



CULTURAL FEMINISM IN THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract: This paper will explore the possibilities of having a different fate for Sita and also attempts to analyze other trivialized women characters in the light of cultural feminism in the novel “The Forest of Enchantments.” Cultural feminism seeks to validate the feminine attributes like motherhood, nurturing and cooperation. They try to build a peaceful balance between men and women by accepting that they are culturally and biologically different and their perspective of the world also differs from each other. In a way, this paper attempts to redefine the life of Sita. Sita, an embodiment of beauty, innocence and courage had to meet a tragic end in this epic love story. In order to preserve dharma and peace in the world she had to endure immense miseries and ultimately, she took a stand for herself. Her strong faith in herself became an epitome of strong personality.

Keywords: *Cultural feminism, Sitayan, gender, Sita*

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture and society have influenced writers and its impact can be seen in literature. Literature is considered to be the ideal reflection of reality. The social norms, rules, stereotypes and so on of an age can be understood from the work of an author of that particular age. Women were always associated with fragility and objects of pleasure for men and this can be traced back to the beginning of time. Even in the epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, women were always victims of subjugation, domination, mistreatment and misunderstandings. The troubles and hardships they are put through shapes their individuality and encourages them to believe in themselves but even then, a woman who stands up for herself will be the target of the patriarchal society and eventually ends up being the evil character. This paper attempts to analyse the women characters of this novel ‘The Forest of Enchantments’, especially Sita, Surpanaka, Kaikeyi, Urmila, Ahalya, Sarama and Mandodari in the light of cultural feminism. When a woman writes women, it paves way to the hidden and inner spheres of women’s life and Divakaruni was successful in doing this.

Ramayana is one of the world’s greatest epics written by Valmiki from the perspective of Ram. It glorifies the heroism of Ram as a protector of dharma for the sake of his kingdom. Whereas in the genius re-telling ‘The Forest of Enchantments’, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has narrated the story from Sita’s perspective and it’s known as “Sitayan”. Sitayan is not just the story of Sita, but also about the other side-lined women characters of Ramayana like Surpanakha, Kaikeyi, Urmila and Mandodari. The author has not only penned down the hardships of Sita but also the ways in which she acclimatized herself with the troubles that came her way. All versions of Ramayana, right from oral tradition to written enunciate praises and hails for Ram. Whereas, no one acknowledge the atrocities Sita had to face. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has meticulously portrayed Sita as a simple woman who has wishes and longings to fulfil her small desires, and not as a Goddess. Unlike other versions of Ramayana, the beauty of this novel is truly exceptional. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has done a marvellous job in portraying each character without glorifying or vilifying anyone.

The novel starts with Sita reading through Valmiki's Ramayana and realising that her heartbreaks, compromises and the darkness she had been put through was completely erased. She voices her anger and discontent to Valmiki and he encourages Sita to write her part of the story as she is the only one who can do it. Throughout the novel, Sita took up the roles of daughter, sister, wife, warrior and mother but above all she was a simple human being too. Sita, the eldest daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina was married off to Ram in a Swayamvara by breaking the Haradhanu. Her life tremendously changed when she moved to Ayodhya after marriage but somehow she managed to cope up with their strict rules and new lifestyle. She tries to build a healthy relationship with everyone around her and at the same time, keeps an eye out for betrayals. Her journey from the palace of Mithila to a life under the Ashoka tree in Lanka has taken a toll on her but it clearly made her realise her inner strength. Even in the midst of the dreadful war between Ram and Ravan, she was hoping against hope to have a happy life with Ram once she walks out of Lanka freely. Unfortunately, her life went downhill after her rescue from Lanka. Ram had to prioritize his kingdom and subjects than his own wife, Sita. In order to satisfy them, she even obliged to jump into the fire to prove the virtue of the Queen of Ayodhya. Later, she was abandoned by him in the forest without even a proper justification. She accepts her fate and moves forward with her life but after many years, she encounters Ram again. Even then, for the second time, she was asked to prove her virtue to everyone for getting accepted by Ram. This is when she had to put an end to all her sufferings by saying no more! Sita endured all the pain silently and made her way through it but being a woman she had to stand up for herself at least now. She mustered up her courage to stand up for what was right. Apart from being a retelling of Ramayana, 'The Forest of Enchantments' propagate values that are relevant in this contemporary world. Sita has made it a point to talk about all the misunderstood women characters in her Sitayan; their hopes, dreams, despair and desires were given a voice.

Cultural feminism has its roots in radical feminism from which it was later developed into a separate movement. In 1975, towards the end of second wave of feminism, Brooke Williams coined the term 'Cultural feminism.' The theory acknowledges the fact that men and women are biologically and culturally different and their way of approaching the world also differs from each other. Cultural feminist considers the characteristics associated with women and their way of looking at the world superior to some of the characteristics of men's. They seek to validate the feminine qualities which was undervalued by the male-dominated society for ages. They emphasize the superior cultural values of women rather than the gender differences. They claim that feminine qualities make way for a harmonious world since women tend to approach issues peacefully. They contend that certain stereotypical masculine traits such as aggression, dominance, ego and rivalry, occasionally prevent men from making wise decisions. The feminine attributes like nurturing, caring, awareness of the situation, emotional literacy, valuing relationships, peace and cooperation are given more importance. According to this theory, in every sphere of life, a woman longs to have a female companion with her and they try to create a woman culture, womanhood or sisterhood. Cultural feminist believes that a woman understands a woman better at any point of time, whether it's their pain or joy. Cultural feminism puts forward their arguments in favour of females without completely going against the beliefs about men and women. Their main goal was to bring in a change in the patriarchal society by finding ways to appreciate the qualities of a woman. Mary Daly, Jane Addams and Adrienne Rich are some of the central figures of cultural feminism. According to Daly, women need to form bonds with other women in order to revitalize their feminine nature and reclaim their power from male dominance.

In the novel, Sita is portrayed as a woman who vehemently believes in her intuitions and judgments. She was outspoken and had a way with words. If we observe Sita through the lens of cultural feminism, there are numerous situations in the novel that points out that her life would have been different if Ram believed and listened to her. After breaking the Haradhanu in the Swayamvara, Ram stated his promise made to his brothers of getting married at the same time and to the same family to avoid conflicts that may arise among their wives. This confession shocked everyone including Sita but she was able to offer a solution for it without disrespecting anyone. A woman speaking out in public would never be accepted in the patriarchal culture of the past, even if she provides a rational solution to any problems. This was the condition of the society back in her day and yet Sita managed to untangle the situation. "If you want to stand up against wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn't bruise a man's pride. You'll have a better chance of success' (46). This is a piece of advice Sita receives from her mother and from this, it's evident that women are stereotypically wired in such a way that they don't question men's ego with their emotional literacy. Sita eludes situations like that by having a peaceful approach to problems in order to spread positivity.

The incident with Ravan's sister, Surpanaka changed all of their lives. If Ram and Lakshman chose a different way to scare her away rather than making her a victim of life-long humiliations, all of their lives would have ended differently. As a woman, Sita was able to understand Surpanaka and she expected her husband to act more maturely with Surpanaka. She believed that Surpanaka didn't deserve to be taunted by these men for her genuine confession. If Sita had the chance to deal with Surpanaka, she would have mellowed the raging Surpanaka with respect which might have avoided the war. She never imagined that Lakshman would disfigure Surpanaka and every time Sita saw her face, it made her guilty as she could feel her pain and embarrassment. How these two men dealt with this situation changed their lives forever. This shows that at certain occasions women can deal with things more rationally but they are never given a chance. Even when Sita confronted Ram and Lakshman of their stupid deed, they were adamant with their actions as the right choice. If they had let Sita do the talking with Surpanaka, maybe not just the life of Sita but also the lives of Mandodari, Sarama and Urmila would have been different. In the novel, *The Liberation of Sita* by Volga, Surpanaka is depicted as a self-actualized character. "I struggled a lot to grasp that there is no difference between beauty and ugliness in nature...I searched every particle in nature and in the course of that search, my own visions changed." These are the words said by Surpanaka and Sita immediately feels a bond with her as they both have the same point of view.

Women who sense a connection to one another in some way, are said to form a sisterhood or womanhood, according to cultural feminist. In this novel, Divakaruni attempts to create a womanhood in Sita with the characters like Kaushalya, Ahalya, Sarama, Urmila, Kaikeyi and Mandodari, with injustice as a unifying factor. One of the completely silenced or ignored character is Urmila, who is the sister of Sita. They both share an unbreakable sisterly bond but Sita had to leave her behind when she accepted the forest life. She knew that her sister would understand and respect her decisions and Urmila supported Sita till the very end. For many years, Urmila lived her life alone without her husband and sister beside her. All her life, she always felt the need to be with Sita for emotional and moral support. Kaushalya is Sita's mother-in-law and in the course of time, they grew close. Sita understood Kaushalya's agony of getting ignored by her own husband and tries to bridge the gap between Kaushalya and King Dasharath whereas, Kaushalya made sure that Sita was feeling welcomed to her new home. They became each other's supporter and helpers. The novelist throws light onto the positive side of the character Kaikeyi, who is usually portrayed as the evil character. Sita's encounter with Kaikeyi made her realise the humorous, intelligent and brave side of Kaikeyi while she seemed to enjoy her time with Kaikeyi even though, everyone warned Sita to keep a safe distance from her. Later, in her life Kaikeyi caused her so much grief but Sita was able to forgive her as she understood the reason behind Kaikeyi's actions were solely out of her love for her son. Divakaruni attempts to emphasize the fact that in any situation, woman understands a woman better. During the exile, Ram, Lakshman and Sita have been wandering the forest for a while now that, Sita longs to have a female companion for a woman-talk. Unexpectedly, she got the opportunity to meet Ahalya, who was once turned into a stone by her own husband sage Gautam for a misunderstanding. Ahalya taught her a life lesson "Once mistrust has wounded it mortally, love can't be fully healed again" (136). Every woman who was there in Sita's life taught her different lessons. She imbibed each and everything and inculcated those lessons in her life which made her realise what's right and wrong.

Every second Sita spent in Lanka was an emotional and physical torment. Once in a while, Sarama, wife of Vibheeshan visited Sita which was a consolation for her. Sarama had every reason to hate her but she didn't instead she tried to distract Sita a tad from her sufferings. They formed a bond out of respect for each other as both of them were victims of injustice. Sarama knew about the foreboding fate of her son and husband Vibheeshan but was completely helpless. The only person in Lanka, she could talk out her heart was with Sita and even Sita freely spoke of Ram with her. They belonged to entirely different classes but were unified in the midst of utter chaos as they understood each other's pain. These are multiple instances from the novel that helps to substantiate cultural feminist's argument that women try to build a woman culture, womanhood or sister in any circumstances.

Sita wanted to embrace motherhood and it was one of the feminine attributes she cherished the most. For a long time, she was denied of being a mother and this created a turmoil inside her. In the novel, there are instances where she tries to convince Ram, how lonely she felt in the forest and her longings to have a child to care and nurture which would help her emotionally. When Sarama and Mandodari expressed their fear and pain of losing their child in the battle, Sita was able to relate to their maternal instincts even though she

was not a mother then. Sita respected motherhood, valued relationships and was aware of the situations she was in. Her attributes like caring, nurturing and creating peace was not just limited to human beings. She considered the plants, animals and forest as her children and nurtured them.

A notion that prevailed through centuries is that women are supposed to deal with dirt, not just the dirt of the household chores but also the dirty thoughts of the society. The patriarchal society back then, deliberately made women deal with this using their hegemonic power. Their cries and sufferings were never valued or heard by the society, the collective thoughts of men in the society always had the final say. Sita was a victim of this too. People raised questions on her purity since she stayed in Lanka for too long and unfortunately, Ram, being their King felt more responsible to his subjects than to Sita as her husband. She was asked to prove her innocence to everyone and she did it for his sake. Even after enduring everything in Lanka, Sita's sufferings didn't end there. She was later abandoned by Ram in the forest, she gave birth to their children and raised them in the forest as a single parent. After years of separation, Ram and Sita had the chance to reunite but still she was asked to prove her innocence again by jumping into the fire. There was a limit to endure insults and mistreatments when it was not even her fault to begin with. This is when Sita took a stand for herself and for the future women generations to have self-respect because anger and self-pity are useless. Faith and reason play a subtle role here. If Ram assured his subjects about Sita's innocence and his faith in her then this tragic fate of Sita could have been avoided but he threw away his last chance of happiness. Ram and Sita had their own reasons for their actions but here, Sita's reason has the upper hand. With the help of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble*, Ram's actions can be regarded as a result of his gender role in the society. She argues that gender identity is a performative deception rather than an intrinsic quality in order to please the societal expectations. This is what Ram did as he thought of Ayodhya before his wife Sita. At times, it's imperative to consider the views of a woman and the reasons behind her actions. Sita became an example to millions of women for her exemplary braveness and the willpower to stand up for herself.

In conclusion, if Sita's voice were valued, every female character who is related to her in some manner would have led a different life. Cultural feminism aims to bring a peaceful balance between men and women although they favour females more, rather than turning completely against men. As John Milton once said "A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit" Sita wrote *Sitayan* for the world to know her part of the story and also to bring into light those women characters who were trivialised and ignored. She knew that a book would stand the test of time and through her work, she wanted to show a path of courage, compassion and self-respect for all women in the coming ages.

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