
**Rewriting the Epic, Reclaiming the Self: Feminist Revisionist Mythmaking
and Ecological Agency in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
*The Forest of Enchantments***

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Abstract

This paper explores Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) as a profound intervention into the politics of narrative authority, retelling the Ramayana through Sita's first-person perspective. Going beyond a simple feminist revision, the novel transforms Sita from a passive epic ideal into a questioning, self-determining subject who controls her own story. Grounded in the feminist and ecofeminist theories of Rich, Ostriker, Cixous, Gilbert, Gubar, and Shiva, the analysis examines the novel's treatment of female voice, *dharma*, and exile. Crucially, the forest is reframed not merely as a backdrop of suffering, but as an alternative epistemological space where Sita accesses knowledge that fundamentally challenges patriarchal hierarchies. Furthermore, Divakaruni extends this intervention by amplifying the historically marginalized voices of peripheral women, including Urmila, Kaikeyi, and Surpanakha. Rather than merely replacing Rama's centrality with Sita's, the novel dismantles the traditional epic structures that historically silence women, nature, and desire. Ultimately, this paper argues that Divakaruni's revisionist mythmaking inextricably links the reclamation of a female narrative voice to the assertion of ecological, ethical, and relational agency.

Keywords: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Sita, Ramayana, feminist mythmaking, revisionist myth, ecofeminism, female agency, narrative voice.

Introduction

Myths survive because they are repeatedly retold. Their survival, however, does not mean that every retelling preserves the same meanings. A myth can remain recognizable while its centre of interpretation shifts radically. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) belongs to this tradition of literary re-vision. The novel retells the Ramayana through Sita's voice, transforming a cultural narrative conventionally dominated by Rama, kingship, exile, warfare, and masculine duty into a story of female consciousness, memory, suffering, desire, friendship, and ethical questioning. Recent scholarship similarly identifies the novel as a feminist reinterpretation that gives Sita interiority and agency while challenging androcentric representations of women in the epic tradition (Athreya and Patil; Dua and Pillai).

The importance of Divakaruni's intervention lies not simply in changing the narrator. Changing who speaks changes what counts as significant. Events that appear central in a heroic account; the war in Lanka, Rama's victory, the restoration of kingship; are repeatedly refracted through Sita's emotional and ethical experience. Conversely, experiences traditionally treated as secondary become central: marriage as negotiation, the loneliness of exile, the violence of suspicion, the bonds among women, the relationship between human beings and the forest, and the psychological consequences of being transformed into a symbol of ideal womanhood.

The novel therefore raises a fundamental literary question: who has the authority to narrate a cultural tradition? Adrienne Rich describes revision as the act of "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (35). Alicia Ostriker similarly understands feminist revisionist mythmaking as an attempt to appropriate inherited myths and transform the meanings that patriarchal traditions have attached to women. Divakaruni performs precisely this kind of intervention. She does not discard the Ramayana; she enters it from the position of the woman whose life has often been interpreted by others. This distinction is crucial. *The Forest of Enchantments* is not an anti-Ramayana text. It retains many of the epic's major events and figures. Instead, it demonstrates that a cultural tradition can be internally contested. The same story can contain different ethical possibilities depending on whose consciousness organizes it. Divakaruni's Sita is neither simply the obedient wife of conventional idealization nor a modern individualist who rejects every inherited value. She is a complex subject who values love, duty, family, nature, and spiritual meaning while simultaneously questioning the patriarchal structures through which these values are enforced.

The novel's feminist politics are also inseparable from its representation of the forest. The

forest is a space of exile, but it is also a space of education and transformation. Sita's relationship with trees, animals, rivers, herbs, sages, and other beings complicates the opposition between civilization and wilderness. Recent ecofeminist readings of the novel emphasize this connection between Sita's empowerment and her relationship with the natural world (Chandran, Foong, and Xian; Kapoor et al.). This paper develops that argument by suggesting that the forest functions as an alternative epistemology. Away from the palace, Sita encounters forms of knowledge that cannot be reduced to patriarchal authority, royal law, or social reputation. The paper therefore argues that *The Forest of Enchantments* performs a double act of reclamation. First, it reclaims narrative authority for Sita and other women marginalized by patriarchal epic structures. Second, it reclaims the forest as a space of relational knowledge rather than merely a threatening wilderness. Feminist and ecological agency become connected because both challenge systems that define value through domination, hierarchy, possession, and control.

Revisionist Mythmaking and the Politics of Voice

The feminist rewriting of myth has a long literary history. Women writers have repeatedly returned to inherited stories because myths often provide powerful cultural scripts for femininity. Adrienne Rich's idea of revision is especially useful here because revision does not merely mean changing an old story. It means reading it against the assumptions that made certain interpretations seem inevitable. Rich's famous formulation; "Re-vision; the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes" (35); captures the method of Divakaruni's novel.

Alicia Ostriker's "The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking" provides another important theoretical framework. Ostriker argues that women writers can appropriate patriarchal myths and remake them from within, exposing the assumptions encoded in traditional representations. The point is not simply to make myth "modern." Rather, revisionist mythmaking reveals that myths have always been interpretive constructions. What appears timeless may actually reflect historically specific structures of gender and power. Divakaruni's choice of Sita as narrator is therefore politically significant. Sita has been one of the most influential female figures in South Asian literary and religious imagination, but her cultural authority has often depended upon her idealization. She is celebrated as faithful, pure, patient, self-sacrificing, and devoted. Such praise can paradoxically silence the woman being praised. When a woman becomes an ideal, her individual contradictions disappear.

The Forest of Enchantments reverses this process. Sita becomes a person before she becomes an icon. She remembers, desires, doubts, resents, forgives, and evaluates. Her

narration makes the reader inhabit experiences that a conventional heroic structure might summarize in a sentence. Exile is not simply a plot mechanism; it is lived time. Separation from Rama is not merely an episode; it becomes an occasion for reflection on love and selfhood. The ordeal by fire is not simply proof of purity; it becomes a crisis in which Sita confronts the violence of being required to prove what others have already decided to doubt.

The first-person voice is particularly important because it transforms Sita from object into subject. In an androcentric narrative, women can become objects of male action: they are abducted, rescued, married, judged, protected, or sacrificed. Divakaruni asks what happens when the woman narrates these actions herself. The difference is profound. The reader is no longer positioned outside Sita, observing whether she fulfills an ideal. Instead, the reader enters her consciousness and encounters the costs of the ideal. This strategy can be read alongside Hélène Cixous's argument that women's writing can disrupt structures of discourse that have historically excluded female experience. Cixous calls for writing that refuses the rigid oppositions and hierarchies associated with phallogocentric discourse. Divakaruni's narrative does not simply replace male speech with female speech; it expands what counts as knowledge. Emotion, memory, bodily experience, friendship, intuition, and ecological awareness become legitimate forms of understanding. The novel's title itself anticipates this expansion. "Forest" and "enchantment" suggest that the centre of knowledge may lie outside the structures conventionally associated with rational political authority. The forest becomes a space where Sita learns not by being instructed into a predetermined role but by encountering complexity.

Sita Beyond the Ideal Wife

The most important transformation in Divakaruni's novel is the movement from Sita as ideal wife to Sita as autonomous moral subject. The conventional image of Sita often emphasizes obedience: she follows Rama into exile, remains devoted to him during captivity, undergoes the fire ordeal, and eventually accepts separation. Divakaruni does not erase these events, but she changes their meaning by giving Sita an interior voice.

Sita's decision to accompany Rama into exile is therefore not represented as passive submission. She understands the dangers of the forest, yet chooses to go. Her choice contains love, loyalty, curiosity, and agency. The distinction matters because feminist interpretation should not assume that every act of devotion is necessarily oppression. The more complex question is whether the woman has the ability to interpret and choose her action. Divakaruni's Sita repeatedly exercises this interpretive agency. She questions Rama, evaluates his decisions, and recognizes contradictions within the ideal of

dharma. Her relationship with Rama is affectionate but not intellectually empty. She can love him and disagree with him. This is one of the novel's most significant revisions because it refuses the binary between "traditional woman" and "liberated woman." Sita does not need to stop loving Rama in order to become self-aware. Marriage itself becomes a site of negotiation. Sita's identity cannot be reduced to her relationship with her husband because the narrative continuously returns to her own desires, memories, relationships, and ethical judgments. Her individuality exists before, during, and beyond marriage. This becomes particularly important when Rama's public responsibilities conflict with Sita's dignity. The novel exposes the cruel logic by which a king can justify actions that would be indefensible within an intimate relationship. Sita's suffering is therefore not simply personal. It reveals a political structure in which the woman's body becomes a site for the preservation of male reputation.

The fire ordeal makes this structure unmistakable. Sita is asked to prove her purity even though she is the victim of abduction. The moral burden is transferred from the aggressor to the woman. Divakaruni's narration makes the injustice of this transfer visible. The question is no longer whether Sita is pure; it is why her purity must be publicly demonstrated at all. This shift from "Is Sita pure?" to "Why must Sita prove her purity?" is characteristic of revisionist mythmaking. It changes the ethical question itself. The novel therefore exposes what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify, in a different literary context, as the problem of patriarchal traditions that define women through male-authored images. The woman writer's task can involve challenging the cultural script that tells women what they are supposed to be. Divakaruni's Sita does precisely this by refusing to allow her identity to be exhausted by the roles assigned to her.

The Other Women of the Epic

The novel's feminist intervention extends beyond Sita. One of its most important achievements is the recognition that women's experiences are plural. There is no single "female perspective." Different women respond differently to patriarchy, love, power, sexuality, motherhood, and violence.

Mandodari, for example, is not simply the wife of the antagonist. Through Sita's attention, she becomes a woman trapped within a political and marital structure she cannot control. Her intelligence and moral awareness complicate the binary of good woman and evil woman. Likewise, Urmila's long separation from Lakshmana exposes another dimension of sacrifice. While the epic foregrounds the men who enter the forest, the women who remain behind endure a different kind of exile.

Kaikeyi is also reinterpreted. Rather than functioning merely as the villainous

stepmother responsible for Rama's exile, she becomes part of the complex network of political and familial desires through which women attempt to exercise limited power. The novel encourages readers to ask whether women who operate within patriarchal structures should be judged solely by the consequences of their actions or also understood through the constraints placed upon them.

Surpanakha offers an especially significant challenge to conventional moral categorization. Traditionally associated with sexual desire, violence, and otherness, she represents the dangerous female body. Divakaruni's narrative gives attention to the possibility that her humiliation and anger have histories. Her presence complicates the neat division between virtuous woman and monstrous woman.

Ahalya's story similarly contributes to the novel's larger project of recovering female experience. Across these narratives, Divakaruni suggests that epic history has been built through selective attention. Some women become symbols; others become villains; still others disappear almost completely. Feminist rewriting asks what happens when the silenced are restored to the narrative field.

This multiplicity also prevents the novel from becoming a simple "Sita versus Rama" story. The real problem is larger than one man. It is the cultural system that repeatedly defines women through male-centered categories. Sita's liberation therefore requires a change in the way stories are told.

The Forest as Counter-Space

The forest is the novel's most important symbolic and epistemological space. In the traditional Ramayana, the forest is a place of exile and danger, outside the ordered world of the kingdom. Divakaruni retains this function but transforms it. The forest becomes a site of knowledge, companionship, spiritual growth, and ecological relationship.

Sita's connection with the forest is not decorative. She learns to perceive plants, animals, rivers, seasons, and landscapes as meaningful presences. Her attention is relational rather than possessive. The forest does not simply provide resources for human survival; it participates in Sita's transformation. This representation can be read through ecofeminist theory. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* traces the historical transformation of nature from a living, organic presence into a resource imagined as passive matter available for exploitation. Val Plumwood similarly critiques dualisms that construct reason over nature, culture over wilderness, and masculine over feminine. Vandana Shiva's work links the domination of women and the domination of nature within modern systems of development and patriarchal control. Divakaruni's forest offers an alternative to such hierarchical thinking. Sita does not become powerful by mastering nature. She becomes

stronger by entering into relationship with it. This is an important distinction. Agency is not represented solely as domination or control. It can emerge through attentiveness, care, reciprocity, and belonging.

Recent scholarship has identified precisely this dimension of the novel. Chandran, Foong, and Xian argue that the forest becomes a source of empowerment for Sita and that her relationship with nature helps her speak for women marginalized within the epic. Kapoor, Bhattacharya, and Vijaykumar similarly interpret the novel through ecofeminism, emphasizing the connection between Sita's female identity and her relationship with the forest. The forest can therefore be understood as a counter-space to the palace. The palace represents social hierarchy, public reputation, dynastic obligation, and political surveillance. The forest is unpredictable, but that unpredictability creates possibilities. In the forest, Sita encounters forms of life that do not recognize royal hierarchy. A tree does not care about lineage; a river does not ask whether she is a queen; an animal does not demand that she prove her purity. This does not mean that the forest is simply utopian. It contains danger, violence, and loss. Its importance lies not in being a perfect alternative world but in enabling different relationships. It destabilizes the assumption that civilization is the only location of knowledge.

The Forest and Female Embodiment

The connection between women and nature has always been theoretically complicated. Ecofeminist criticism has sometimes been accused of reinforcing the very essentialism it seeks to challenge by assuming that women are naturally closer to nature because of their reproductive or nurturing roles. Plumwood's critique of dualism is useful because she rejects the hierarchy itself rather than simply reversing it.

Divakaruni's novel is strongest when it avoids saying that Sita is powerful because women are naturally connected to nature. Instead, it presents Sita's ecological relationship as something she develops through experience. The forest teaches her attention. It offers her a vocabulary beyond royal duty and social judgment. Sita's association with the earth is also central to her identity. Her birth from the earth already complicates conventional distinctions between woman and nature. Yet Divakaruni does not reduce this symbolism to biological essentialism. Earth becomes an ethical figure: it represents endurance, receptivity, renewal, and an existence that exceeds human political structures. This becomes especially powerful in the novel's treatment of Sita's final withdrawal. Her return to the earth can be interpreted not simply as defeat but as refusal. If the social world insists on repeatedly testing her worth, Sita ultimately withdraws from the system that demands the test. The earth becomes the site of an alternative judgment; one that does not require

public approval. This reading also complicates the notion of agency. Feminist narratives are sometimes expected to end with visible resistance: the woman speaks, leaves, fights, or triumphs publicly. Divakaruni offers a subtler form of agency. Sita's final decision is powerful precisely because she refuses to continue participating in an unjust system of validation.

Dharma, Doubt, and Ethical Agency

One of the most intellectually interesting features of *The Forest of Enchantments* is its treatment of *dharma*. The novel does not simply reject *dharma* as patriarchal. Instead, Sita questions the ways in which *dharma* is interpreted and applied.

Rama's commitment to duty is sincere, but sincerity does not make every consequence ethical. The novel distinguishes between an abstract principle and the human beings affected by its application. This creates a recurring tension between public duty and private responsibility. Sita's questions are therefore philosophical as much as feminist. What is the value of a moral code if it produces injustice? ¿Can a king's duty to his subjects justify cruelty toward his wife? Does social reputation have greater value than individual dignity? Who has the authority to interpret *dharma*? These questions are especially important because they prevent the novel from becoming a simplistic celebration of individual freedom. Sita does not simply say that personal desire should always defeat social duty. Instead, she asks whether duty itself has been interpreted from a sufficiently broad ethical perspective.

Her perspective introduces relational ethics. A decision is judged not merely by whether it conforms to a rule but by how it affects living beings. This orientation connects the feminist and ecological dimensions of the novel. Both require attention to consequences and relationships rather than obedience to abstract hierarchies. The novel thus creates a conflict between two forms of moral authority. One is external, institutional, and patriarchal; the other is internal, relational, and experiential. Sita's growth involves learning to trust the latter without completely abandoning the cultural world from which she comes.

Love, Desire, and the Limits of Idealization

Divakaruni's Sita is also significant because she is allowed to experience desire and emotional complexity. Idealized representations of Sita can make her appear almost beyond ordinary human emotion. Divakaruni reverses this dehumanization by allowing her to experience jealousy, fear, anger, longing, attraction, disappointment, and tenderness. This does not diminish Sita's spiritual significance. Instead, it makes her spirituality meaningful because it emerges from embodied experience. A woman who never doubts

cannot teach us much about ethical struggle. A woman who suffers, questions, and nevertheless develops an ethical position becomes more psychologically and philosophically compelling. The relationship between Sita and Rama is therefore not romanticized. Love is real, but love does not erase power. Sita can love Rama and still recognize his failures. This is an important feminist distinction because it rejects the assumption that criticism of patriarchal behavior requires rejection of affection. The novel also asks readers to distinguish between love and possession. Patriarchal marriage can transform a woman into an extension of male honor. Sita's narrative insists on her status as a person whose emotional life cannot be owned by another. In this sense, Divakaruni's feminism is not simply about giving women more power within existing structures. It is about questioning the structures themselves. A woman who becomes a queen but remains defined by her husband's reputation has not necessarily achieved autonomy. The deeper question is whether she can determine the meaning of her own life.

Revision as Cultural Conversation

The Forest of Enchantments should also be understood as part of the long tradition of Ramayana retellings. The Ramayana exists not as one fixed text but as a vast network of versions, performances, regional traditions, translations, adaptations, and reinterpretations. A contemporary retelling therefore participates in an already plural tradition. This context is important because feminist rewriting is sometimes criticized as an imposition of modern values on an ancient text. Such criticism assumes that there was one original and uncontested Ramayana against which all later versions can be measured. The history of the epic complicates that assumption. Multiple Ramayana traditions have always existed.

Divakaruni's novel adds another voice to this plurality. It does not claim to replace Valmiki. Instead, it demonstrates that cultural inheritance can remain alive only when it permits dialogue. Revision is therefore not destruction. It is a form of cultural participation. This point also explains why the novel retains Rama as a complex figure rather than turning him into a simple villain. A feminist retelling does not need to reverse the hierarchy mechanically. If Rama becomes merely evil and Sita becomes merely perfect, the old binary structure remains intact. Divakaruni's more interesting achievement is to allow both characters to possess contradictions. The same applies to Ravana and the other figures. The novel does not eliminate moral distinctions, but it complicates them by giving readers access to motives, histories, and perspectives. This is one of the strengths of revisionist narrative: it can replace judgment based on fixed categories with interpretation based on context.

The Politics of Silence

If voice is central to *The Forest of Enchantments*, silence is equally important. Sita's suffering is repeatedly intensified when others speak for her or when her experience is subordinated to public narratives. The novel exposes the difference between being praised and being heard. This distinction has implications beyond the Ramayana. Women can be represented extensively while still being silenced. A culture may produce thousands of images of an ideal woman while denying actual women the authority to define themselves. Representation and voice are therefore not identical. Divakaruni addresses this problem through narrative form. Sita does not merely appear in the story; she controls the story. Her narration determines what the reader notices and how events are interpreted. This is a formal realization of feminist agency.

The importance of voice is especially evident in relation to the other women. Their stories appear because Sita pays attention to them. The narrative becomes a network of female experiences rather than a single heroic biography. This creates a collective dimension to Sita's voice. She speaks for herself, but her story also creates space for others. Such a strategy resembles what feminist criticism has often called the recovery of women's literary and cultural histories. The aim is not to create one universal woman but to reveal the diversity that patriarchal narratives suppress.

The Contemporary Relevance of the Retelling

The Forest of Enchantments speaks to contemporary debates about gender because the conflicts it dramatizes remain recognizable. Women continue to be judged through family honor, public reputation, sexual morality, and expectations of self-sacrifice. The question of whether a woman's worth should depend on her conformity to social ideals remains unresolved.

The novel is particularly relevant because it does not treat patriarchy as a problem belonging exclusively to the past. Its retelling of the epic demonstrates how ancient narratives can continue to shape contemporary ideas of femininity. The ideal woman is still often expected to be patient, forgiving, devoted, and self-denying. Divakaruni's response is not to reject patience, devotion, or care as such. Instead, she asks whether these qualities have value when freely chosen or whether they become oppressive when demanded. The distinction between choice and compulsion is central to the novel's feminism. The ecological dimension is equally contemporary. The forest is increasingly threatened in the modern world by development, extraction, and commodification. Reading Sita's relationship with nature through an ecofeminist lens allows the novel to participate in a larger critique of human-centered domination. The forest is not simply a resource; it is a

community of living relations. Thus, the novel joins two forms of resistance: resistance to patriarchal appropriation of women and resistance to exploitative appropriation of nature. Both involve challenging the assumption that the powerful have the right to define the less powerful as objects.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* stands as a masterclass in literary retelling functioning as incisive cultural criticism. By reclaiming the Ramayana through Sita's perspective, Divakaruni achieves more than granting a familiar heroine a voice; she fundamentally transforms the dynamics of myth, gender, and power. Rather than remaining a static figure whose meaning is dictated by patriarchal tradition, Sita evolves into an active interpreter of her own epic. Crucially, the novel posits that true emancipation does not require a wholesale rejection of tradition. Instead, Sita's feminist agency is highly interpretive, forged by questioning and redefining inherited concepts of duty, sacrifice, and love. This interpretive feminism is amplified by the novel's pluralistic approach to secondary female characters including Urmila, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Ahalya, and Mandodari. Their intertwined narratives expose the limitations of epics centered solely on masculine heroism. Furthermore, the forest emerges as a vital, alternative epistemological space. Here, the novel's ecofeminist critique intertwines with its gender politics: just as patriarchy seeks to objectify and possess women, a dominative worldview seeks to control nature. Sita counters this structural logic of possession with an ethos of reciprocity, attention, and ecological care. Ultimately, Divakaruni's revisionist mythmaking embodies Adrienne Rich's concept of looking backward with fresh eyes. By opening a closed, authoritative myth to marginalized voices, the novel proves that inherited narratives are fertile sites for ethical transformation. Sita's ultimate agency lies not merely in speaking her truth, but in utilizing that voice to permanently alter the epic's meaning.

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