

Sita: A symbol of Strength, Resilience, and Empowerment in *The Forest of Enchantments*

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ABSTRACT

The epic, Ramayana is an enduring literary classic and serves as a guide for social practices, which have a great deal of influence even today. Ramayana is about satisfaction, sacrifice, honesty, and destruction of greed and indiscipline. The epic pictures the birth of goddess, Lakshmi as an avatar to rescue the earth and to destroy the evil kings, who plunder the resources and destroy life through bloody wars and evil conduct. Sita is one of the significant characters in the epic, Ramayana who is considered to be one of the Panchkanyas and respected as the epitome of all womanly virtues for Hindu women. Ramayana depicts women as warriors in domestic life and the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, depicts the incredible journey of women in a patriarchal society and pictures the struggle of modern women to achieve their identity in both their families and society. Chitra Banerjee in *The Forest of Enchantments* explores the characters of women and brings out their qualities like their moral strength and urges them to attain their destiny. The novel brings out the importance of women's role in both their family and society.

Keywords: *Women, Sita, Womanhood, Patriarchal society, Identity, Survival, Strength.*

Sita has been placed in literature for more than thousands of years because she is a woman relevant across empires and eras as the embodiment of an enduring Hindu culture. Sita can be viewed as a multi-faceted woman who has created an identity in her life and has proved the sanctity of wifehood and womanhood in a patriarchal society. Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*, and the protagonist of the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*. The novel narrates the idyllic life of Sita in Mithila as the favourite daughter of King Janak which is a retelling and continuation of the original epic *Ramayana*.

Sita's survival shows the strength that the woman gender holds. Sita's life has been at risk and there has been a chance that the child may have died or been taken away by some evil creatures

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or could be eaten by animals in the forest until king Janak and queen Sunaina find her. The survival of Sita at such risks proves that she has been sent to the earth by Bhomidevi in order to glorify the essence and power of womanhood through the life of Sita.

Sita, who is worshipped to be an avatar of Goddess Laxmi, is believed have miraculous healing powers over Nature. She is the daughter of *Bhumi* (The Mother Earth) in reincarnation because the childless King Janak finds her while ploughing the field as part of a yajna and adopts her as his daughter. She is named Sita which means ‘from the furrow’ and symbolizes the fertility of the soil. She is brought up as a warrior princess, who is trained in martial arts under the guidance of a skilled female warrior with a prediction that Sita’s future would be challenging. She is the first princess to get an opportunity to learn all the arts and Vedas apart from the usual guidance, which helps her to be defensive. She possesses the qualities of tolerance, kindness, and passion. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Sita, not as a coy and a docile wife but as the one who combats several challenges to rise from a great transformation of an adopted orphan to a brave warrior princess and ultimately a goddess by breaking the barriers to achieve her great destiny, which is to rule the world.

Sita is one of the *ayonijas* or those not born from the womb of the mother. She is called Janaki, and also is referred to by the name Mythili, as King Janak is the ruler of Mithila. Queen Sunaina readily accepts to adopt the girl child from mother earth. Sita loves and respects her foster-mother Sunaina, who is an epitome of royalty, grace, and sensibility. Sunaina possesses utmost prudence in matters of state and domesticity; she has assisted her husband, who is the King of Mithila, but never superseded him with an awareness that the people of their kingdom lay their trust in the male ruler. As a mother, she tutors Sita that “If you want to stand up against the wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn’t bruise a man’s pride. You will have a better chance of success” (46). She prepares her daughters in a way that they could maintain peace with the sexes and teaches them that, “Pull yourselves together... we come into the world alone and we leave it alone. ...Draw on your inner strength. Remember, you can be your own worst enemy – or your best friend. It’s upto you. And also this: what you can’t change, you must endure” (54). She plays a major role in moulding Sita and her sisters as brave warriors.

Sita and her sister, Urmila enjoy a blissful life gamboling around the palace of Mithila and its extensive gardens. Sita gets married to Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, who wins her hand in the *Swayamvara* as he is the only person able to string the mighty bow of Lord Shiva; her

sister Urmila is married to Laxman, the younger brother of Rama. After the grand wedding, Sita encounters numerous hardships as the issue of patriarchy versus women's liberation is featured strongly in Divakaruni's novel. Valmiki's characterization of Sita is surrounded by piety and upheld as a goddess of sacrifice while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sita is a questioning being, falling prey to the deepest of doubts and bouts of hopelessness. In the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni voices the grievances of Sita and the other ostracized women characters.

Sita enters the phase of married life fraught with palace intrigues and jealous politics between the three queens of Ayodhya. Kaushalya, the mother-in-law of Sita, is a conventional and docile woman. The devotion and affection of Kaushalya towards her husband, King Dashrath is marred by his love for the other two queens, Kaikeyi and Sumithra. In a way to stand against the father's polygamist choices, Rama pledges never to marry another woman. Kaushalya, as the eldest is neglected for her age and is always in deep sorrow and finds her place in the place through her adjustment. Being the mother of Ram, Kaushalya becomes the centre of Sita's life and both perceive their role as a queen with a polite attitude as Sita justifies with her interpretation of the word – "Endure. A word solid as a tree trunk. A good word upon which to build a life, I thought. I would learn it, and it would" (73).

Kaikeyi is a charismatic and courageous woman, the mother of Bharath is known to be the bringer of calamity to the kingdom. She has always wanted her son to be the king. She symbolizes aggressive feminism through her barbaric and unwomanly manipulation when the King decides to crown Rama as the King. She locks herself to gratify her ambitions and toys with the decisions of her husband. Divakaruni remarks about Kaikeyi as,

"Did you know she has an anger chamber in her quarters? I don't understand how Dasharath allows it. He certainly wouldn't have let me have one—not that I've ever wanted something so barbaric and unwomanly. Anyway, Kaikeyi threw off all her ornaments and silks and refused to eat or drink anything until he apologized and promised that Manthara could stay in Ayodhya as long as she wanted.' There was outrage in Kaushalya's voice – that a mere wife should be able to do this. But underneath that I heard a trace of longing." (73)

Kaikeyi exhibits her arrogance by denying to surrender before her husband. She is ostracized to a great extent on account of her transgressions when her son imprisons her in the palace and the Kingdom plunges into an epoch of darkness as the king passes away and Ram along with Sita and Lakshman is forced to undertake *vanavas*. It is a blind maternal love that coaxes Kaikeyi to sow the seeds of conflict and it is expressed as,

"From the veranda, which ran along one edge of the palace, we could see the bordering street. The music was louder here. Men and women danced on the street, strewing flower petals. A ceremonial gate decorated with bright fabrics and coloured flags had been erected. I guessed that Ram and I were

supposed to begin a chariot-procession from there. Manthara stopped for a moment, rising on her toes to observe the festivities. ‘Ah, the stupid masses. They’ll soon be dancing to a different tune. Truly, ignorance is bliss, is it not?’ Her words sent a chill through me. I wanted to ask what she meant, but I knew that was exactly what she wished me to do. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.” (84)

Kaikeyi is eventually a loser, takes the vow of silence, and begs for mercy. In the epic, soon after Ram marries Sita, he is exiled from the kingdom to the forest for fourteen years because of a vow that his father had made years earlier to his favourite wife, Kaikeyi. Sita knows that the duty of a wife is to follow the path of her husband and be with him in all circumstances. Sita has the choice to live the luxurious life in the palace, but she opts to be with her husband because of her sincere love and devotion towards him. She has made up her mind to be brave in the uncertainty and insecurity of forest life and support him in all hurdles of life. It is her obligation that turns into her choice and finds happiness to live with her husband and support him in all possible ways. Sita immediately gets ready to sacrifice her royal life-style and readily joins Ram on his *vanavas*. She takes challenges and stands by her husband as an ideal consort like Kaikeyi.

King Dashrath marries Sumitra, his third wife and the princess of Kashi, as his other two wives remain childless for a long period of time. Sumitra, the mother of the twins, Laxman and Shatrughna is considered to be the wisest among the other two queens. She is a highly righteous queen and has great equanimity of mind. She has an optimistic outlook in life and faced difficult situations with fortitude. Though younger in age, Sumitra has the maturity to console the senior queen, Kaushalya when the latter plunges into sorrow. She is the first to realize that Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Sumitra values her role in the family and commits herself to her role as mother and directs both her sons to follow their brothers. She readily sends her sons to support Ram and Bharat in all their endeavours and always protects them, “She’s (Sumitra) waiting at the door when he gets back from helping Ram with governing problems. She’s the one asking if he’s tired and offering him a cool drink. She’s the one serving him food, and asking if he wants second helpings” (97). Sita finds Kausalya as the person who plays the most effective role of a mother who teaches both her sons the value of dharma and brotherhood. Sita is able to endow Sumitra’s teaching to her sons and is able to forge a stable familial bond between them.

Sita comes across as a sensible, sensitive and intelligent woman who pauses to reason out and find appropriate solutions to the variety of issues that crop up in her life as princess of *Mithila* and daughter-in-law of *Ayodhya*. Her mind is alert to all kinds of patriarchal discrimination

that pose obstacles and she does not acquiesce very easily without a critical analysis. Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* is able to articulate her thoughts like “The problem was clearly with the king, but it was the queens who had to pay the price for it”(89).Sita takes up cudgels on behalf of other wronged women like Ahalya and her own sister, Urvashi. She does not stop short of a little manipulation too with the best of intentions if it could help sort out the difficulties of another woman, like in the situation between Kaikeyi and Kaushalya. Sita’s response to the women in her life is very humane and realistic. Her meeting with Ahalya fills her with female compassion and feminine outrage at the wrong done to Ahalya by her husband, Gautam and the lord Indira. Sita finds Ahalya’s story thought-worthy as she visualizes herself with Ahalya :

“... the beautiful, was created by Brahma himself, who then gave her in marriage to Gautam, the ascetic. Things went well— Gautam busy with his austerities, Ahalya devoted to taking care of him— until she came to the notice of Indra. As king of the gods, Indra believed that such a beautiful woman should belong to him. He approached Ahalya, promising her luxuries and pleasures beyond imagining, but she was a virtuous wife and rebuffed him. Indra wasn’t ready to give up, however. He waited until a day when the sage went deep into the forest to perform a special yagna. Then he transformed himself magically and, in the guise of Gautam, came to the ashram and took Ahalya to bed. Returning late at night, Gautam ... realized what had happened. In his fury, he cursed Indra...(and)...Ahalya ...For betraying her sacred marital vows for the sake of bodily pleasure, she would be turned into stone.” (161)

Sita is petrified of the misguided actions of a learned rishi like Gautam. After knowing the story Sita is amazed at Ahalya’s forgiveness of her husband and asks Ahalya how it would be possible to love someone after they distrust one in spite of their faithfulness, “Your husband—he condemned you even before he gave you a chance to speak. You’d been his faithful wife for many years. ...I understand that he did it in anger, that in anger we can lose ourselves. But you—when you were turned back into a woman, you forgave him. ... And do you still love him?” (166). Ahalya’s answer is cryptic when she tells Sita that she must figure out the answer through her own life’s challenges which would be upon her soon. Sita also learns an important lesson about love – once wounded it cannot be healed again. Sita, like Ahalya is bonded with love to Ram and Ahalya’s advice helps Sita to make crucial decisions while facing Ram’s acquisitions.

The author’s portrayal of Sita is on the lines of feminist ideology. The issue of patriarchy versus women’s liberation features strongly in Divakaruni’s presentation. Sita’s rejection of Ram’s appeal to come back to *Ayodhya* after she is subjected to the humiliation of the *Agnipariksha* and final banishment from the kingdom touches the highest point of feminist independence where there is no compromise in the refusal to appease the male ego and where

there is a complete rejection of the need for male support. Ahalya's decision to adopt silence for the rest of her life is small compared to that of Sita to subsume herself into the lap of her mother earth and walk proudly away from her role of wife and mother. This final act of self-respect on the part of Sita is admirable. Sita's tragedy is brought out more as a personal one, a tragedy of love rather than purely a public one. Before taking her final exit Sita tells Ram that: "I accept your priorities, and understand why they are so important to you...But I don't agree with you that the private life must be sacrificed for the public one. And that is the final advice that I leave for my children...balance duty with love" (356).

Esteemed as a paragon of virtues, Sita is an ironical mixture of the martyr and the victim. She questions her husband that, 'If you reject me now, word will travel all across Bharatvarsha, and men everywhere will feel that they, too, can reject a wife who has been abducted. Or even been touched against her will. Countless innocent women—as innocent as I am—will be shunned and punished because of your act. Is that dharma? Is that what you want?' (243-244) The name of Sita is evoked by Indians to inculcate self-sacrificing virtues of sacrifice and acceptance in young girls of marriageable age and yet no one wants their daughters to have a life like Sita. Sita's life is a cursed one; after her grand wedding to the scion of Ayodhya she has to face (with her husband) the jealous wrath of her stepmother-in-law, Kaikeyi, and gets banished from the kingdom thereby sacrifices the luxuries of royal life and is compelled to live the life of ascetics in the forest for fourteen years. Subsequently, she gets abducted by Ravana, King of Lanka after which Rama wages a war to get her back. She has to give an *Agnipariksha*, a test through fire, to prove her purity. The anguish of Sita is revealed as,

"Ram's hand tightened around my wrist, his grasp like iron. I knew I'd have a bruise later, but that was the least of my concerns. Stand up against this huge injustice, I wanted to say. But he shook his head, indicating he didn't want me to speak. I obeyed, but in my mind I begged him. Protest. If nothing else, remind your father of his kingly duty to the people of Ayodhya." (105)

Sita maintains her strength as a hostage in the hands of Raavan with the support of his loyal and faithful wife, Mandodari. She wants to lead her husband down the path of righteousness. It is a great challenge to her when her husband, Raavan kidnaps Sita. She knows that her husband's lust is too great to overcome, and so uses her power to save Sita's life, when Raavan tries to behead her when she refuses to marry him. She tries her best to make a better person out of him, which is extremely admirable and brave. She never becomes jealous of Raavan's affection for Sita. The strength of her character parallels that of Sita in every way.

Mandodari knows that her husband's lust would bring downfall to their lives and so repeatedly advises Raavan to let free Sita. She gives a lot of hope to Sita saying that she will be rescued by her husband. Sita admires Mandodari for her kindness and boldness in all her actions. Mandodari remains the most ardent woman in the novel, who according to the author is the epitome of queenly virtues. She obeys her husband and when she encounters crucial circumstances, she stands firm to confront the dangers with her wits. She counsels in the royal decisions and encourages women to exercise the power that they hold to protect themselves. She even stands against her husband to protect Sita stating that:

“The woman made a prophecy that Lanka will be destroyed by her husband. You will die—our sons will die—no one would be left even to cremate the dead. That's exactly what I dreamed last night. I was trying to tell you about it earlier, but you wouldn't listen. I saw the entire city in flames. I saw on the ground the severed head of my beloved son, your heir Meghnad. I saw the goddess Chamundi who protects our city ascending to the heavens, her face turned away from my pleas. ...Send back this witch, this bad-luck creature, before she brings ruin on us all. Please, ... I'm begging you.” (216)

Mandodari considers Sita to be her abandoned daughter and tries all the means as a mother to save her daughter rather than the kingdom. She goes against all odds to help Sita to escape from the Ashoka Forest. Mandodari's support gives a way of sunrise to Sita when Hanuman, the great devotee of Ram comes to rescue Sita. Hanuman carries Sita home on his back, but she refuses the offer knowing that it is the sole destiny of Ram to rescue her from Raavana's empire. Sita suggests that Ram should come to her rescue since she feels that people will ridicule the valour of Ram saying that he could not rescue his wife.

Sita encounters the tortures of Rakshashis, who causes threat to break her thoughts and physique: “They made a game of poking at me with sharp nails that bruised my skin just when I fell asleep, or suddenly transforming themselves into horrifying monster-shapes to startle me, or rushing at me, teeth bared, as though to devour me” (226). The Rakshashis' constantly try to lure Sita to believe the death of Ram at Ravana's hands. Surpanakha, Ravana's sister for whom Sita, is captured for vengeance, threatens Sita and foreshadows the tragic circumstances of Sita's life in the future.

Sarama, Vibheeshan's wife and Ravana's sister-in-law, guides Sita through the turmoil. Sarama shares her role as the wife of the traitor. She is worried about the life of her husband and son which makes Sita wonder “... love's contradictions, how it fills us with joy but also with worry for welfare of the loved one and pain for his suffering” (229). Sita learns the ordeal of a woman thoroughly when she is rescued from Lanka and Ram decides to leave Sita stating that:

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...But I cannot take you back to Ayodhya with me. Ravan abducted you from my home. You've lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you've had with him—' (288-289)

Sita is furious when she hears the harsh words from Ram and fears losing her reverence that could tarnish the name of her parents. She defends herself from the acquisition and fights for her dignity. She prays to *Agnidev*, the holy fire, to prove her chastity and innocence. The gods deliver Sita unscathed to Rama but they affirm her purity by reproaching Ram for his distrust. Sita, though not literally sacrificed during her *Agnipariksha*, her willingness to submit to the trial by walking into the fire and the subsequent praise that she receives for her willingness substantiates her as a sacrificial woman. She makes women understand their unconventional role of self-sacrifice.

Ram apologizes and Sita forgives him. She in the process is "...transformed. Perhaps that was why I had to endure pain—because true transformation can only happen in the crucible of suffering. All impurities fall away from gold only when it's heated to melting" (294) and she becomes the light of hope for all the women. She embraces the role of the queen and dutifully takes the responsibilities of a wife, daughter-in-law, and motherly figure to Ram's brothers and Hanuman. Sita becomes more equal to Ram in solving governmental and familial issues. The final blow comes to Sita and now pregnant is finally exiled from *Ayodhya* by her husband on hearing derogatory words from a washerman about her chastity. Her anger towards Rama for banishing her is revealed as, "For the sake of my sons, I made myself live when it would have been much easier to give up and die than to go through the pain of having the person you love most in the world abandon you. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. (357)"

Sita stands against all the cruelties committed against women and stands as a role model for the world population to review their actions towards women. She wishes to die rather than tolerate the repeated need for a woman to prove her innocence. She reproaches the idea of women being tested and asks women to stand up for themselves.

The way society views things is greatly influenced by the king's power structure. The reason for this is because the monarch is regarded as God's incarnation and is in charge of deciding what is right and wrong for his subjects. Because Sita believes her husband has the ability to address social injustice, she protests against him. Realizing the structural power, Sita makes

the case that the monarch ought to exercise greater consideration in both his words and deeds. As part of her fight against injustice, Sita acknowledges that other women can go through similar circumstances. In feminism, it's critical to recognize not just our own inequality but also that of other women. It is more crucial to save other people.

In the forest at Valmiki's ashram, she gives birth to the twins Luv and Kush and finally re-enters the earth, the womb of her mother to escape from the cruelties of this world. Her unresisting acceptance of the decisions imposed upon her by others, has been immortalized as a paragon of duty, devotion, and sacrifice. Divakaruni retells the story of Sita and Rama, trying to give it a more human and realistic account, making Sita less of a Goddess and more of a woman with natural and human instincts that make her laugh with joy, that make her heartbeat with love and passion, that make her weep in frustration and grief. Divakaruni says that the story of Sita haunts her for three reasons, firstly, because Sita is intensely human, secondly, because her choices and reactions stem from courage (though it is easily mistaken for meekness because she is not assertive) and thirdly, because of Ram and Sita's tragic love story. Thus, in the author's note, Divakaruni writes:

"I'm going to write the story of Sita, I said, because I've always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just like Panchaali, my Sita (yes, with the presumptuous intimacy of authors, I thought of her as mine) will tell her own tale. She'll fill the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats. She'll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them." (vii)

The novel begins in the ashram when Sita reads the Valmiki's *Ramyana* from the man's perspective and she feels dejected and says "...what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt—first in the forest and then in Ayodhya—when I was the most beloved woman in creation" (12). Sita with Valmiki, reasons and analyse the need for women to understand each other as Valmiki "...haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another" (13). Sita is urged to write her version and the story begins from a women's perspective, *Sitayan*.

Revisiting the facts, in the prologue to the novel, Divakaruni gives an exposition to her *Sitayan*. Living in exile in the ashram of the sage Valmiki, Sita is given the manuscript of the work he had been composing for decades, for her approval because he says that it contains her story too. But the name he has given to his work brings the mixed feelings of rage and sorrow

of Sita's mind, for Valmiki had chosen to call his story the *Ramayan* – the story of Rama. Finally, Sita decides to take control of her life, for once. Sita tells the sage Valmiki that he has captured everything beautifully, the histories of heaven and earth, the wars, the weddings, the farewells and betrayals, the palace and the forest, everything in superb poetry, sublime descriptions and perfect rhythm but, scarcely able to control her anger, she says, "...what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt- first, in the forest and then in Ayodhya-when I was the most beloved woman in creation" (2). Valmiki tells Sita that, she must write the story herself, "...for only you know it" (2). Sita starts to write her own story and revisits her lesson from all the women in her life:

"Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband." (14)

Sita feels a sense of need for the other women in her life, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Mandodari, and her own sister Urmila, who asks her to "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten-or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (4). Sita promises to write their stories too because without them her own story would be incomplete, and thus composes the *Sitayan*.

In the modern context, Sita's story as revived by Divakaruni, is one that falls into the category of issues like victimization and single motherhood. Divakaruni's attempt is to relate mythology into an identifiable reality recognizing the need to build a narrative that breaks the norm, though she has not tampered with the original storyline. Divakaruni follows the original storyline faithfully without any fictional additions to the plot or characterization. The only thing Divakaruni has done is to tell the story from the viewpoint of Sita. She says that it is unmistakable that "...the story of Sita and Rama is one of the greatest and most tragic love stories-not just in our Indian culture but in the world" (ix). In the process of writing, *The Forest of Enchantments* she realized that 'the novel became a meditation on the nature of love'(ix), and it is her endeavour to be able to do justice to both Sita as well as Rama: "...I hope that, while focusing on the many wonderful, exciting and surprising layers to Sita's character. I've simultaneously been able to portray Ram as the complex being that he is: noble,

earnest, devoted to his wife, but beset by challenges of his own and forced to choose between his public role of king and his private role of husband and lover.” (ix)

Chitra Divakaruni, in the prologue of the novel, has skillfully created the context. When Sita reads the manuscript of *Ramayana* which is handed over to her by sage Valmiki. She realizes that it is no doubt a poem that is superb, with sublime descriptions and perfect rhythm, but at the same time, she points out to the sage:

“You’ve captured the histories of earth and heaven both, the adventures and the wars, the weddings and the deaths, the betrayals and the farewells, the palace and the forest. But... what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don’t know. You don’t know my despair. You don’t even know my exhilaration, how I felt...” (2)

The injustice in the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* reveals the unfair treatment and oppression which is repeatedly experienced by women. The unjust treatment of women is portrayed as,

“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 to judge other women. Even when they aren’t guilty, the burden of proving the innocent will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. (356-357)”

Sita is a woman, who crafts her relationships and imbibes motherhood from four great women like queen Mandodari, Ahalya Bhoomidevi, and queen Sunaina. Sita is considered to be a sign of power by each female. She is remembered for her virtuous nature, which is a clear reflector of qualities received from the four legendary ladies. Sita is a brave woman of extraordinary brilliance and immeasurable patience. Traditionally, Hinduism has championed Sita as the role-model and epitome of domestic wifely duty towards one’s husband. Sita is identified as a goddess and she is approached by worshipers not as deity who provides blessings, but rather as an intermediary figure who can petition her husband for the dispensation of grace upon human beings.

Sita, the central character, is revered during popular Hindu festivals. Ram and Sita celebrate their wedding anniversary on Rama Navami, the last day of a nine-day celebration known as the *Vasanthotsavam*, or the festival of spring. Hindus all throughout the world offer prayers to Ram and Sita, along with their close friends. During the ten-day Vijayadashami holiday, Sita and her husband are immensely revered. Sita also plays a significant role in the Rama-Lila, a dramatic rendition of the Ramayana that is performed all over India. Lamps and candles are traditionally lit at Diwali, the Festival of Lights, to recreate the famous tale in which oil

lamps are lit along the route to Ayodhya to guide Ram and Sita back home after Raavan had been defeated.

In the epic, *Ramayana*, Sita's character embodies an exalted philosophical and creative alteration. Sita is related to Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Parvathi, the three powerful goddesses for her supreme muse of artistic inspiration and for her capacity to nourish all creatures through the Earth, and the yogini, who can renounce and transcend all limitations. Sita learns to accept or sacrifice anything to achieve her destiny on the path of dharma from her three mothers-in-law Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra. Kaushalya is the powerful woman in the epic. She is the eldest wife of king Dhasrath and the mother of Sita's consort, Ram. She is born as *Manushatrupa* in her previous birth and her tough penance and deep reverence for Lord Vishnu have pleased him. Vishnu blesses her to bear him as a child in her next incarnation and so Vishnu is born to Kaushalya as Ram, who is a woman of great character and penance. When Dasharath marries Kaikeyi and later, Sumitra she has no malice in her heart. She accepts them without any negative emotions of jealousy or pretense of acceptance. In fact, she assures them that they would both be like her sisters. Kaushalya loves the sons of her sisters, Kaikeyi and Sumitra equally. She has never differentiated between the heirs of the Ayodhya kingdom. Kaushalya serves as an example for an ideal mother to raise her son, Ram in the path of dharma. She proves that a woman moulds the future of man. She does not mourn when her own son is sent to exile, instead, she accepts the situation and also supports the king's decision to make Bharat, the ruler of Ayodhya. Sita learns from her to accept or to tolerate anything without complaint. Thus, she accepts Ram's decision when she is sent for exile to the forest during her maternal period. She raises her sons as noble warriors and fulfills her duty as a mother.

Kaikeyi, the second mother-in-law of Sita is pictured to be a shield of King Dashrath by breaking all the stereotypes that only men can protect his wife because he is physically strong rather than a woman. She never steps back to fight for her kingdom even when the opponent is a glorious warrior. She accompanies her husband at the time of war because she has learnt the martial arts and is ever ready to fight for her kingdom. She is not a woman to accept her fate and Sita too learns the same. She never fears to fight for her rights in the patriarchal society. Sita learns to accept her fate but tries to be brave and fights for her rights. She is ready to face death, when Ram asks her to undergo the fire trial to prove her chastity.

Sumitra, the third mother-in-law of Sita is the wisest among the queens of Ayodhya. Sumitra is considered equal to Kaushalya in status. She is serene, sweet-natured and courteous and

therefore a favourite to all. She is balanced in her outlook and friendly with everyone around. It is because of her friendly disposition that she earns the name Sumitra, a good friend. She treats Kaushalya and Kaikeyi, the other two queens, with sisterly love and they too respond to her unselfish affection. She never steps back in a helpless situation and is a strong woman to find solutions for the most hazardous issues in the kingdom. She serves as a pillar of support for her husband, king Dashrath to rule the kingdom. Sumitra holds the position of a king, who holds the glory of Ikshvaku dynasty.

After the death of the king, she never expresses her grief but trains Bharat to rule the kingdom in the absence of the king and Ram. This immense strength is seen in Sita as well, especially when she is prisoned by Raavan. Ayodhya is ruled by Ram with Sita's advices to enhance the kingdom and expressed a great concern for the people in the kingdom. Thus, the three great mothers-in-law share an amicable relationship and stand as the role models for their daughters-in-law, especially for Sita.

The three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Shrutkirti serve as the glorified daughters-in-law of the kingdom by following and helping their mothers-in-law and also by supporting their husbands to follow the path of dharma. The novel gives voice to the silent muffled or stereotypical voices of the women in the epic. The three younger sisters of Sita, or otherwise the daughters-in-law of Ayodhya, live in the palace, yet they live the life of vanaprastha, after their sister's exile into the forest. These sisters enjoy their life as the princesses of their kingdom, only after Sita's return from the fourteen years of exile.

Urmila, the immediate sister of Sita, gives the courage to her husband and sends him along with Ram and Sita. She lives up to her role of being a *Dharampatni* by helping her husband tread the path of righteousness as Sita does for Ram. She lives a *vanaprastha* life in the palace. Urmila's sacrifice for her husband is the actual Tapasya, a real understanding of life, which makes Lakshman so strong that he is able to kill Indrajeet Meghnath, son of Raavan who is a strong warrior. Urmila is known to be a great scholar and a talented painter. She spends the entire fourteen years painting the scene of Sita's wedding. This act shows her love towards her sister and brother-in-law. She is one of the strongest characters and a significant contributor to the events in the story. It is Urmila who comes out as the most influential character – outspoken yet respectful, headstrong yet calm, strong in the face of adversity, a learned scholar, with an ability to forgive, and to forget the wrong thing. She is pictured as an incarnation of silence.

Sita conjures up the image of a chaste woman or an ideal woman but in the modern times the chaste ideal becomes negative when a woman is victimized and oppressed. She obeys her husband's commands, remains faithful to him, follows him and serves her in-law, raises her children and does the duty whether she likes it or not. It all depends on how one perceives Sita as an ideal wife. Sita can be related to the modern woman as she is seen as a liberated woman despite her complicated life. She is outspoken, had the freedom to express herself, asserted herself whenever she wanted to get her way, loved her husband, was faithful to him, served her family well, faced her suspicious husband, tries to appease him, reconciled her marriage and later accepted her separation and raised her well-balanced children as a single mother. Despite the terrors and temptations and complicated life, her greatness stands out of her ability to remain true to her principles. Chitra Banerjee rightly concludes in the voice of modern Sita that it was time when women need not prove their "...innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!" (421).

Women fulfil their duties as ideal wives by respecting and supporting men's decisions and never expect men to praise their virtue. Today's women make men to believe and agree that they have aspirations, abilities, and qualities better than man.

Women are the driving force of social change. Recognizing and amplifying the contributions of women in driving social change is essential for fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and progressive society. Their leadership and advocacy continue to inspire positive transformations on local, national, and global scales. Thus, the happiness and prosperity of the men in the epic are caused by the noble qualities of women. The women characters gave their husbands, tremendous support to achieve their destinies. The glory of men cannot be highlighted without the presence of women characters in the epic.

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