



Retelling Myths, Reconstructing Narratives: Exploring ‘Desire’ in Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

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Eve Tuck asks for “desire-centric” frameworks in place of the traditional “damage-centric” studies. Forwarding her concept to feminist studies in India, especially in fiction writings, we see more desire-based approach in recent appropriations of Indian mythology. Feminist scholarship often follows “damage-centric” frameworks while discussing positions of women in a phallogocentric world, which cannot do justice to women’s agency. Mere damage-centric writings create a stereotypical picture of feminism, while a desire-based approach can become more useful to women’s cause. This paper investigates desire-based approaches in Divakaruni’s appropriation of Draupadi and Sita in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, whose religious and cultural influence is immense in India despite having an undisputed centrality of men in its narratives. Divakaruni challenges these narratives and attempts retellings. This study explores desire-centrism in Divakaruni’s fictions, which, it opines, is a necessary adjustment of approach for recent feminist scholarship in India in its quest for philosophical decolonization.

Keywords: damage-centric writing, desire-based approach, draupadi, myth-fiction, sita, reconstruction of narratives, women’s agency

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Introduction

Indian feminism might have found its modern face through the Western influence in its colonial and postcolonial era, but the roots were always present in Indian experiences which were often presented through its literature, especially mythology. Further, the influence of Indian mythology on the cultural and social fabric of India is substantial. Numerous authors, especially women writers, have found inspiration in it as a source of subjects through which they have been able to examine and communicate their own experiences and points of view. Indian mythology has served as a substantial inspiration for contemporary Indian women's literature, since it offers an abundance of storylines, symbols, and archetypes that may be utilized to delve into matters pertaining to gender, identity, agency, and power. The majority of the aforementioned female authors have created new narratives that question traditional gender norms and prejudices by incorporating mythological figures and tales. Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) presents a retelling of the Mahabharata through the lens of Draupadi, a

female protagonist who is frequently sidelined in the original epic. She examines matters pertaining to gender, power, and agency in her retelling, thereby offering a feminist lens through which to analyze the epic. In a similar vein, the author, in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) employs the character of Sita from the Ramayana to "examine the status of women in patriarchal societies, contemplate the concept of female autonomy, and put new light on a major Hindu epic" (Pallavi). Through the utilization of the mythological persona Sita, she skillfully constructs a potent metaphor that mirrors the plight of modern Indian women as they negotiate their position in a rapidly evolving global landscape and navigate many cultural identities.

The reenactment and modification of mythical narratives within Indian literary and cultural works may not be an unprecedented occurrence. In several groups and traditions of India, Sita and Draupadi are revered as goddesses. While women truly venerate them, they also strive to comprehend them by drawing parallels to their own lives. Middle Age Bengali



literature also has retellings of the Ramayana from Sita's point of view, in the form of Chandrabati's Ramayana. What then has changed in these contemporary retellings? The distinction is double-folded. Initially, contemporary writers exhibit a deliberate awareness of feminism and gender issues, which was not the case before. Furthermore, this feminist awareness is not a mere adherence to Western feminist ideology; instead, it is an effort to establish the identity of Indian feminisms within the multifaceted and varied cultural milieu of India. The underlying argument of this entire dispute is that "desire" is present in these works of fiction. While "damage" is not completely disregarded, the emphasis is placed on "desire" as the primary theme in literary representations by women.

By first conceptualizing "desire" in feminism as opposed to "damage" or damage-based researches, and secondly applying the conceptual framework of desire-based writings to Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's two popular novels, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, to underscore the need for more desire-centric research and writing in Indian feminist scholarship, this paper seeks

to problematize the issue of "desire" in Indian feminist scholarship. The realm of traditional feminist scholarship in India continues to be influenced by Western feminist philosophy, which frequently fails to acknowledge the socio-cultural realities of the Third World. Consequently, desire-based frameworks that are evident in contemporary Indian literary feminism, exemplified by Divakaruni's endeavor to rewrite the Mahabharata and Ramayana and give Draupadi and Sita the narrative prominence that they lack in the original patriarchal accounts of the two epics, may contribute to the pursuit of feminist principles in Indian literature. In the following, the paper, at first, shall offer a brief overview of Indian Feminism; then it will discuss the mythological influence in it as a recent trend; next, the concept of desire shall be explored in short; after that the discussion shall focus on the two mythological characters the author appropriates in the two novels; finally, we shall trace the instances of desire as a new outlook offered in these retellings.

An Overview of Indian Feminism

Although literary feminism in India has been a subject of discourse for several



decades, it has experienced a substantial surge in prominence around the turn of the 21st century. Amidst a patriarchal environment, the feminist movement in India has been a protracted and tough struggle, with women fighting for their rights and equality. Writers who have utilized their words to challenge societal conventions and draw attention to the difficulties women confront have been essential in this movement. Nevertheless, its origins may be traced back to colonial India, where it was predominantly male writers and social activists who labored for generations to eliminate the numerous socioreligious injustices against women. The pioneers included Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Jyoti Rao Phule, and others. Subsequently, notable political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar emerged. K. Karuna Devi in her book *Female Emancipation, Male Voices in Colonial India* (2022) says, "... there were times when women were subjected to bondage and sufferance by way of inhuman restrictions and customs ... imposed on them by the men in Indian society. ... Reformers such as Raja Rammohun Roy, Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr.

B. R. Ambedkar articulated the dismal condition of women and ways to mitigate this evil." (15). Women who worked for women's causes at that time included writers and reformists Begum Rokeya and Savitri Bai Phule, to name just a few.

During the period following independence, feminism evolved in a manner characterized by what Chandra Mohanty Talpade refers to as "Under Western Eyes". Indian feminism has been significantly impacted since the 1960s by Western feminist movements, particularly those that emerged after the second wave of feminism in Europe and America and included notable figures such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Simon De Beauvoir, and Gertrude Stein, among others. Prominent women writers, including Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, and Kamala Das, among others, delved into the intricate complexities of the hardships and experiences of Indian women in their literary works.

Feminist literature in India has flourished in the twenty-first century, with authors delving into a variety of subjects and themes pertaining to identity, sexuality, and



gender. A notable contribution of feminist literature in India has been the incorporation of the experiences and perspectives of women. Feminist authors have illuminated the hardships and obstacles encountered by women in a culture that frequently rejects their perspectives. Arundhati Roy, a renowned feminism writer in India, has consistently expressed her strong support for social justice and the rights of women. A commitment to social justice and profound compassion for the downtrodden are defining features of Roy's literature. Anita Desai is an additional significant feminist author in India; her novels delve into the experiences of women amidst societal transformations. Desai's literary oeuvre is distinguished by a profound comprehension of the intricacies of interpersonal connections and the obstacles that women encounter within a patriarchal structure. Moreover, contemporary feminist writing in India has played a pivotal role in subverting conventional gender norms and preconceived notions. The nuances of gender and sexuality have been examined by writers, who have challenged the binary concepts of male and female. LGBTQ+ voices and experiences being represented in

feminist literature in India has been among its most significant achievements. Authors such as Shobha De and Arundhati Roy have actively championed LGBTQ+ rights through their literary works, which they have employed to contest prevailing societal conventions and biases.

Furthermore, feminist literature in India has played a key role in contesting prevailing historical and cultural narratives. Female authors have challenged the patriarchal narratives that have historically and culturally dominated Indian history and culture by shedding light on the contributions of women to these domains. Prominent authors such as Kamala Das and Mahasweta Devi have played a pivotal role in questioning prevailing historical and cultural narratives by drawing attention to the lives and experiences of underprivileged women.

The Shift towards Mythology

In this setting, the subject matter and viewpoint of popular Indian women's fiction written in English have taken a radical shift. Indian mythology has emerged as a plentiful wellspring of narrative and storyline elements. An increasing number of Indian women writers who write in English have



emerged and gained popularity during the past decade. Myth-fiction authors like as Kavita Kane, Koral Dasgupta, Ira Mukhoty, Saswaroopaa Iyer, Trisha Das, and others, both established and emerging, are among the notable figures in the subject. Their purpose is frequently articulated in an open manner. Divakaruni in an interview expresses it as in the following:

There have always been important writers who have focused on women and their challenges—Rabindranath Tagore, for one; and later, Mahasweta Devi, have had strong women protagonists. But these writers have been in the minority. Things are changing, both, in literary and popular publications, especially in new books by women. But I still feel we need more stories that are telling a woman's story from her perspective. Such stories allow us to empathize more with a woman's challenges and learn how to deal with such challenges ourselves. For me, Draupadi and Mother Sita, and now Maharani Jind Kaur from my newest novel, *The Last Queen*, have been inspirations in my tough times.

(Matra, “An Exclusive Interview...”).

Evidently, her goal pertains to the contemporary prominence of Indian mythology and its narratives in the realm of women's literature. It is impossible to comprehend a civilization without investigating its myths. Myth holds tremendous cultural significance in India; it is intricately interwoven with their lived experiences. Myths have indeed exerted an influence on communities since the dawn of time. Arvidsson viewed the principles of nature and human conduct in a poetic manner via the lens of myths. An alternative perspective is the euhemeristic one, which ascribes divine nature to the heroes of mythology. In both instances, the interpretation suggested that underneath the myths' seeming juvenile folly resided a concealed, twisted reality. Consequently, myths served as a facade for a degree of rationality concealed beneath their blatant foolishness and abhorrence (Arvidsson 329).

Desire vs Damage

While not entirely explicable, the literal definition of “desire” can provide some insight into what the paper intends to convey through the use of the term in the



present study. Oxford Learner's Dictionary explains it as "a strong wish to have or do something"

(oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com);

Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "a strong feeling of wanting something, or something you want"

(dictionary.cambridge.org). The purpose of

this paper is to examine the definition of "desire" from an alternative standpoint. I am

interested in its meaning in relation to the term "damage", which means "physical

harm caused to something which makes it less attractive, useful or valuable"

(oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). Eve Tuck,

a noted American professor, explores the idea of "desire" in opposition to "damage" in

her paper "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities" (2009). "Desire-based" and

"damage-centered" studies are the two concepts she examines. She emphasizes the

critical nature of academics recognizing the knowledge gap that exists between

themselves and the populations under investigation. She requests that, as part of

the process of reconciling with the matter, we reevaluate the erroneous notion of

change that forms the foundation of "damage-centered research". For her, in

"damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe." (Tuck

413). She defines it as a "research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory

of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation." (413). Her

argument against this type of research is that "damage-centered" research aims to record

victims' suffering so that oppressors can be held liable for their actions. This line of

inquiry is based on a flawed theory of change, as it is frequently employed to gain

access to resources for underserved communities while simultaneously

reinforcing a one-dimensional stereotype of those people as depleted, ruined, and

hopeless (409).

Instead of focusing on damage, she provides us with an alternative narrative in

which "desire" plays a central role. As a paradigm shift, a thirding, and a means of

comprehending the nuances of the communities we aim to assist, desire is an

epistemologically sound starting point. Desire-centric approach shows how we can,

in the pursuit of knowledge, be less reductionist and more appreciative.

Tuck asserts-



Desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. Considering the excerpt from Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2005), desire-based frameworks defy the lure to serve as “advertisements for power” by documenting not only the painful elements of social realities but also the wisdom and hope. Such an axiology is intent on depathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that — so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression. (416).

To explain further, desire-based research encompasses any investigation that seeks to comprehend the intricacies, contradictions, and individual agency of marginalized communities or individuals. Eve Tuck presents an argument that challenges damage-centric research and supports desire-centric approaches. Tuck centers her

conceptual framework on the aboriginal communities of Canada. Furthermore, her thesis is applicable to the examination of any globally marginalized community.

We shall endeavor to communicate this notion to the feminist movement, particularly to the existing body of feminist study in India. As a collective, women have historically been sidelined within the patriarchal socio-cultural framework that has pervaded this planet. Across nations, communities, governments, and religions, women have been subjugated to a phallogocentric power system and the male gaze for centuries. Despite variations among countries, the oppression and deprivation of women remains a universally significant issue. Eve Tuck's conceptualization of “desire” and “damage” is thus applicable and of equal significance in feminist studies and gender studies.

The initial focus of the Indian feminist movement throughout the colonial era and throughout the latter half of the 20th century was on causing damage. It is not surprising that early reformists such as Raja Rammohun Ray, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Begum Rokeya, Savitri Bai Phule, and others were preoccupied with the tyranny,



oppression, destruction, and suffering that women-class endured in Indian communities. Their objective was to raise societal and women's consciousness, enact the legal reforms that were essential to protect women's rights, thereby alleviating women's suffering and increasing their involvement in education and other spheres. Although some of their works, such as Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream*, contained hints of a celebration of women's agency, their primary objective was to examine the harm or damage that women endure in a phallogocentric social structure. Later decades of the post-independence era witnessed a multitude of legal reforms, a tremendous surge in women's education, and the empowerment of women in the majority of societal sectors. However, despite these advancements, the fundamental concern of emancipating women persisted, as societies continued to hold phallogocentric perspectives. Therefore, literary feminists in India, particularly those who composed in English as a pan-Indian language and in diverse Indian languages, persisted in prioritizing damage over desire. Despite the fact that authors such as Kamala Das and Mahashweta Devi have consistently

endeavored to honor the autonomy of women in their works, a contemporary trend of "desire-based" writings has emerged among women writers in English in the twenty-first century. According to Jasbir Jain, this is due to the "Indigenous Roots of Feminism". She examines in her 2011 book, *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity, and Agency*, how numerous strands of Indian history have interwoven to shape the female identity. In order to examine the historical development of feminist inquiry, a diverse collection of seminal texts is utilized, commencing with the Upanishads and encompassing major epics and retellings, Natya Shastra, Manusmriti, and Bhakti literature. She refuses the Western identification of women's experiences in India as the same in Europe and Indian feminism as a singular idea by claiming that "Feminism in India cannot be treated in the singular; there is not one but several feminisms, having their origin in social conditions, religious traditions and caste backgrounds." (4). In order to resist the imposition of Western identity on the Indian feminist movement, Indian women writers embarked on a quest to establish a distinct identity for Indian



feminism. They turned their attention to India's extensive collection of ancient literature, including the epics, puranas, and the vast array of Indian mythology. The primary subject in Indian women's works is the appropriation of legendary narratives, rewriting of stories, and retelling of myths from a standpoint of "desire" rather than focusing solely on depicting "damage". In the subsequent chapters, I will analyze Chitra Banarjee Divakaruni's two books, in which she incorporates desire into her reinterpretation of the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Retelling Mahabharata: Liberating the Voice of Draupadi

Vyasa, an ancient Indian sage, seer, and philosopher, is widely recognized as the author of the Mahabharata. The narrator of Mahabharata is sage Vyasa himself, however, it is "recited by Ugrashrava Sauti unto a group of sages in the Naimisha forest who have been performing a yagna under the head of Shaunaka Kulapati." (jayarama.wordpress.com). *The Palace of Illusions* draws inspiration from this epic, presenting the story from the unique perspective of Draupadi, an exceptional woman. *The Palace of Illusions* transports

readers to a fantastical era that combines elements of mythology and history, drawing intriguing analogies to the present day. The tale chronicles the life of Panchaali, a princess from Panchaal, from her dramatic birth to her intricate role as the wife of five men who were deprived of their father's kingdom. Panchaali becomes involved in their struggle for reparation and remains loyal to them throughout a prolonged period of turmoil and a harrowing internal conflict that encompasses almost all prominent monarchs in India. Panchaali, the spouse of the Pandava siblings in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, offers a novel viewpoint on a traditional narrative. Panchaali recounts her extraordinary birth from a fire and her demise as she concludes the Third Age of Humanity with astute observations and unwavering determination. Divakaruni's establishment of a platform enabled the rise of a new wave of modern Indian literature that creatively reimagines and reinterprets the Hindu epics. Divakaruni confronts the patriarchal voice of the original by centralizing Draupadi in her work and placing "desire" at the forefront, without making any major changes to the original plot.



The novel moves away from placing its protagonist as a mere victim of a phallogentric social structure. By empowering Draupadi through the narrative voice it offers an alternate perspective into the original. Tuck explains that a desire-based work is “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (416), Draupadi in *The Palace* has not been merely idealized as an epitome of virtuous women, rather she is presented as a woman who has all the characteristics of any normal human being, but with a predetermined destiny- she “will leave a mark on history” (Divakaruni, *The Palace*, 39).

Women in epic stories are typically portrayed from an ideological perspective, as models of stoicism and tolerance who watch helplessly as misfortune and injustice befall them. Divakaruni, however, re-imagined the women’s roles by giving them a distinct voice and allowing them to make their own decisions and experience their own bodies and lives. Many previously unseen nooks and crannies of the mysterious female psyche of the mythical women characters are revealed to the readers. Introspective and exploratory writing about epic characters is a

common literary trope. In the current work of fiction, the author portrays Draupadi as a strong and self-reliant protagonist. Draupadi is portrayed as the liberator who can successfully fight for her freedom. She challenges the patriarchal society because she knows how to assert her independence, self-worth, and the need to create an identity for herself. The narrator Divakaruni has created is a strong, independent woman who does not accept the idea that women’s identities should be limited by the presence or absence of men. The name her dad gave her doesn't sit well with her. For this reason, she stops calling herself Draupadi (meaning “daughter of Drupada”) and adopts the name Panchaali instead.

In one way, the desire in *The Palace* is created through gaze- a female one not a male one. As Roy Chayanika says, “The female gaze unlike the male gaze has different power dynamics and does not objectify men to be a subject of their desires and pleasures of looking.” (1). She continues, “The female gaze that Divakaruni portrayed through the figure of Draupadi is not about pleasure or even power; it is about presence. Chitra Divakaruni penetrated through the heart of Panchaali and revealed



many hidden secrets.” (2). In the novel, the author invites us into the world of Draupadi saying, “It is her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision that I invite you into.” (The Palace of Illusions, Author’s Note xv). Draupadi’s sorrow, joy, pride, determination, failure, self-discovery, self-development, vengeance, love, and many other characteristics and qualities that fulfill a human being as a complete one, have been minutely explored in the novel. She has not been portrayed as a mere victim of a patriarchal world, rather she becomes an equal participant in the theatre of the world. She is not portrayed as an idealized woman figure under the male gaze. She is rather black. She recognizes herself with Krishna in that sense- “Perhaps the reason Krishna and I got along so well was that we were both severely dark-skinned.” (8). She is ill-confident of her complexion, which she later transforms into her confidence, “I, too, am beautiful, I told myself, holding Krishna’s words in my mind.” (10). The desire emanates from her postures then one. Her determination to protect her brother Dhri is clear when she despite being impressed with Karna in the *swayamvara* rejects him and challenges him by questioning his father’s

name- “Then, out of the silence that shrouded the marriage hall, a voice rose, Before you attempt to win my hand, king of Anga, it said, tell me your father’s name.” (95), which ultimately checkmates Karna.

The author takes us to the secret chamber of a woman’s heart when Draupadi’s secret love for Karna and her sorrow for insulting him is sketched throughout the novel, which is never present in the original narrative of Vyasa’s Mahabharata. Is it something that Vyasa failed to peep into? Divakaruni’s presentation of this secret love implies a meaning on this text that a woman’s heart is strong enough to resist even a sage’s peep into it. This is what I will call the use of mythopoeia by the novelist in reconstructing the narrative of Mahabharata. Draupadi’s vengeance on the Kaurava brothers, especially, Duryodhan and Dushyshan for insulting her femineity in the Kaurava king’s court is pictured in details. In many traditional interpretations and narratives, which are phallogocentric, Draupadi is regarded as the cause of destruction for the Kuru dynasty. Even traditional feminist narratives see Draupadi as a victim, which Divakaruni in her novel avoids consciously in her portrayal. This is what Tuck calls



“damage-centric” works. Divakaruni rather uses what I mentioned earlier as a “desire-based” framework. Draupadi in *The Palace* transcends herself from this stereotypical portrayal. She becomes a complete human being, a woman who is destined and capable “to change the course of history”. The author places her, constantly, in Krishna’s shadow. Krishna, the lord supreme, God himself, becomes a constant guide to Draupadi, while in the original Mahabharata Krishna is the mentor and companion of the Pandava brothers. Divakaruni through her reconstruction of narrative in *The Palace* claims Krishna from the Pandavas and gifts him to Draupadi. In Draupadi’s voice, in the very end of the novel, at the scene of her death:

Krishna touches my hand. If you can call it a hand, these pinpricks of light that are newly coalescing into the shape of fingers and palm. At his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled in the snow below. I am buoyant, expansive, and uncontainable- but I always was so, only I never knew it!” Draupadi’s is the story of a woman rising above the

destiny which is set for her, is it her story of becoming *Krishna*? (360).

Therefore, Divakaruni transforms Draupadi into a contemporary woman who represents the “buoyant, expansive, and uncontainable” nature of women—a quality they continuously possess but are oblivious to. *The Palace* thus becomes a historical, contemporary, and futuristic account of feminist aspiration.

From Ramayan to Sitayan: Seeing through Sita’s Eyes

The goal of Divakaruni’s 2019 book *The Forest of Enchantments* is to retell the Ramayana, the most well-known epic in Indian mythology, from a different angle. The goal of the fiction is to write Sita's story, “Sitayana”, when she receives the “tome” of the Ramayana from the sage Valmiki, who has been writing it for decades. Sita questions this, stating, “You haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires,...” sets the objective of the current novel- to write “Sitayana”- the story of Sita. Retelling the Ramayana is not a relatively recent phenomenon; Chandrabati's Ramayana was practiced in Bengal as early as the Middle Ages, and there are numerous



other regions of India where comparable versions can be found. Jyothsna Hegde in her review of the present novel says:

Synonymous with fertility and purity, the traditional image of Sita etched in our minds is as the paragon of filial, spousal, and maternal merits, the ideal woman, a symbol of nobility. Divakaruni's Sita, is all of that and something more. This Sita is every bit human as you and me, plunging into the abyss of despair, anger, frustration and rising to the pinnacle of elation, serenity and satisfaction. It's not that 'Sitayana' has not been attempted before, but Divakaruni's *Forest*...lets you in on deeper, darker and even, enchanted secrets. (jaggerylit.com)

Divakaruni's art is unique in a lot of ways. It's not just a recounting; it's a look at the world from Sita's perspective. In addition to taking on the challenging task of reconstructing the identities of several mysterious women from the epic, such as Kaikei, Ahalya, Surpanakha, and Mandodari, through Sita's interactions with them, it does not contain itself to present Sita as merely a victim of patriarchal oppression,

denial of justice, and violence. In the original, the roles played by the women, their efforts, and their sacrifices are frequently disregarded or undervalued. Therefore, the myth's retelling attempt by Divakaruni seems more interesting. Sita uses them to probe the limits of rationality in a patriarchal society by asking whether women should be held to the same standards as men and judged accordingly. Through Sita's story, *The Forest* explores the double standard that exists between the sexes and the times when it is imperative to protest rather than succumbing to fate.

With her relentless style and fabulous storytelling expertise, Divakaruni frequently uses mythical and magical analogies in her works of fiction. She has outlined the fantastic progression of women from naiveté to experience in the midst of odious repercussions of dishonor and worn-out passivity. Further, she has specified the unrestrained persistence of life as substantiating precarity, fragility, and uncertainty with a best-case goal of joy and ecstasy. On the one hand, Sita has been mystified through her mysterious birth, on the other hand, she has been humanized through her experiences of a beloved



daughter of King Janak, her divine love for Ram, her sufferings as the wife of Ram, her determination in the face of a violent demon king Ravan, her compassion to the other women in sufferings, her unparalleled love to her two sons Lav and Kush, and finally, her protest against a patriarch King Ram's discriminatory notion of justice. S. Narmadha calls Divakaruni's Sita a courageous woman, an example for the present age too- "Divakaruni shows Sita as quite courageous who can survive any difficult circumstance, she can easily move forward in spite of obstacles who never give up...." (117).

Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita in *The Forest* is the author's attempt for a desire-based retelling of traditional Ramayana. Through her extensive research of many versions of Ramayana, as she mentions in the Author's Note of the novel, she has recreated it, and has written *Sitayan*. She remains loyal to the plot of original Valmiki Ramayana but, the protagonist is Sita, not Ram. The desire is to see through Sita's eyes that Valmiki or most other male authors of various versions of Ramayana failed to see. Sita is often regarded and idealized in patriarchal Indian society as an ideal wife

who always suffers with her husband, but never complains, who sacrifices for the family but never stands up for self-right. Divakaruni's Sita is different. She is not all about the "damage" she receives from the society; she is an image of modern-day women and their desire to stand up too. She has agency. Sukanya Saha explains it in the following manner:

Sita of Ramayan must be a goddess but Banerjee's Sita is a human, a one who is relatable. Sita's contemporary rendition is focal in this novel. She is capable of being smitten, angry, confused, afraid, or heartbroken. Banerjee confines the portrayal of her Sita within the dictates of the epic and at the same time lets her fancy take flight in endowing Sita with an unmatched intellect, martial art skills, penchant for latest fashion, and ability to express intimate desires sans inhibitions. Banerjee's Sita mirrors contemporary woman in every bit as far as she could exercise control over her creation. (2).

Despite the fact that the Ramayan is commonly told in Indian homes, Divakaruni's portrayal is compelling



because of the enthusiasm, intensity, and sincerity with which it is presented. Her goal of freeing her tale from the overwhelming shadow of Ramayan is sincere. For Saha, “Sita’s life oscillates between two extremes, royalty and wilderness, emanating many-hued emotions and impulses. Sita is the emergence of an independent voice, unabashed of social inhibitions, voicing a modest protest which never turns into a tirade.” (5). Sita’s life does not remain confined to one particular experience- a princess or a queen’s, rather it goes through a journey- from royalty to poverty, from luxury to ordinary, from joy to pain. Divakaruni creates Sita independent of the stereotypical portrayal. Sita speaks up and stands up to challenges. The very last chapter of the fiction sums up of her experiences- Sita returns to Ayodhya, her joy knows no bound that she will finally reunite with her beloved Ram, will have a beautiful family with her husband and sons. However, when she learns that to please the gossip-mongering citizens of Ayodhya, Ram has prepared another “agni-pariksha” (fire-test), Sita speaks up- not only for herself but also for the entire women class of the world-

‘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. I can’t do that to them. (356-358).

Sita’s “no” to Ram is not simply a refusal to Ram, but towards patriarchy, towards the phallogocentric society that fails to acknowledge women’s sacrifices and unjustly treats them according to their whims. Sita’s stance symbolizes women’s agency. Divakaruni’s Sita transcends herself from the position of a mere receiver and becomes a powerful expression of resistance.



Desire in Myth Narrative: Shaping Contemporary Indian Feminist Identity

Indian feminist identity has always been multifaceted. In the postcolonial times, especially in independent India, emergence of distinct feminist ideologies was evident. The dominant one is the Western feminist doctrine, which initially shaped Indian feminism to become a formal discipline in academia and also a social movement in the country. The second one consists of complex Indian perceptions of women's role, women rights, gender equality, and development on the basis of "indigenous roots of Indian feminism", which doesn't deny tradition in its entirety despite being more or less androcentric. For Geetanjali Gangoli:

Indian feminists have recognised and acknowledged differences between themselves. What they share is recognition of differential power relations between women and men, with men enjoying power over women. The recognition, does not, as we will see, detract from the recognition that not all men are equal in relation to each other, indeed that not all women are similarly placed in positions of subordination. (15)

While urban feminist activism has been more tailored to the shape of White European feminisms, unorganized rural women's activism often ignored by mainstream urban leaders showed off India's own feminist voices in many movements. The Chipko movement in 1970s is a remarkable example of that. Hence the woman question in India which took shape primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth century in India as a part of "anti-colonial nationalist movements" (Sarkar) gradually took a definite shape in the post independent period. However, the western legacy of Indian feminism has become a contentious question from the 1990s. The relevance of Western feminist beliefs was subject to increasing questions. What started as a part of anti-colonial movement in India hence began searching for an independent self-identity. This might be called a process of decolonization. Literary feminism plays an important part in the decolonization process of Indian feminism, and this paper argues that literary feminism in the twenty-first century has attempted a novel way of decolonization and identity formation for Indian feminism by initiating desire-based frameworks in fiction writing.



Desire-based fiction writings appropriating popular Indian mythology has ushered a new era in the identity-formation process of Indian feminism. Endeavoring to shy away from White feminists' generalization of women's experiences, which Herr referring to Chandra Mohanty calls "'colonialist move' ... in depriving Third World women of 'their historical and political agency'" (5), are evident in many of the recent popular women novelists of Indian English. Divakaruni's *Palace* and *Forest* indicate towards this ideological shift. As stated in earlier sections both of the novels try to shift the tone from a damage-centric one to a desire-based one. Draupadi and Sita, two omega points in Indian women's representation in mythology, are appropriated for a greater goal. While discussing them, we must remember that they are highly revered figures in Hindu beliefs in India. So, the appropriation of them by Divakaruni must have implications on Indian women in many ways, at least through literature and popular media. The objective, thus, is to reshape or to make the readers to rethink about them. Divakaruni is conscious in her attempt to not radicalize Draupadi or Sita, which many critics ask for,

but they forget that any such radical revision of Draupadi and Sita would not be welcoming among many traditional readers, hence that will fail to create any impact on the intended audience. At the same time, such radicalized feminist portrayal will align the writings more to the Western feminist beliefs which is "largely a global application of the ... white feminist outlook" (Herr 4) than accommodating the nuances of the Third World Indian feminism. Thus, the process of decolonization of Indian feminism would fail and the quest for an autonomous identity of Indian feminism cannot be explored. The most important thing that Divakaruni has done in her quest is to give back Draupadi and Sita their voices, the denial of which is original and perennial. From the times of Valmiki to the present day. However, that does not mean that all the cultural essences have to be cursed upon to recreate and reimagine the mythical figures. Indian feminism as an important part of Third World feminism which "examine and analyze Third World women's oppression and resistance on the ground in their historical specificity by paying attention to intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nation pertaining



to their locations”, must not abandon their male partners. As part of the Third World, their resistance must not “involve an explicit demand for gender equality or radical social restructuring” only for achieving “feminist goals”; in contrary, they should “opt for gradual changes that result from their collaboration with their male counterparts to enhance their communal influence ... to improve living standards of their families and of the community itself”. (Herr 5). Divakaruni devises her works in this manner. She is completely aware of the necessity of keeping her feet on the ground, in reality and not placing it totally to an imaginary, fancy “Herland” in her retellings of the epics, in recreating the narratives.

Divakaruni’s Draupadi is hardened and revengeful on the one hand, loving and caring on the other hand. She cries in vengeance for the blood of Dushasana, but feels sorry for doing injustice to Karna; she holds the hands of Arjuna, but craves for Karna in the secret chamber of her heart. Divakaruni portrays her as a human being rather than a “wonder woman” in *Palace*. Thus, her Draupadi is identifiable as an Indian woman who has her voice and agency rather than a “madwoman in the attic”

Western feminism. Draupadi’s portrayal is thus desire-based not damage-centric. She becomes “An epitome of feminine assertion” (Vanitha 331) who works on self-development who suffers, falls, gets up and fight back; she questions herself “about her own endurance, her will, her preference and her aptitude to take resolution” (Vanitha 335).

Divakaruni’s Sita is similarly a fusion of myth and desire. In Ramayana Sita becomes free from Ravana’s captivity, but remains captured in an androcentric narrative. In contrast, Divakaruni attempts to liberate Sita in *Forest* by writing Sitayana is an act of resistance to the phallogocentric literary narratives prevalent in Indian literary tradition. Divakaruni’s idea is not a radical one, rather quite similar to Draupadi’s portrayal in *Palace*. The objective for the author seems not a rebellion but a revision of existing narrative structures. For the sufferings and experience of Sita, the author does not try to alter the Ramayana; what she does is reversing the narrative voice, thus liberating Sita’s voice, creating an insider’s first-person narrative in place of a partial omniscient narrative. The subaltern speaks this way. Hence the pure damage-centric



portrayal of Sita for ages by both men and women are superseded by a desire-based narrative of Sita- a woman who “in Ramayana is revered for her dedication to her dharma (duty) as wife and mother and for the sacrifices she made to achieve this vocation”, often described as “a symbol of femininity and is an ideal to imitate for other women”; despite being a goddess herself, she is often viewed “as an extension of Lord Ram, but not an aspired individual with vision” (Chandran et.al. 64-65). Her portrayal is often submissive, representative of the cherished socialization of girls in Indian society. Divakaruni in *Forest* reconstructs Sita and “propagates a new sense of empowerment through endurance that ultimately leads women to challenge the obstacles and strive in triumph” (Chandran et.al. 65). Sita’s desire ultimately liberates her not only from Ram’s (read phallogocentric) injustice, but also from the unjust representation of her in traditional narratives. In feminist scholarship this can be debatable if viewed from mere damage-centric views which sees Sita as a broken figure, as a victim only. However, Divakaruni’s quest, while not taking away her sufferings, portrays Sita as a free-

thinker. This is suggestive of an ongoing identity formation for Indian feminism by “decolonizing the mind” from White feminist philosophies and incorporating Indian values and culture in Indian feminist struggle.

Conclusion

To wrap things up, Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* are representative of a new perspective in Indian feminist scholarship. They, together with many other recent myth-fictions are striving to locate an indigenous root for Indian feminist scholarship which seeks to shy away from its colonial legacy. The search for a new identity result in the retellings of the great Indian epics from the perspectives of Draupadi and Sita. The inadequacy of the Western feminism to understand the aspirations and reality of Third World Women’s experiences, and its attempt to generalize them have led Indian feminist writers, even diasporic Indian writers like Divakaruni to examine their own cultural past, history, and myths to enrich the Indian feminist repertoire. Indian feminism as a part of the Third World feminist struggle against what Mohanty (1991)



termed as “white feminists’ pernicious mischaracterization of Third World women’s oppression as merely a worse case of gender oppression” (Herr 2), aims to generate “descriptively reliable feminist analyses by Third World women themselves of Third World women’s diverse forms of oppression and different modes of resistance on the ground” (Herr 2), and focus on “Third World women’s activism in their particular local/national contexts.” (Herr 2). The current study, in this context, explores Divakaruni’s appropriation of Indian Mythology, the popular and revered characters of Draupadi and Sita, in her attempt to reinterpret them, retell them, and if necessary, revise them. To counter the very fossilized notions of right and wrong regarding women’s action in society, the author reconstructs the center, makes women the protagonist, provides them the necessary voice they were deprived in the original ones, and, thus, pushes for a more (what Eve Tuck terms as) desire-based writings of feminist literature in lieu of a mere damage-centric one. Draupadi and Sita in Divakaruni’s fictions are not portrayed as mere victims, nor they are presented as ideal women. They are human beings with all the

emotions; they have their joy and sorrow, success and failures. What makes them stand out in these new readings is their ability to speak up, their desire to chase their dreams, their agency to rise from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and, most importantly, their self-respect. They represent the new women of India in the 21st century who no more wants to be represented as merely broken figures in a patriarchal social structure, but desires their own voices to be heard. Myth has turned out to be the most prolific field in this endeavor. Numerous stories and characters are there which can be re-interpreted through the writers’ imaginative power. Further, mythology forms an important part of the Indian cultural core, since those are closely related to religious beliefs. So, retelling of significant myths and mythological tales can, at the same time, make an important impact on the educated psyche of human beings. Thus, myth can usher a new age in Indian feminist scholarship- can become a new voice of feminism.

At the last, about the limitations- this paper could not adequately explore the necessary theoretical distance between Western feminism and Indian feminism as



the focus is given more on the attempted appropriation of mythology in Indian feminism. To add, this study discusses only one author while a comprehensive analysis of some other authors and their writings could have been more useful.

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