



Narrative Strategies of Subversion: Understanding Literary Revisionism through Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract:

Revisionism in literature involves subverting established narratives to foreground marginalised perspectives, critique dominant ideologies and construct counter-narratives to canonical texts. Existing scholarship has largely examined revisionism as an ideological or thematic intervention in the canon. This study examines the narrative form of revisionist texts as a strategy of subversion, using Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*. The novel retells the events of *the Ramayana* using Sita's first-person narration while privileging memory, interiority and situated knowledge over epic omniscience. Drawing on Stanzel's typological circle and Fludernik's concept of experientiality, the study analyses how the novel reconstructs Sita's subjectivity through redistribution of narrative authority and perspective, thereby reshaping readers' access to Sita's experiential world. The study argues that revisionist subversion is achieved not merely through ideological reinterpretation but through the narrative reorganisation of authority and experience, positioning narrative form itself as a site of resistance and epistemic reconstruction.

Keywords: Narrative Strategies, Subversion, Literary Revisionism, Stanzel's Typological Circle, Narrative as Experientiality.

RE-VISIONING *THE RAMAYANA*

Contemporary revisionist fiction based on the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* have increasingly focused attention on subalterns and other marginalised perspectives instead of on the epic hero. Such revisionist writings have often been studied as feminist, subaltern or postcolonial retellings of the original epic. However, the structure of the narratives in revisionist writings as tools for subverting or challenging canonical truths and traditional ideologies has received much less attention. This article argues that the narrative strategies employed in retellings of the *Ramayana* serve to subvert canonical authority and foreground the subjective experiences of marginalised characters.

Revisionist literature has given rise to alternate discourses that form counter-narratives to existing canonical texts. “Entering the old text from a new critical direction” does not negate the canon; rather, it exists in a dialogic relationship with the canonical text (Rich 18). In the words of Shah, revisionist literature is simultaneously a part of, and apart from “the centralist tendencies to express a contextual discourse that disturbs us into revisioning the ideological orientation of dominant and dominating discursive practices”. Shah argues that revisionist counter-discourse functions through the “remaking of language,” enabling the deconstruction of social norms and the interrogation of dominant ideologies such as patriarchy (xii).

A. K. Ramanujan’s essay *Three Hundred Ramayanas* (1999) gives another understanding of revisionist literature, particularly of the counter-discourses of the *Ramayana*. Drawing upon research from South and Southeast Asian regional traditions, Ramanujan says that “for every Rama, there is a *Ramayana*”. In other words, whenever the story of Rama is told, a new *Ramayana* is formed. Ramanujan uses the word “tellings”, preferring it over versions or variants, stating that the latter terms can imply “an invariant or original text” (134).

This also implies that all the different tellings of the Ramayana are not meant to displace one another; rather, they are meant to co-exist and act as different discourses for the same story.

This study examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), a first-person retelling of *the Ramayana* narrated by Sita. By repositioning Sita as the narrator of her own story, the novel reconstructs her lived experiences and reimagines canonical authority through narrative form. Moving away from epic spectacle, Divakaruni foregrounds Sita's emotional, psychological and social experiences. The present study argues that the narrative strategies adopted by Divakaruni function as a tool in reconstructing the subjective experiences of Sita, positioning her not as a goddess but as a woman who lives in a patriarchal world, knowing when to compromise and when to stand firm. The narrative strategies subvert the objectification of Sita as the ideal wife into the subjective exposition of an ordinary woman.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Current scholarship has examined *The Forest of Enchantments* as the subjective experiences of the epic's female characters, as seen through the eyes of Sita. Patra, Sharma and Srinivasa view Sita as the independent woman at the centre of female subjectivity, who refuses to be swayed by populist perceptions. Gulati, on the other hand, focuses on the subjectivity of vilified female characters such as Mandodari, Kaikeyi and Surpanakha, challenging the male perception of the female body as a site for betrayal and transgression.

Present scholarship has also examined *The Forest of Enchantments* from a revisionist perspective, as the subversion of the ideal woman. Raghav and Saxena, Rajkumar and Rathore all highlight the resilience and dignity of Sita even as she is subjected to isolation, misunderstandings and great sacrifices.

There is not much scholarship on analysing the narrative structure of the novel and how it serves as a medium of subversion. Analysing the structure is relevant because it is not only

the dialogues of the characters that subvert the traditional authority of the original epic and give voice to lived experiences. It is also the way in which the text re-visions space, chronological time and subjectivity. There is a critical need to shift from character revisionism to structural revisionism. Such a shift can show that narrative structure is used as a tool to perform a subversive act on history and myth, as well as underscore the subjective nature of human experience.

This study examines the narrative strategies through which Divakaruni's revision transforms Sita from an object of narration into a narrating subject, thereby transforming the Ramayana from a monolithic cultural truth into a pluralistic space where truth is presented as subjective and multiple.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper has adopted Franz Karl Stanzel's theory of narrative, as explained in Fludernik's *An Introduction to Narratology* (2009), as the methodology of the study. Stanzel's original formulation in *A Theory of Narrative* (1984) was consulted directly to analyse and reproduce the structural layout of the typological circle (Stanzel 56). This study prefers the hybrid approach of Stanzel's typological circle's continuum, which allows the analysis of nuanced narrative situations and offers a more holistic way of understanding revisionist mythologies as experienced by the reader.

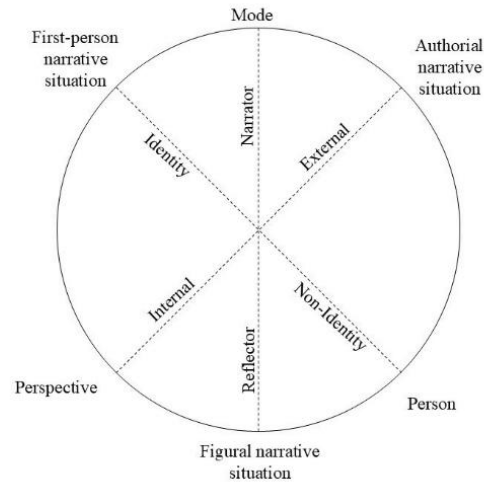


Fig. 1. The Typological Circle, from Franz Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (1984). Reproduced with permission from Cambridge University Press.

The Three Narrative Situations

Stanzel's typological circle (Fig. 1) identifies three narrative situations: first-person, authorial and figural (Fludernik 88). Both the first-person and authorial narrative situations are characterized by the presence of a distinct narrator, or "teller persona". However, in the case of the first-person narrative, the narrator is also a character in the text, and the point of view is always within the world of the story. The focus of fictional first-person narratives can be on the "narrating self" (narrating -I), when events and actions are reported from the perspective of a now-older character, with elements of retrospection. The focus can also be on the "experiencing self" (experiencing I) of the narrator, telling the reader about actions and events as they occur. In such cases, the first-person narrator is also the protagonist of the story, with the story being told in the present tense (Fludernik 90).

In contrast, the authorial narrative can bring in an external perspective, or a bird's-eye view of the characters and events in the story. In the case of the figural narrative, the events are 'told' from the perspective of any one of the characters in the story. This character may or may

not be the central protagonist. The reader feels that “there is no narrator”. However, according to Stanzel, the narrator is “concealed” behind this focal character from whose perspective the narrative is told (Fludernik 89). Such characters are termed reflector characters, and the corresponding narrative situation is known as the reflector mode.

Axes of Person, Perspective and Mode

The typological circle also shows three axes that act as coordinates that determine the narrative situation of a given literary text. They are the axis of person, perspective and mode.

The axis of person shows the identity or non-identity of the narrator. If the narrator is a part of the world of the text and there is shared existence between the voice telling the story and a body in the story, then the narrator has identity and leads to the first-person narrative situation. If the narrator is outside the text, then the narrator has non-identity, and leads to the authorial narrative situation. The figural narrator also has non-identity because the voice is in third-person and exists outside the world of the text. Stanzel argues that the narrator in the figural situation is a covert or invisible entity in the consciousness of the reflector character through whose eyes the reader is ‘shown’ the story.

The axis of perspective focuses on the vantage point of the narrative. When the events are seen from the perspective of characters inside the story, it is internal. When the events are seen from the perspective of characters outside the story, like an omniscient narrator, it is external.

The axis of mode showcases how the story is being mediated. In other words, if the narrator ‘tells’ the reader the story, like the narrating-I, then it is called teller mode. However, if the narrator only ‘shows’ or ‘reflects’ the story, like the figural narrator, it is called reflector mode.

The mediacy of narration is more accurately determined by combining the narrative situation with any of the three axes. This is what makes Stanzel's typological circle more flexible in analysing any given narrative situation. It demonstrates that narrative situations exist along a continuum rather than within rigid categories, reflecting the fluidity and diversity of narrative practice.

Narrative as a Representation of Experientiality

While the major theoretical framework in this study remains Stanzel's typological circle, it also incorporates Fludernik's concept of narrativity as a representation of experientiality, as examined in her work *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (1996). Fludernik puts forth the radical notion that narrativity should be "detached from its dependence on plot". She defines narrativity as a representation of the lived experiences of the characters and narrator(s). Narratives convey more than the plot; they convey actions, intentions and feelings of the characters, filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. This implies that "narrative is a subjective representation through the medium of consciousness" (Fludernik 109).

This study analyses the narrative structure of *The Forest of Enchantments* using Stanzel's typological circle. It then interprets the findings through Fludernik's concept of experientiality to examine how narrative form reconstructs Sita's subjective experience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs textual analysis to examine the narrative structure of *The Forest of Enchantments*. According to Belsey, "textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help" (160). Under textual analysis, the study uses close reading and content analysis to understand the narrative structure. According to Abrams and Harpham,

close reading is “the detailed analysis of the complex interrelationships and ambiguities (multiple meanings) of the verbal and figurative components within a work” (243).

Close reading and textual analysis are employed to examine how shifts in narrative perspective, mediation, and experientiality, analysed across key episodes in the novel, function as strategies of subversion within Divakaruni's revision of *the Ramayana*, reconstructing marginalised subjectivity.

NARRATIVE AUTHORITY AND THE RECLAMATION OF VOICE

The authority of the *Ramayana* is shaped by who tells the story, who interprets it and who determines its meaning. By positioning Sita as the first-person narrator, Divakaruni subverts the narrative authority of the traditional epic. Narrative authority thus shifts from epic historiography to Sita's lived experience.

The traditional narrative of the *Ramayana* is strictly an authorial narrative situation, offering a God's-eye view of the epic. Within the traditional epic, this kind of narration upholds the dharma as constructed by dominant and hegemonic ideologies. Authorial narrative situations privilege externally mediated accounts of events and offer less room for first-person subjectivity. Divakaruni's Sita shuddered with sorrow and fury when she saw the title of Valmiki's epic: *Ramayana*. “The story of the glorious king Ram” (1).

“The poetry is superb, the descriptions sublime, the rhythm perfect...but 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 – first in the forest and then in Ayodhya – when I was the most beloved woman in creation” (Divakaruni 2).

Valmiki tries to placate her by saying that he merely wrote down what was shown to him in divine vision. Divakaruni's Sita retorts:

“It must have been a god that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess. For 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” (2).

Here, Divakaruni critiques not just Valmiki's knowledge but also what counts as legitimate knowledge. When Sita declares that he could not know a woman's life, Divakaruni privileges lived experience over divine inspiration. In other words, she challenges the epistemic authority of the canonical text. Valmiki himself supports this view when he tells Sita, “You must write that story yourself, Ma, for only you know it” (Divakaruni 3).

As Sita begins to write her story, the *Sitayana*, a clamour of voices rises in her mind. They are the voices of women silenced, vilified and marginalised in the *Rama katha*, including Kaikeyi, Mandodari, Urmila and Surpanakha. They tell her:

“Write our story too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten – or maligned and used as cautionary tales” (Divakaruni 4).

Sita agrees because “without them, [her story] can't be complete” (Divakaruni 4).

When Divakaruni gives the narrative authority to Sita, the *Sitayana* comes into being: the story of her lived experience and that of the other women in the epic. It rejects the authorial narrative situation, replacing the certainty of an omniscient narrator with the subjectivity of the first-person narrator. She reclaims the voice of her protagonist, Sita, by prioritising her lived experience over the divine knowledge of Valmiki. Sita also becomes the custodian of the other

marginalised female characters in the epic, leading to a distribution of narrative authority through her voice.

By transforming first-person narrative situation into a strategy for reclaiming marginalised voices, the novel relocates narrative authority from an omniscient epic narrator to the experiential knowledge of marginalised women. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that the Ramayana embodies a singular and authoritative truth and instead reimagines it as a plurality of lived experiences.

NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

The first-person narrative does more than redistribute authority; it also restructures the reader's access to Sita's consciousness and her subjective experiences. The narration periodically suspends retrospective commentary, allowing the reader to experience events through Sita's immediate consciousness.

Sita's first-person narrative situation occurs with temporal and spatial shifting between the narrating self (narrating – I) and the experiencing self (experiencing – I). The narrating Sita assumes a limited retrospective authority, when the older and wiser Sita uses the foreknowledge of her future and makes flash-forward statements. When she looks back on her girlhood, assuring her mother that “[she is] going to stay with [her] always”, the narrating Sita knows that it was just “wishful thinking” and that she would have to leave all that was familiar behind (Divakaruni 10). At the time the golden deer appears, the narrating Sita says, “It had been like a fever, that strange desire that gripped me, as though I’d been bewitched” (Divakaruni 162). Although the narration acquires retrospective authority, the reader's knowledge remains confined to Sita's own lived experience rather than extending to omniscient authorial knowledge.

The experiencing Sita is caught in the moment, as she rebels against customs that forbid women from ruling Mithila, the young princess navigating the political nuances of Ayodhya's palace, the faithful wife who sets out to follow her husband into the deepest of jungles, the trembling woman, frightened and alone in the darkness, a captive in the Ashoka forest in Lanka. In all these instances, the narrative pushes the reader deeper into internal first-person perspective, trapped in the limited emotions and experiences of the character.

Narrative Immediacy

Divakaruni also intersperses a figural narrative technique in the first-person structure that Stanzel would describe as “figural taint”. In other words, certain moments in the narrative cause the narrator (Sita) to disappear entirely, leaving the reader with reflector activity or narrative immediacy. This allows the reader to directly experience the situation without the filter of a narrating voice. This can be illustrated particularly during moments of emotional crisis such as during the exile, Sita's abduction and her trial by fire.

On the eve of Ram's coronation, Sita dreams about Queen Kaikeyi who had locked herself “in a room made of shining metal. When Kaikeyi consents to open the door, the narrator temporarily recedes, and we experience the wrath of Kaikeyi and the folly of Dasharath without any filters.

“Kaikeyi remained silent, forcing Dasharath to plead more and more desperately. When she finally spoke, her voice was cool...Kaikeyi opened the door to the anger room. Dasharath put out his arms hungrily to embrace her but she pushed him away. ‘It is time to redeem your promise, King.’ ‘Tell me what you want,’ the king said, his face suffused with love – or was it folly? ‘Whatever it is, I will give it to you, or die trying.’ Kaikeyi smiled, and her smile was

beautiful and cool as moonlight in summer, or snow on a parched summer day. And dangerous, at the same time, as the shining edge of a dagger” (Divakaruni 99).

In the abduction scene, when Sita is carried away by Ravana in the Pushpak Vimana, the mediacy of narration becomes transparent, giving readers the impression of experiencing events directly rather than through a narrator. They witness the terrifying flight through Sita's consciousness, sharing her confusion, fear, and despair. The narrative mode becomes showing rather than telling when Divakaruni describes what Sita sees as she is in the Pushpak Vimana:

“...my hut and the clearing in which it sat shrank into a dot, then into nothingness as it was swallowed by the forest. The forest too shrank until it was no bigger than a bedsheet, pocked by peaks. Rivers glinted here and there in it, thin threads of silver... on a mountain peak below, a group of hairy men – or were they monkeys? - sat clustered, conferring. I threw down my jewellery to them. Necklace, bangles, anklets...the jewellery fell through the air glinting like teardrops, and was lost in the dense foliage...we swooped low over an ocean froth-white with waves beneath which churned tentacled monsters. Then we soared into black clouds edged with lightning until my hair crackled with the currents” (172).

After Ram rejects her, Sita resolves to enter a fire that she constructs herself from wood gathered on the battlefield, "pulling them from destroyed chariots or broken bows" (Divakaruni 245). After setting the towering pyre alight before Ram, she walks into the flames, embracing what she believes will be her death. Divakaruni describes the scene vividly:

“The flames leaped up avidly. Taller than the treetops, taller than Ravan’s palace. Heat blistered my skin and burnt away my eyebrows” (245).

The flames are represented entirely through Sita's consciousness as she walks into the fire. The transparency of mediacy creates the illusion of direct access to her experience, so that the reader undergoes the scene through her fear, pain, and resignation rather than through the narrator's mediation.

These shifts reconfigure the relationship between narrator, character, and reader by redistributing narrative authority from external narration to subjective consciousness. The movement within the typological circle is characterised by progressive interiorisation, as the narrative increasingly privileges sensory perception, emotional response, and ethical reflection. This inward movement transforms external events—such as exile, abduction, and trial—into experiential spaces defined by subjective interpretation. The narrative authority of the protagonist thus arises not from social power but from experiential knowledge, reinforcing Fludernik’s assertion that narrative meaning is fundamentally rooted in embodied consciousness.

The movement from retrospective narration to immediate perception progressively reduces the distance between narrator and reader. As the reader comes to inhabit Sita's consciousness rather than merely observe it, her subjectivity becomes the primary source of narrative meaning. Divakaruni thus reconstructs Sita not simply as the protagonist of the epic but as the consciousness through which the epic itself must now be understood.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES OF SUBVERSION

Much of existing scholarship has analysed *The Forest of Enchantments* as a feminist or revisionist reading of the Ramayana, because the novel recentres Sita’s voice and experiences.

However, the above analysis suggests that revisionism in the novel is enacted not just through content but also through narrative form. By reorganising narrative authority, perspective, and readers' experiential access, these narrative strategies transform the first-person narrative into a powerful instrument of revisionist subversion.

Divakaruni uses narrative strategy as a tool for epistemic subversion. In the traditional epic, the sage Valmiki acts as the omniscient narrator whose authorial certainty comes from divine knowledge. By shifting the narrative authority to Sita, Divakaruni challenges epic truth. She privileges experiential knowledge as the basis of epistemic authority, paving the way for plurality of truth. In other words, Divakaruni re-visions what counts as authentic knowledge. Thus, omniscience becomes situated knowledge, history becomes memory, and certainty becomes plurality.

Divakaruni's revision is not confined to revising Sita's character. Rather, she revises the narrative mechanisms through which *the Ramayana* has traditionally produced authority. Narrative authority no longer depends on the distance and omniscience of the traditional epic narrator. Instead, it shifts to Sita's embodied consciousness and the reader's experience of her subjectivity. Collectively, these strategies dismantle the appearance of epic objectivity and reconstruct subjectivity.

Divakaruni demonstrates that revisionist literature does not merely rewrite canonical events. It reconstructs the narrative structures through which those events acquire historical legitimacy and cultural authority. Revisionism therefore becomes not only an ideological intervention but also a narratological one.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that revisionism in *The Forest of Enchantments* emerges not only by retelling the canonical story but by reconstructing the narrative structures through

which those stories are told. Through the reorganisation of narrative authority, perspective, and experiential mediation, Divakaruni transforms Sita from an object of narration into a narrating subject with agency. She reconstructs epic truth as plural, situated, and experiential instead of singular, omniscient and authoritatively mediated.

This analysis reveals that revisionist narratives should be seen not only as ideological interventions but also as narratological interventions. Revisionist texts do more than rewrite canonical narratives. They reorganise the narrative conditions through which authority, knowledge and meaning are produced. Narrative form thus becomes more than a neutral vehicle for alternate storytelling; it functions as a tool in challenging dominant cultural discourses and assumptions of absolute truth.

This study also demonstrates that Stanzel's typological circle provides a flexible framework for examining revisionist literature. Rather than treating narrative situations as fixed structural categories, the analysis shows how movement across narrative positions can reveal shifting relationships between authority, subjectivity, and ideological power. Stanzel's framework thus becomes a productive tool for understanding not only how narratives are constructed but also how they participate in cultural revision.

The findings of the present study invite further research to examine narrative form as a central mechanism of revisionist writing across other mythological and historical retellings. Such an approach shifts critical attention from what revisionist texts say to how they produce alternative forms of knowledge, demonstrating that literary revisionism is enacted as much through narrative form as through narrative content.

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