



Retelling of Myth, Reconnecting with the Past: A Study of Chitra Banerjee's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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ABSTRACT

The act of Telling and Retelling of tales is not a new phenomenon. It has always been there, perhaps ever since human creativity began crafting stories. However, the first two decades of the 21st century have registered an unprecedented surge in Retellings, especially of myths. This prompts academicians to explain this phenomenon theoretically. Theoretical frameworks such as Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Feminism etc have attempted to elucidate this phenomenon based on their own theoretical assumptions. This paper, however, takes a different approach from any of these. In doing so, it tries to explain the phenomenon of Retelling in connection with the phenomenon of Globalisation. The paper argues that the current trends of Retelling do not stem from a dearth of fresh plots, as superficial assumptions may lead us to believe, but rather fulfills certain narratorial requirements. Globalisation, with its disintegration of joint families leading to the separation of grandchildren from their grandparents, disrupts the connection between the present and the past. This is so because younger generations are increasingly detached from the traditional stories, once passed down orally by their grandparents. Traditional stories like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have a lot to offer for the present, and at the same time, there is much that needs to be challenged as well. Therefore, to establish contact with the past, Retelling becomes a narratorial necessity. This paper analyzes Valmiki's *Ramayana* and its retelling in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) in this very light to illustrate how Banerjee's novel establishes a cultural dialogue with the past (Valmiki's *Ramayana*) and the negotiations involved in the process.

Keywords: Retelling, Myth, Globalisation, Ramayana, Culture

Introduction

In the landscape of storytelling, the practice of telling and retelling narratives has persisted over time, driven by evolving reasons but a consistent necessity. Anant Pai, an Indian educationist, observed this need firsthand while watching a TV show on Doordarshan. He noted that Indian children struggled with questions about their own mythology but were well-versed in Greek myths, highlighting a disconnection from their cultural heritage. In response, Pai founded Amar Chitra Katha to bridge this gap, recognizing the imperative of connecting the younger generation with their traditional stories and cultural past. This initiative served as a proactive response to the widening gap between Indian children and their rich cultural narratives, ensuring the preservation and transmission of these stories for future generations.

Indeed, connecting younger generations to their traditional stories is a one of the ways through which Present engages with Past. In her book "The Past as Present", Professor Romila Thapar delves into the intriguing concept of how societies construct their past. She asserts, "All societies over the centuries have constructed their past, often in accordance with contemporary theories about the meaning of the past." This perspective sheds light on the understanding that our perception of history is often shaped by the present. The past is represented through various mediums – oral traditions like mythology and folktales, and literary forms such as epics, narratives, drama, and chronicles. These diverse representations form the foundation of what we term 'traditions.' Thapar's viewpoint underscores the dynamic nature of historical narratives, suggesting that they are not static records of events but are continually reinterpreted and reshaped to resonate with the contemporary ethos. This concept is particularly relevant in the context of initiatives like Amar Chitra Katha, which represent an effort to reconstruct and retell cultural narratives in a way that connects with and is meaningful to the present generation.

There has always been desire to create cultural past through mythological stories. However contemporary society – society of the first two decades of the 21st century – has been found to be in a growing sense urgency both in India and the West. Homeric Epics which has their origin from Greek Mythology are being told in quite number of times recently. *Odyssey*, for example, has been retold in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad* (2015), and Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). So far as *Illiad* is concerned, it appears in David Malouf's *Ransom* (2009), Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011), and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018). To name few in Indian context, *Mahabharata* is retold in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Anand Neelakantan's two novels; *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013) and *Ajaya: Rise of*

Kali (2015). In recent years, Ramayana has been of special interest to fiction writers. Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012) is centred around Ravana's point of view. Likewise Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014), Aashish Kaul's *The Queen's Play* (2015) and Manani J. Anandani's *Mandodari: Queen of Lanka* (2018), Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess* (2016) present the views of Urmila, Mandodari, and Surpanakha respectively. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Hanuman's Ramayana* (2009) and *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana* (2013) used Ramayana myth. Sita has been at the centre of many of Ramayana's retellings which include *Sita's Ascent* (2012) by Vayu Naidu, *Sitayana* (2019) by Amit Majmudar, and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Amish Tripathi's three books of Ram Chandra series- *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015), *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017), and *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019)- is a brilliant retelling of the myth. Ashok Banker's Ramayana series too exploits Ramayana myth.

What is the past these retellings wish to revisit, and most importantly, why? This paper will try to explore these questions in regard to Chitra Banerjee's novel *The Forest of Enchantment*. This retelling of the Ramayana invites us to revisit a cultural history of the Ramayana, but this time through Sita's perspective. But whose Ramayana? Is it Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas? Valmiki's Ramayana? Or the Ram Katha traveling from generation to generation before any of these poets wrote it? Or is it all of them - and many more - that constitute the past together?

"The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history", writes Prof Thapar, "for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places, even within its own history in the Indian subcontinent". The field of Indian epic studies appears to be experiencing a resurgence, marked by the recent emergence of numerous new translations, monographs, and scholarly paper collections. These works focus on one or both of the epics, delving into their adaptations, reinterpretations, and evolutions across diverse languages and socio-political contexts (Robert P Goldman)

Text

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments", a detailed analysis reveals a profound reconnection with the past, particularly when juxtaposed with Valmiki's Ramayana. The novel reinterprets key episodes, infusing them with new perspectives and emotions.

Sita, while convincing Ram to take her to the forest, is vocal in Valmiki's rendition but relatively mute in Ramcharitmanas. Ultimately, Ram has to be convinced – the specific details of the conversation are not the focus here. The poets have no choice but to send Sita into the forest; failing to do so would mean no Sita's kidnapping, no Ram-Ravana war, and no victory of good over evil. In short, the entire basic structure of the Ramayana would collapse. Therefore, Rama has to be convinced. The matter of discussion is how Sita convinces Ram – whether through emotional blackmail, as she does in Tulsidas or Ramanand Sagar's serial, or through strong arguments, as in Valmiki's and Chitra's versions. In Valmiki's Ramayana, the abduction of Sita by Ravana is a key event that sets the epic's larger narrative in motion. In this depiction, Sita is portrayed largely as a passive character, whose abduction serves as a catalyst for Rama's heroic quest. The focus is predominantly on the conflict between Rama and Ravana, with Sita's experience and perspective receiving less attention. Her character is emblematic of purity and virtue, traits that are constantly tested throughout the epic. This traditional portrayal tends to uphold an idealized version of womanhood, emphasizing chastity, loyalty, and endurance in suffering. For contemporary women, this representation might seem restrictive, as it emphasizes passive virtues and the role of the female as an object in male narratives.

Contrastingly, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments", Sita's abduction is portrayed with a deeper exploration of her emotions and thoughts. Divakaruni presents Sita as an active character with agency, resilience, and inner strength. The focus is on her experience, her understanding of the event, and how she copes with the trauma and betrayal. This retelling challenges the traditional narrative by giving Sita a voice and a perspective that is usually overshadowed. Sita's character is not just a symbol of purity but a complex individual facing adversity with courage and introspection. For modern women, this portrayal is empowering as it highlights resilience, emotional strength, and the capability to endure and overcome challenges. It presents a more relatable and realistic image of womanhood, resonating with contemporary values of individuality and strength.

While Valmiki's Ramayana presents Sita primarily as a virtuous, passive figure, central to the epic's moral and ethical themes, Divakaruni's novel reimagines her as an empowered individual, providing a perspective that is more aligned with modern views on female agency and resilience. This shift in portrayal from the traditional to the contemporary reflects a broader evolution in how women's roles and experiences are depicted and understood in society.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments," the Agnipariksha (trial by fire) episode is reimagined to highlight Sita's vocal stand, a portrayal that resonates deeply with the contemporary issue of resisting patriarchal attitudes, especially victim-blaming, prevalent in modern society. Traditionally, in Valmiki's Ramayana, the Agnipariksha is a test of Sita's purity and chastity, a moment that underscores her virtue in the face of suspicion and doubt. Sita's acquiescence to this trial has often been interpreted as a symbol of her unwavering devotion and fidelity to Rama. However, this aspect of the story also reflects a patriarchal mindset, where a woman's value and integrity are contingent upon the approval and judgment of men, often leading to a culture of victim-blaming. In Tulsidas' version, the justification for the Agnipariksha is based on the premise that the real Sita was handed to Agni Dev (the fire god) earlier, and the Maya Sita (illusionary Sita) was created long before Ravana abducted her. Therefore, the Agnipariksha is considered a means to retrieve the true Sita from Agni Dev.

If I count on none other than Rama, indeed,

And with sincere heart, in My thought, word, deed,

O, Fire-god, you know the contents of each heart,

For Me, become cool as sandal on your part."

(Ramcharitmanas Trans. By Khatri, p 705)

However, the content of the statement shows different things. The content indicates that the Agnipariksha served not only as a means of retrieving Sita but also as a loyalty test. Otherwise, the necessity of uttering specific words during this ritual would not have been apparent. In Valmiki's version and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's interpretation, Sita argues that Ravan, being physically stronger than her, forcibly abducted her. She emphasizes that it was not her fault and, given the vast difference in strength, she had no agency in the abduction. This perspective contrasts with the portrayal in Tulsidas' version, where the emphasis is on the concept of Maya Sita and the Agnipariksha as a means of validating her purity and loyalty. The varying interpretations highlight the nuanced nature of Sita's character and the divergent themes explored by different poets.

The portrayal of Sita in "The Forest of Enchantments" is particularly significant for contemporary women. It mirrors the ongoing struggles against patriarchal structures and victim-blaming attitudes in modern society. By giving Sita a voice to challenge the unfairness and inequality she faces, Divakaruni empowers her character. This empowerment serves as an inspiration for women today, advocating for the importance of raising their voices against unjust societal expectations and norms. The Agnipariksha episode, as reimagined by Divakaruni, becomes a powerful narrative tool for highlighting the need for resistance against patriarchal victim-blaming. It underscores the relevance of ancient stories in contemporary discourse and their potential to inspire and empower. Sita's vocal stand in the novel is a call for women to assert their dignity and reject the unjust standards imposed upon them, making Divakaruni's interpretation a significant contribution to the conversation on gender equality and women's rights.

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments," the portrayal of Sita's exile is not just a narrative of victimhood but also a profound exploration of her strength and resilience as a mother raising her children in adverse circumstances. This aspect of the novel offers a nuanced perspective on how a mother, despite being a victim of injustice, can nurture and empower her children against the odds. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Sita's exile is a consequence of societal pressures and doubts cast upon her chastity. She is portrayed as a wronged woman, sent into the forest while pregnant, enduring her fate with quiet dignity. However, in Divakaruni's retelling, there is a significant shift in how Sita's exile is represented. While she remains a figure who faces grave injustice, her character is imbued with agency and resilience.

During her exile in the forest, Sita is not merely a passive sufferer. Divakaruni portrays her as a strong and nurturing mother who single-handedly raises her sons, Lava and Kusha. In this challenging environment, away from the luxuries and support of the palace, Sita teaches her sons about life, values, and strength. She instills in them a sense of justice, courage, and resilience. Her role as a mother is depicted as proactive and empowering. Despite the unjust circumstances she finds herself in, Sita uses her situation to impart important life lessons to her children, preparing them to face the world with courage and wisdom. Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita in exile is a powerful commentary on the strength of motherhood in the face of adversity. It resonates with the experiences of many women who, despite facing injustices and hardships, continue to raise their children with strength and grace. Sita's character becomes a symbol of empowerment, showcasing how a mother's influence can be a formidable force in shaping the future generation, even in the most challenging situations.

By depicting Sita as a strong, nurturing, and wise mother, Divakaruni highlights the idea that victimhood and strength can coexist. Sita's ability to raise her children effectively, instilling in them values of righteousness and bravery, despite her own personal struggles, is a testament to her character's resilience and the transformative power of motherhood. This portrayal is particularly relevant for contemporary society, where mothers often face various challenges yet continue to be the cornerstone of strength and guidance for their children. Sita's exile, as depicted in "The Forest of Enchantments," thus becomes a narrative of empowerment, celebrating the enduring spirit of motherhood in the face of injustice.

. For the sake of my sons, I made myself live when it would have been much easier to give up and die than to go through the pain of having the person you love most in the world abandon you. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. (Divakaruni, p. 357)

Furthermore, Divakaruni extends her narrative to include other characters like Urmila, who are marginalized in the original epic. By giving voice to these characters, she enriches the narrative, offering a more inclusive and comprehensive view of the story.

In "The Forest of Enchantments" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Sita's refusal to undergo the fire test a second time is a pivotal moment that powerfully encapsulates a woman's resistance and the assertion of saying "Enough." This act of defiance is more than just a refusal; it is a profound statement about the limits of endurance and the necessity of setting boundaries, even in the face of overwhelming societal pressure. In the traditional narrative of Valmiki's Ramayana, Sita's compliance with the Agnipariksha (trial by fire) is seen as a testament to her purity and devotion. However, when asked to prove her purity again, Sita's acquiescence is not demanded in Divakaruni's retelling. Instead, she chooses to reject this second test. This refusal is a moment of significant empowerment. It symbolizes a woman's right to refuse to be continually subjected to unjust and unreasonable demands for proving her integrity and honor.

Divakaruni's portrayal of this moment speaks volumes to the contemporary context, where women often face repeated scrutiny and are forced to prove themselves in various aspects of life repeatedly. Sita's refusal becomes a metaphor for the modern woman's struggle against such relentless judgments and the patriarchal expectation of endless patience and endurance. It underscores the idea that there comes a point where one must draw the line and assertively say "enough."

This narrative turn is crucial for its message that endurance has its limits. Sita, in Divakaruni's novel, embodies the wisdom to recognize when endurance turns into unnecessary suffering and when to take a stand against it. Her decision to refuse the second Agnipariksha is not a sign of defeat but an assertion

of self-respect and dignity. It sends a strong message that while endurance and patience are virtues, they should not lead to the perpetuation of injustice or become a tool for one's victimization.

In essence, Divakaruni reimagines Sita not just as a symbol of endurance, but as a beacon of resistance and self-respect. Her refusal to undergo the fire test again is a call to women to recognize their worth and to understand that saying "enough" is sometimes necessary to preserve one's dignity. It's a powerful reminder that while enduring adversity is commendable, recognizing the point where endurance becomes self-destructive and saying "enough" is equally important. In this way, Divakaruni's Sita becomes an emblem of strength and wisdom, guiding contemporary women on when to endure and when to assertively stand up against injustices. Lastly, the novel's ending is a stark contrast to Valmiki's Ramayana. Divakaruni portrays Sita as a figure of agency, making her own decisions about her life and destiny. This strong assertion of female agency is a significant departure from the traditional narrative, where Sita's fate is largely influenced by Rama's decisions. Through these reinterpretations, Divakaruni's novel not only reconnects with the past but also redefines it, offering a fresh and more inclusive perspective on the Ramayana. The novel encourages a reevaluation of the epic, highlighting the relevance of these ancient stories in contemporary discourse, especially in terms of gender dynamics and societal norms.

Conclusion

The flurry of retellings that we see in the recent past has close connection with the Globalization. The advent of globalization has led to the disintegration of the joint family system, severing the younger generation from their grandparents. This separation resulted in a loss of cultural stories, which were traditionally passed down orally. This gap created a narrative necessity for retellings as an established genre, serving to reconnect us with our past. However, this reconnection with history initiates a two-fold dialogue. Firstly, it allows us to celebrate our cultural heritage, which offers much to the present. Yet, the past also contains aspects that require questioning and challenging, such as ingrained prejudices, be they gender-based, racial, or otherwise. This critical examination forms the second trajectory of retelling. Helen Morales, in her book "Antigone Rising," notes that myths can also reinforce such prejudices. Therefore, while retellings help in preserving and appreciating our cultural treasures, they also provide a platform for scrutinizing and addressing the more problematic parts of our history.

But there is question, can the prejudices be challenged through fresh stories, infact gender, racial prejudices are being challenged these days through fresh stories, then why through myth? It's because these myths are not just storeies but way of living, therefore prejudices here are more deeply interegerated. Chitra banerjee, for example says:

"Growing up in Kolkata, the sense of Sita she got was of a "very meek and mild, obedient wife and daughter-in-law, who did not create any trouble. Elders would bless me and say, may you be like Sita, the epitome of all those qualities. That used to really annoy me! I thought there has to be more to Sita than that."

To confront and challenge these deeply ingrained prejudicial values, it is essential to utilize the same medium of storytelling. Helen Morales, in the preface of her book, elucidates the significance of myths, stating, "What makes a myth a myth, rather than just a story, is that it has been told and retold over the centuries and has become meaningful to a culture or community." She further emphasizes the importance of reinterpreting myths, "Telling new stories is, of course, essential, but viewing our worlds through the lens of the old myths is also meaningful" (14).

In conclusion, it becomes imperative to engage with Valmiki's portrayal of Sita, distinct from the versions presented in various patriarchal retellings. This approach offers a redefinition of womanhood, marking a balance between endurance and the assertion against injustice. The key lies in understanding when to bear hardships and when to unequivocally say, 'Enough!' While the essence of the Ramayana remains timeless, the novel "The Forest of Enchantments" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni brings these age-old narratives into contemporary relevance. It raises crucial questions: How should women be treated by their loved ones? What rights do they hold within a relationship? And crucially, when is it time for a woman to take a stand and declare, 'Enough!?' These questions not only resonate with the ethos of our times but also serve as a guiding light for reexamining and reshaping our understanding of gender roles and relationships in the modern world.

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