



## Female Subalternity and Self-Expression in the Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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**Abstract:** *Mythological narratives have long occupied a central position in Indian cultural and literary traditions. However, these narratives have traditionally been dominated by patriarchal interpretations that silence or marginalize female voices. Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly revisited mythology to reinterpret women characters from feminist and subaltern perspectives. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments represents a significant contribution to this literary movement by retelling the Ramayana through the voice of Sita. The novel reconstructs Sita not merely as the ideal wife and silent sufferer of traditional mythology, but as an emotionally resilient, intellectually aware, and self-expressive woman who questions patriarchal structures and social injustice. This research article explores the themes of female subalternity and self-expression in the novel through feminist and subaltern theoretical frameworks. The study analyzes how Divakaruni transforms Sita into a powerful narrator who articulates women's emotional struggles, resistance, and identity. The article further examines how the novel critiques patriarchy, redefines mythological womanhood, and foregrounds women's agency and voice. Through its feminist reinterpretation of mythology, the novel becomes a literary space where silenced women reclaim narrative authority and dignity.*

**Keywords:** *Female Subalternity, Self-Expression, Feminism, Mythological Retelling, Sita, Patriarchy, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.*

**Introduction:** Indian mythology has significantly influenced the cultural, moral, and social consciousness of Indian society through epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which continue to shape ideals of gender roles, morality, and social conduct (Beauvoir 45). In these narratives, women are often portrayed as symbols of obedience, sacrifice, chastity, and devotion, while their individuality and emotional complexities remain overshadowed by patriarchal values (Millett 67). In the traditional *Ramayana*, Sita is idealized as the perfect wife whose identity is defined by loyalty and suffering, yet her personal voice and psychological struggles are rarely foregrounded (Divakaruni 12). Contemporary Indian English writers have attempted to reinterpret mythology from feminist perspectives, challenging patriarchal readings and recovering women's agency and self-expression (Mohanty 103). Among them, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, reimagines Sita as a self-aware narrator who articulates her emotions, pain, and resistance against patriarchal oppression (Divakaruni 25). The novel also reflects the idea of subalternity, associated with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, by giving voice to a marginalized female figure whose experiences were traditionally mediated through male narratives (Spivak 82). Thus, Divakaruni transforms mythology into a space of feminist resistance where women's emotional realities, identity, and self-expression receive recognition and narrative authority.

**Objectives:** This article seeks to analyze the representation of female subalternity and self-expression in *The Forest of Enchantments*. It examines how the novel critiques patriarchal structures, foregrounds women's experiences, and reconstructs mythological womanhood from a feminist perspective.

**Female Subalternity and Patriarchal Structures:** The condition of female subalternity forms one of the central concerns of *The Forest of Enchantments*. Although Sita is revered as a queen and goddess-like figure, she repeatedly experiences emotional neglect, social humiliation, and patriarchal oppression. Her life reveals the contradictions of a society that symbolically worships women while denying them agency and voice in reality (Divakaruni 56). Patriarchy in the novel operates through social customs, moral expectations, and political authority. Women are expected to uphold family honor through silence, obedience, purity, and sacrifice, while their individuality remains subordinated to male-defined morality (Beauvoir 112). Sita's life becomes a continuous negotiation between personal emotions and societal expectations.

From childhood, Sita is expected to conform to ideal feminine behavior despite her intelligence and curiosity. Although she possesses strength and independence, society gradually attempts to shape her identity according to patriarchal norms (Divakaruni 71). Her marriage to Rama initially appears harmonious, yet it gradually reveals unequal gender dynamics embedded within royal and social structures. One of the most disturbing manifestations of female subalternity occurs after Sita's rescue from Lanka, when she is compelled to prove her purity through the trial by fire despite her unwavering loyalty (Divakaruni 198). This episode reflects the patriarchal tendency to scrutinize women's morality while exempting men from similar judgment (Millett 89). Sita's emotional suffering intensifies because her personal truth carries little significance before public opinion.

The novel critiques how women's worth is measured through notions of chastity and honor. Sita's suffering becomes symbolic of the experiences of countless women whose dignity is questioned because of patriarchal suspicion and social judgment (hooks 64). Her second exile during pregnancy represents the ultimate expression of patriarchal injustice. Rama abandons her due to public gossip, prioritizing political reputation over emotional responsibility (Divakaruni 254). Within this framework of royal duty and patriarchal morality, Sita's emotions and well-being become insignificant. Through these experiences, Divakaruni exposes how patriarchal systems silence women and reduce them to symbols instead of recognizing them as individuals. Sita's subaltern condition lies not only in her suffering but also in society's refusal to acknowledge her humanity and emotional truth (Spivak 82).

**Reclaiming Voice and Narrative Authority:** One of the most revolutionary aspects of *The Forest of Enchantments* is its narrative structure. By allowing Sita to narrate her own story, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reclaims feminine voice from patriarchal literary traditions. In traditional retellings of the *Ramayana*, Sita is generally portrayed through male perspectives such as Valmiki's narration or through the actions of male characters, leaving her inner world largely unexplored (Spivak 90). Divakaruni transforms this condition by positioning Sita at the center of narration.

The novel begins with Sita deciding to write her own story because she realizes that history has failed to represent her truth (Divakaruni 3). This act itself becomes a form of resistance against patriarchal historiography. Through narration, Sita rejects silence and asserts authority over her identity. Storytelling empowers her because it transforms her from an object of representation into a subject capable of interpretation and self-definition (Showalter 145). She no longer exists merely as Rama's wife or as an idealized symbol of virtue; instead, she emerges as an emotionally complex and intellectually conscious individual.

Sita's voice reveals dimensions of experience often ignored in traditional narratives, including loneliness, disappointment, emotional longing, fear, and inner conflict (Divakaruni 146). Through storytelling, she recovers her humanity from rigid patriarchal idealizations. The act of narration also symbolizes the broader feminist struggle for representation and voice. Patriarchal societies often silence women by controlling

narratives and historical memory, but Divakaruni challenges this silencing by enabling Sita to articulate her own perspective (Mohanty 103).

Importantly, Sita's narration transcends personal experience and becomes representative of collective feminine consciousness. Her struggles reflect the emotional realities of countless women who have endured silence, sacrifice, and social judgment across generations (hooks 78). Thus, narrative authority becomes a form of liberation through which Sita reclaims dignity, agency, and identity.

**Self-Expression as Feminine Resistance:** Self-expression emerges as one of the most significant forms of resistance in the novel. Traditional patriarchal systems often associate ideal femininity with silence, obedience, and submission. Women are expected to endure suffering quietly while prioritizing social harmony over personal truth (Beauvoir 134). Divakaruni challenges this ideal by portraying Sita as emotionally expressive, intellectually aware, and psychologically resilient.

Sita openly reflects upon injustice, loneliness, emotional pain, and societal hypocrisy. She questions customs that impose unequal burdens upon women and reveals a critical awareness of gender discrimination and patriarchal authority (Divakaruni 175). However, her resistance is not always confrontational. Much of her strength lies in emotional endurance, moral clarity, and self-awareness. She resists oppression not through aggression but through dignity and refusal to surrender her inner identity (Rich 56).

The novel emphasizes that self-expression itself becomes a political act for marginalized women. When women articulate their experiences, they challenge systems that depend upon silence for survival (Spivak 94). Sita's storytelling therefore becomes an assertion of both existence and humanity. Her final decision to refuse return to Ayodhya after enduring repeated humiliation represents the culmination of her self-expression and resistance (Divakaruni 321). Instead of seeking validation from patriarchal society, she chooses self-respect and personal truth.

This moment transforms Sita from a passive sufferer into an empowered individual capable of defining her own destiny. Divakaruni's portrayal of self-expression highlights the importance of emotional honesty and personal voice in resisting patriarchal oppression. Through speech, memory, and reflection, Sita reclaims the power historically denied to women within patriarchal discourse (Butler 121).

**Feminist Reinterpretation of Mythology:** The Forest of Enchantments belongs to a broader tradition of feminist mythological retellings that reinterpret ancient narratives from women's perspectives. Such retellings challenge patriarchal readings of mythology and foreground women's emotional and psychological experiences (Mohanty 112). Traditional mythology often reduces women to symbolic roles such as devoted wife, sacrificial mother, or moral guardian, while feminist reinterpretations seek to humanize these figures by exploring their individuality, desires, fears, and agency (Showalter 154).

In the novel, Sita is no longer represented as an abstract ideal of purity and sacrifice; instead, she emerges as a fully realized human being with emotional depth and intellectual complexity (Divakaruni 94). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores her vulnerabilities, strengths, contradictions, and aspirations in order to challenge conventional portrayals of mythological womanhood. The novel also critiques the glorification of female suffering, as patriarchal cultures often celebrate women who silently endure pain as symbols of ideal virtue (Beauvoir 138). Divakaruni questions whether such glorification perpetuates gender oppression by normalizing female sacrifice and silence (hooks 82).

Through Sita's perspective, the novel reexamines key events of the *Ramayana* and exposes their emotional consequences for women (Divakaruni 176). This reinterpretation destabilizes patriarchal assumptions embedded within traditional narratives. The feminist dimension of the novel lies not only in criticizing patriarchy but also in reconstructing feminine identity beyond restrictive social roles. Sita is portrayed as a thinker, storyteller, healer, mother, and emotionally resilient individual whose identity cannot be confined

within patriarchal definitions (Butler 127). By rewriting mythology, Divakaruni creates space for alternative cultural meanings and feminist consciousness, demonstrating that mythology remains open to reinterpretation according to evolving social and ethical concerns (Spivak 91).

**Emotional and Psychological Complexity of Sita:** One of the most remarkable achievements of the novel is its psychological portrayal of Sita. Divakaruni moves beyond idealized representations and presents Sita as an emotionally complex human being (Divakaruni 102). Sita experiences love, joy, fear, loneliness, grief, anger, and hope, and her emotional journey reflects the psychological realities of women living within patriarchal structures (Rich 74).

As a child, Sita possesses curiosity, intelligence, and emotional sensitivity. Her connection with nature symbolizes freedom and emotional openness (Divakaruni 36). Marriage introduces new responsibilities and emotional challenges. Although she deeply loves Rama, she gradually becomes aware of the limitations imposed upon women within social and political systems (Beauvoir 145). Life in exile transforms Sita psychologically, as the hardships of forest life strengthen her resilience and deepen her understanding of suffering (Divakaruni 144).

Her abduction by Ravana intensifies emotional conflict as she struggles with fear, isolation, uncertainty, and humiliation. The trial by fire leaves profound psychological scars because it signifies public distrust and patriarchal suspicion (Divakaruni 203). Sita realizes that personal truth alone cannot protect women from social judgment. Her final exile during pregnancy becomes emotionally devastating, yet motherhood provides renewed emotional purpose and strength. Despite personal suffering, she raises Lava and Kusha with wisdom, dignity, and compassion (Divakaruni 287).

Divakaruni's psychological exploration humanizes Sita and challenges simplistic portrayals that reduce women to moral symbols (Showalter 162). The novel insists that women deserve recognition of their emotional depth, individuality, and inner struggles.

**Motherhood and Feminine Strength:** Motherhood occupies a significant place in the novel, yet Divakaruni portrays it as a source of empowerment rather than mere sacrifice. Traditional patriarchal ideology often idealizes motherhood while simultaneously restricting women's individuality and autonomy (Rich 91). Divakaruni challenges this contradiction through Sita's character.

After being abandoned, Sita independently raises her sons in Valmiki's ashram and becomes responsible for their emotional, moral, and intellectual upbringing (Divakaruni 276). Despite her suffering, she nurtures them with dignity, wisdom, and compassion. Sita's motherhood reflects resilience rather than passive endurance. She transforms personal pain into emotional strength and refuses to allow bitterness to shape her relationship with her children (Rich 88).

The novel also presents motherhood as a form of self-expression. Through storytelling and teaching, Sita communicates values of empathy, justice, and integrity to Lava and Kusha (Divakaruni 291). Importantly, Divakaruni does not reduce Sita solely to maternal identity. Even as a mother, she retains intellectual independence, emotional individuality, and self-awareness (Butler 136). This balanced portrayal challenges stereotypes that confine women exclusively within domestic roles.

Motherhood therefore becomes an expression of feminine power, creativity, emotional endurance, and resilience rather than patriarchal control (Rich 102).

**Nature and Feminine Identity:** Nature and the forest function as powerful symbols throughout *The Forest of Enchantments*. Unlike the royal court governed by politics and patriarchy, the forest represents freedom, healing, introspection, and feminine self-discovery (Divakaruni 121). For Sita, the forest is not merely a place of exile but also a space where she reconnects with her inner self and emotional truth.

Nature provides emotional refuge from social expectations and patriarchal pressures. Divakaruni frequently associates Sita with rivers, flowers, trees, and the earth, symbolizing feminine creativity, resilience, nurturing power, and spiritual depth (Showalter 170). The title *The Forest of Enchantments* itself suggests a world of mystery, emotional richness, and wisdom hidden beyond patriarchal civilization.

The forest becomes a metaphor for women's inner lives that patriarchal society often ignores or fails to value. The symbolic relationship between women and nature also reflects ecofeminist concerns because both women and nature are subjected to domination and exploitation within patriarchal systems (Mohanty 119). By aligning Sita with nature, Divakaruni critiques structures of control and oppression while emphasizing feminine harmony with emotional and spiritual freedom (Divakaruni 158).

Thus, the forest emerges as an alternative space where feminine identity can flourish beyond restrictive social norms and patriarchal limitations.

**Contemporary Relevance of the Novel:** Although rooted in ancient mythology, *The Forest of Enchantments* possesses immense contemporary relevance. Many issues faced by Sita continue to affect women in modern society. Women today still encounter moral policing, gender discrimination, emotional neglect, victim-blaming, and pressure to conform to idealized standards of femininity (hooks 94).

Society frequently expects women to sacrifice personal desires for family honor and social acceptance. Sita's experiences therefore resonate deeply with contemporary feminist struggles, reflecting the universal challenges faced by women seeking dignity, autonomy, and self-expression (Beauvoir 152). Her emotional journey symbolizes the ongoing struggle against patriarchal oppression and societal judgment.

The novel also encourages readers to critically examine inherited cultural traditions and dominant narratives. Rather than rejecting mythology, Divakaruni reinterprets it in ways that promote empathy, gender equality, and social justice (Mohanty 124). For modern readers, Sita becomes not merely a mythological figure but a symbol of emotional resilience, self-respect, and feminine consciousness (Divakaruni 315).

The novel's emphasis on voice and storytelling further highlights the importance of women narrating their own experiences in literature, history, and society. By reclaiming Sita's voice, Divakaruni demonstrates that self-expression remains essential for resisting silence, marginalization, and patriarchal domination (Spivak 97).

**Conclusion:** Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* represents a profound feminist reinterpretation of mythology that reclaims the silenced voice of Sita and reconstructs her identity beyond patriarchal limitations. Through the themes of female subalternity and self-expression, the novel challenges traditional representations of women rooted in silence, obedience, and sacrifice. Divakaruni transforms Sita into an emotionally complex, intellectually aware, and self-expressive narrator who questions injustice, reflects upon suffering, and ultimately asserts her dignity. Her storytelling becomes an act of resistance against patriarchal historiography that has historically marginalized women's voices. The novel exposes the mechanisms of patriarchy through social expectations, political authority, emotional neglect, and moral scrutiny. At the same time, it celebrates feminine resilience, solidarity, motherhood, emotional intelligence, and inner strength.

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