



Retelling the Ramayana: Myth and Magical Realism in *The Forest of Enchantments*

Shalini Shekhawat

Research Scholar, Department of English, JVBI, Ladnun

Email: peacecpf@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a contemporary retelling of the Ramayana narrated from the perspective of Sita. The novel reinterprets traditional mythology through a feminist lens while employing magical realism as a major narrative strategy. This paper examines how Divakaruni blends mythological elements with magical realism to create a narrative that is emotionally profound, culturally rooted, and socially relevant. The study explores how myth functions as a dynamic literary framework rather than a fixed religious narrative. Through Sita's voice, the novel challenges patriarchal interpretations of the epic and reconstructs female identity, emotional agency, and self-expression. Magical realism in the novel integrates supernatural events such as divine births, prophetic visions, sacred rituals, Hanuman's miraculous journey, Ravana's magical powers, and Sita's return to Mother Earth into ordinary reality without creating separation between the magical and the real. The paper further analyzes how magical realism intensifies emotional realism by grounding mystical experiences in human emotions such as grief, love, loneliness, sacrifice, and resilience. Nature, spirituality, and cosmic forces are also examined as important components of the magical realist atmosphere of the novel. The study concludes that Divakaruni successfully revitalizes ancient mythology for contemporary readers by combining feminist reinterpretation, emotional realism, mythological symbolism, and magical realism. The novel therefore emerges as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English literature and feminist mythological fiction.

Keywords: Myth, Magical Realism, Feminism, Sita, Retelling of Ramayana.

1. Introduction

Indian mythology has long served as a rich source of inspiration for writers in contemporary Indian English literature. Ancient epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* continue to influence modern literary imagination because they contain timeless themes related to morality, identity, love, sacrifice, duty, and spirituality. Contemporary authors reinterpret these mythological narratives in order to connect traditional cultural values with present-day social and psychological realities. Through such retellings, mythology becomes a living and evolving literary form rather than a fixed religious or historical narrative. Modern reinterpretations often question patriarchal traditions, social hierarchies, and rigid moral structures embedded within ancient epics. Writers use mythology to explore issues such as feminism, migration, cultural identity, emotional suffering, and selfhood. This process of reinterpretation demonstrates that myths continue to remain relevant because they provide symbolic and philosophical frameworks for understanding human experience. In contemporary literature, mythology therefore becomes both a cultural memory and a creative narrative strategy for addressing modern concerns and emotional realities.

Among contemporary Indian English writers, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni occupies a unique position because of her innovative blending of mythology, magical realism, emotional depth, and feminist interpretation. Her novels frequently combine supernatural elements with realistic emotional experiences, creating narratives that are imaginative as well as psychologically profound. Divakaruni's fiction reflects a strong engagement with Indian cultural traditions while simultaneously addressing contemporary issues related to gender, identity, migration, spirituality, and emotional conflict. One of the defining features of her writing is her ability to humanize mythological and legendary figures by exploring their inner emotions, vulnerabilities, and personal struggles. Instead of presenting myths merely as sacred stories, she transforms

them into emotionally intimate narratives that connect deeply with modern readers. Her literary approach also reflects the influence of magical realism, where mystical events and divine interventions coexist naturally with ordinary human life. Through this narrative style, Divakaruni bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, mythology and emotional realism, thereby enriching contemporary Indian English literature with cultural depth and artistic innovation. Lois Tyson in his work *Critical Theory Today* says: "From a feminist perspective when we interpret text or anything else, the way to deal with our subjectivity is not to try to avoid it but to be aware of it as possible, to include it in our interpretation as fully as possible, so that other will be able to take it into our account when evaluation our viewpoint" (95).

The Forest of Enchantments is one of Divakaruni's most significant mythological retellings in which she revisits the *Ramayana* through the voice of Sita. Unlike traditional versions of the epic that focus primarily on Rama's heroism and moral greatness, this novel foregrounds Sita's experiences, emotions, and psychological struggles. Sita emerges not as a silent symbol of sacrifice and obedience but as an emotionally complex and self-aware individual. By allowing Sita to narrate her own story, Divakaruni challenges patriarchal interpretations that have historically marginalized female voices within epic traditions. The novel presents mythological events such as exile, abduction, separation, and the Agni Pariksha from Sita's emotional perspective, transforming these incidents into deeply human experiences rather than distant heroic episodes. Through Sita's narration, the novel explores themes of love, suffering, loneliness, resilience, motherhood, and identity. This feminist reinterpretation of mythology gives emotional depth and psychological realism to an epic that has traditionally been dominated by male-centered perspectives and heroic ideals.

The novel also combines myth and magical realism to create a narrative that is simultaneously spiritual, emotional, and socially relevant. Myth provides the cultural and philosophical framework of the story, while magical realism allows supernatural events to coexist naturally with ordinary human life. Miraculous incidents such as Sita's birth from the earth, Hanuman's supernatural powers, Ravana's magical abilities, divine interventions, prophetic visions, and Sita's final return to Mother Earth are all presented as natural aspects of reality. These magical elements do not distance readers from the narrative; instead, they intensify emotional realism and symbolic meaning. Through this fusion of myth and magical realism, Divakaruni transforms mythology into a deeply personal and emotionally engaging narrative. The novel explores important themes such as exile, sacrifice, gender inequality, love, emotional suffering, resilience, spirituality, and self-discovery. By humanizing mythological characters and grounding supernatural events in emotional truth, Divakaruni makes the epic meaningful and accessible for contemporary readers while preserving its cultural and philosophical richness.

2. Myth as a Literary and Cultural Framework

Myth forms the structural and thematic foundation of *The Forest of Enchantments*, as the novel draws extensively from the narrative framework of the *Ramayana*. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retains the major mythological episodes associated with Sita's life, including her miraculous birth from the earth, her swayamvara, exile to the forest, Ravana's abduction, Hanuman's journey to Lanka, the war between Rama and Ravana, the Agni Pariksha, and her final return to Mother Earth. These events preserve the epic grandeur and spiritual depth of the original mythology while simultaneously being transformed through emotional and psychological interpretation. Instead of focusing solely on heroic action and divine destiny, Divakaruni presents these mythological incidents as deeply personal experiences shaped by love, suffering, fear, resilience, and emotional conflict. Through this reinterpretation, mythology becomes emotionally intimate and psychologically realistic. The epic narrative is therefore humanized, allowing readers to engage with mythological characters not as distant legendary figures but as emotionally complex individuals struggling with human emotions and social expectations. Dr. Dipti Agarwal writes in her "*The Forest of Enchantments* as 'Sitayan': A Feminist Reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*" that: "In Divakaruni's version, Sita is not merely a mythological figure; she is a relatable and strong individual whose journey of self-discovery and empowerment resonates deeply in the modern world" (1).

The novel also demonstrates that myth is not static or unchangeable but dynamic, adaptable, and capable of responding to contemporary concerns. Divakaruni reshapes traditional mythology to address issues related to gender inequality, female identity, emotional autonomy, and patriarchal oppression. Through Sita's narration, mythological events acquire new meanings that reflect modern feminist perspectives and emotional realities. Sita questions the social expectations imposed upon women and reflects upon the emotional burden hidden beneath idealized concepts of sacrifice, obedience, and purity. Her experiences reveal how patriarchal structures often demand silence and suffering from women while glorifying these sacrifices as moral virtues. By retelling the *Ramayana* through Sita's consciousness, Divakaruni exposes the emotional pain and inner conflicts concealed within traditional mythological narratives. Myth therefore becomes a medium through which contemporary readers can critically examine gender roles, emotional injustice, and social conditioning. The novel proves that mythology continues to remain relevant because it can evolve and accommodate new interpretations according to changing cultural and social realities.

Another important aspect of Divakaruni's use of myth is the reclamation of marginalized voices within epic tradition. In most traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed primarily as an ideal wife and symbol of purity, while her emotional experiences and personal perspective remain largely unexplored. Divakaruni challenges this patriarchal representation by allowing Sita to narrate her own story in her own voice. This narrative shift transforms mythology into a space for feminist self-expression and emotional truth. Sita emerges as an intelligent, reflective, emotionally resilient, and self-aware woman who struggles to preserve her dignity and identity within restrictive social structures. Her narration reveals the psychological impact of exile, separation, public humiliation, and emotional loneliness. Through this reinterpretation, mythological storytelling becomes a form of resistance against the silencing of female voices in traditional literature. Divakaruni therefore revitalizes mythology by reconstructing Sita as an active subject rather than a passive symbol, making the ancient epic meaningful and emotionally relevant for contemporary readers and feminist literary discourse.

3. Feminist Reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*

One of the most remarkable features of *The Forest of Enchantments* is its feminist reinterpretation of the *Ramayana*. In many traditional versions of the epic, Sita is represented primarily as an obedient wife and a silent embodiment of sacrifice and purity. Her emotional experiences and inner conflicts often remain overshadowed by the heroic narrative centered on Rama. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni challenges this conventional representation by allowing Sita to narrate her own story. Through this narrative strategy, Sita emerges as an emotionally aware, intelligent, courageous, and reflective woman rather than a passive mythological figure. Readers gain direct access to her thoughts, fears, desires, and emotional struggles, making her character psychologically complex and deeply human. This reinterpretation transforms Sita from a symbolic figure into an active narrator of her own experiences. By foregrounding Sita's voice, Divakaruni reclaims female agency within epic tradition and creates space for feminist self-expression and emotional authenticity within mythology. The novelist writes in her author's note that:

I'm going to write the story of Sita, I said, because I have always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just like Panchaali, my Sita (yes, with the presumptuous intimacy of authors. I thought of her mine) will tell her own tale. She will fill the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats. She will tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directs the course of her life. What she believed in. What interested and moved her. How she felt when faced with the deepest of tragedies. And what gave her the ability to overcome them. (Author's note 7)

The feminist dimension of the novel becomes particularly powerful during episodes such as exile, abduction, and the Agni Pariksha. These events are no longer portrayed merely as sacred mythological incidents or moral tests but as emotionally traumatic experiences that expose patriarchal injustice and societal expectations imposed upon women. Sita's exile into the forest reflects not only physical hardship but also emotional isolation and sacrifice demanded by duty and social norms. Similarly, her abduction by Ravana reveals her vulnerability and emotional suffering within a world dominated by male power and conflict. The Agni Pariksha becomes one of the most significant feminist moments in the novel because it symbolizes the unjust expectations of purity and obedience placed upon women by patriarchal society. Sita questions why women must constantly prove their virtue and endure suffering to satisfy social standards. Through these emotional reflections, Divakaruni critiques rigid gender norms and reveals the psychological pain hidden beneath traditional ideals of womanhood and sacrifice.

Through Sita's perspective, mythology becomes a powerful space for resistance, emotional truth, and feminist critique. Divakaruni transforms the *Ramayana* from a heroic epic into a deeply personal exploration of female identity, dignity, and selfhood. Sita's narration exposes the emotional consequences of patriarchal systems that glorify female suffering while denying women emotional freedom and autonomy. Rather than silently accepting every injustice, Sita reflects critically upon her experiences and attempts to preserve her individuality within restrictive social expectations. Her voice represents countless women whose emotions and struggles have historically remained marginalized within cultural narratives. This reinterpretation demonstrates that mythological stories are not fixed or unquestionable but open to reinterpretation according to changing social and cultural values. Divakaruni therefore reconstructs Sita as an active subject with emotional depth, intellectual awareness, and personal agency. The novel ultimately presents mythology as a living literary form capable of challenging patriarchal traditions and affirming the importance of female voice, identity, and emotional resilience in both ancient and modern contexts.

4. Magical Realism in *The Forest of Enchantments*

Magical realism is one of the most significant narrative techniques employed in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Unlike fantasy literature, where magical events are usually presented as separate from ordinary reality, magical realism integrates supernatural elements naturally into everyday life. In the novel, divine interventions, sacred rituals, cosmic forces, prophetic dreams, miraculous births, and supernatural journeys are treated as normal aspects of existence. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

does not create a distinction between the magical and the real; instead, both coexist harmoniously within the narrative world. This narrative style reflects the cultural and spiritual consciousness deeply rooted in Indian mythology, where the divine and human worlds are interconnected. Magical realism therefore becomes an effective literary strategy through which mythology appears emotionally believable and culturally authentic. By blending mystical events with ordinary human experiences, Divakaruni creates a narrative atmosphere that is imaginative yet emotionally grounded, allowing readers to engage with spiritual realities as natural dimensions of life and existence.

The magical realist atmosphere of the novel is established from the very beginning through Sita's miraculous birth from the earth. This extraordinary event is narrated naturally without disbelief or dramatic exaggeration, encouraging readers to accept the supernatural as part of reality. Similarly, episodes such as Hanuman's leap across the ocean, Ravana's magical powers, divine weapons used during battles, and Sita's final return to Mother Earth are presented in a calm and matter-of-fact manner. These magical incidents are woven seamlessly into the emotional and social realities of the characters. The supernatural therefore does not appear artificial or detached from human life but becomes integrated into the cultural worldview of the narrative. Divakaruni's use of magical realism preserves the spiritual essence of mythology while simultaneously making it emotionally accessible for modern readers. Through this technique, mythological events acquire symbolic depth and emotional significance rather than functioning merely as miraculous spectacles intended to inspire awe or wonder.

Another important aspect of magical realism in the novel is its connection with emotional realism and human psychology. Despite the presence of supernatural events and divine forces, the characters continue to experience deeply human emotions such as fear, grief, loneliness, love, sacrifice, hope, and emotional suffering. Magical realism intensifies emotional authenticity rather than diminishing it because the magical elements are grounded in realistic emotional experiences. For example, Sita's return to Mother Earth is not merely a miraculous mythological event but also an emotionally powerful moment symbolizing exhaustion, dignity, liberation, and spiritual peace. Similarly, divine interventions and cosmic signs often reflect the inner emotional states of characters and contribute to their spiritual transformation. Through magical realism, Divakaruni encourages readers to accept spiritual and supernatural experiences as meaningful aspects of human existence. The technique reflects the philosophical worldview embedded within Indian mythology, where material reality and spiritual consciousness are interconnected dimensions of life rather than separate or opposing forces.

5. Combined Effect of Myth and Magical Realism

The fusion of myth and magical realism gives *The Forest of Enchantments* its unique artistic richness and emotional depth. Myth provides the narrative with symbolic, cultural, and philosophical significance, while magical realism creates a literary world in which supernatural events coexist naturally with ordinary human experiences. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni skillfully combines these two narrative techniques to connect ancient Indian tradition with contemporary emotional and social realities. Myth preserves the spiritual grandeur and cultural continuity of the *Ramayana*, whereas magical realism makes the miraculous elements emotionally believable and accessible to modern readers. Divine interventions, prophetic visions, sacred rituals, and supernatural journeys are integrated seamlessly into realistic emotional experiences such as love, grief, loneliness, sacrifice, and resilience. Through this synthesis, Divakaruni transforms mythology from a distant sacred narrative into a deeply personal and emotionally engaging story. The fusion therefore enables the novel to maintain its mythological essence while simultaneously addressing modern concerns regarding identity, gender, suffering, and emotional selfhood.

The combination of myth and magical realism also allows the novel to operate on multiple literary and philosophical levels at the same time. On one level, the novel functions as a retelling of the *Ramayana* that preserves important mythological events and spiritual values associated with Indian cultural tradition. On another level, it becomes a feminist narrative that foregrounds Sita's experiences and challenges patriarchal interpretations embedded within epic tradition. The novel also functions as a psychological exploration of emotional suffering, love, exile, loneliness, sacrifice, and resilience. Through Sita's introspective narration, readers gain insight into the emotional and psychological consequences of mythological events. At the same time, the novel contains philosophical reflections on destiny, morality, spirituality, and human existence. Magical realism enriches these dimensions by adding symbolic depth to mythological incidents and spiritual experiences. Supernatural events are not presented merely for wonder or spectacle but are closely connected to emotional truth and psychological reality, making the narrative intellectually meaningful as well as emotionally powerful. Gupta (2020) notes that: "Through *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni succeeds in highlighting the complexities of gender roles in Indian mythology, offering a nuanced portrayal of Sita that resonates with modern feminist values" (45).

Another important effect of this fusion is that it revitalizes mythology for contemporary readers and demonstrates its continuing relevance in modern literary discourse. Divakaruni does not treat myth as a static or unchangeable cultural inheritance; instead, she reinterprets it according to present-day concerns related to women's identity, emotional autonomy,

social justice, and spiritual self-discovery. Magical realism plays an important role in this reinterpretation because it bridges the gap between ancient spirituality and contemporary realism. The magical elements preserve the imaginative and sacred quality of mythology, while realistic emotions and psychological depth make the characters relatable and human. As a result, readers are able to engage with the epic not only as a religious or cultural text but also as a modern literary exploration of human emotions and social realities. Through the fusion of myth and magical realism, Divakaruni successfully transforms the *Ramayana* into a contemporary narrative that remains culturally significant, emotionally resonant, spiritually meaningful, and artistically innovative for modern audiences.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Forest of Enchantments* successfully demonstrates how myth and magical realism can work together to reinterpret classical epics for contemporary readers. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni transforms the traditional narrative of the *Ramayana* into a deeply emotional, feminist, and psychologically engaging work by foregrounding Sita's voice and experiences. Through this narrative shift, myth becomes a dynamic literary framework for examining themes such as gender inequality, sacrifice, identity, spirituality, emotional suffering, and self-discovery. Divakaruni reimagines mythological events not merely as heroic or religious episodes but as emotionally intimate experiences shaped by human vulnerability and resilience. Magical realism further enriches the narrative by allowing divine interventions, supernatural journeys, prophetic visions, and mystical experiences to coexist naturally with ordinary human emotions and social realities. As a result, the novel humanizes epic characters and transforms mythology into an emotionally accessible and culturally relevant literary form for modern audiences. Nabaneeta Dev Sen observed that:

Just as the Ram myth has been exploited by the patriarchal Brahminical system to construct an ideal Hindu male. Sita too has been built up as an ideal Hindu female, to help serve the system. The impact is far reaching. Several years ago, Sally Sutherland showed that for 90 percent of the Indians she interviewed. Sita was their favorites (mythical) woman. No one blesses a bride by saying Be like Draupadi. It is always Sita and Sabitri. Sita's life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide and through whom and through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently. (Dev Sen, 19)

The fusion of myth and magical realism also gives the novel remarkable symbolic depth, artistic richness, and philosophical significance. Myth preserves the cultural continuity and spiritual essence of Indian tradition, while magical realism bridges the gap between ancient mythology and contemporary emotional realism. Supernatural events are presented naturally and are deeply connected with the emotional lives of the characters, thereby intensifying psychological authenticity and symbolic meaning. Through Sita's introspective narration, the novel critiques patriarchal structures and restores agency to a female character traditionally confined within idealized roles of obedience and sacrifice. Divakaruni therefore revitalizes ancient epic traditions by presenting them through a modern feminist perspective that emphasizes emotional truth and individual identity. The novel ultimately emerges as an important contribution to contemporary Indian English literature, feminist mythological retellings, and magical realist fiction. It proves that mythology continues to remain meaningful and adaptable because it possesses the power to address universal human experiences and evolving social realities across different historical and cultural contexts.

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