



A Study of Patriarchy and Misogyny in the Context of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

The Ramayana penned by Valmiki around 200 BCE is regarded as his magnum opus and is held in esteem as one of the greatest epics in history. Consisting of 24,000 shlokas or verses, it has served as a basis for moral conduct and gallantry for humans around the world. However, in recent times, there have been concerns about its supposed promotion of patriarchy. With feminists feeling that the epic has suppressed the voices of its female characters, numerous adaptations have emerged. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such work, which aims to advocate the suffering of its female lead, Sita. The aim of this article is to analyse instances of feminism, gynocentrism and misogyny in the above-mentioned work and also to argue and support the claims that the condition of women since all those years ago has not changed. It critically examines the actions and thought processes of the author's myriad characters, extracts the values from them and endeavours to relate it with the condition of women in the twenty-first century. The article does not make a comment on the original epic written by the revered Valmiki, all conclusions drawn are based on *The Forest of Enchantments* alone.

Keywords

Forest of Enchantments, misogyny, suffering, feminism, Ramayana

Introduction

In a patriarchal society, a woman's role is confined within the boundaries of domestic responsibilities. She is supposed to be an obedient daughter, a supportive wife and finally an ideal mother. The qualities of adjustment, service, sacrifice, adaptability, submissiveness and tolerance are not just expected of her; these contribute to the very

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definition of being a female. Her individuality is suppressed and her identity is demolished.

Unfortunately, some believe that this rationale has not developed in recent times. According to certain feminists, the foundations of such an ideology date as far back as the period of occurrence of Hindu mythology. They claim that certain verses, such as the following excerpt from Manusmriti, reinforce misogynistic notions found today.

Patriarchal culture and society exclude women from many social, political and creative activities in the name of their feminine nature. This ideology benefits men and gives women the tasks that men think are suitable for them, thus subduing them and hampering their self-esteem. The following quote explains precisely the idea of what patriarchal mindset is all about:

Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males [of] their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. (Buhler, 1886, Verse 9.2)

There are women who respect this as a part of their culture such as the esteemed Delhi High Court judge, Pratibha M Singh, who advocated the chivalry found in these texts and said that women should feel blessed to be born in such a respectful culture (Smitha, 2022).

On the other side, there is Gynocentrism, where 'gyno' means a female in Greek and 'kentron' denotes centric, that refers to focus on and dominance by women. Anything that focusses totally on women can be called Gynocentric. This term has been in use since the 1800s. Gynocentrism is a form of feminism. Iris Marion Young (1985), in 'Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics (p. 178)', believed that the problem of women's oppression was not to be fixed by participating in humanity, but that we needed to stop devaluing feminine virtues. Essentially, he thought femininity was to be appreciated and that for women to be liberated and not oppressed, they had to affirm their difference (Young, 1985: 184).

In spite of the awakening around the world through feminism and Gynocentrism, the women in India still languish behind and take pride in being suppressed in the name of culture. The many women authors from this sub-continent have depicted characters of women who are still suppressed as they have to endure patriarchy. Through their works, they project the varied problems faced by women in this society where a largely patriarchal mindset dwells and runs the whole narration.

Radicals argue that the reasons for this continuation of patriarchy and subjugation of women could be because of the wordings of our ancient texts and possibly incorrect interpretations that have inadvertently continued to influence the thought processes of people. An author of Indian descent, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, feels that The Ramayana, which is one of the most revered religious texts, is no exception to this blatant misogyny. The glorification of Sita for the suffering she endured and the appreciation showered on Ram for being the embodiment of Justice are testimonies to this undeniable fact, in her opinion. Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpankha, Mandodari, Urmila and many other women characters of the text endure subjugation in the name of culture and what's right from the patriarchal lens. Sita is the main feminine character who is depicted as an

ideal Hindu woman, a selfless and dutiful wife who is subjugated but at the same time epitomized because of these characters (Moodley, 2020). Women's character, that is her chastity, is so strongly emphasized that it is still meant to be the main characteristic of a woman and her identity (Banerjee, 2010).

To counter this, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses her thought-provoking writings to share her passionate thoughts on feminism, women's rights, and women's empowerment and frequently utilizes mythology as a means of disseminating her viewpoints while creating original depictions of our prehistoric works. Divakaruni and her female characters indeed make a strong duo; the women's centric theme is unmistakable and frequent in all of her works.

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2019) is a modern interpretation of the Ramayana written from Sita's perspective. It is an effort to portray Sita as the human she is and aims to put an end to the concept of endurance being the paramount quality of a woman and forces its readers to identify her true aptitudes and personality.

With her words, Banerjee Divakaruni dispels the misunderstanding that has been around our capacity for critical thought and outlines both the main failings and virtues of each type. Unvoiced characters like Urmila, Mandodari, and Surpanakha have been given a voice in this work. Banerjee's Sita is a warrior with her own goals and desires. She is part of the fabric of the plot; not a shadow fusing into the background.

The main argument in this work is that despite the differences in the age in which the epic Ramayana was written and today's twenty-first century, the requirement of women to undergo umpteen tests of chastity, endurance and character assassination, remain unchanged. The authors also argue that though these qualities of chastity and purity are age old, they run the roost of this modern-day Indian society because of their presumed glorification in religious epics.

Ramayana: A Glimpse

The epic tells the story of Ram, the eldest son of King Dashrath of Ayodhya, who was revered and loved by his entire populace. King Dashrath spent many desperate years hoping for children. Finally, through divine intervention, his wives Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi were blessed with four sons Ram, Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan. The heirs of Ayodhya grew up to be illustrious young men and proved their capabilities time and again. Ram married Sita by fulfilling the conditions put forth by her father, King Janak of Mithila. Unfortunately, at the dawn of his coronation, he was banished to the forest by his stepmother Kaikeyi, who harboured a desire for her own son Bharat to be crowned. King Dashrath was unable to prevent such an injustice due to a forgotten oath given in haste. Hence, ashamed of his incompetence and heartbroken on losing his beloved son, he passed away, leaving the kingdom in a state of chaos.

Ram was accompanied by his younger brother Lakshman and his wife Sita in the forest. During his exile, the demoness Surpankha fell in love with him, and when rejected, tried to attack his beloved wife Sita. Enraged, Lakshman cut off Surpankha's nose, which set in motion a chain of events ending with the kidnapping of Sita by the Demon King

Ravana, Surpankha's brother. Ravana already nursed a grudge against Ram due to his own inability to win Sita as his wife. Distraught on losing his wife, Ram vainly searched the forest for his beloved and chanced upon an army of monkey-people. With their help, and his confidante Hanuman's devotion Ram managed to reach Lanka, where his wife was being held captive, defeated her captor and rescued her. On returning to his capital, he was crowned the King of Ayodhya.

The Uttara Ramayana, argued by some scholars to be a contemporary version, takes the story further. Sita's character is questioned by the people of Ayodhya, due to which Ram banishes her despite her pregnancy. In the forest, Sita gives birth to twins, Luv and Kush, whom she raises lovingly as a single mother. The Sage Valmiki provides her refuge in his dwelling and imparts invaluable teachings to her sons. During this period, he pens his magnum opus, the Ramayana. Luv and Kush erroneously attack their own father, unaware of his identity. Sita rebukes them and reveals their parentage. A tearful Ram regrets his actions and pleads with Sita to return to his capital as his wife. However, Sita refuses on the grounds of preserving her self-respect and dignity. The story ends with the princes being entrusted to their father, while Sita calls upon Mother Earth to take her away from this world of suffering (Debroy, 2017).

Patriarchy in the Indian Epic

Ancient Indian epics, which are unquestionably the pinnacle of scholarship, are viewed as prejudiced by some advocates due to the perceived patriarchal exaltation in them. Sita is described in Valmiki's Ramayana as the beautiful daughter of King Janak, the obedient wife of Ram and the loving mother of the heirs of Ayodhya. However, Banerjee observes that in the minds of the general population, she has never been assigned a position that corresponds to her abilities. The only quality of hers that is always emphasized is her own attractiveness, which again reflects the ingrained human propensity to objectify women. Such might not be the intention of the revered Valmiki, yet this is how her life story has been perceived by the modern era.

According to Banerjee, the praise received by Sita from numerous authors, both past and current, accentuates only a fraction of her persona. She is the epitome of piety and one of the 'pativratas' (a virtuous and devoted wife), which, although an excellent quality, is considered by Banerjee as showing how every woman must bear sorrow and how a wife is morally subordinate to her husband.

Few of us are aware that Sita was a gifted healer, proficient in martial arts and an ardent botanist. The world is aware of Ram's incursions, his victories in battle and his legendary feats against demons; nevertheless, we frequently overlook Sita's internal conflict throughout the narrative, which is arguably a more significant conflict. While in captivity in Lanka, acceptance of sadness and despair was seen as part of a wife's duty towards her husband. Banerjee opines that this incident reminds us only of Ram's righteousness and his readiness to sacrifice his beloved for the benefit of his people, even when she is subjected to public humiliation and has the credibility of her testimony questioned in front of a packed courtroom. There are questions on whether this incident genuinely occurred, with arguments that the Uttara Ramayana which mentioned this was not originally penned by Valmiki.

In response to Valmiki's claim that he had supernatural visions that helped him write the great epic, Banerjee Divakaruni's (2019) Sita tells him, 'It must have been a God that brought it to you and not a goddess' (p. 2), highlighting the reality that even the most powerful beings may be insensitive. Figuratively speaking, Divakaruni comments on modern society's desire to change while maintaining deeply ingrained preconceptions. The idea of women's empowerment seems arrogant and unrealistic given how male-centric our epics are, she notes.

Ram and His Sense of Duty

Throughout the volume, Ram's heightened and frequently exaggerated feeling of duty to his motherland is highlighted. Ram is said to have only ever comprehended one word, duty, without any exceptions. On closer inspection, the erroneousness of this sense of obligation is highlighted by the author.

The first act of misogyny committed by Ram appears early in the book, on the day of Sita's Swayamvar (a wedding ceremony of ancient India, where a woman is given the freedom to choose her husband). Having strung the mighty bow of Lord Shiva, he says to the ebullient Janak:

My father bowed his thanks, but Ram raised his chin stubbornly. There's one other matter. I've promised my brothers that we'll get married at the same time – and into the same family, so as to avoid the conflicts that occur so often among wives. Therefore, before we ask my father's permission, I must make sure that King Janak can fulfill my vow. (Divakaruni, 2019: 53)

Sita's reply to this admission, albeit uttered by the Goddess through her, is one of the first indications of the presence of a strong-willed woman behind her mild-mannered façade:

Your desire to avoid conflict among brothers is a good one, Prince of Ayodhya, but perhaps you should have informed us of this vow before you strung Shiva's bow? Surely you knew that once her bride-price is paid, a woman can't marry anyone else. (Divakaruni, 2019: 54)

These lines penned by Divakaruni are a testament to Ram's sense of duty becoming illogical and fatuous. In order to fulfil an oath given to his brothers in a moment of jest, the Prince of Ayodhya appears to be willing to put an innocent maiden's life and dignity in jeopardy. This is furthermore an indication towards the blatant objectification of females, the portrayal of Sita not as a human being, but as a prize to be won and showcased, to highlight his masculine prowess, according to Divakaruni. Even today, the conception of a woman as an object of honour is widely prevalent. Throughout history, the status of women has been reduced to a covetous commodity, especially during wars. The females of a family are viewed as sacred, and any stain on their character is considered as a victory against the entire region. This has proven to give rise to dread among the inhabitants in regard to females' safety and remains a key reason behind honour killings and female infanticides. Although the women in India pay a large sum as dowry to the man and the family where they are getting married, still in this patriarchal society the men and his family have an upper hand.

Ram declares after saving Sita:

I have rescued you, Sita, I have built a bridge over the ocean and crossed over it with my allies of the monkey nations. My followers and I have suffered greatly in the process, for the rakshasa army was a powerful one. Now we have slain Ravan, and set you free. **Here ends my duty** to you, and my responsibility. Go where you will to live out the rest of your days. (Divakaruni, 2019: 289, author's emphasis)

Numerous questions are raised by just one sentence. The task of rescuing his better half was Ram's obligation, but didn't he also have a duty to uphold the honour of the woman he had promised to defend in front of the sacred fire and bring her back to his nation as his Queen? Even if he chose to disregard the subtleties of his husbandly duties, Sita was still a citizen of his city and thus a member of the populace he was purportedly protecting from injustice by this banishment. Divakaruni's words strive to poignantly describe this subtle betrayal of his own population.

Ram fervently describes his aspirations for his kingship:

In my kingdom, every man will have a voice, no matter how humble he is. (Divakaruni, 2019: 123)

Banerjee's statement about the misogynistic nature of old laws is straightforward but effective. A cursory reading gives the impression that it is spoken in an incredibly delicate and sympathetic language, with all of the elements praising Ram as the greatest ruler of Bharat Varsh. Yet only a small portion of the people in Ayodhya appear to have access to freedom of speech. No mention of the kingdom's women is made, as Sita rightfully wishes to point out in the middle of this conversation. Women have been suppressed, subjugated and oppressed for centuries as silent sufferers in India without having any voice. The voice of women has not been given any significance or importance, to the extent that it is considered unacceptable and intolerable to go against the wishes of patriarchy. Women have all the potentialities, traits and abilities equivalent to men still they are not considered on par with men. Masculinity has always been connected and associated with supremacy, power, self-rule and domination. Even today, regardless of a person's gender identification, the term 'man' is used to refer to all people; as a whole, we are referred to as 'mankind'. We need to use more gender-neutral language that does not encourage any form of prejudice or chauvinism in this age where we are heading towards full acceptance of fluid as well as transgender identities.

Cases of the Objectification of Women in *The Forest of Enchantments*

Surpanakha's Humiliation: The Genesis of All Misery

The rejection of Surpankha by the brothers Ram and Lakshman is one of the most significant occurrences in the Ramayana. Although Banerjee praises Ram for remaining devoted to his wife and swearing never to engage in polygamy, her portrayal of his behaviour towards Surpankha is extremely upsetting:

Why don't you talk to my brother, Lakshman. He's better looking than me – fair-skinned, more muscular. Most important, he's all alone in the forest and would surely appreciate some female company.

I was shocked. True, Lakshman hadn't taken the one-wife vow. Still I felt outraged on my sister's behalf and upset at Ram's insensitivity. And confused as well. It wasn't like my husband to joke like this. What was he thinking of? (Divakaruni, 2019: 183)

This is a passage from Sita's inner dialogue in which she expresses her wrath over Ram's advice to Surpankha to ask Lakshman for company. Despite being aware of Lakshman's rage, Ram plays with Surpankha's feelings by using her innocuous love as a source of entertainment.

Apart from this, Sita emphasizes that this conversation undermines her sister, Urmila's position as Lakshman's lawful wife. She is enraged that instead of revering Urmila's devotion towards her in-laws and her supreme sacrifice of staying back in Ayodhya taking care of her in-laws, the brothers seem to have forgotten her existence. Divakaruni's Sita resents such an attitude of men, admiring their spouses only when in proximity.

Banerjee believes that Surpankha's role in the book, which depicts her as a malicious and immoral demoness, a sign of doom for an innocent marriage, has to be re-evaluated. She implies that Surpankha's nose being cut off was unjustified and an instance of violence against women. Ram, on the other hand, is symbolized due to this episode as *ek-patnivrata* meaning someone who has vowed to have a singular wife. Ram's order to Lakshmana to mutilate her nose is seen as chivalrous and there are efforts made to convince the act of mutilation as a punishment for her supposed attempt at discrediting Sita's position as his consort. It is reiterated that Surpanakha was punished for her attempt to injure Sita when confronted by the fact that Ram could have only one wife. However, considering the fact that most women are judged by their facial symmetry, both then and now, it might have been a kinder fate to take her life, rather than subject her to an eternity of stigma and solitude.

An assenting opinion is put forward by the popular author Devdutt Patnaik regarding this incident. He condemns the brothers' behaviour as inappropriate. Why, for instance, does Ram never again experience joy following the mutilation of Surpankha's nose, is the question he discreetly puts forth. He further adds that this was how the ancients demonstrated the concept of karma, rather than justice, for those who were curious to see. Karma is, after all, an Indian idea. Justice is the forte of the Greeks, he comments (Patnaik, 2016).

On the other hand, it is widely believed that Lakshman's show of temper was a result of Surpankha's provocation. Hence, scholars view this incident as an act of defence, a much-admired venture of Lakshman for rushing to the aid of his sister-in-law.

Ahalya's Chastisement: A Penance Without Purpose

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a sudden movement. Ahalya, who was on her way to the kitchen, had stopped and turned. She was looking directly at me, and if I read her glance right,

it indicated that her husband didn't know the truth. That he didn't understand her at all. (Divakaruni, 2019: 165)

This is the inference that Divakaruni's Sita draws from Ahalya's stony expression. She implies that years spent as a sculpture have hardened her heart and broken something inside her, which her husband Sage Gautam couldn't comprehend. Divakaruni illustrates Ahalya as an unfortunate character who was cursed to spend years of her life as a stone as a repentance for a crime she never committed. Deceived by Indra, the ruler of Gods, who, driven by lust, had taken the form of her husband, she was not only assaulted but also punished for being a victim. After attaining her human form, she was compelled to spend the rest of her life with her husband, a revered sage, who had not comforted her in the time of her distress but had rebuffed her.

In the book, Sage Gautam proudly proclaims his wife's divine prowess and compliments her on her oath of silence. Sita puts forward a differing opinion regarding Ahalya's muteness. She says that Ahalya's decision is not reflective of her spirituality but a very humane reaction towards being betrayed by someone she trusted most.

However, it is also generally argued that Ahalya, being a scholarly and spiritual woman, was aware of Indra's deception, and hence deserved to be punished. Also, it is fallacious to assume that she was the only one to endure suffering. Indra was also cursed by Sage Gautam and made to repent for his actions. Divakaruni's Sita feels that Gautam's pleasure at his wife's return is a sign that he never even considered the unfairness of his deeds. This is again Divakaruni's representation of how a woman is expected to endure for her husband. The mentions in our scriptures of Ahalya as one of the 'pativratas', as an exemplification of purity for how young girls in the future ought to behave, is ironic from her perspective. Her name is taken as one of the pativratas, yet no one talks against Gautama's excesses as he turned her into a stone. These stories told by men have women like Ahalya (a name which translates to 'untouched by a plough') who are expected to be meek, docile and follow the rules dictated by men.

Sunaina: The Unseen Face of Mithila

Queen Sunaina, the wife of king Janak and Sita's adoptive mother, is seldom given eminence in the Ramayana, according to Divakaruni. However, she was the primary advisor to the ruler of Mithila, his confidante and aide in terms of State matters.

Banerjee, at the inception of her novel, describes a heart-touching conversation between the stoic queen and Sita, who innocently asks if she could one day inherit the throne. The reply is reflective of a woman weary of society's patriarchy and prejudice:

Even if you were a goddess among women, it wouldn't be possible. The kingdom of Mithila can be ruled only by a man. Because it's built upon an age-old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough – or wise enough – to guide them.

But actually, you're the one who decides what happens in Mithila. Aren't you as much a ruler as he?

But in the eyes of the populace, he's the king. And I'd never do anything to upset their belief in him, for in that lies the stability of the kingdom. (Divakaruni, 2019: 28, 29)

The above dialogue is indicative of the notion that for flourishing, a kingdom required a male leader. Notwithstanding a woman's abilities and wisdom, she is rejected solely based on her gender identity, as portrayed by Divakaruni. According to Elaine Showalter, one of the most celebrated feminists of the twentieth century, the biological depiction of males as the stronger sex and females as the weaker sex is the root cause of discriminative impressions (Showalter, 1985). Often, the acclaim for a female's deeds goes to her male counterparts, as observed in this conversation. The commendation due to Queen Sunaina for her decisiveness is taken by Janak, who in the eyes of his people is the sole authority. Sadly, this situation continues even today. The need for a male to be the face of an organization is a concept that needs to be altered. Even today, in this twenty-first century, families are patriarchal and women are subjugated. The women who are in powerful positions are often demeaned and perceived as not feminine enough.

Sita as a Single Mother

The customary reaction to Sita's banishment from Ayodhya is one of pity and sympathy. Divakaruni's novel too, to an extent, dwells on these emotions. Sita, however, was not a character who pined away for male attention. Rather, she was a proud mother to two boys, for the sake of whom she lived and thrived:

'Don't be afraid, little ones', I whispered, pushing my way determinedly into the dark, even though I had no idea of what it held. Hot tears scalded my cheeks. 'I'm going to live for you. I'm going to guard you with my last breath. I'm going to love you enough for mother and father both, so you feel no lack. I'm going to teach you everything you need to know to be princes. But more than that, I'll teach you what 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'. (Divakaruni, 2019: 375)

This ideology is relevant to today's times. Many women put up with toxic and abusive relationships out of concern for society's criticism. It is believed that a child requires the attention of both parents for holistic development. The women are used as machines to bear children and raising them is also a duty which is supposed to be totally a women's prerogatory:

Compared to Ram, alone in his splendid, loveless palace, we were the lucky ones. (Divakaruni, 2019: 389)

Banerjee's usage of the antithesis – splendid, loveless palace – is an adage to the apparent benefits of an unhappy married life. Ram has all the luxuries in the world, yet it is his twin sons, living in a humble hermitage with their banished mother, who are living life to the fullest.

Sita: From Silence to Stridency

Divakaruni's Sita is seen voicing her opinions most persuasively at the end of the book. On hearing of Ram's offer to return as his consort, by undergoing a trial by fire, she refuses, stating the impact this would have on society:

O king of Ayodhya, you know I'm innocent, and yet, unfairly, you're asking me to step into the fire. You offer me a tempting prize indeed – to live in happiness with you and my children. But I must refuse. 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. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. (Divakaruni, 2019: 420)

She emphasizes the consequences of such an action on both men and women of the future, commenting on the possibility of this being a probable validation of atrocities heaped upon women by their husbands. Furthermore, it could inadvertently become an ideal for all women to follow, she notes.

I can't do that to them.

Men would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions, saying King Ram did so. Then why shouldn't I? (Divakaruni, 2019: 420)

Sita directs her last words as a mortal to all the future women, yet unborn, and encourages them to take a stand for themselves. She urges them to introspect on situations instead of submitting to the social conventions of being demure and acquiescent:

I bless my daughters, who are yet unborn. I pray that, if life tests them – as sooner or later life is bound to do – they'll be able to stand steadfast and think carefully, using their hearts as well as their heads, understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not. And that is why, O King Ram, I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more! (Divakaruni, 2019: 420)

In this manner, Sita assumes the form of the goddess she is, serving as a guiding light for all the marginalized. She progresses from being a servile and silent sufferer to a resolute and selfless role model, compromising her happiness for the sake of the betterment of society.

Analysis

Ramayana has been thought of for centuries as the tale of valour of the Raghava King, Ram. Ram is 'maryada purushottam' (a perfectionist) an ideal to humans even today. The women characters in the epic, albeit being wise and courageous, were portrayed as shadows of the men they belonged to (husbands). Today's generation upholds such mistaken comprehensions and views them as standards to encourage women to act as per the wishes of men and society.

The women in patriarchal societies like India are still subjugated and remain under the guidance of a male be it the father, husband or the son. The women who try to break these shackles are perceived to be bad. A woman still cannot roam like a boy in the night and if boys tease her or rape her it is altogether her responsibility. Filmmaker Leslie Udwin in her documentary, 'India's Daughters' has captured the indifference of the accused men, where one goes on record to say, 'A decent girl doesn't roam around at night with boys. A girl is more responsible for rape than a boy' (Roberts, 2015). The politicians of the country also back these comments and Kailash Vijayvargiya, a minister, comments and compares 'badly dressed' women to the mythological character Surpanakha who is the sister of the mighty king Ravana another important character in Ramayana. Even a Madhya Pradesh Minister Usha Thakur said that one should wear decent clothes in public places so that 'wrongful thoughts do not arise in anyone's mind'. She further said,

If you pick up the Vedas and read them, it guides us about our clothes, our lifestyle, our food and what should be our daily routine. Our clothes should be so decent and so civilized that when we are in public places no wrongful thought ever arises in the mind of anyone seeing us. (The Hindu, 2023)

A typical patriarchal household comprises a woman who is obedient and submissive to her husband's demands like Sita or Ahalya, a husband who is the breadwinner of the family, a household where women stepping out at night is seen as a shameful act. In fact, a patriarchal household considers the birth of a girl child to be unfortunate. Violence against women starts from birth by means of sex-selective abortions. The United Nations says an estimated 2000 unborn girls are illegally aborted every day in India and between 2013 and 2017, about 460,000 girls in India were missing at birth each year (Nair, 2011). According to one analysis, gender-biased sex selection accounts for about two-thirds of the total missing girls, and post-birth female mortality accounts for about one-third (The State of World Population, 2020). These statistics clearly indicate the situation of women in India.

The author's argument that women are treated as secondary citizens and are dictated to be the shadows of the men in their life whether it was the Ramayana time or now is very clear from the above examples. Violence against women and their mistreatment is very common. In a country where Goddesses are worshipped and revered women still languish in despair, the violence against women from womb to tomb continues.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, women have been given the respect and admiration they deserve in Indian Mythology. However, this is maligned due to the different perspectives and notions inferred by the general populace based on their own interests while reading these texts. Women in today's times, who should magnify themselves to become 'Lakshmi' – the goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, 'Saraswathi' – the epitome of knowledge and 'Shakti' – the seeker of justice, see themselves trapped by very mundane situations. They have long realized that the conferring of the 'Devi' status is only ideological, because, in real life, Indians have not acknowledged them in the same sense as the 'Devi' in the

cosmos. Even today, Indian society expects that an ideal woman turns out to be a model of Sita, Gandhari, Sati, Shakti, Saraswathi and Lakshmi, considering them the ultimate representations of womanhood, yet never quite understanding the pain they have been put through. The Indian woman is particularly conditioned by tradition and conventions and willingly or unwillingly accepts the responsibility of being the custodian of the family and prestige. Even though we have surmounted many evil practices like child marriage and Sati, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni feels that such a chauvinistic portrayal of Sita and Savitri still reigns supreme in the mind of the Indian population.

Women all over the globe desire equal treatment from males. They don't want to believe that they are inferior to males. Indian culture portrays women as 'pativrata', who are wholly devoted to their husbands, as dignified mothers, and as the goddess 'mata' (mother), whose pictures are widely accepted, yet this fails to provide them with the dignity they deserve. In such a situation, her book *The Forest of Enchantments* exposes the unseen facets of its female characters. This might not be a true portrayal of Valmiki's epic, which is a work of merit, yet it highlights how the ordinary reader perceives its characters. Divakaruni feels that Ram's identity as the ideal man – an obedient son, a caring husband and a just ruler – comes crashing down as one reflects upon his decisions and deeds. Undoubtedly, Ram was a perfectionist, a stickler for the concept of Dharma or righteousness. However, his christening as 'Purushottam' (a paragon) is misleading as per Divakaruni's descriptions. A more appropriate term, as is actually mentioned in our scriptures, is 'Maryada Purushottam' or an epitome of regulations. Sita, on the other hand, carves niches for herself in Divakaruni's book. She is a warrior, a physician, and most importantly, the daughter of fire. She is indeed a blaze herself, tender and warm towards a weary traveller, but scorching any ignorant human who dares to question her dignity. The surge in increasingly feminist writings which revolve around the female lead Sita and its popularity have been christened as 'Sitayana' – The story of Sita. This indicates a progression in gynocentrism – writing featuring women, usually unsung and marginalized, as their protagonists.

Divakaruni's work also brings to light the existence and accomplishments of single mothers in mythology. Sita, arguably the first divorcee in history, testifies to the credibility of single females in raising their children to be good human beings. The time has come for the country to follow the lead of Sita, a warrior, a physician, and most importantly, the daughter of fire. We need to recognize a woman as a blaze, tender and warm towards a weary traveller, but scorching any ignorant human who dares to question her dignity. The aim is not to endorse patriarchy or female centrism, but to create an inclusive and accommodating environment that upholds the sanctity of all genders.

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