Culture, Identity, and Empowerment in *The Sitayan* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: *The article attempts to analyse and evaluate the female characters and their relation with culture and its impact on them as portrayed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantment. The article traces the image of women shown in the Sitayan, narrated by the female protagonist Sita herself, with the touch of other women characters like Sunaina, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Kaushalya, Mandhodari and Ahalya. These women are caught in the flux of their culture and their inner voices, which make them suffer from the intense psychic turmoil. They try to become aware of their situation through endurance, observation and understanding, suffocation, turmoil, uncertainty and apprehension. Particularly, Sita, when she meets with dilemma, self- doubts, frustration, disappointments, isolation, insecurity, and identity crisis, she never gives in herself but rather fights for the light of her self-awareness. The courage she gets, the wisdom she achieves are the result of her culture and her believes to it. Additionally, the article also attempts to unveil the reasons for identity crisis which is commonly faced by every individual since time immemorial. In the journey of self-quest, Sita has to face several struggles. She has to question the myth or culture sicken society, and has to break all the rules and conventions, in fact she certainly has to ask questions to herself so as to fulfil her quest. Thus, she is able to find her real self, the real identity which leads to the path of empowerment. Moreover, this piece compiles the importance of myth and modernity in the literature and how could it shape the women characters in the Sitayan. Divakaruni has done a remarkable work by using the voice of Sita to impart the importance of self-awareness to the modern world.*

Keywords: Culture, identity, myth and modern, empowerment, quasi-autobiography

The Forest of Enchantments, the *Sitayan* presents a nuanced portrayal of Sita, a central figure in Indian mythology *Ramayana*. Divakaruni's narrative offers an exploration of Sita's identity, her cultural context, and her quest for empowerment within the framework of a patriarchal society. This article aims to unpack the layers of culture, identity, and empowerment as portrayed through Sita's experiences and choices in Divakaruni's rendition of the epic.

Culture, a term which carries varied meanings and interpretations whereas it's hard to deny that every individuals have some or other connection with it. Since the very beginning of human history, we can say that culture plays an immense role in making one's identity defined. Since, culture has the ability to define many aspects of human world, it is always gratified to talk about one's rich culture and why not. Even in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of Culture is given as "the customs and beliefs, art, way of life, and social organization of a particular country or group" ("Culture").

Several critics and scholars have also given definitions on it. Among the critics, Kluckhohn and Kelly in their work *The Concept of Culture* conceptualize culture as a system of both visible and underlying patterns of behaviour and thought, shaped by historical experience and commonly practiced by all or particular members within a. Building on this, Raymond Williams, in his influential work *Keywords*, outlines three distinct yet intersecting definitions of culture. First, it signifies personal development and intellectual refinement, often implied when referring to someone as "cultured". Second, it denotes the shared way of life of a particular community, be it national, institutional, or ethnic such as in references to "French culture" or "corporate culture". Third, culture embodies organized artistic and intellectual activities, including literature, music, visual arts, and film, typically fostered through institutions like ministries of culture or represented through critical discourse in contemporary media. These three understanding of culture are essentially rather diverse, and, Williams inscribes, they compete with one another. Whenever we use the word "culture," we have a tendency to depend on one or another of its facets that is toward the "culture" that's imbibed through osmosis or the "culture" one acquires through exposure to museums and the arts often associated with personal refinement and intellectual growth to the broader understanding of culture as a social framework that shapes group identity and belonging.

Therefore, we can also state that the definition of culture differs from time to time or purpose to purpose. However, it is something which will attach to defining one's individuality. As every individual has to carry one's culture to complete the quest for one's identity since it defines the way of one's living. Or more so we can extend that it is one of the key aspects in fulfilling the quest for one's identity. Even different critics have given definition on the relation of culture and identity, like, Stuart Hall in his *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* states that, "Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (225). Hall defines Cultural Identity as a process based on an individual's connection with a social or cultural grouping. It gives people a pattern of self-identity and social belonging that is determined through a multiplicity of elements such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, or region, all characterized by certain cultural features. To Hall, cultural identity is not merely an expression of where one

hails from, but also a way people position themselves within historical accounts and collective memory. This dualism which is conjoining both heritage and ambition defines the cultural person. Hall posits that identity is constructed not only by continuity with the past but also by an ongoing relationship with the future. It is this dynamic, changing aspect of identity that encloses the permanent tension between history, experience, and self-knowing. As said by Stuart Hall, there are two idiosyncratic definitions of cultural identity. Stuart Hall conceptualizes cultural identity as a fluid feeling of identification with a specific social or cultural group. This identity is firmly rooted in both the individual and collective stories that stretch into the past and reach into the future.

Hall, in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* presents two different views of cultural identity. The first is a shared, collective identity, one based on common origins, historical continuity, and enduring traditions. This understanding of identity is stable and unified, providing individuals with a way of returning to their cultural origins and ancestral heritages. With this perspective, cultural identity is an arena of historical reflection, allowing people to trace family lines and connect with inherited experience and truth. However, Hall proposes a more nuanced understanding of cultural identity with one that stands in contrast to rigid or essentialist notions of identity as fixed and unchanging. It is an approach which does admit that identity is not permanent but ever in flux. It allows for both similarity and difference, seeing how historical circumstance and cross-cultural encounter have constructed us as we are today. In place of that fixed essence known as identity, Hall contends that identity is actually constructed through an iterative process of transformation. This strategy incorporates the nuances of identity, especially the nuanced and usually hidden boundaries that arise from historical and deeply entrenched cultural forces. Cultural identity, for this reason, is not just a matter of belonging but also of becoming that is a continuous negotiation brought about by memory, displacement, and change. Therefore, it is no doubt in saying that quest for one's identity is not an easy task as it has to go through multiple stages of doubts and questions. Nonetheless, one can be able to achieve the empowerment afterwards as it is also defined in *Oxford English Dictionary* as "empowerment is the act of giving somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in" ("Empowerment").

Furthermore, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, a prominent diasporic writer vividly portrays those women who have been subjugated by the societal norms, who have to face the discrimination not only from single subject but from several, in their path for quest for their identities. She gives voice to the voiceless such as a mythological female character like Sita or Draupati and many others. Sita, the voice of *The Forest of Enchantment* states in the beginning of her Sitayan that:

> I took a deep breath and touched the first palm leaf to my forehead, invoking Saraswati, goddess of creativity serene on her white swan, though a part of me wondered what she could know of my very human tribulations. I unplugged the inkpot and was startled to see the colour the sage had chosen for me Red. (Divakaruni 3)

In the above abstract Divakaruni with the help of her protagonist portrays the Indian culture which is deep rooted to herself even after migrated to other nation. This shows one's connection to their own culture which plays a crucial part in defining who she is, where is her root and her identity which is deeply rooted to her homeland. Not only Sita but with the help of her female characters, Divakaruni is able to show her rootedness to her culture and her belongingness to her nation. She showcases that Sita's identity is intricately linked to her cultural background. Born of the earth and revered as the epitome of virtue, she embodies the complexities of womanhood in ancient India. Sita obediently follows her husband till she is succumbed by the illness of patriarchal society.

Moreover, Divakaruni meticulously weaves cultural motifs, rituals, and societal expectations, portraying Sita's struggles with her identity as a daughter, wife, and queen in a patriarchal society. The false culture which was engrained to every individual in the society and had to follow it regardless of any individual's choice. However, the question is that is it right to blindly follow a culture only because it has been following by the elders. To analyse and in the quest to answer this, Divakaruni with the help of Sita's voice reflects on the misconception of false culture and gives empowerment to the women of the society by making them realised how strong and courageous women were from the beginning. To show this, Divakaruni portrays in her Sitayan that:

Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealousy fury; Suparnakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and beloved son perished because of ger husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with husband. (4)

Again, in the above abstract she shows the neglected women who had to suffer from the patriarchal society. Whether it's Kaikeyi, the Queen or the other female characters Ahalya or Suparnakha or Mandodari or Urmila, they all fell into the pit of male dominated society. Even after sacrificing their whole life for their love ones, they are totally neglected by the man writers, leaving them voiceless. However, Divakaruni gives light to each female characters, she acknowledges each character's sacrifices to show their courage and deep rootedness towards their culture and their empowerment. Since the patriarchal society sealed their lips, we can say that it is their cultural background that they quietly endure their voiceless pains till the end. However, we can also see that some of them are able to emancipate from the bond of this society.

At the heart of Divakaruni's storytelling lies Sita's journey toward self-empowerment. Despite societal constraints and adversities, she demonstrates resilience, inner strength, and unwavering determination. Because of empowerment in Sita's choices, highlighting her resilience amidst societal expectations and personal trials. Sita, at the end is able to deny

the question raised by the society about the chastity, especially her husband, the God of the people who even raised the question to his beloved wife that shows even Ram is not spared from the disease from patriarchal stricken society. Nonetheless, Sita emancipates and able to safe her identity, that's the empowerment given to the women of the society who are numbed and voiceless. Sita is able to inspire the women to have courage and empower themselves from the injustices around them. Even though she is well aware of her culture, she does not let the misogynists to jeopardise her selfhood at the end. However, she also wonders about her belonging, she states:

> .… I often wondered where I'd come from. Because what called to me most powerfully were the forests that I could see from the palace turrets. (7-8)

It's been always a question to women's identity? Even the mother Sita has to question herself for she has kept in the darkness for she was born into this patriarchal society. It's that single courage that can bring a light to the power of voice to gain the empowerment. It's always that turmoil for the quest of oneself that's the toughest test for oneself.

It wasn't something that women did. Even my mother, the most intelligent person I knew, would have been baffled if I confessed this desire to her. (8)

This statement of Sita reflects the deeply embedded cultural limitations placed on women, even within environments that celebrate female intelligence and strength. Sita's hesitation to express her desire is perhaps to learn, lead, or explore beyond traditional roles which reveals how systemic patriarchy often stifles women's aspirations at an early stage, not through overt oppression alone, but through the normalization of silence and conformity. That even her mother, a figure of wisdom, might fail to understand her longing emphasizes how generational conditioning perpetuates restrictive gender norms.

Additionally, Divakaruni uses this moment to underscore the quiet beginnings of Sita's awakening and a realization that empowerment begins with the recognition of one's suppressed desires. It also demonstrates how internal resistance to societal norms is the first step toward self-determination. Through this internal dialogue, the narrative foregrounds Sita's journey not just as one of physical endurance, but of intellectual and emotional assertion against structures designed to limit her potential. By emphasizing these intimate moments of inner struggle, Divakaruni positions Sita as a symbol within the broader feminist conversation, one where breaking the silence passed down through generations becomes a powerful assertion of autonomy and resistance. However, it's not only Sita that possess the strength and intellectuality, her mother Sunaya has the understanding and temperament which a virtuous ruler has to possess.

> She was, in some ways, the real ruler of Mithila, sharp of intellect, clear of vision, balancing kindness with justice.… They would discuss the issues in their bedchamber late into the night, and the next day he would

do as she counselled. But she never let anyone outside the immediate family know this. (9)

Sunaya, the Queen of Mithila, despite holding a significant position in the governance of the kingdom, remains hidden behind a curtain, as the patriarchal norms of society suppress her ability to display her intellect. In order to protect her husband and the kingdom, she hides herself forever behind the wall of her culture. Her intelligence and wisdom can be shown only in the four walls of her bedchamber because of the ridiculous believe of the Mithila that no woman is strong enough or wise enough to guide them. She is one of the characters who shows the potential of women clan but subjugated by the misogynists. What is even more disheartening is that she willingly surrenders herself, constrained by the cultural expectations imposed upon her by the world she inhabits. However, the same mistake is rectified by her daughter Sita by denying to give *Agni Pariksha*. Divakaruni brings out the real thoughts of every woman and their sacrifices with her Sitayan. She gives power to the female leads to reflects on their story in their own voice. To reflect on this, she reveals with the help of her protagonist that:

> My challenge would be to remain calm and devise the best strategy to deal with my situation. Sometimes there was no escape, and I had to learn to withdraw within myself and find the strength to endure. (27)

It vividly expresses the condition of women to the patriarchal society where they find no escape from the injustice, therefore, they are learned to withdraw and endure the unfairness since the world would be dumb to their voice. Besides, there is no wrong in saying that the culture which has been following by the people is mostly constructed by the patriarchal society and which was forced to follow since the time immemorial.

The narrative consistently highlights Sita's inner strength, most notably during her years of hardship and isolation in the forest. Despite the hardships and societal expectations, she maintains her composure and inner strength. When describing her emotions during exile, Sita reflects, "I choose to see our time in the forest as an opportunity, a period for introspection and growth rather than just a punishment."

Sita displays agency in making choices that reflect her independent thinking, challenging traditional gender roles. Her decisions are often based on her own convictions rather than societal norms. Sita confronts societal expectations when she says, "I refuse to be confined by the limitations set by others. My choices are my own, and I will not be dictated by societal norms" (112)

Sita challenges stereotypes associated with women, breaking away from the archetype of a passive, submissive figure. When discussing her role in society, Sita articulates, "I refuse to conform to the stereotype of a passive woman. I will act based on my beliefs, not dictated by societal expectations." Sita defies the conventional portrayal of women as passive or submissive; she makes choices based on her own convictions, refusing to be steered by external expectations.

Sita's quest for meaning and purpose drives her actions, showcasing her pursuit of a fulfilling life beyond societal confines. She reflects on her journey, expressing, "My quest is not merely to fulfil societal expectations but to seek my own purpose, to define my path." Her empowerment and agency as portrayed in *The Forest of Enchantments*, emphasizing her resilience, independence of thought, and defiance of societal norms in shaping her own identity and destiny.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* serves as a poignant narrative that resonates with discussions on culture, identity, and empowerment. Sita's story symbolizes the resilience of the human spirit, prompting readers to reflect on the complexities of cultural identity and the pursuit of empowerment within a society shaped by norms and individual agency.

This article endeavours to contribute to the scholarly discourse on literature, culture, and empowerment by exploring the intricate ways in which Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reimagines mythological narratives through a feminist and diasporic lens. Her retelling of *The Ramayana* in *The Forest of Enchantments* offers more than a mere reinterpretation of an epic; it becomes a powerful commentary on gender roles, autonomy, and the socio-cultural constructs that shape individual identity. By placing Sita at the centre of the narrative and granting her a voice often suppressed in traditional versions, Divakaruni not only challenges patriarchal norms but also brings attention to the layered complexities of cultural identity and how it is informed by tradition, questioned by experience, and redefined through personal agency. In doing so, the narrative transcends its mythological origins to engage with contemporary issues of empowerment, selfhood, and resistance. This study invites further scholarly engagement with Divakaruni's work as a compelling site for examining the intersections of literature, gender, and cultural transformation, emphasizing the continuing relevance of myth in articulating modern identity struggles.

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