



## **Existential crisis in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments***

**Anushiya. M<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Sreeja Balakrishnan<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, 641043, India.

<sup>2</sup> Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore, 641043, India.

---

### ABSTRACT:

Ramayana is one of the great Indian epics, also known as Itihasas. It teaches mankind the righteous way of living a human life and the goals of human life through the central figures, Ram and Lakshman. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* is a retelling of the Ramayana from a woman's perspective; it focuses on the suffering of the protagonist and the existential crisis faced by Sita and other major female characters. This paper concentrates on the existential frustration faced by women in ancient times and their struggle to overcome it. The concept of existential feminism is applied in the research paper.

---

Keywords : Existentialism Feminism, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita, Women

The philosophical examination of human existence is the focus of existentialist philosophy. Existentialist philosophers examine topics of value, meaning, and purpose in human life. The founding father of existentialism is Soren Kierkegaard. The human situation may be examined as a distinct search for self-discovery, a journey intended to overcome a 'existential crisis'. The term "feminism" refers to a collection of socio-political theories and ideologies that aim to define and promote gender equality in the social, political, and economic spheres. There are four key timeframes within modern western feminism.

The concept of an existential crisis addresses how men and society interact. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir examines women's conditions from an existential stance. Beauvoir is a well-known existentialist and one of the pioneers of second-wave feminism. *The Second Sex* (published in 1949 in French and then translated into English in 1953), is where the phrase existential feminism first appeared, as Beauvoir accurately notes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283).

Although frequently disregarded among the many in-depth sources on existentialist feminism, some believe Beauvoir has made a great deal more progress than Sartre. The writings on existential psychoanalysis written by French philosopher, existentialist, and phenomenologist Jean-Paul Sartre had a significant influence on existentialist feminism. In his work, Sartre challenges the idea of the pure individual, arguing instead that the person is the intersection of universal schemata. Existentialist feminists emphasise the importance of concepts like freedom, relationships, and the experience of being a human. An example of existentialism's ideology is a woman who makes conscious decisions about her life, embraces her uniqueness, and feels the unease that accompanies being self-reliant, rebellious, and alone. These existential heroines may be found in the writings of Margaret Drabble, Kate Chopin, Doris Lessing, Joan Didion, and Margaret Atwood.

Poet, novelist, and short story writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is noted for her depictions of women. Indian-born American Divakaruni changed her perspective on the value

of Indian women in society after immigrating to the US in 1976. She penned poetry and novels based on what she experienced and other Indian women's experiences. Her collection of short tales, *Arranged Marriage*, was the 1996 American Book Award winner. Divakaruni's works are mostly set in India and the United States and often focus on the lives of South Asian immigrants.

*The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, published in 2019 is a narrative about the Ramayana, but instead of portraying the triumph of virtue over evil or glimpses of Lord Ram, it tells the unsung story of Sita, which we learn from her perspective as she is the story's narrator. Sita is often portrayed as a peaceful, meek, self-sacrificing, and subservient woman in contemporary culture. These traits are often viewed as ideal qualities for a woman. However, Divakaruni consistently challenges societal perceptions of women by portraying them as powerful, approachable, and inspirational figures in the works she produces. Divakaruni delves on the existential dilemma that Sita and other prominent female characters encounter, as seen from Sita's perspective in the novel. However, these women stand up for their dignity and self-esteem. The wire news paper reviews *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as "Sita's image from a meek, almost servile woman to a rebel, warrior and trailblazer."

Sita is not just a character in the ancient scriptures; she is also a strong symbol of independence and a woman who exhibits resilience. Sita transformed her ductile appearance into the symbol of the liberation in order to explore the new existence of muliebrity means womanly qualities, during her

journey of self-discovery. Sita, along with other major female characters, investigates their existential behaviour. Even though Sita's story is the primary focus, Divakaruni has also added the personal histories of other powerful female leads.

Sunaina, mother of Sita, isn't bound by the social norms of society; instead, she stands as a distinguished woman among others. Kaikeyi, the second wife of King Dasharath, shows her blind devotion to her son, Bharat, but it turns to his hatred instead. Divakaruni also tells the story of Ahalya, who is cursed to be a stone by her husband. Another strong woman is Mandodari, wife of the Lankan king Ravan. Mandodari suffers a lot because of her husband's obsession with another woman, which led to the death of Mandodari's son. Urmila, Sita's sister, is the forgotten one, because she was abandoned by her husband and her beloved sister. Surpanakha's is the wild enchantress sister of Ravan. Surpanakha's only crime is her desire for the wrong man. Finally, Kaushalya, Queen and first wife of King Dasharatha, who yearns for her husband's love and affection.

By shedding light on the characters of the missing female voices in the novel, Chitra Banerjee's Sita has filled the void. There are several notable characters in this story: Sunaina for her wisdom, Kaikeyi for her gallantry in warfare, Urmila for her strong mentality, Kaushalya for her passionate love, Ahalya for her frosty silence, Mandodari for her unwavering faith, and Surpanakha for her outrage. Divakaruni presents these female characters, who make deliberate decisions.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, before beginning her novel, studies all four main versions of the Ramayana: the Valmiki Ramayana, the Adbhuta Ramayana, the Kambam Ramayana, and her favourite, the Bengali Krittibasī Ramayana. It enables her to create her own version of Sita and get to know more about her in-depth understanding of Sita and the sufferings she endures. According to Divakaruni, Sita has been symbolised as an inspiration for women, as she says, "As I send the Forest of Enchantments out into the world, I ask for the benediction of Sita, goddess, daughter, sister, lover, warrior, mother, and a role model for women all over the world" (vii-viii).

The novel opens with Sita expressing her dissatisfaction with the sage Valmiki's Ramayana in the prologue. Sita shows her gratitude for his efforts but expresses displeasure that she was left out of the story of her own suffering, difficulties, and despair that she faced alone. Sita questions in anger "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 it felt— first in the forest and then in Ayodhya— when I was the most beloved woman in creation" (2). And this is how Sita, on the sage's suggestion, writes *Sitayan*, which talks about the plight of Sita and the marginalised women in the Ramayana. Sita undergoes her existential crisis in various stages, right from her birth. She was found in the field beside the palace when her father tilled the field for the yagna. "A baby lay in his path, naked and newborn, glistening in the young sun as though it was a mirage"(6). Although not the real daughter of King Janak and Queen Sunaina, she was the eldest and most beloved among them.

After seeing Ram in the hall, she instantly fell in love with him and they were married. As the eldest brother Ram's wife and future Ayodhya queen, she was expected to be a good queen for her subjects, especially for the women. However, all of Kaikeyi's hopes were dashed in an instant when she persisted in demanding that Ram be banished from Ayodhya for a period of fourteen years. Even after that, she refused to submit to the circumstances and voluntarily accepted her banishment in order to travel with her husband into the forest. Fearlessly, she assumed her duty to accompany her lord into the forest and spoke up against negative stereotypes about women.

'I'm sorry,' I said, very sweetly. 'I'm not going to be able to do that. You see, I'm going to the forest with you.' His brows snapped together. 'What folly is this? You can't possibly come with me. You're a Woman. It's too dangerous. I won't allow it.' I wanted to say, not all women are weak are helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you. (111)

She was alone in Lanka when she faced threats to her life, but she never let them weaken her resolve; when Ram chose to liberate her from all marriage-related obligations on the battlefield, she rebelled against him by choosing to walk into the fire; when she was in a culture that is hierarchical, Sita uses self-expression and self-assertion to empower herself and explore her sense of uniqueness by presenting herself as a skillful lady. She makes the decision to live for her kids, teaching them "...to be good human beings so that you'll never do to a woman what your father has done to me,"(317). instead of pleading for mercy.

In the novel, Ravan, seduced by Sita's beauty, degrades and objectifies her. "As you can see, this is Sita, my prize. I wrested her from her husband for Surpanakha's sake, but now I've decided to keep her for my own purpose" (176). In a situation where male power deprived Sita the agency to be a human, this most heinous treatment calls into question the very existence of her. Her existence has importance only to Ravan. Mostly because he finds sensual pleasure in her.

All these instances triggers Sita's existential crisis. She is forced to face the hard facts of life and the boundaries of her own authority. She starts to dispute the patriarchal standards that have shaped her life up to this point and starts to wonder about the typical duties and expectations that society places on women. Sita overcomes her existential crisis and comes out stronger and more self-aware, in spite of her doubts and anxieties. She gains a renewed sense of purpose and identity as she learns to accept her own agency and establish her independence. Sita gains confidence in her own abilities and learns to trust herself on her adventure through the jungle. She also gets the courage to speak up for her beliefs. Sita's existential crisis transforms into a life-changing event that aids in her personal development.

Sunaina, the queen of Mithila and mother of Sita. Mutual respect and equal sharing define the excellent relationship between King Janak and his queen, Sunaina. Sita always looks up to her parents for this quality, which gives her hope that one day she could be like her mother. The novel's portrayal of Sunaina epitomises what a queen ought to be. She is the one who fulfils her husband's obligations as his obedient wife and shares his responsibilities. Divakaruni endows her with a keen and powerful intellect. The mother of Sita, Sunaina, plays a part that is similar to the idea of the perfect person.

Queen Sunaina recognises Sita's need and provides her with martial arts training. "I sense that your future's going to be different from that of most princesses, It might take you to dangerous places where you'll need to defend yourself" (9). In their private chamber, she advises her husband on matters regarding the kingdom and behaves sensibly while her ministers are there by being quiet and innocent.

Queen Sunaina was the silent, concealed ruler of Mithila, balancing justice, kindness, intelligence, and forward-thinking vision. She handled her responsibilities as queen, wife, and mother delicately while serving as king Janak's counsellor. She is not constrained by societal conventions.

Kaikeyi is the wife of Dasharatha in Ayodhya. She is among Dasharatha's beloved wives because, in addition to being a skilled charioteer, she twice saved Dasharatha's life. She is in a position of influence and authority. Although Kaikeyi is required to support her husband's decisions as queen, she finds it difficult to balance her own desires with those of her position. Kaikeyi's world completely collapses when Dasharatha declares that he will name his eldest son, Rama, as his heir. Overwhelmed in hatred and resentment, Kaikeyi feels betrayed and ignored. Manthara, her maid, manipulates her by telling her that her son Bharata's future is in danger because of Rama's ascent. In a moment of weakness, Kaikeyi insists that Dasharatha elevate Bharata to the throne in place of Rama. Although she is plagued with remorse and shame, she is equally adamant about defending her son and ensuring his succession. Kaikeyi is shown as a complex and imperfect character throughout this entire novel. In addition to her ambition and thirst for power, she is propelled by her love for Bharata and her dread of losing him. The ageless themes of the Ramayana, such as the tension between duty and desire, the fallout from treachery, and the necessity for Kaikeyi to face her own demons and make peace with her past, are all reflected in Kaikeyi's tribulations. Kaikeyi gains insightful knowledge about love, forgiveness, and the real meaning of power as she makes her way through the difficulties of the forest of enchantment. Through her journey, she learns that compassion and self-awareness are the true sources of strength, rather than manipulation or control.

As a loving wife, Ahalya was cursed by her husband to become a stone for the unintentional crime she did. Ram subsequently touched the stone with his foot to restore Ahalya's human body. After realising Ahalya's suffering, Sita had a lot of concerns, including whether or not she still loved and forgave her husband. However, Ahalya failed to respond to any of her inquiries and perplexed her by saying, "The answer to this one you must figure out through your own life's challenges-they will be upon you soon enough" (135). Sita could sense Ahalya's anguish, and mental struggle when she talked about her pledge, but her husband Gautam was unaffected by her promise to remain silent her whole life. In fact, he took delight in the idea that she would receive spiritual merit for keeping her word, even if he was ignorant of the true motivation behind it. Sita was able to empathise with Ahalya since she was a woman, and in her dream, she learned that the reason behind Ahalya's mouna-vrata, or vow of silence, was that her husband had punished her without giving her an opportunity to express her feelings. Ahalya's decision shows the rebellious mentality of a faithful woman who was found guilty of infidelity by her husband. It raises her existential crisis.

The wife of Ravan, Mandodari, who is an unexplored female figure, witnessed when her husband Ravan and her son Angad died, and she also saw Lankapuri come to an end. She made an effort to preserve her family, but Ravan's passion and Sita's abduction made it impossible. She wanted to safeguard her family's heritage and asked Ravana to send back Sita to her place, fearing she would destroy Lanka. Despite her rakshasi heritage, she has a kind heart. She was Ravan's loyal and loving wife in addition to being the morally upright queen of Lanka. She did everything she could to fulfil her responsibilities. She decides to stick by Ravana out of duty and love even though she is aware of his shortcomings and the results of his deeds. But as the narrative progresses, Mandodari starts to doubt the loyalty and significance in Ravana's life.

Two more of the novel's least concerned female characters are Urmila and Surpanakha. Urmila was very close to her sister Sita and the two of them had a unique affinity. She lived blissfully in her father's home in Mithila. She was married to Lakshman and arrived at her new house with different hopes and expectations, just like any other bride. But when she saw how devoted her husband was to his brother and to his royal duties, all of her wishes dispersed. She occasionally confided in her sister Sita about her hardships. She yearned for more affection from her spouse, but she never received it. It triggers the existential crisis in her. Urmila endured the suffering and did her duty as a wife. She paid Lakshman's debt to Nidra Devi, allowing her to spend her fourteenth year of life at home.

Throughout her life, Urmila struggled and made a great sacrifice. She battled the problem with great bravery after experiencing the trauma.

Ravan's sister Surpankha is portrayed as the antagonist and is said to be the primary reason behind Ram and Ravan's conflict. Surpankha was viewed as the antagonist and assessed based on her humanitarianism, but in this one, she is shown as a young woman who wants a partner. Sita was inconsolable about how Lakshman had disfigured Surpankha. Surpankha's deformity and mutilation compelled her to become the antagonist in the story. Since women in our culture are objectified by their appearance, Sita felt sorry for her and understood how painful it was for her to be disfigured. "I didn't think that living with a mutilated face was any easier than a clean death, especially for a woman who had so badly wanted a mate. But saying this would have led us to a confrontation, and at this time, particularly, we needed to stick together" (151).

Through these powerful female characters, *The Forest of Enchantments* vividly illustrates the existential crisis that is comparable to the challenges that modern women endure. Men and women have had existential crises from ancient times, yet they have walked through enormous difficulties and suffering to survive.

#### REFEFANCES:

1. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 2019. *The Forest of Enchantments*. Picador India, India.
2. Beauvoir, Simone de. 1949. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, New York.
3. Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2007. *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Yale University Press, USA, 2007.
4. <https://m.thewire.in/article/books/the-forest-of-enchantments-review/amp>