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## Melancholic Existential Regal Life as Portrayed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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### **Abstract:**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a prolific Indian writer, speaker and activist. She has authored more than 21 novels and, her themes stand unique and appealing to the readers. Simple life incidents, women and their role in family, love, loyalty and morals are some common themes centred in the works of Chitra. Being an activist, she extensively speaks about women and their self-esteem and the ways to keep it up amidst patriarchy. The novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* is based on the epic, Ramayana narrated through the voice of Sita. This novel is unique in that it traces the life values and the mere existence of regal women who are destined to lead only a life filled with compromise.

**Key words:** Ramayana, Self-esteem, Patriarchy, Regal women, Existence.

Ramayana and Mahabharata are the two words entangled in the lives of the Indian people. Not only as words but as epics and moral preaching masters, they stand deep rooted in the Indian culture too. Ramayana is widely popularised to the ordinary people as a story that happened in ancient times, primarily focusing on Ram, King of Ayodhya, and his life principles. The story and its various versions were spread by popular sages and hermits during olden times and their recordings are preserved as manuscripts till date. These recordings or scriptures highly descended in the folklore form, reaching every nook and crank of India.

The key learnings emphasized in Ramayana include kingly duties, patriotism, honesty, discipline in all walks of life, bonding of siblings, loyalty in marriages, moral deeds and many other values essential to humankind.

The pivotal characters always taken as role models showcase undoubtedly Ram, Sita, Lakshman, Ravan, Hanuman, vital Monster clan rulers and various other characters. All studies over Ramayana generally focus on the male tone or their perspectives speaking the life lessons and turmoils occurred.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is based on this famous epic Ramayana, but presenting the story from the perspective of Sita. The author has brilliantly presented the narration via Sita making the readers wonder how women's life is unchanged from ancient to modern times. Women, rich or poor are forced the responsibility for any wrong happening and men escape the reality veiling under the gendered stereotypes.

The select regal women from the story, Sita, Urmila, Kaushalya and Kaikeyi are no exception to the society however they bear the tag Princess and Queens only for identification and not for self - identity. These regal women's life and hardships leave the readers understand they were unsung melancholic individuals who have lived only a compromising life beyond their richness. The story, narrated through the voice of Sita, presents the exact state of royal women who were also like the ordinary women in the households.

Sita, the Princess of Mithila and later the Queen of Ayodhya, has never led a life as familiar readers imagine to be on the bed of roses. On contrast, the life of Sita has only been the bed of thorns and harsh life tests she has to endure all time. Sita's birth itself is a mystery as she was picked up from a field wrapped in gold cloth revealing, that King Janak and Queen Sunaina were only her foster parents. However, they showered and adorned Sita with infinite love and affection, treating her to be their key to happiness.

Sita's childhood and adolescence phase has been the happiest and most disciplined of her life without any worries or hindrances. Only at the time of her marriage she felt the suitors were of no real match to her except Ram, who has been in the palace court for a visit. Upon succeeding to tie the Shiv bow, Ram and Sita were happily married to each other and lived their dreamy love life not knowing it would be ephemeral.

Things overturned once the couple were announced banishment for 14 years. The couple turned trio as Lakshman was stubborn in accompanying and guarding Ram as he considered it to be his life duty. Even their accessories and attire were hermit-like made out of wooden barks giving up all riches and comfort. Meanwhile in the adaption phase to the forest life, Sita was abducted by Ravan and thereafter her life was miserable beyond imagination. Sita remained a captive longing for Ram to save her, and later she was forced to prove her purity

by getting into the fire. After years, when coronated as Queen of Ayodhya, a word- of- mouth comment about Sita's captivity by Ravan ended her marriage life forever and she was back into the forest as a single mother of twin kids, Lav and Kush. Later that life too didn't last for her, as another life test demanded and she entered the earth adored by Goddess of Earth as a mark of Sita's self -respect.

Urmila, the sister of Sita has been identified in the parallel universe like that of Lakshman who devoted his life to guard Ram and the same with Urmila caring Sita. Urmila has been presented as a fun loving, energetic Princess whose life turns miserable when her husband Lakshman abandons her in the palace to care for the aging mothers and moves to the forest life along with Ram and Sita. Urmila gave up interest over life and meditated Yama, God of Death to take her away. She also starved and avoided sleep to die soon, but Yama and his sister, Goddess Nidhra got impressed by Urmila and gave a boon to sleep for 14 years until Lakshman comes back. The sleep is not the usual sleep instead it is a yogic sleep where Urmila will be able to get the vision of the activities around her and also foresee the future life of her dear ones. Urmila accepts and this marks the highest compromise of a wife beyond imagination because Lakshman has prayed Goddess Nidhra not to take him and let him be awake for next 14 years and later sleep for 14 years as compensation after getting back to Ayodhya. This was balanced by Urmila by sleeping for 14 years in advance, fulfilling the deal which Lakshman agreed to Goddess Nidhra so that she can live happily with Lakshman after he returns.

Kousalya, the Queen Mother of Ayodhya and Mother of Ram, is to the core simple and pure. She enjoyed no real happiness as a queen as she was shadowed by Queen Kaikeyi, another wife of Queen Dashrath. King favoured Kaikeyi a lot and that admiration paved way for the low esteem of Kaushalya and lack of respect for her from the servants. Ram was the only ray of hope in her life and that too did not last as he was sent out on banishment. Kousalya turned much dull and poor upon her son's destiny and just existed as a creature in the palace. Compared to other queens Kaikeyi and Sumitra, Kausalya lived a poor life with no much luxuries availed and unhappiness over everything.

Kaikeyi, the favourite consort of King Dashrath and the mother of Bharat is distinguished for her dominance and adeptness in the governance assisting King Dashrath. It is Kaikeyi who fated the banishment of Ram, not thinking about the consequences. All her strategies to crown Bharat as King of Ayodhya failed immediately when Ram accepted banishment and moved away. Her fearless wish only invited the death of King Dashrath,

Bharath, her only son shifting to the forest praying for Ram's return and the cry of many others in the country. Upon realising her imprudent decision, Kaikeyi found she lost all her loved ones and ended up neglected by everyone. She honestly wished to repent for her deed and adopted silence forever. Since then, she abandoned all her richness and lived only a simple yet existential life.

The concept, Existentialism popularized by Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus presents the philosophy that projects individuals as an isolated being. Those individuals view themselves as someone who is lost in an alien universe holding no possession of inherent human truth, value or meaning. They assume life is only filled with nothingness and pursue life towards a nothingness state only. The individuals just live without any hope or dream and pass only fake smile crying deep down inside precisely indicating they are just in the survival mode not recovering from the past experiences or hardships. The concept proposes the individuals abandon the material joy and real happiness and accept the way of life.

The concept blends perfectly to the humankind and applying the same to this story, helps the readers understand how the regal women have lived an existential life. The four women in this story only exist forgetting they are from royal background which is of no aid to them. The circumstances in their life have only made them to remain like ordinary women struggling to mend their life.

Sita's existentialism is heartbreaking as life transferred from the palace to the forest not once but twice, marking it as forever.

I remembered that ill-fated day when Surpanakha had crept into the palace and forced me to draw Ravan's image.

Was that when a seed of doubt that had somehow remained in Ram's mind all the while, began to sprout? Was that when the whispers became so important to him?

And then he'd sent me away without even having the courage or the consideration to tell me to my face what he was doing to me and why. Without asking me, his helpmate and queen, what I thought should be done, he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people.

But weren't we his people, too? Didn't he have a duty to us? (320)

Her transformation is observed from being a happy Princess to a dutiful, serious wife to a miserable single mother concealing her real identity as queen and existing as a poor mother of two in an ashram.

Sometimes I thought, its true what people say: every darkness is edged with light. In a palace, bound by my royal duties, I'd never have had so much time for my children. We'd never have been so close to each other, known each other so well. Motherhood taught me something new about love. It was the one relationship where you gave everything you had and then wished you had more to give.

But here was a strange thing: even though Lav and Kush were curious about everything, they never asked me a single question about their father. (332)

Urmila's happy phase ended after her marriage by always crying and awaiting her husband's return from the forest. Ram and Sita in one way has been considered blessed to have been together, but not Urmila who was left alone to care the aged Queens, but all in vain.

On the day the three of you left, I made up my mind to die. What was the use, I thought to myself, of living on when I'd been rejected by the one man I had adored with all my heart since the day I met him? Ram took you with him. Why then did Lakshman refuse to take me? Was I so unworthy?

Well then, I decided, I would free myself of this unworthy life.

I sat in meditation, hoping to drop my body, hoping Death would come to me like he did to faithful wives in mythical tales. (281)

She just existed, not knowing how to proceed in life and longed only for a happy life with Lakshman. Her meditation towards Death led her to sleep for 14 years, awaiting Lakshman.

Nidra said, "My elder brother Death is impressed with your husband and asked me to take pity on your distress. Thus, I offer you this choice – you may take on Lakshman's sleep for the next fourteen years. This will pay off his debt to me."

A part of me was afraid. What would happen if I fell into fourteen years of sleep? Would people think I was dead and create my body? Then I thought, I don't care. If it helps Lakshman, I'll do it. (282)

Kausalya, the queen and poor soul of Ayodhya longed only for happiness of everyone, but she never lived a happy life. Since her marriage, her life has only been a sacrifice and compromise-filled phase. Initially, she compromised and accepted her husband's multiple marriages.

'It wasn't a perfect marriage, by any means,' Ram said wryly. My father had an eye for women, many of whom ended up in the palace as concubines. This was a trial to my mother, but she'd been taught that queens were expected to accept behaviour. So she did. It helped that she was far above them in birth and influence. My father spent his nights with them, but he always came back to my mother. (67)

The lesser-known but crucial sacrifice of Kausalya includes giving away their daughter to a friend of Dasharath.

A few years into their marriage, Kausalya gave birth to a daughter, Shanta. Dasharath gave the girl to his friend, King Romapad, because of a promise he'd made earlier. Kaushalya didn't like this, but she took comfort in the belief that she'd provide her beloved husband with a male heir soon. But unfortunately, no other children came. Dasharath began looking for another wife, finally choosing Kaikeyi, daughter of Ashwapati, and forming an alliance with the powerful kingdom of Kekaya. That, too, Kaushalya accepted. (67)

In the later part of life she was struggled by her son's banishment and in the final years wept over Ram's broken marriage life. Throughout her life she just existed, seeking only happiness which was actually out of reach.

The most powerful and ruling Kaikeyi too is observed to be existential in life, especially after succeeding her wish of banishing Ram. She was abandoned by her son Bharat for being cruel towards the kingdom, and that marked her failure as a mother. She was left with all richness but of no use to her in any way nor the mental state to enjoy all those. She therefore highly existed, grieving over her actions of ruining everyone's life and happiness. The Repentance phase of Kaikeyi is highly existential and was just passing every day hoping to restore liveliness to the Kingdom by coronating Ram and Sita as rulers of Ayodhya.

My mistress has taken a vow of silence, but with her last words, she instructed me to say the following: She knows she can never make up for the pain she

caused you and her husband. She cannot understand what came over her, like a fever, forcing her to insist on the two terrible boons that destroyed your lives. She wants you to know that she hasn't had a day of peace since then. First to see her beloved husband, who held her so dear to his heart, die of grief, blaming her. And then to be berated and shunned by her son, for whose kingship she had risked all. She hadn't imagined either of these happening, but she understood why they did. Only ill-fortune can come out of evil. (285)

On analysing the story, the article leads the readers understand that richness is only an aid in life and not the core. What speaks really in life is the compassion and ethical living. Richness becomes secondary and in the case of the regal women, Sita, Urmila, Kausalya and Kaikeyi life was beyond imagination and they just existed with no happiness. The women were subjected to compromise and dedication where the same was not reciprocated to them through their beloved spouses and got only partially from their kin. Thus, the existential life of these regal characters is concluded in the story by connecting them as celestial beings who were born on earth for a cause and their life and struggle is a teaching to the humanity in order to emphasise and stick on to morals and values.

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