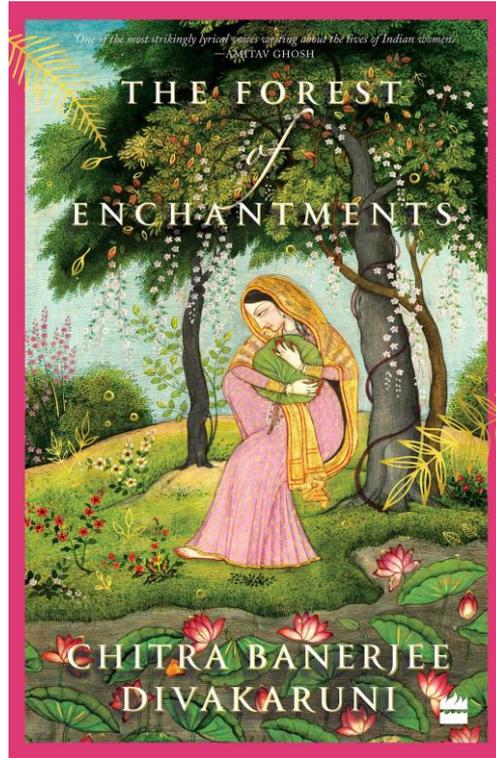


Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*. Noida, India: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019. 372 pp. ISBN: 978-93-5302-598-4.



Retelling/rewriting epics is one of the recent trends in Indian English fiction. However, every time an epic is retold, it brings a new reading, casting the narrative in a different light and reshaping the very context in which actions were previously recounted. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is no exception. It is the modern-day retelling of the great Indian epic, *Ramayana*, from the point of view of Sita.

Chitra Divakaruni sets up the context very skilfully in the prologue of the novel. As Sita reads the manuscript of *Ramayana* handed over to her by sage Valmiki, she realises 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)

This is where the "Sitayan," the tale of Sita, through her own voice sets in. Chitra Divakaruni brings a dramatic effect to this retelling of "Sitayan" through the following lines:

But I had a task to complete before that. I took a deep breath and touched the first palm leaf to my forehead, invoking Saraswati, goddess of creativity serene on her white swan, though a part of me wondered what she could know of my very human tribulations. I unplugged the inkpot and was startled to see the colour the sage had chosen for me. Red. But of course. How else could I write my story except in the colour of menstruation and childbirth, the colour of marriage mark that changes women's lives, the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity.... (3-4)

Chitra Divakaruni reframes the "Sitayan" not just as the tale of Sita, the misjudged heroine, but weaves it with stories of other women characters who are often overlooked. We read of Suanina, a wise and able leader and Sita's mother; Urmila, Laxman's long-suffering wife; Mandodari, Ravan's wife, brushed off as a demon; Surpanakha, Ravan's sister, wronged by two men and even Kaikeyi, Ram's stepmother, who is almost always portrayed as a villain. All these characters, though considered minor, get a fair representation in the novel.

What is most promising in this story of Sita and other minor characters is that the men are treated with equal thoughtfulness. As she portrays the majestic Ram with all his kingly state, Lakshman the dutiful brother and Ravana as the greatest devotee of Lord Shiva, the author questions the stark contradiction between good and bad by suggesting that each individual has his/her own understanding of *dharmā*. What differs is the perspective of the viewer. Instead of giving an opinion of her own, Divakaruni leaves it to the readers to construe the story in the light of their own individual understanding.

The simplicity of the language used by Divakaruni enables us to visualise the character of Sita and her various shades. Sita is for that reason neatly portrayed as a young princess on the eve of her marriage to the magnificent prince of Ayodhya. She is well-versed in martial arts, understands nature and has mystic powers to cure ailments. It is her inner beauty that is primarily highlighted rather than her physical glamour.

Unlike the other writers retelling mythical tales, Divakaruni's narrative of the simply woven plot does not fictionalise the epic story. Instead, through the plain story telling of the oral tradition, Divakaruni brings Sita alive and

connects her to every woman as she reasons, fights, agonises and, above all, claims her voice to say what she has to.

It's clear to me now, what I need to do. Anger and self-pity are useless emotions, so I push them away and speak calmly, even though my heart is breaking all over again.

O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you've always placed your role as king ahead of your role as a husband. In this court, which has been set up to dispense justice to all citizens, I ask you this, for I've been a citizen of Ayodhya too....

You care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? (356)

With such powerful accounts, reading *The Forest of Enchantments* is a joyful experience. As the title suggests, the story attempts to enchant its readers through the slow but powerful rendition of the various episodes of Sita's days in the forest and under the Ashoka tree. Retaining the essence and the message of the epic – about morality, duty, sacrifice – Sita is no doubt portrayed from a feminist perspective. She throws away the mantle of silence, docility and meekness and readily answers all the questions that have troubled women.

Towards the end, as Sita voices her concern for self-respect, she clearly says,

for the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me.... Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more! (357)

She turns out to be a multi-faceted personality who will find resonance in the contemporary time. A dutiful daughter, protective sister, loving wife, gentle daughter-in-law, nature lover, healer, skilled warrior, able administrator and a strong single mother – Sita rises above time as a perfect role model for the twenty-first century. Here it needs to be mentioned that Divakaruni is not the first writer to focus on the retelling of Sita's story from a woman's point of view. Several others have done it over the last few decades. One may point out Mallika Sengupta's novel *Sitayan* (2014) and Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Girl Who Chose: A New Way of Narrating the Ramayana* (2016) in this context. A few years earlier Divakaruni had also attempted to present the story of the *Mahabharata* from a feminist point of view, i.e., retelling the entire myth through the eyes of Draupadi, and named it *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). However, *The Forest of Enchantments* is a book that is balanced and non-judgmental and stays with a mark in the heart of its readers.

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