the enigma of a single mother**

She could not forgive Ram as he was not with her in toughest times but blesses her son being the only parent. Like every mother, she wishes the best for her twin babies and it is a feminine feeling as Sahu's Sita says, “You must understand the ecstasy and ache of/ your solitary mother, Sita, the wife castaway./ You must shine as the resplendent sun importunately.” (*Sita*,93) Divakaruni's Sita declares that she will teach everything and, “But more than that, I'll teach you everything you need to know to be good human beings, so that you'll never do to a woman what your father has done to me.” (*TFoE*,317)

When the children grow up, they are being sent to the kingdom and Ram accepts them as heir however when Sita was called in the court, she thought that Ram wants me because he loves me but when she came to know that another pyre is being prepared for her for proving her purity for the people of Ayodhya, she retaliated and this was an outcry of a woman who decided to say no more humiliation and along with that a message for society to respect woman whether be king or a commoner. Her psychological resistance altered to a verbal proclamation that it is time to say no more. Muni Valmiki asserts the piety and righteousness of Sita and even condemns Ram for the callous act of abandoning Sita for the gossipers. Even Lakshman disapproves of a second fire test as one had already been done. He was a witness to it but when Rama remained adamant, Sita too did not keep quiet. She vents up her pent-up emotions by raising the question of a King's duty towards his subjects. He failed as a father in being oblivious to them for so many years, as well as being a husband, who left her wife when she needed him the most.

#### **x. Questioning King Rama's Justice**

She asks for justice and, if that is denied, she questions even the throne to be challenged. "If justice cannot be given, what/ right has the king got to adorn Ayodhya's venerated throne?" (*Sita*. 105)

Similar questioning is done in *TFoE*, when Sita asks :

Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what were you about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny? Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, even death in the wilderness? And if you were not, shouldn't someone be judging you today? (*TFoE*,356)

What Sita did at that time can be said in terms of Maya Angelou as, "Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it, possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women." Apart from being a daughter, a wife and a mother, she is a woman too. Moreover, if she succumbs to fire test, it would be an insult to all women, for which Sita sets an example by denying queenship and status of Ram's wife. Sita is not submissive to Ram now and argues pragmatically that purity lies in mind or in body and taking a stand for every woman.

#### **xi. Message for Society**

If she had been violated, was it her fault or Ravan's,? "Is it an example you have set my Lord/ that in future if a helpless woman's body be/ violated beyond her wish, then she must be deserted?" (*Sita*, 106) Similar echoes in *TFoE*, when Divakaruni's Sita says, "Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall on them." (*TFoE*, 356-357) This speech is a testimony to the fact that Sita pioneered feminism and she took stand against the patriarchy and discrimination. She raised her voice not only for herself but for future generations.

#### **xii. Invoking Mother Earth**

She is now tired of proving her chastity again and again and wishes that she should move away, and then she invokes Mother Earth to embrace her and relieve her from these sufferings :

Oh Mother Earth! If I am unstained in my thought and  
action, then my dignity is yours; receive me back on your lap.

If in obligation and dedication, I have thought  
of only my husband and no other man,

eliminate my ignominy, my shame and take me back!

(*Sita*, 107)

**A similar invocation is made by Divakaruni's Sita :**

'I call on my mother Earth and my father fire-for both have shaped me into the woman I am today-to come to my aid. O Mother, O Father, all my life I 've suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign.'*(TFoE, 357)*

The mother earth takes Sita in her lap and thus it ends the tale of Sita who achieved immortalisation by her courage. She proves her chastity but also tells that she can deny the queenship for dignity. She tells that it is not Ram's rejection of Sita but Sita's rejection of Ram due to the humiliation and she chooses her dignity above anything and everything. She has professed all the duties of daughter, wife, and mother, but now the duty that she has to fulfil, is that of a self-respecting woman for which she takes a stand.

The novel and poem are both steeped in portraying nature which looms large in the text. In this regard, Dr. Indu & Sujitha says, "Sahu makes use of the heroine of the *Ramayana* as her mouth-piece and she gives Sita the identity of an ecofeminist. Rulika Borah says about *The Forest of Enchantments* :

Moreover, the story narrates Sita's journey from earth and back to it and her love and understanding of nature. It shows how Sita healed nature and nature healed her as well. The novel also depicts how the misogyny of the great warriors like Ram caused the exploitation of both nature and women .

## Conclusion

The poem and novel are two different genre, but they have articulated notes of similitude and thus it is noteworthy how a creator can create magic with words. Sita is emblematic who enchants the readers with her esteemed presence and voicing the inner psyche of herself. The poet talks about the issues of female foeticide, dowry, rape incidents and harassment thus transcending the geographical and temporal grounds and the novelist depicts Sita from the past to present and make her alive through this work. Both of the writers have read various versions of Sita but their tribute to Sita is through their works creating an everlasting impression on the grounds of feminism. The story is as memorable as the poem in advocating the rights of women.

“Feminism is just another word for equality. It means equality.” — Malala Yousufzai.

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