

Locating Love and Repositioning Sexuality in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract

Rethinking and retelling myths reproduce an alternative discourse as it provides new dimensions to hitherto untold stories, reconceptualized and recontextualized in a different milieu such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, which explores the Sita myth with reference to the Ramayana. The novel centralizes Sita's voice as the narrator as opposed to the traditional male bards and her life and experiences. Divakaruni writes her Sitayana, positioning alternate definitions of femininity, sexuality and identity regarding women in the epic. The paper delves deep into the notion of love – its myriad shades and sexuality presented through Sita rendered from a twenty-first-century perspective. A sense of naturalness and frankness is accorded to the representation of female sexuality (which has long been a taboo in a Patriarchy) in the text, solidifying women's sexual identity beyond the "Madonna-whore" dichotomy – the dominant identities established in male-authored works and which exist in closed cultures.

Keywords: Female sexuality; Feminist revisionism; Love; Myth-retelling.

The twenty-first-century literary scenario has witnessed a surge in genre experimentation, such as epic retellings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the west and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in India. Rethinking, revising and repositioning women of the epics are necessitated by adopting new strategies to revisit epic poems to suit the changing times and contemporary post-modern sensibilities of the internet age. In the retellings by women, the commitment to revising ideas of femininity, womanhood, sexuality and identity through female agency is prominently felt, first, through the deconstruction of patriarchy – the locale and the setting of the epics,

in order to reconstruct new ideologies (sometimes feminist) about female characters; and secondly, through the centralization of the private spheres of women's lives focusing on hitherto untold or neglected parts of the epics or through bringing into centre-stage, the minor characters. Retellings take up this task of "deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice: and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked" (Greene and Kahn 6). Twenty-first-century epic retellings like Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) address these issues.

Referring to the 'Author's Note' wherein the novelist remarks that the story of Sita and Ram is one of the "greatest and most tragic love stories" and that the novel is "a meditation on the nature of love" (XI), the paper aims at offering a perspective on love – its myriad forms and shades in various stages of Sita's life and touches upon the issue of sexuality as reshaped and retold by Divakaruni. She explores love as an important motif that guides many characters, shedding new light on many instances from the original epic: "The feeling of love in all its beauty, as well as turmoil, is a core theme of the book. There are many proses on the nature of love interwoven across the book" (Khandelwal). From the beginning, Sita's role as healer and nurturer is stressed; her qualities and virtues are considered miraculous and as abundant as the 'earth-goddess'. Her love for the forest, trees and flowers, and her love for her parents and sister Urmila form the centre of her everyday life in Mithila while she awaits marriage to the person who can lift and string "the Haradhanu" – Shiva's bow (as her bride price): a feat which one hundred and sixteen suitors have already failed to achieve. She is rather happy that none of the suitors has succeeded in stringing the bow until Ram appears before her. The moment Ram passes her by while looking at her, Sita is whisked away in a dream vision, oblivious to her surrounding and remains rooted to the particular spot where she stands: "His eyes were large and very dark, and shaped like lotus petals, pulled into them, I felt like I was falling" (Divakaruni17). Seen through cinematography, this scene would be a classic case of love at first sight.

Reference may be made to a scene in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* in the 1972 film version in which Michael Corleone (acted by Al Pacino) stood rooted to the spot, dazed after seeing Apollonia Vitelli in Sicily when Fabrizio told him that he has "got hit by the thunderbolt" (*The Godfather* 1:39:00-1:39:18). It may be a modern-day cliché used in movies and tv

dramas, but the effect of first love which for Sita is both emotional and sensual seems to fall heavily on her. She becomes sure “like never before, that Ram was the right mate – the only one – for me” (Divakaruni18). The author’s choice of the double-entendre word ‘mate’, not man or husband, suggests the nature of primeval desire associated with Sita’s love for Ram, the warrior-prince.

Sita prays to Goddess Parvati sincerely and fervently for the first time in her life to guide Ram’s hand as he strings Shiva’s bow, stating, “I’ve never felt this way about a man” (Divakaruni 18). Even after the priest interprets the meaning of the Goddess’s blessings, which indicates both happiness and sorrow in her life, she cannot stop thinking about him: “I wanted Ram. I desired him more than I’d ever desired anyone” (19). Once again, the words ‘want’ and ‘desire’ hint at the physical/sensual aspect of love, triggered in her mind after seeing a scene of sweet intimacy with Ram in her dream-like vision. Thus, adolescent Sita’s romantic love is merged with sensual awakening. At night she imagines Ram: “He would have bathed and rubbed scented oil onto his travel-weary limbs before sleep. Now he lay stretched out on the bed, his body dark against the conch-white sheets, his chest smelling of musk. Beneath closed lids, his eyes flickered. Was he dreaming? Dream of me, I willed him. . .” (23).

The passage vividly renders a picture of longing and desire where Ram could be taken as a modern-day counterpart of the tall, dark, handsome (TDH) hero of Mills and Boon romances who arouses desire in the woman, to whose imaginative gaze he is exposed in his most vulnerable and natural position, i.e., sleep. The reference to musk, which is a strong-smelling substance excreted by the male deer to attract a mate, further heightens the effect. Traditionally, the woman is exposed to the male gaze, interest, scrutiny and worship due to her position as a sexual object. The novelist overturns this age-old notion by making Sita’s imagination run wild in picturizing Ram as an object of desire and challenges the patriarchal idea that woman is ‘the other’ of man, whose sexuality and identity exist only in relation to or as a reference to a man. What Maggie Humm comments about French feminist Helene Cixous’s opinion on western myths may be reproduced here in the present context as they are true for epics too:

One key feature of women’s writing which attracts Cixous is feminine myths. Cixous ‘re-revisions’ mythology by rereading traditional myths such as the story of Sleeping Beauty and discarding masculine metaphors in favour of feminine metaphors. The classic dualist/binary opposition between female passivity and male

activity in a myth like Sleeping Beauty, Cixous points out, is a binary opposition at the heart of all symbolic systems. (63)

The epic as a product of patriarchal culture functions within the symbolic system which naturalizes male activity and desire while female passivity is taken to be the norm which considers female sexuality as taboo. In Divakaruni's text, the female narrative disregards and discards the masculine viewpoint for the sake of feminine imagination and instincts to revise the concept of female sexuality. Lois Tyson, in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, while discussing the western classic fairy tales like Sleeping Beauty and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs wherein the young maidens are awakened from death-like slumbers by the kiss of would-be lovers, observes that such endings imply that "the proper patriarchal young woman is sexually dormant until 'awakened' by the man who claims her" (89). Feminist critique of fairy tales derides such conclusions as these equate femininity with submissiveness and passivity because, in patriarchal ideology, only two kinds of feminine identity exist – the good and the bad woman, the so-called "Madonna and whore" dichotomy. The same is the case with epics too when female submissiveness and passivity are lauded as the concept of ideal womanhood, whereas female activity and speech are condemned as a sign of promiscuity and unwomanly behaviour.

Sita learns from the bow other aspects of love – that a relationship like that of Shiva and Shakti, which is based on love, respect, awareness and understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses – is the best example and that, above all, forgiveness is of key importance in love. She even dreams about the kind of relationship she desires with Ram:

Around me rose an intoxicating smell. At first, I thought it was from the flowers. Then I realized it was the scent of Ram's body, headier than any human-made perfume. I moved closer to run my hand over the warm protective expanse of his chest. He put an arm around me and looked at me with such tenderness that I thought I would melt to my core. 'You are mine,' I said, 'and I am yours.' (Divakaruni 30-31)

Sita's initial love for Ram is filled with an all-consuming desire, so much so that even when he wilfully breaks the bow, she does not worry much about his action, which shocks everyone in the swayamvara and does not ponder about what else he might destroy in the future. Her love for Ram consumes every aspect of her life. Psychologists talk about this type of

love to include “the desire for union, idealization of the beloved, exclusivity, intrusive thinking about the love object, emotional dependency, a reordering of motivational hierarchies or life priorities, and a powerful sense of empathy and concern for the beloved” (Sorrell 19). This directly contrasts with Ram’s actions, for whom adherence to duty takes precedence over any other. This sows the seed for the first conflict between the two lovers and becomes the core reason that ultimately divides them. Ram does not marry Sita without his father’s permission and without fulfilling his promise to his brothers that he will get married at the same time and into the same family as them to avoid family rivalry and conflicts. This incident paves the way for Ram’s later actions of abandoning the pregnant Sita to protect his kingship duties which include giving importance to his subjects’ gossip over his duty towards his wife. Thus, for Ram, the public domain is above private spheres of life, and to fulfil his dream of a Ramrajya, he would sacrifice his love and duties as a husband.

Even if deeply in love, Sita doesn’t remain a mute spectator at her own humiliation and raises her voice and reprimands Ram, emphasizing the fact that “once her bride-price is paid, a woman can’t marry anyone else” and that he should have stated his demands before taking part in her Swayamvara (Divakaruni36). Sita, thus, in the retelling, is no longer the meek and long-suffering woman but rather someone who stands up against injustice. It is not Ram or any other men but Sita herself who finds solutions to the problems of marrying into the same family by suggesting her cousin sisters be married to his brothers at the same time as their marriage. However, her anger and misgivings vanish as love overcomes those emotions when Ram seeks a private conversation with her to explain his actions and ask for forgiveness.

One catches a rare glimpse of Ram’s love for Sita, which makes her realize that he did not reject her love as she thought but that, for him, love is not separate from his duties – his dharma and his words. Amid the frenzied wedding preparations, when everything seems to change, Sita finds only one thing constant, i.e., her longing for him. “I longed for Ram, for him to hold my hands again in his archery-calloused fingers and tell me that he loved me” (44). Another aspect of love she realizes from her mother is that “even the strongest intellect may be weakened by love” instead of making people more courageous and determined to live according to one’s principles (42). In her parents’ place, “love flowed like a calm and aged river nourishing but predictable” (42), unlike her newfound love for Ram, which is tinged with colours of desire, expectation, romance and, most importantly, unpredictability.

Sita's love for Ram contrasts with that of Ram, who puts his duties above his love for Sita. His love comes like a gift to her in her swayamvara in the form of his vow to take Sita as his only consort and beloved: "At our wedding after the exchange of garlands, he'd held my hand just like this, and shocked everyone by vowing aloud that he would never marry again. Sita will be my only consort and beloved, all the days of my life" (Divakaruni 56). Sita's joy knows no bounds at Ram's devotion to her, thinking that he has made the vow for her, only to realize later that his decision is made for Sita as much as for his mother Kaushalya, who suffers from heartbreak because of Dasharath's other wives. This once proves that Ram's love for Sita is just one aspect of his existence, whereas Sita's love for him is a total surrender of her personality, thoughts and ideas in merging with Ram's life. This vow of Ram also fails to protect Sita in the future as he sets her free to choose another husband after the Lankan war, as he cannot take her back to Ayodhya after Ravan's abduction. Sita did not elope but was abducted, yet the fact of having stayed under another man's protection/captivity (with the implied meaning of sexual transgression) proved stronger than her victimized situation in Ram's mind.

Whether Sita resisted Ravan's attempt at abduction or not, she is pointed out as a woman who has transgressed the moral and sexual boundaries of a wife, and her willingness or resistance is never considered. Helen Morales, while referring to Greek and Roman women of antiquity, observes that it "was not so much the woman's consent that was at issue. . . rather it was the insult to the woman's father, or other male guardian, that constituted the crime" (86). Having defeated Ravan, Ram is now ready to punish Sita consequent upon his suspicion based on the possibility of Sita's sexual transgression, which is why he refuses to take her back. Thus, when the issue of female sexuality is concerned, women have been at the receiving end of male anger, and the above instance can be seen as a form of punishment meted out to women for arousing desire in another male in patriarchy regardless of her sexual interest. He also banishes her to the hermitage to ensure that his concept of Ramrajya prevails; and that righteousness and the sacred responsibility of Kingship are above his private duty to his wife. He does not take another wife and keeps a statue of Sita in the court by his side but never comes to enquire about Sita and her sons, which makes Sita wonder whether his refusal to remarry has to do with his vow or not.

Sita spends her early days in Koshal as Ram's bride learning new things about inner palace politics, the roles of wife, daughter-in-law, and princess and most importantly, finding new dimensions of love and desire

in her relationship with Ram. Sita's depiction by Divakaruni as a sexual being who embraces her sensuality removes her identity as just a dutiful wife to Ram. Her physical and emotional desires make it clear that unlike how they are depicted in male-centred epics, women are not "simply partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros" (Cixous 880). It is always not about the sensual pleasures that Sita is happy about, but her closeness to Ram which makes her his confidante, giving her immense pleasure: "What I enjoyed as much as the physical pleasures of love was the time afterwards, when Ram and I lay, limbs intertwined, heads on the same pillow, and conversed into the night. Darkness added a special intimacy to the moment" (Divakaruni 66). Expression of female sexuality makes the woman an equal partner in the act itself and no longer the passive receiver of male desire, and thus, Sita asserts her right to pleasure.

Denial of sensual pleasure and intimacy with her husband drives hyper-sensitive women like Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* to morbidity and mental breakdown, especially when her life is already troubled. Maya expresses her desire like Sita on many occasions "I turned upon my side, closer to him, conscious of the swell of my hip that rose under the white sheet which fell in sculptured folds around my rounded form" (Desai 42) but sadly, Gautam does not pay heed to her covert gestures. Both Desai and Divakaruni's women express sexuality in many ways stressing their right to pleasure – a notion Nicole Dennis-Behn also champions: "a woman has the right to express herself sexually and still be in control of what happens to her body" (28).

Sita's perspective and emotions regarding her marriage to Ram is something that the text dives into deeply – a perspective largely omitted and unimportant in the original epic. Divakaruni's Sita is uncomfortable at how Valmiki never addresses her feminine spirit. Sita tells her own story, and with this, she finds herself discovering and addressing her previously dormant multitudes. What Helene Cixous says about female authorship in "The Laugh of Medusa": "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" can be applied to Sita (880). The more Sita expresses herself, the more she is aware of her equation with her situations. Unlike other heroines of fairy tales and epics, Divakaruni's Sita is aware of her awakening sexuality and speaks about it even if her behaviour is not forward before her marriage. In a palace full of spies and eavesdroppers employed for palace politics, Sita manages to secure a private sphere for a blissful marital life in the confines of her bed. Sexual intimacy becomes Sita's sanctuary of

desire, confidence, familiarity and openness: "And at night, when Ram and I were in bed, I could let myself dive into the current of our passion without worrying about anyone hearing our love cries.

Perhaps that was one reason our relationship was doing so well" (Divakaruni 75). In a conversation with Amitav Ghosh, Divakaruni says, "The ancient legends also bring up complicated questions concerning female sexuality and its limits, and I am interested in re-examining this" (Amitav Ghosh). The context is still the traditional locale of the epic, but Sita is being repositioned through a changed perspective, and hence it becomes possible to re-examine the concept of sexuality beyond the restrictive confines of patriarchy.

Doubts and questions in Sita's mind would come only later when it is too late for her to do anything except flow with the current of life. When tragedy strikes in Sita's family in the form of Kaikeyi's demand to make Bharat the king of Ayodhya and send Ram to the forest for fourteen years, Sita is yet to learn love's many faces – Kaushalya, Urmila, Lakshman and her own perceptions and reactions – that make people ready to wreak havoc to protect those whom they cherish and follow "the twisted paths along which love swept us humans along" which catch people in "love's shackles" unawares (Divakaruni107).

Kaikeyi, who for the sake of her son Bharat demands fulfilment of his promises to her from King Dasharath, also falls victim to love – Bharat abandons her, blaming her for the King's death and Ram's banishment, and refuses to accept the Kingship fraudulently given to him. Sita also acknowledges the strength of love, which "could make us forget our own needs. It could make us strong even when the world was collapsing around us" (114). What she understands is that women bear the brunt of love more than men as it seems that women's predicament is "always to be pulled between conflicting loves" as she has to go to Ram, whom she follows into his exile after leaving her sister Urmila all alone without a sister or a husband (115). She is unsure whether her choice to follow Ram is right: "these different loves and duties battled within me, but finally, my love for Ram won. Was it the right choice? I'd never be sure" (117). She follows Ram because of her love for him, but her inner conflicts reflect the novel's dissection of the "nature of love as both an enabler and obstacle to happiness" (Menon). Her choice to leave the palace is deemed an act done for love at a great cost by sage Gautam's wife, Ahalya.

What makes Sita survive the mental and emotional torture of Ravan's threats and promises during her captivity is her love for Ram and her hope of his coming to Lanka to rescue her, which makes her endure the hardships despite her weakening body and mind. Her love for Ram makes her forgive him after he publicly rejects her in Lanka, for she knows in her heart that public opinion, righteousness, and people's voices are equally important as Sita in his life. However, even after forgiving him, she also makes a startling discovery: "Love is the spade with which we bury, deep inside our being, the things that we cannot bear to remember, cannot bear anyone else to know. But, some of them remain. And they rise to the surface when we least expect them" (Divakaruni 246). This is true for both Ram and Sita – this side of love is imperfect, flawed and distrusting, and it rises again for Sita when she refuses to deliver the news of the twins' birth to Ayodhya, forfeiting Ram his share of happiness as her anger and bitterness against him for abandoning without informing her rises above her love. Again, when the *astras* of the twins wound Ram, Sita uses herbs and chants to bring his life back, but it fails to do the magic as her anger and wish to make him suffer despite her love exists; and he comes back to life only after she prays to release her anger: "For the sake of love, I give up my anger" (341). Divakaruni points out that despite their differences, it is only Sita who sacrifices for love – something which Ram never reciprocates.

Sita has to constantly compromise her personal will due to her love for Ram – something which gives her both anguish and happiness. For humankind, "What is more absurd is the fact that all are victims of their own will and they suffer because of the force they possess called love" (Santiago 39). In Ram's case, this imperfect side of love arises when he refuses to take back Sita as his wife, distrusting Sita's love and virtue, and, thus, shames her in public, suggesting that she take another husband. The seed of suspicion/distrust sown here paves the way for Ram's second act of rejecting and banishing Sita after the washerman's accusation that Sita's virtue and chastity in Lanka cannot be proved. Despite the heartbreak he suffers from sending Sita to the forest while pregnant, he still chooses to remain true to his sacred responsibility of Kingship, which includes listening to each and every citizen of Ayodhya.

One may well wonder whether his decision is taken solely for the sake of his dharma as a king, as there already exists doubt in his mind about Sita's fidelity to him when he sees Sita's sketch of Ravan on the floor of their bedroom, which Sita tells him is the result of Surpanakha's asura magic to the utter disbelief and shock of Ram (Divakaruni 295). What Sita has

learned from Ahalya's example that "once mistrust has wounded it mortally, love can't be fully healed again" comes true to both Ram and Sita (136). So, long before the final fire test, the love between Ram and Sita has weakened due to cracks caused by mistrust, misunderstanding, different priorities and, above all, the very difference in the nature of their love for each other. Love without trust cannot exist, just as love without forgiveness has no meaning. Sita learnt while in captivity that no matter how deep love is, it "wasn't enough to transform another person: how they thought, what they believed. At best, we could only change ourselves" (257); comes to her rescue. She will change herself; she will stop expecting Ram to prioritize his love for her and make herself suffer for the sake of her love for him, and most crucially, she will stop accepting others' decisions for her. Ram, her "greatest joy", her "greatest sorrow", will not change (353), and thus, there is no hope for her happiness.

Love is a major and yet complex driving force: "it can be said that love is the most responsible drive for all his/her course of actions, frustrations, dilemmas, and pursuits that may give catastrophic effects to his/her life resulting to favourable or unfavourable consequence to his/her present state" (Santiago 34). The final decision to stand on her own grounds by asking mother earth and father fire to come to her aid is her final farewell to all her loved ones and an exercise of personal autonomy driven by love.

The issue here is no longer concentrated on love alone but on female sexuality. In the first fire test, Sita proposes to end her life through fire rather than live dishonourably, but the second fire test is imposed on her. The first instance proves Sita's virtue and chastity after her captivity in Lanka, so the second test is made to prove or disprove her purity during her stay in Valmiki's ashram. Both instances reveal Ram's mistrust of Sita's sexual purity. All these prove that female sexuality may be acceptable within the bounds of matrimony, but beyond that, it is problematic. Ram may not have suspected her if she were a passive and shy woman, but her bold sexual nature may have touched the chord of mistrust in the rigid patriarch. Questions of morality form one of the central issues in the epic, which has become an issue of sexuality in the contemporary retelling. It is pertinent to mention Divakaruni's opinion in this context:

Re-examining epics and legends gives me a chance to tease out important themes in them that are relevant to today's world, and to put my own spin on them. In both *Palace of Illusions* and *Forest of Enchantments*, I'm interested in how the original texts, the *Mahābhārata* and *Ramayana*, bring up questions of morality, but

I've tried to examine them as a woman who lives in today's world and is concerned about the particular form these questions currently take. (Ghosh)

Thus, the myriad shades of love presented through Sita's perspective are associated with compassion, understanding, respect, trust, forgiveness, and sacrifice, as well as mistrust, doubt, the crippling effects of selfishness and putting love aside for duty. The concluding lines of the text about love, "It isn't doled out, drop by drop. It doesn't measure who is worthy and who isn't. It is like the ocean. Unfathomable. Astonishing. Measureless" says it all (Divakaruni 358). The evolving notion of female sexuality explored in the text has emphasized the bold expression of sexuality and women's right to pleasure. However, certain male biases inherent in patriarchy make the issue of sexuality problematic even in today's world. Ram's righteousness, for which his praise is sung, brings not only suffering to Sita but also initiates the events that condemn Sita on her sexuality. Divakaruni shies away from resolving this issue and shifts the problematics of female sexuality beyond the confines of the text.

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