

---

## Concept of the 'Ideal Woman': A Critical Study Through The Female Characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

**Ragini Raghav**

PhD Scholar, SBS P.G. College Rudrapur

**Dr. Sharmila Saxena**

Research Guide

---

### ABSTRACT

#### Publication Info

#### Article history :

Received : 15-06-2022

Accepted : 06-10-2022

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v18i2.6

#### Key words:

Ramayana, culture,  
mythology, Sita, epic

#### Corresponding author :

minann.rarch1993@gmail.com

In Indian mythology there have been several female characters, who have played prominent roles. They were women who had sacrificed greatly to be idealized. An ideal woman is the one who is a perfect daughter, following her parents' wishes; a perfect wife, obeying and following her husband; a perfect mother, looking after her children. Throughout her life she hardly questions the oppression she suffered. She is the upholder of "culture" and its preservation is her duty and makes sure that her daughter and daughter-in-law learn it from her. In the great epic, *Ramayana*, we come across several women characters who are considered as ideal woman, good, meek, long suffering and bearing everything silently. However, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantment" we see Sita in a different light and also other sides of an ideal woman. Although she suffers throughout the novel but she has a voice and firmly puts her thoughts. The novelist successfully brings new meaning to the concept of an ideal woman.

---

Literature is an inseparable part of the society's culture and it embodies its aspirations and trials. When a piece of literature is appreciated widely it becomes an essential part of that society's living and it's impossible to see the people separated from that. Similar is the case with the epic *Ramayana*. *The Ramayana* is one of the greatest Hindu epics. It narrates the story of Lord Rama who killed the mighty rakshasa king Ravana and saved his wife Sita. The epic was written by Valmiki and has immortalized the character of Rama as 'Maryada Purushottam'. For decades the epic was propagated in different ways telling the story of the great king Rama and inspiring people to follow his path and be an ideal person. The female characters were only obedient daughters, devoted wives, loving mothers, wicked mother-in-law, damsel-in-distress or a total evil. "By the time humankind reaches the stage of writing its mythology and laws, patriarchy is definitively established: it is males who write the codes. It is natural for them to give woman a subordinate situation..." (Beauvoir)

As time passed there have been several rewritings of the epic and almost all of them talk about the adventures and struggles faced by Rama where Sita is the passive character, following Rama as her duty of a good wife. Her fears, her thoughts, her feelings were not considered much, only through the writings of some of the novelists the voices of the female characters are presented. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one such novelist who has explored the life of Sita through the rewriting of the epic from a female perspective. In the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee has written the story of the female characters narrated through the character of Sita, who fills the gap between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic ( ) The novel depicts the story of Sita, her relationship with other female characters, her journey from earth and back to it. It also tells the misogyny of the male

characters. In the novel she is Sita, a human being, not the incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi who transcended to help Lord Vishnu in fulfilling his duty. In writing about Sita and her struggles Divakaruni never made the readers hate Rama instead she depicted the several ways of 'the nature of love' ( )

Sita, the eldest daughter of King Janaka, was an adopted daughter who was found in the field. Urmila was the younger sister of Sita, and his biological daughter. They had a strong sisterly bond. They were obedient daughters, when Urmila fell in love with Lakshmana at first sight, she hesitated to tell this to her parents as Sita being the eldest daughter was supposed to get married first. For Sita, she had to wait for the man who could string Lord Shiva's bow. Sita had an inquisitive mind since childhood, she often questioned the people around her rather than keeping her curiosity to herself. This was not considered appropriate for the princess. When she asks Shatananda, her father's chief advisor, whether he has seen a rakshasa, he looks at her father in disbelief, "... this is what happens when you don't discipline girls as they ought to be" (8)

Sita's mother Sunaina was a wise woman, she used to help her husband in courtly duties and insisted that Sita should learn martial arts. She was the actual ruler of Mithila, a true companion of Janak. Although she didn't teach her the use of weapons instead, she was taught how to use her body as a weapon. Despite being an intelligent woman, Sita was told by Sunaina that women could not rule the kingdom as it was for men and the duty of woman was to help them. "Woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal..." (29). It's evident that all societies big and small have made certain ideals and conception for women to live by.

At the ceremony, Ram told King Janak about his promise to his brothers of getting married in the same family to avoid conflict among the wives. Sita gave the solution by suggesting her cousin (sisters) names, this was considered shameless but Sita spoke for herself and her family. She was not ashamed of admitting the fact that she wanted to get married to Ram as she loved him. When they were on their way to Ayodhya, the soldiers were cutting down the trees that came in the way, it pained her to see the nature suffer for humans to whom they had caused no harm. Sita without hesitating called her husband and asked him to stop the soldiers from doing so, with this she made it clear to her husband that she was a partner in the relationship not just a follower.

Dashrath had several wives, among them were three main women in his life, Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. He married Kaushalya who gave birth to a daughter, Shanta but Dashrath gave the child to his friend because of his promise even though Kaushalya didn't like it she couldn't refuse him. She failed to give him an heir. Knowing all along that the problem lay in him, he still married Sumitra and Kaikeyi and didn't succeed. The wives were devotional towards him and suffered as they longed for his attention and love. Among them only Kaikeyi maintained her position firmly by her wit and bravery, which out of jealousy and uncertainty of her position led her to ask for the exile of Rama for fourteen years.

Sita followed her husband into exile to the forest due to her wifely duties whereas Urmila couldn't. Sita suffered the hardship with him leaving the luxurious life of the palace with which she was accustomed all her life and was termed as an ideal wife whereas Urmila who stayed back in Ayodhya because Lakshmana refused to take her along with him did her wifely duty by wearing the same bark clothes as them and slept for fourteen years in Lakshmana's stead to fulfill his duty. Even when Sita was abducted by Ravana, she remained faithful to Rama despite all the threats and temptation by Ravana. She refused the food offered by them and remained hungry, hence proving herself as a devoted wife. After the war, when Rama frees her of her wifely status, she refuses to leave him and walks into the fire to prove her chastity to him. "...a young woman of surpassing beauty who is abducted by the local ruler and though rescued from

him, her chastity is repeatedly questioned..." (26) Sita forgives him even though she feels betrayed as she thinks it was his duty towards his subjects.

When a woman who worked in the palace as washerwoman came to Sita for her aid, she generously listened to her problem which foiled her own life. The woman asked her for shelter and told her the fact that even if her husband took her in, he would take the issue, that she spent the night out of the house, as an excuse to abuse her. Sita wisely took the decision to keep her at the palace, which clearly sets an example for other women who suffer from the same fate.

Ahalya, wife of Gautam, devoted her life to her husband was cursed by him on the pretext of betraying her marital vows. She couldn't believe that she was being punished for the crime she didn't commit, she was clearly fooled by Indra. He respected the devoted, chaste and docile wife only. When she later turned into human from stone as her curse broke, she took the vow of silence as a punishment for her husband who didn't believe her.

Mandodari never succumbed to her husband, Ravana's motives. Although she devoted her life for him, she had her independent ideas. When Ravana ordered her infant daughter to be killed, she took her own decision and saved her life even though the daughter was predicted to be the end of her father's kingdom. She gave him advices to not indulge himself in the war, remained strong when she learned about her son's death. Even when Ravana was on his verge of death, she accompanied him.

Suparnakha, the evil character of *Ramayana* who is thought to have paid for her wicked behavior towards Sita, has been portrayed by Chitra Banerjee as a girl who was lonely and in search of love, she offered herself to Rama. Being a savage, she could not understand the ways of the civilized people, she could not understand the vow of Rama for his wife. Instead of making her understand the fact that both Rama and Lakshmana were unavailable they played with her emotions making her look like a fool. She could not understand their mockery and attacked on Sita thinking that she was the reason they were in denial. Lakshmana chopped off her nose and ears as punishment for attacking Sita which left both Sita and Surpanakha in shock. "...her eyes full of disbelief that someone could do such a thing to her when all she'd offered him was love. (149). When Sita confronts Rama about what Lakshmana did to Surpanakha he justifies his actions by saying that they were protecting Sita. Being a girl from rakshasha family she couldn't be treated like a civilized woman, "they can't be treated with human courtesy. They don't understand it, and certainly don't appreciate it..." (150). Women have always been seen as the sites of chastity, loveliness and selfless. Domesticated woman becomes a good woman, who is seen to represent the honor of her entire community. Domestication of woman is also important to control the potentially dangerous female sexuality (2372). Her insult in turn led to the separation of Rama and Sita.

After Sita was exiled by Rama into the forest, she breaks down while thinking of the betrayal and the uncertain future of her unborn children. However, she later learns to adapt to her life and teaches her sons to be righteous men. She taught them 'self-defense, all that I'd learned in Mithila' (331). She teaches them to respect all beings and to know the pain of betrayal and about summoning the magical weapons. Until they encountered Rama's army, Lav and Kush were not told about their father. "What would I have told you? That your father, though a great and valiant king, had banished me for no fault of my own, because of frivolous gossip?" (340)

When sage Valmiki hands over the manuscript of *Ramayana* to Sita, she reads it and replies that the poetry was superb but she asks him about her side of the story the pain that she suffered that will remain unheard.

"For you 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" (2)

Sita writes her side of the story, Sita-yan with the red ink, the color of menstruation and child-birth, the colour of the marriage mark that changes women's lives. (4) It reminds the readers of Cixous' exhortation "women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word silence" (Cixous). Her sons, Lav and Kush, sing Sita-yan in the court of Ayodhya in the respect for their mother.

At the end of the novel when Sita is asked to do another agni-pariksha, she refuses while protecting her dignity and setting an example for other women, "I bless my daughters, who are yet unborn. I pray that, if life tests them- as sooner or later life is bound to- 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." (357)

"...I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more! (357)

The women who do not adhere to their dharma, following their husband's orders or the males in the family, fall prey to serious problems. It happened with Sita when she forced Lakshmana to go to Rama's aid when she sensed that he was in danger and Ahalya who could not recognize her husband because of the disguise. Sita being alone in the hut was considered as helpless and in turn helped Ravana in her abduction. It was the dharma that Sita was following which led to her abduction, she politely refused to cross the Lakshmana-rekha but Ravana reminded her that she needs to follow the dharma, "... this isn't the hospitality I expected from the House of Raghu – or from the daughter of Janak and Sunaina! (165). She only followed her duty as was told by her mother, "my mother had impressed upon me that it was our duty as householders to take care of the guests that landed at our door, invited or otherwise." (165).

The female characters in the novel and the epic, *Ramayana*, were women of strong minds who devoted their lives to their family and yet took their stands wherever necessary. As its human nature to commit mistakes, they make certain mistakes because of the situations they are put into. They portray the image of an ideal Hindu woman with their self-respect bearing in their minds. They don't just have identities related to their husbands but are also individuals, human being who do certain things out of love for their family. Sita being considered as the ideal of Indian women for being meek and docile is presented as a woman who has opinions and thoughts of her own. It truly reflects the vision with which she chose her. She constantly challenges the boundaries of social and moral norms.

### Works Cited

- Anthias, Floya, & N.Y. Davis. *Woman-Nation-State*. Springer, 1989.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Vintage e-books, Random House Inc, 2011.
- Bose, M., & S. P. Bose. *A Woman's Ramayana: Chandravati's Bengali epic* (Routledge Hindu Studies Series) (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Routledge, 2013.
- Cixous, H., Cohen, H. & Cohen P. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Chicago Journals*, vol.1 No.4, 1976, pp 875-893. <http://www2.csudh.edu/ccauthen/576F10/cixous.pdf>
- Divakaruni, B. C. *The Forest of Enchantments* (1<sup>st</sup> ed). Harper Collins India, 2019.
- Singh, Sneha. The Ideal Hindu Woman: Defined by Hindu Nationalism and Culture. *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research*, vol.04, No.09, 2021, pp 2369-2377. [www.ijsshr.in](http://www.ijsshr.in)