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Women from the Margins: Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* in Perspective

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Abstract:

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is the retelling of *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. It becomes unique as Sita probes into the untold tales of the marginal women characters of the epic. All these women are somehow related to her. Some are relatives and others are enemies and a few mere acquaintances. Yet Sita devotes time to bring out their repressed histories. She tries to unravel the mindset of Kaikeyi who risked all for the sake of her son only to be berated by him later on. Sita tries to rationalize Ahalya's return to her unjust husband Gautam. She feels guilty for Surpankha's disfigurement. She is touched by the devotion of Mandodari to her demonic husband. Urmila's surrender to sleep for the sake of her husband moves Sita. She questions these events and tries to find rational explanations for them.

Keywords: Epic, Feminism, History, Mini narratives, Myth.

A new trend has emerged in Indian writing in English whereby the ancient epics are being reinterpreted by contemporary authors. For instance, *Ramayana* has been published under the name of *Sita* both by Devdutt Pattanaik (2013) and Amish Tripathi (2017). While Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has titled her interpretation as *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019). As the titles of Tripathi and Pattanaik's works suggest their main thrust is towards depicting the life of Sita. Divakaruni's work is also told from the perspective of Sita rather the work suggests that it is her version of the epic. But what has made it even more unique is that through Sita, Divakaruni has ventured to speak about other women characters, who appear no more than a footnote in Valmiki's saga.

The Prologue is where we get to know that the following narrative would be shaped by Sita. She pondered upon the task at hand and as she set out to work, she felt:

But as I dipped my quill into the inkpot, they rose inside me. Voices...Kaikeyi...Ahalya...Surpankha...Mandodari...Urmila...*Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed forgotten---or maligned and used as cautionary tales.* (Divakaruni, 2019, p.4)

The intentions of the author were very clear. She wanted to bring to light the tales that deserved to be heard. The women who had been more often than naught viewed from a patriarchal perspective needed to be reevaluated from a feminine perspective.

The narrative began with Sita's Swyambar. As she was about to leave her own house to settle down in Ayodhya her mother Sunaina offered her some valuable advice. Among which was to be alert of the animosity between the wives of Dasharath. The ills of polygamy were scrutinized by her. Sita became wary of the competitive atmosphere at the home of her in-laws. She observed, "How many people I'd have to deal with in my new family, to cajole or appease, comfort or avoid, as the need arose!" (Divakaruni, 50) The balancing act required by wifely duties subdued her.

Kaikeyi

Sita was intimidated by the personality of her mother-in-law Kaikeyi. She was in awe of her during their very first encounter. Kaikeyi's prowess with the sword was the first thing that Sita admired about her. But she was able to subdue the latter with her own fighting skills. Soon both enjoyed a conversation which became strategic as Kaikeyi tried to wrest information from Sita about Dasharath's equation with her rival queen Kaushalya. The queen tried to win Sita over with her sharp sense of humour so much so that Sita noted, "...such was her wit that she made me feel that she and I were allied, in our superior intelligence and charisma, against them all." (Divakaruni, 84) It was this same conniving queen who was reduced to a pathetic figure waiting to end her life. She had suffered the worst at the hands of her husband and son for whom she risked all. Her schemes were the root of her fall. But we must remember that although she was ambitious, she never desired anything for herself. All her machinations were for the benefit of her son, Bharat.

Ahalya

One of the women Sita met during her stay in the forest was Ahalya. Sita was much moved by her pathetic tale. She believed Ahalya to be more sinned against than sinning. Ahalya was created by Brahma himself and thus was spectacularly beautiful. Her beauty was her bane. Indra, the king of Gods, was so enticed by her that he partook of subterfuge to get her. He deceived her by taking the shape of her husband. She surrendered to his deceit and was cruelly penalized by her husband. She was denied the opportunity to defend herself. Such was her husband's wrath that he turned her to stone without waiting for any explanation from her.

When Sita confronted Ahalya about this, the later was silent as she had taken a vow of silence after being released from her captivity in stone. But she communicated with her looks with Sita. Sita observed, "She was looking directly at me...it indicated that her husband didn't know the truth. He didn't understand her at all." (Divakaruni, 131) A little later though Ahalya condescended to answer only one question of Sita as she believed that the later had done a great sacrifice for the sake of love. When Sita asked about the unfairness of Gautam's chastisement Ahalya replied that "When you put your hand in the fire, knowingly or unknowingly, do you not get burned?" (134) For Ahalya it was the unfathomable nature of karma. When Sita further quizzed her about how she could forgive her husband for his rash actions? Ahalya said that Sita would figure out the answer through her own life's challenges.

Later at night Sita had a dream about Ahalya. Perhaps her subconscious was able to discern the quiet Ahalya. It was in her dream that Sita was finally able to comprehend Ahalya's response to her husband's injustice. In the dream when Ahalya emerged from stone the ascetic husband stood repentant before her. In response to his gentle endeavors, "But she (Ahalya) didn't smile, and she didn't look at him. Was it then she made the decision that she'd punish him the rest of her life by never speaking to him again, so he'd always remember what he'd done?" (Divakaruni, 136). Ahalya took her revenge for having being treated unjustly. She was a victim of foul play and the wrath of her husband but she refused to take it lying down. She never reverted to the selfless wife that she once had been.

Surpankha

The other woman that Sita met in the forest was a diametric opposite to Ahalya. But there was a similarity between the them. Both were wronged by the men they bestowed love upon. Surpankha, the demoness who desired the brothers Ram and Lakshman was brutally rebuffed by them. She was an independent woman who did not care for feminine coyness. So

much so that despite being of a royal lineage she did not wear clothes. She was bold enough to ask for the love of the man she desired. Surpankha revealed her rebel nature when she pointed out that she did not care to live in the palace of her brother and rather preferred to stay in the forest, "Me, I prefer roaming in the forest. Living the natural life. Plus I like to speak my mind---and that can get you in trouble in court." (Divakaruni, 146)

Sita was bewildered by Surpankha's forward behaviour. She guessed that being an asura meant that laws of womanhood were different from their own kind. But she was genuinely sorry for the way Ram and Lakshman were treating Surpankha's entreaties of love. According to Sita, 'she (Surpankha) didn't deserve to be taunted.' (148). When the demoness tried to intimidate and invite Sita to a fight, Lakshman disfigured her. Sita was able to understand Surpankha's response to this, "her eyes full of disbelief that someone could do such a thing to her when all she'd offered him was love." (Divakaruni, 149) Sita was outraged by her husband and brother-in-law's treatment of Surpankha. She confronted them about it. But they responded that it was the right thing to do in order to not seem weak before the asuras. Sita kept thinking about the incident and was of the view that a clean death for Surpankha would have been better than the mutilation which disfigured her for life especially as she had been looking for a mate.

Surpankha however did not reciprocate the sympathy that Sita had for her. When she later was abducted, Surpankha tried to demotivate her and dashed her hopes of being reunited with her husband. About Ram, Surpankha said:

I think he's gone back to Ayodhya and taken another wife. Why would he want anything to do with a woman who'd been abducted, who'd been touched---or worse---by another male? (Divakaruni, 2019, p.189)

When Ram was able to conclude the battle by killing Ravan, Surpankha tried to strangle Sita. She said that she should have killed her in the forest or at least when she arrived in Lanka. Sita retaliated by fighting back but Sarama intervened and the fight stopped midway. Surpankha turned her attention to Sarama and blamed her husband for selling out the secrets of Ravan and held him responsible for the deaths of Ravan and of their own son.

Surpankha escaped further punishment from Ram and Lakshman and Sita felt relieved for her sake. But she held herself responsible for the entire Lanka episode. She felt that had she been able to avoid Surpankha's disfigurement she could have prevented the ensuing tragedy that had cost so many lives. But Surpankha who was bent on avenging her and her brother's ruin returned to torment Sita assuming the shape of Shanta, Sita's sister-in-law. She tricked Sita into

drawing Ravan's portrait with an enchanted chalk. The result was that Sita's clothes got entangled in the portrait. Surpankha then taunted Sita by saying that she could kill her then and there but, "I have a better plan. Live on, Sita. Live without love, as I've been forced to. See how it feels to lose everything you cherish...you'll long for death." (Divakaruni, 295). Surpankha was a dynamic character. A free spirit. Fiercely loyal to her brother and motherland. She never swerved from the path of vengeance for she felt her people had been wronged because of Sita. In an epic built around heroes she carved her own niche.

Mandodari

Ravan's sister hated Sita with all her heart but his wife Mandodari had a motherly concern towards her. She was an enigmatic woman so much so that her husband confessed to Sita that of all the women in his life Mandodari 'is the wisest', though being less wise than her he often neglected her counsel. Mandodari was of the belief that Sita was her long-lost daughter given the facts that Sita was an adopted child. Mandodari had been separated from her daughter at birth as the astrologers had predicted that the child would bring death upon Ravan. The demon king had decreed the child to be killed but Mandodari had ensured that the child was saved from that fate. She had used her own resources to bribe the rakshasa to ensure that he would place her somewhere far away and safe. The way Sita slept by turning to the left with her legs drawn up towards her chest---the way in which Mandodari herself was habituated to sleep convinced her that Sita was her daughter, the one she had sent far away.

Sita urged her to talk to Ravan about her conviction. But Mandodari refused as she feared being severely penalized by her husband on account of her dalliance in this matter. Instead, she proposed to make Sita's life easier. She then stretched out her arms to embrace Sita but the later refuted her motherly claim. She never approached her again. Sita observed, "She possessed a queenly dignity" (194)

It was with that same dignity that she sat by the pyre of her dead husband refusing food. Such was the nature of her sorrow that she wanted some sort of compensation for her loss. She visited Ram in disguise. When Ram tried to bless her with the boon of happiness and long wifehood, she revealed her true identity. She cursed Ram that he will suffer the same heart break that he had caused her. Sita pondered about Mandodari's decision to sit by the undying pyre of her husband. Sita came to the conclusion that this act of hers was her declaration of her love for Ravan and also that of her forgiveness. Sita tried to put herself in the shoes of Mandodari and thought:

Could I have done it? I wasn't sure if I was capable of such devotion. Of such total forgiveness for a man who'd betrayed my love, and who, in refusing my counsel over and over, had opened the gate for death to enter my home and snatch away my son. (Divakaruni, 2019, p.250)

Mandodari was a study in devotion. She lived her life for the sake of her husband. A devoted wife and a mother she refused to give up on her difficult husband.

Urmila

Urmila was a girl full of life when she got married to Lakshman. But her joyous nature was trampled upon from the very beginning of matrimony. She complained to Sita that her husband did not spend much time with her so much so that she hardly knew him any better than on the day of their marriage. When her plan to go to the forest with Ram, Lakshman and Sita was thwarted by Lakshman, Urmila's reaction startled Sita. "Her voice was calm and emotionless, and this frightened me more than if she'd been weeping," (Divakaruni, 116) observed Sita. Urmila had tried her best to argue her case with him pointing out that her elder sister was accompanying his brother. But Lakshman had refused on the pretext that she had to stay back in order to take care of her in-laws mentioning that it was her duty towards her husband. When Urmila had asked about Lakshman's duty towards her, he had refused to respond saying that he did not have the time to engage in such philosophical debate. She was too overwhelmed by Lakshman's nonchalance towards her. That she was no more than another problem to her husband defeated Urmila.

Sita enquired about her and got to know from Bharat that Urmila had shut herself in her chambers after she had left. Sita comprehended her precise state of mind in her dream of her sister, "Her spirit had receded somewhere far ---- perhaps in grief, perhaps in anger, perhaps, in abhiman" (Divakaruni, 125). It was the same posture that Sita found Urmila in after she returned from Lanka. Urmila was lying in the yogic dead man's pose. She hadn't aged in the fourteen long years that had passed. Lakshman had failed in rousing Urmila from that state. Sita tried to rouse her to no avail, "The spirit had receded far away and was reluctant to return to this plane of sorrows." (Divakaruni, 280). It was finally Sita's tears that brought Urmila back to plane of the living.

Urmila then recounted the incident behind her death-like sleep. She had made up her mind to die on the day Sita had left with the brothers. She felt that life was meaningless as she had been rejected by the one man, she had adored with all her heart. It was more hurtful as Ram

had taken her elder sister along but she had been refused the same privilege by his brother. She had started meditating on death drawing inspiration from mythical tales of faithful wives who had gracefully embraced death. Her intense meditation had moved Yama, the God of death. He had paid her a visit but dissuaded her from embracing death.

Yama sent his sister Nidra to Urmila. She informed Urmila that she had been earlier summoned by Lakshman who had wanted a boon of sleeplessness for fourteen years from her, in order to keep a vigilant eye on Ram and Sita for the sake of their safety. He had also agreed to greet those missed hours of sleep on his return to Ayodhya. Thus, he would be asleep for fourteen years post his stay in the woods. Urmila was alarmed on hearing this. They would never be able to enjoy their conjugal life if Lakshman fell asleep on his return. So, she begged Nidra to pass on Lakshman's sleep to herself. Nidra was impressed with Urmila's selfless act and blessed her, "Sleep now, Urmila, whose sacrifice few will know and praise. But here is my gift to you...but allow you to experience yoga nidra..." (Divakaruni, 282-283)

Sita sensed that Urmila had matured to great knowledge beyond the ordinary mortal realm. Urmila claimed that she had undergone a spiritual transformation during her sleep filled years. She had gained the knowledge that things happened due to complicated reasons. She also gave a prophetic view of Sita's future. But when Sita tried to question her further, she reverted back to her carefree state.

The devoted wife finally took a back seat when Sita was asked to stand trial by fire to prove her purity after having been abducted by Ravan. Urmila suggested that they both go to the forest with their children rather than being suspected and humiliated. She said, "Oh yes, this time I'm coming with you and so are my children. Lakshman can do what he wants. I've given him enough of my life already." (Divakaruni, 352)

Urmila evolved over time. In the beginning she was a lovelorn wife. Next a woman fortified with wisdom. Finally, a woman who stood up for the honour of her sister. The woman who had once embraced sleep for fourteen long years to be able to enjoy the companionship of her husband afterwards was ready to sacrifice domestic pleasure when her sister's honour was put to question.

Sita

The female protagonist of the epic does certainly not belong to the margin. But it is essential to discuss her equation with the marginalized women. We see the women discussed

above from Sita's perspective. She evaluated each of these women and lauded them for their fortitude. She was not unsympathetic towards her arch enemy Surpankha as well. In the forest after Ram banished her, Sita had a dream:

In the dream, too, I lay in the forest, but now I was surrounded by women. They walked around me with soundless measured steps. They looked at me with wise and compassionate eyes, eyes that had known suffering. Some I recognized: Sunaina, Ahalya, Mandodari, Sarama, Kaikeyi. Some I guessed at: a monkey with a diadem on her head who must be Tara; a tribal woman holding a half-eaten fruit who must be Shabari. Why, even Surpankha was among them, a rare calm veiling her mutilated face.

Endure, they seemed to say. *Endure as we do. Endure your challenges.* (Divakaruni, 2019, p.322)

The dream was a great equalizer. It brought demon and woman on the same plane; also, queen and commoner. No matter what the status of a woman it was her lot to endure. They had suffered so will Sita too. When Sita refused to entertain Ram's request of a second trial by fire to prove her purity and decided to return to the very earth that she had appeared from, she delivered a message for women of future generations, that when life tested them, "they'll be able to stand steadfast and think carefully, using their hearts as well as their heads, understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not." (Divakaruni, 357) This was what she had learnt through the journey of her life.

Vivek Tejuja in his review of Divakaruni's book held that the book was dominated by alpha males but importantly the women characters were given a voice that had been previously denied to them. According to him:

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni trains her lens on both the major and minor women characters of the Ramayana — it doesn't matter how much time they get or not in the book, it is about the role of women in an epic and how their voices are often muted. (Tejuja, Vivek. "The Forest of Enchantments' Review: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni Does Justice To The Women Of Ramayana". *Huffpost.com*. 15 January 2019, www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/the-forest-of-enchantments-review-chitra-banerjee-divakaruni-does-justice-to-the-women-of-ramayana_in_5c3c6eae4b0922a21d693e4)

Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective and so it encompasses the mini narratives of all the women who were a part of her story. Sita learned from them and tried to help them in her own way. Her retelling upholds the untold story of women who were treated no more than foils to their male counterparts in Valmiki's saga.

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