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Negotiating Aesthetic Distance: A Reception Study of Love and Wisdom in Sita's Narrative in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments

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Abstract

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel that primarily focuses on Sita's voice, thoughts, feelings, emotions, viewpoints, sufferings, and life experiences, presenting her side of the story and making it a Sitayan rather than merely a retelling of the Ramayana by Sage Valmiki, which centers on male figures. It clearly blends age-old mythology with contemporary female awareness, creating a strong connection with the modern audience of the present era. Sita, being the best daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife, sister-in-law, mother, warrior and a perfect idol for the women of all over the world through ages, has always been analysed or viewed through the male characters around her, the most prominent one being "The Wife of Lord Rama of the Raghu Dynasty." Her divinity, wisdom, devotion, chastity, identity, and sacrifices that she made throughout her life seem to remain unnoticed and unheard over time. This paper examines the character portrayal of Sita through the lens of Reception Theory by Hans Robert Jauss, which is also known as Horizon of Expectations, which shows how the meaning of any literary work is produced through the interaction between the text and the reader and how the meaning of the same work keeps changing over time with the generational shift of the readers. This gap between the expectations of the readers from different generations and the actual experience of the literary work is termed "Aesthetic Distance" by Jauss, who shows how it plays a significant role in preserving the relevance as well as interpretive richness of the text, as any literary work, being dynamic, continuously keeps evolving. This paper analyses the lessons of love and wisdom discussed by Divakaruni's Sita in the novel The Forest of Enchantments through the lens of Aesthetic Distance that shows a clear differentiation between the portrayal of traditional Sita by a male author and her modern depiction by a female author. By highlighting this gap, this paper aims to urge the readers to reassess the established ideas of love, wisdom, and duty. This research paper examines how Aesthetic Distance increases the involvement of readers and allows the literary work to be interpreted in a variety of ways depending on the historical as well as cultural context. This study also reaffirms the applicability of the Reception Aesthetics by Hans Robert Jauss on the modern mythic retellings of the ancient epic to show how The Forest of Enchantments holds different responses from the readers.

Keywords: Aesthetic Distance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Hans Robert Jauss, Horizon of Expectations, Reception Theory, Sita, The Forest of Enchantments, The Ramayana.

Introduction

The Ramayana, penned down by Sage Valmiki in Treta Yuga that is also considered as the Second Age of Man, is considered as one of the two most sacred ancient Indian epics that prominently focuses on the story and glory of Lord Rama, the eldest son of King Dasharatha of the Raghu Dynasty, who used to rule over a kingdom named Ayodhya. With the perspective of male author, the entire focus of the epic rests on the male protagonist Rama, making the work a male-centric narration. Other female characters such as Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, Shrutkirti, Ahalya, Shabri, Surpankha, Mandodari and other minor female characters are portrayed mostly as a daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife, mother or a devotee that is wholly dependent on the male figures around them, either in their home or in the society as a whole. In her article entitled "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," Linda Hess mentions the words of Umashankar Joshi who says: "If the Ramayana moves one to the depths of one's being, it is perhaps due to the raw deal meted out to Sita" (Joshi qtd. in Hess). Apart from this, she also takes the reference of a Hindu scholar quoted by the Supreme Court Justice Hidayatullah in the inauguration of an international conference on the Ramayana in Delhi in the year 1981, which was later preserved in the written form by K. R. S. Iyengar in his work Asian Variations in Ramayana. He says:

> The Ramayana is a mirror of the highest ideals of Hindu culture and civilisation. Herein is described the ideal hero Sri Ramachandra who is not only the exemplar for all living and dutiful sons, but who is the ideal husband and king....Sita is the noblest flower of Indian womanhood, devoted to her lord in thought, word and deed...There can be no better text-book of morals which can be safely placed in the hands of youths to inspire them to higher and nobler ideas of conduct and character. Rama and Sita...are exemplifiers of right thought, right speech and right action under all circumstances. Sita represents compassion and grace. She suffers most but preserves herself with heroism, love and devotion. She is the ideal wife and is the model for our womanhood (Iyengar qtd. in Hess).

In recent times, there have been a large number of retellings as well as movie and television adaptations of the character of Sita from the Ramayana through various genres and in different languages. Some of the major literary sources re-portraying Sita from the Ramayana include The Liberation of Sita by Volga or Popuri Lalitha Kumari that is a feminist fiction in Tamil and English, reinterpreting Sita through modern feminist perspectives and questioning patriarchal ideals; Sita: Warrior of Mithila by Amish Tripathi that is a mythological novel in English, portraying Sita as a warrior, administrator and central political force; Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni that is a graphic narrative in English, retelling the epic from Sita's viewpoint using visual and narrative innovation; Sitayana by Nabaneeta Dev Sen that is a modern poetry in Bengali and English, exploring Sita's emotional life and resistance through modern poetic expression; Sita Speaks by Mallika Sengupta that is a feminist poetry in Bengali, giving Sita a direct, assertive voice and challenging her silence and suffering; Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Mahabharata by Devdutt Pattnaik that is a popular mythology in English, simplifying and reinterpreting the story of Sita for contemporary readers; and Asura by Anand Neelkantan that is a revisionist fiction in English, offering a revisionist framework where Sita's identity is contextualised. Apart from this, the film adaptations include Sita Sings the Blues by Nina Paley, Raavan or Raavanan by Mani Ratnam and Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama by Yugo Sako. The television adaptations are Ramayan by Ramanand Sagar that was a devotional narrative whose portrayal of Sita continues to influence modern

cultural reception; Ramayan by Anand Sagar that that was a re-visualisation for contemporary audiences with renewed focus on the endurance of Sita; Siya Ke Ram that was a Sita-centric retelling presenting the epic largely from her perspective; Ram Siya Le Luv Kush that focused on Sita as a mother and moral guide, extending her narrative beyond exile; and Srimad Ramayan by Siddharth Kumar Tewary that depicted the fierce, strong and brave side of Sita throughout her life, emphasising on the phase when she was living in the hermitage of Sage Valmiki after being deserted by Lord Rama during her pregnancy. While commenting on the retelling of the character of Sita in the modern age, Linda Hess in her article entitled "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," writes:

> Today more than ever before, Sita is a site of contestation. The Sita who clung to the dharma of worshipping her husband and bowing to his will, even when he repeatedly and cruelly rejecter her, is still embraced as the ideal woman by many Hindus of both sexes. But others, increasingly, are describing that ideal as concocted by and serving the interests of dominant males from ancient times to the present. What is it that they are rejecting? In a cultural environment where Rama and Sita are widely and fervently believed to be real, both historical and divine figures, we can say that most of them are not claiming to reject the "real" Sita. Swimming in an ocean of texts, knowing that all textual Sitas are chhaya Sitas, rising and disappearing between the covers of a book or the opening and closing of a performance, they are rejecting the Sita of patriarchy (Hess 28).

In her research paper entitled "Environment and Women: A Study of Deep Ecologism in The Forest of Enchantments," Daisy Rajbongshi comments on The Forest of Enchantments, novel by an Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a modern retelling of the ancient Sanatan text the Ramayana by Sage Valmiki. She writes:

> It is an interpretation of the liminal spaces where these women were abandoned in the course of the events that gave Valmiki's narrative its masculine appeal. Throughout the history of Indian literature, the female space was never remembered, for such was the height of neglect that the absence of the female narrative made no difference to the story. The early male writers gave rise to an archetypal woman: fragile, morally lax, unintelligent, sinful and inferior. These marginalized characters were forced out of their existence to take shade in the eerie no woman's land where they were still dependent on the patriarchal structure. Women were stigmatized as a cause for the man's impending misfortunes, which is evident from the story of Kaikeyi, or washerwoman. Thus, it is imperative to vocalize the views of the relegated "others" by first creating a fissure in the stereotypes of the female characters - meek, submissive, and silently stoic through all their trials and tribulations (Rajbongshi 3).

The section entitled "Rejecting Sita, Rejecting Rama" in her article named "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," Linda Hess cites the words of the writer, Saroj Visaria who commented on "No More Sitas." She writes:

> The ideals, ethics and morality heaped on women since time immemorial are suffocating and killing. The adjectives used to praise us have become oppressive. Calling us loving, they have locked us in the closed room of culture,

> calling us gentle, they have reflected us in a mirror of helplessness, calling us kind they have tied us in cowardice, they have handcuffed us with modesty and chained our feet with loyalty...Now we must refuse to be Sitas. By becoming a Sita and submitting to the fire ordeal, woman loses her identity. This fire ordeal is imposed on women today in every city, every home. Our exclusion from the scriptures, from temples, from smritis, is also our strength. We can be fearless since we have no models...Today we are not Sitas but Saritas [rivers], flowing free, able to cross rocks, capable of generating electricity (Visaria qtd. in Hess).

Linda Hess also takes the reference of Bina Agarwal's 1985 poem which begins like: "Sita speak your side of story. We know the other side too well..." (Agarwal qtd. in Hess). Agarwal also highlights the injustices to Sita in the conventional narrative, including the agni pariksha and she writes: "With your husband you chose exile;/ suffered privation, abduction/ and then the rejection - the chastity test on the scorching flames/ the victim twice victimised./ Could those flames turn to flowers/ without searing the soul?" (Agarwal qtd. in Hess). Bina Agarwal concludes her poem as follows:

> The poets who wrote your story/ said a woman is not worthy of hearing/ the Ramayana: like a beast she is fit/ for being beaten./ Could such poetry ever bring your glory?/ Yet they spoke their verses without challenge/ and got away with such falsehoods./ Sita speak!/ You who could lift the magic bow in a play/ with one hand,/ who could command the earth with a word,/ how did they silence you? (Agarwal qtd. in Hess).

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novel published in the year 2019, which is Sita's version of the ancient epic the Ramayana by Sage Valmiki. In this novel, Divakaruni makes powerful comments on love, wisdom, identity, individuality duty, morality, perseverance, endurance, honour, sacrifices, infidelity, betrayal as well as struggles of women to have authority, voice and existence of their own in the society that privileges men over them. In the section entitled "Author's Note" in the novel, Divakaruni talks about why the story of Sita haunted her and she writes: "It was one of the stories I was told, and because I sensed there was a disconnect between the truth of Sita and the way Indian popular culture thought of her. I sensed that Sita was more than what took her to be" (Banerjee 6). After the publication of her novel The Palace of Illusions when Chitra Banerjee was asked what she would write about next, she was very clear about her answer and she replied:

> I'm going to write the story of Sita...because I've always been fascinated by the Ramayan. Just like Panchaali, my Sita (yes, with the presumptuous intimacy of authors, I thought of her as mine) will tell her own tale. She'll fill in the gaps between the adventures undertaken by the male characters in the epic, their victories and defeats. She'll tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed 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 (Banerjee 6).

Some of the major findings observed by Divakaruni through her extensive research and meditations while penning down the novel include: how even though Sita was the incarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi herself on the earth in Treta Yuga, after taking the mortal body, she possessed emotions, feelings, heartbreaks as well as flaws just like ordinary human beings and the same applied to Ram as well. Divakaruni also notes that how decisions taken and deeds done by Sita on some of the major

occasions of her life are motivated by a fierce courage even though sometimes it was in the form of a quite courageousness that could be mistaken for meekness. Apart from this, the foremost concentration of Divakaruni throughout the novel rests on the tragic love story of Sita and Ram which made this work "a meditation on the nature of love" and some of the lessons of love and wisdom are delivered through the eyes and voice of Sita in the course of the storyline that of the ancient Ramayana and these affectionate teachings of love and insights on wisdom are mainly focused by the researcher in the present study.

Research Problem:

Although Sita is a central figure in the Ramayana, traditional narratives often portray her through the perspectives of the male characters around her, limiting the understanding of her own voice, thoughts, feelings, perspectives, emotions and expressions. The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a resilient Sita, emphasising her inner life, wisdom, agency, identity and individuality, yet there is a limited scholarly investigation into how contemporary readers perceive this reinterpretation. This particular study proposes to examine how the Reception of Divakaruni's Sita varies across various generations and cultural contexts by applying Hans Robert Jauss' concept of Horizon of Expectations and Aesthetic Distance. Specifically, it seeks to investigate how themes of love, wisdom, duty and resilience in the novel are interpreted differently from traditional versions of the epic. The research problem, therefore, focuses on the understanding how modern readers engage with the Resilient Sita representing the woman of the contemporary age and how Reception Theory of Jauss can explain the evolving meanings of her character in The Forest of Enchantments by providing the readers with Sita's insights on love and wisdom in the novel.

Review of Related Literature:

The Ramayana, its modern retellings and its movie as well as television adaptations have always remained a fascinating area of research and it earned the attention and interest of many researchers from various fields over years as well as ages. The writers and researchers keep analysing various sources based upon the Ramayana through different perspectives and literary lenses, providing readers with completely new observation about any particular character or incident. The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni too remains one of the novels based on the Ramayana by Sage Valmiki to be analysed through various viewpoints, the prominent one being the storyline of the Ramayana through the eyes and voice of Sita. Here are some of the research papers reviewed by the researcher that critically examine Divakaruni's novel by keeping different point of views at the center of it:

In the research paper entitled "A Critical Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Mahi Singh and Dr. Kumkum Ray discuss how women are deeply connected with nature and are seen as the source of power by using the lens of ecofeminism. In their research paper entitled "Thematic Analysis of The Forest of Enchantment by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," Atul Ansaram Phulaware and Dr. Khan Shaista Talat analyse gender norms, women empowerment shown through the female protagonist and how complex ethical dilemmas are shown being tackled by the author. In the research paper entitled "Sita in Forest: A Critical Analysis of Ecofeminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantment," the researchers Pranjal Kapoor, Jayatee Bhattacharya and Sushila Vijaykumar explores in depth the connection of Sita with the forests by applying ecofeminism literary theory. In her research paper entitled "Environment and Women: A Study

of Deep Ecologism in The Forest of Enchantments," Daisy Rajbongshi tries to study the spiritual connection shared by women and nature by applying the approaches of deep ecologism and environment philosophy and by analysing the text as a feminist ecocentric retelling. In her research paper entitled "Psychological and Spiritual Growth in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantment," Naincy Kumari explains how the forest, which is often seen as the place of exile and suffering in the Ramayana, is depicted as symbol of the spiritual as well as psychological transformation, growth and healing by Chitra Banerjee in her novel by applying Victor Tuners' Concept of Liminality and Carl Jung's Individuation Theory. In the research paper entitled "Intersection of Gender and Caste in Chitra Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Abhabya Ratnam and Dr. Samir Kumar Sharma aim to study how as a work of feminist fiction, The Forest of Enchantments opposes the unfair laws that force women of the society to defend their innocence in the epic Ramayana and how women from different cultures and ages are always portrayed as the lesser "other" who always require the masculine protective ring to preserve their honour. In their research paper entitled "Re-Imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments: A Spiritual Ecofeminist Reading," Gheeta Chandran, Foong Soon Seng and Raphael Thoo Yi Xian aims to study and analyse the role of forest as an imperative source of empowerment and what relationship it shared with Sita in the novel. In her research paper entitled "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments: A Saga of Duty, Betrayal, Integrity and Honour," Sukanya Saha analyses Divakaruni's delineation of Sita's psyche in depth and shows how it is a wonderful amalgamation of ecstasy, fancy, love, passion, remorse, despondency, frustration, and a host of emotions. In their research paper entitled "A Feminist Revisionist Study of Divakaruni's Sitayan," Krishna Chatur Sow Mondal, Lavanya Sivapurapu, Yash Raj and M. Raju examine the character of Sita in light of the social obstacles she faces as well as her search for space and identity within a patriarchal society. In her research paper entitled "Sita: A Symbol of Strength, Resilience, and Empowerment in The Forest of Enchantments," Swetha S. comments on how The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee portrays the struggles of contemporary women to find their identity and individuality, both in their families and societies and what these women go through in the patriarchal society. In their research paper entitled "Sita's Uncharted Odyssey: Echoes of Dependence in The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," Rashmi Verma and Dr. Geeta Sharma examine the agency and resilience of Sita in the novel, highlighting her struggle for independence and challenge to patriarchal norms.

In their research paper entitled "Cultural Feminism in the Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," Anjali P. and Sonia Chellirian, by interpreting the life of Sita, aim to examine the potential of Sita for a different outcome as well as other marginalised female characters in the context of cultural feminism in the novel. In her paper entitled "Beyond the Agni Pariksha: Reimagining Sita's Strength in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Dr. Neha Sharma analyses how The Forest of Enchantments turns the Ramayana into a modern feminist story, making Sita's tale more applicable to readers today and advancing the continuous reinterpretation of the mythological literature. In her research paper entitled "Reimagining Epic Tradition: Intertextuality and Mythical Resonances in "The Forest of Enchantments" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," S.Divyadharshini comments on how Divakaruni challenges conventional portrayals of Sita as a submissive character by using feminist theory and intertextuality to show her as a strong and independent woman. In the research paper entitled "Divinity and the Feminist Indian Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Novel The Forest of Enchantments," Dr. Leema Dhar examines Sita as a Goddess figure in Divakaruni's novel, highlighting

her exceptional strength, individuality, and feminist qualities, while also reflecting the challenges faced by women in the Indian society. In her paper entitled "Divine Influences of Haradhanu and the Goddess in Shaping Sita's Destiny: A Study of Her Spiritual Path in The Forest of Enchantments," Shruti RN, by applying Feminist Literary Criticism and Archetypal Theory, analyses the significance of divine as well as spiritual aspects as metaphors and catalysts for personal growth of Sita and fulfillment of her destined role. In their research paper entitled "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments as Sitayana," M. Divya and Dr. A. Bhagyalakshmi explore Sita's self-identity and womanhood, focusing on how she begins to tell her story, Sitayana. In her research paper entitled "Destroying Myths and Stereotypes of the Women in Ramayana: In Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Shweta Kumari offer a fresh perspective on the Ramayana by presenting the story through Sita and other female characters, highlighting their experiences and analyses how Divakaruni's Sita draws parallels between the struggle of women in the mythic age and those of women today. In a research paper entitled "Concept of the 'Ideal Woman': A Critical Study through the Female Characters of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Ragini Raghav and Dr. Sharmila Saxena comment on how the female characters in The Forest of Enchantments and the epic, the Ramayana were women of strong minds who devoted their lives to their family and yet took their stands whenever necessary. In her research paper entitled "Odyssey of Sita: A Feminist Revision of Mythology with Special Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments," Ritu Devi explores the saga of Sita that acquaints the readers with the sufferings of women along with Sita, who is worshipped for her devotion and unyielding trust towards her husband. In her research paper entitled "Quest for Eco-Spirituality: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Shivangi explores the novel by Divakaruni that is the retelling of the Ramayana by focusing on the intersection of spirituality, feminism as well as ecological awareness. In her research paper entitled "Men in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments," Geetanjali Rathore examines male characters in The Forest of Enchantments, highlighting how Divakaruni humanises male characters namely Rama, Dasharatha, and Ravana, presenting them beyond their traditional divinity and exploring their struggles, sacrifices and flaws.

In the research paper entitled "Sita: A Voice of Resistance in the Novel The Forest of Enchantments," Pramilla Chauhan and Dr. Monika Gupta talk about how Sita in Indian mythology has been idealised as a silent, suffering woman, while her inherent strength has largely been overlooked. In her research paper entitled "A Psychological Study of Female Characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Anu undertakes a psychological examination of the female characters of the novel by Divakaruni to explore the psychological impact of patriarchal oppression, emphasising their trauma, inner conflicts, emotional turmoil, and evolving sense of self-worth within a male-dominated society. In their research paper entitled "Embracing Calmness through the Aisle of Nature: A Probe into Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," P. Ashlin Sherly and M. F. Anne Feril highlight the nurturing essence of nature and its role in guiding humanity towards harmony and peace. In her research paper entitled "The Forest of Enchantments as "Sitayan": A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Ramayana," Dr. Dipti Agarwal highlights how The Forest of Enchantments re-envisions the mythological narratives by foregrounding themes of female identity, agency and emotional strength challenging patriarchal representations of Sita and offering a contemporary feminist reinterpretation of women in mythology. In her research paper entitled "The Forest of Enchantments: A Retold Saga in Mythopoesis," Dr. Debalina Sengupta analyses how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sitayana attains the

inextinguishable magnitude of mirroring the affliction of spiritual exuberance. In their research paper entitled "Nature, Power and Womanhood: An Ecofeminist Reading of The Forest of Enchantments," Sonia Singh and Devendra Kumar Sharma examine the novel through an ecofeminist lens, portraying Sita as an empowered figure whose identity is intertwined with nature and they also highlight the resistance to patriarchal dominance, ecological exploitation and the marginalisation of women. In his research paper entitled "Disenthralling Sita: A Study of Female Agency in The Forest of Enchantments," Mr. Bhojraj Pandhari Shrirame shows how the feminist retelling redefines Sita as a symbol of empowerment and self-identity, challenging traditional interpretations in the contemporary literature. In her research paper entitled "Sita: The Justly Emancipated Woman in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Geetanjali Rathore focuses on how Sita negotiates and restrains male ego and oppression, highlighting her journey towards emancipation and self-assertion. In his research paper entitled "Redefining Sita: A Biocentric Perspective in Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," Tridip Das explores the character of Sita in the novel of Divakaruni as a representation of biocentric values, highlighting her role in promoting ecological resilience and challenging human-centred perspectives, advocating for respect, coexistence, and harmony with nature in the context of contemporary environmental concerns. In her research paper entitled "Women's Knowledge, Healing Capacity and Eco-Sensitivity: A Study of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Forest of Enchantments," B. Chitra examines how The Forest of Enchantments depicts women as healers, custodians of knowledge as well as eco-conscious figures, highlighting their skills, empowerment, and societal undervaluation. In their research paper entitled "Modern Myth-Making Process in the Perspective of the Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni," Manu Radha and Dr. Syed Wahaj Mohsin analyse the novel by Divakaruni as a work of modern myth-making, examining how she retells the Ramayana from the perspective that of Sita and employ mythological elements to create a compelling as well as contemporary narrative. In her research paper entitled "Unveiling the Untold: A Retelling of Sita in Modern Literature with a Special Focus on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Feminist Rendition in The Forest of Enchantments," Reshu Shukla explores the novel, highlighting Sita as a symbol of female empowerment, resilience, and devotion, while examining her human emotions, relationship with nature, and the challenges she faces within the cultural as well as mythological context of Indian history.

Research Gap:

While existing research on The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has examined the character of Sita or the entire novel through the lens of feminism, ecofeminism, ecocriticism, diaspora, psychoanalysis, intertextuality as well as revisionist mythmaking perspectives, significant gaps remain in how the narrative of Sita has been received across different audiences over various generations. Most of the other research studies do not employ the theoretical framework that accounts for evolving interpretive reception dynamics. Furthermore, a scholarly work on reinterpretation of Sita rarely utilises the concepts of Horizon of Expectations as well as Aesthetic Distance to examine how readers from varying culture or historical contexts respond to Divakaruni's resilient Sita. Thus, this research aims to fill these gaps by applying the Reception Theory of Hans Robert Jauss to understand shifts in reader engagement and meaning making in relation to art well as insights on love and wisdom as provided in The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through the viewpoints of resilient Sita.

Aims and Objectives:

Here are some of the aims and objectives of the researcher behind taking up the present study for the research:

1. To examine the reimagining of Sita in The Forest of Enchantments as a resilient and autonomous figure, which is completely distinct from her traditional portrayals.
2. To analyse how Divakaruni centers the voice of Sita and subjective experience to reconstruct the epic narrative from the perspective of the female protagonist.
3. To apply the Reception Theory by Hans Robert Jauss to study the changing interpretations of Sita across historical as well as cultural contexts.
4. To explore the role of Aesthetic Distance in differentiating traditional male-authored representations of Sita from that of modern reinterpretation by Chitra Banerjee.
5. To examine how the novel redefines the art of love and insights on wisdom through the observations and perspectives of Sita.
6. To assess how reader reception and generational concept shape multiple interpretations of the same text, The Forest of Enchantments.
7. To reaffirm the relevance of Reception Aesthetics in analysing the contemporary retellings of ancient epic, the Ramayana.

Sita: An Ordinary Woman or the Goddess?

Sita, one of the central figures of the Ramayana, has traditionally been depicted as the Goddess, embodying ideals of devotion, purity as well as moral perfection. In this divine portrayal, she represents an unwavering model of virtue, loyalty and self-sacrifice, often seen primarily in relation to Rama and expectation of the epic's male-centred world. However, modern retellings such as The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, present Sita as a more human, resilient, and complex character. She experiences fear, anger, sorrow, heartbreak; makes her own choices and confronts societal expectations, thereby reflecting the life and struggles of ordinary women. This duality actually raises important questions about identity, agency and interpretation. Sita can be seen simultaneously as the Goddess symbolising spiritual ideals and an ordinary woman navigating real challenges. Exploring this balance helps the readers appreciate both her mythic significance and her human dimensions, offering a richer understanding of her role across the generations as well as cultures. Linda Hess, in her article entitled "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," takes the reference of Sita, the one-act play written by Snehalata Reddy, radically revising the fire ordeal scene, allowing an angry Sita to reject Rama, his dharma, and his trial by fire. Reddy's Sita says to Rama and Lakshmana:

> I am not afraid of death, Lakshmana, but I'm afraid of the fraud that will be perpetuated in the name of Ramarajya! In the name of dharma! I'm afraid of this awesome male domination and the helpless, pathetic and unbelievable martyrdom of women....This king you all worship is a cruel, heartless tyrant. For the sake of his glory, he wants to sacrifice your queen....(turning to the audience) I beg all of you to fight this injustice and not submit to it. We women have been kept under the yoke for centuries in the name of dharma. Please remember my pain, my rejection, my humiliation - for they will bury it all in silence. Remember me not as a goddess of virtue, but as a defenceless woman, fighting

> for her self-respect. History has never recorded the whole truth...never the downtrodden - always be powerful...They will gloss over my suffering and camouflage their sins with my submissiveness and devotion...I know that the world will not change overnight....if I dare now, more women will dare...I hope and pray that, by exposing your masculine pomposity, absurdity and injustice, who knows, I may be able to sow the first seed of revolution (Reddy qtd. in Hess).

Devdutt Pattnaik, in his novel entitled Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana, comments on the divinity of Sita. Devdutt notes that in Shiva's Ramayana Rama is not a hero but he is God and Sita is not victim, she is the Goddess that has been associated with vegetation and especially with the grass (Pattnaik xv), and he further writes:

> When Ravana's twin who lived in the Pushkara Island attacked Rama and Sita, everyone witnessed an incredible sight of Sita's sudden transformation before Rama could reach for his bow. Her eyes widened, her skin turned red, her hair became unbound and she sprouted many arms with which she grabbed the sticks, stones, swords and spears. She then leapt on to a lion and rushed to do battle with the demon and it was such a fierce one (Pattnaik 253-254). She ripped out his entrails, chopped away his limbs, crushed his heads, broke his knees and drank his blood. Soon after that, being satiated, she returned to sit beside her Rama as the demure Sita with a gentle smile on her lips (Pattnaik 254). Everyone who were present there was shocked and stunned by the realization that Sita was Gauri who was also Kali. It was she who had allowed herself to be rescued. When Lakshmana blames Rama for her abandonment, Sita states that hence Rama is God, he is dependable and hence she is Goddess, she is independent. Rama is a monarch who requires to do his duty, follows rules and protect reputation while she is under no such responsibility. She is free to do as she pleased and love him when he brings her home, when he goes to the forest, when she is separated from him, when she is rescued by him and love him even when he lets her go. She says. "You feel Rama has abandoned his Sita...But he has not... He cannot. He is God; he abandons no one. And I am Goddess; I cannot be abandoned by anyone" (Pattnaik 278).

Thus, it can be said that Sita embodies both the divine and the human, depending on the perspective from which she is viewed. In the traditional Ramayana by Sage Valmiki, she represents the divine ideal; her devotion, purity, patience as well as unwavering commitment to dharma elevate her to a goddess-like status, making her a moral and spiritual guide whose story transcends ordinary human experiences. At the same time, the modern retellings as well as reinterpretations of Sita emphasise her human side by depicting her fears, desires, anger, grief and resilience in the face of injustice. This portrayal presents her as an ordinary woman navigating challenges, questioning societal norms, and asserting her own agency. In this way, Sita bridges myth and humanity, showing that divinity can exist in lived experience, while human struggles can possess universal and timeless significance, making her a figure both relatable and inspirational across generations.

The Theoretical Framework of the Study:

In his essay entitled "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," which was originally written in German and was later translated into English by Timothy Bahti, Hans Robert Jauss discusses major parameters of the Reception Theory and this as well as other essays by Jauss dealing with the same concept have been compiled altogether in a book entitled Toward an Aesthetic of Reception: Theory and History of Literature Vol. 2. In his essay, Jauss talks about how the meaning of a particular text keeps changing over generations and with the change in the mindset of readers. According to Jauss, the text can never remain static and keeps evolving over the passage of time. Jauss discusses seven theses in his essay, out of which in third thesis, he talks about Aesthetic Distance. In this thesis, Jauss also discusses the relationship between work and readers in this thesis. He also talks about the process of the shift in the horizon. He discusses at length how if the audience adjusts to the aesthetics of the new work, change occurs and if the work itself is the horizontal of expectations, no horizontal change occurs. According to the prevailing aesthetics, the audience may find it pleasant or enjoyable. Jauss also explains that as the writer is influenced by the race, environment, beliefs, ideologies and mindset of the audience, literature is closely associated with the readers in line with historicity and societal ideology. The influence of the older aesthetic may now be seen in the audience's perception of previously successful works as outdated and withdrawal of admiration. Hans Robert Jauss defines Aesthetic Distance as follows:

> ...the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a "change of horizons" through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness, then this aesthetic distance can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience's reactions and criticism's judgement (spontaneous success, rejection or shock, scattered approval, gradual or belated understanding) (Jauss 49).

Like this, Hans Robert Jauss used the term Aesthetic Distance in his Reception Theory to describe the gap between a literary work and the existing expectations of the reader. These expectations are shaped by what Jauss terms as "Horizon of Expectations," which includes reader's previous reading experience, knowledge of literary conventions as well as social and historical context. Aesthetic Distance appears when a new work does not really conform to these expectations by the readers. According to Jauss, this distance plays an important role in literary change and innovation. When a text closely matches the reader's horizon of expectations, the aesthetic distance is small, and the work may be easily understood but not particularly challenging. On the other hand, when a text significantly disrupts or challenges established norms, the aesthetic distance is large. Such works may initially confuse or shock readers, but they also have the potential to transform literary taste and expand the horizon of expectations over time. According to Jauss, this distance plays a crucial role in determining the aesthetic value and historical significance of the literary work. Thus, aesthetic distance helps to explain the changing literary judgements and it also highlights the active role of the reader in the creation of meaning within literary history.

In the section entitled "Reflections on Reception" in her article named "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," Linda Hess provides a commentary the reception of any literary work. She writes:

> How do we measure reception and influence? The short answer is - very inexactly and inconclusively. How important and representative are the

> protesting versions of Sita cited here? There is a plenty of evidence that the oppressive, patriarchal view of Sita isn't going away. Steve Derne's interviews vividly illustrate the unabashed promotion by men in the 1980s of old-fashioned male dominance and wifely submission consciously molded on Rama and Sita. Michael Allen cites a 1966 booklet published by the Ramakrishna Mission called The Indian Ideal of Womanhood. Setting forth motherhood as the highest goal of the Hindu woman, it glorifies woman's divine talent for "self-effacing love" and points out that "the culture of the Hindu trains him to look upon all women, nay, to look upon the female of all species, as forms of the one Divine Mother," revering mothers more than fathers and gurus (emphasis added) (Hess 22).

Sita's Perspective on Love: A Human-Centred Interpretation

While penning down her own story, Sita firstly talks about how her father, King Janaka, "found" her and how despite it was unknown who she was by birth, she was always raised up as a princess of Mithila by her parents, King Janaka and Queen-mother Sunaina. She always loved to listen to the story of how her father discovered her in the morning when he, being fond of holy ceremonies and his active participation in its preparations, had gone to till the field beside the palace to level it for a yagna that was to occur soon. While narrating this entire incident, Sita talks about her first lesson on the nature of love. She writes:

> That day, however, only a few steps into his ploughing, he was forced to a standstill. A baby lay in his path, naked and newborn, glistening in the young sun as though it was a mirage. He was amazed that I didn't cry, regarding him instead with unblinking eyes. I'd kicked off the cloth that swaddled me, a gold fabric finer than anything our Mithila weavers could produce, with strange and intricate designs the likes of which no one had ever seen. Believers said the gods had gifted me to the good king, who was childless in spite of years of effort. Sceptics wondered which cunning person had placed me there, at just the right moment, to be discovered by Janak. It must have been someone who knew my unworldly father well, they whispered. Other kings would have had the child removed without considering her fate. At best they would have ordered for her to be brought up in a servant's home. But my saintly father picked me up and held me to his chest. And as he did so, a great hunger within him was assuaged, and he was at peace. This was my first lesson on the nature of love: that in a moment it could fulfil the cravings of a lifetime, like a light that someone might shine into a cavern that has been dark for million years. The power of love. It fascinated me from an early age. I thought about it often, even though I didn't quite understand what it was (Banerjee 12).

When Sita got to witness Rama in front of her eyes for the very first time while she was roaming in the palace garden along with her younger sister Urmila, she felt herself to be under the complete influence of the God of Love. When she saw Rama, he was walking behind Sage Vishwamitra and with Lakshmana by his side. It was such a captivating sight for Sita being newly pierced with love and she expressed the flow of her emotions as: "There was something strangely, deeply familiar about the way

Ram held himself, graceful and comfortable in his body and in the world. How could that be? This was the first time I was seeing him, in waking or dream" (Banerjee 20). Furthermore, she also talks about how love is wild and optimistic, especially in the beginning and writes:

> As he passed us, Ram looked at me. His eyes were large and very dark, and shaped like lotus petals. Pulled into them, I felt like I was falling, No, it was more like I was whisked away to a distant place that shone with a light that was once brilliant and cool, to a time when I'd been someone else. There was an ocean, undulating gently around me, white-foamed as innocence, so beautiful that for a moment I couldn't breathe. In this world, too, Ram stood in front of me, though there was a great shining around him so I couldn't see his face. This ethereal light that filled the huge space where we seemed to float emanated from a giant gem at his neck. I took a step forward. Inexplicably, shockingly, I longed to rest my head on his bare chest...And suddenly I was sure, like never before, that Ram was the right mate - the only one - for me (Banerjee 21-22).

After their wedding, Rama and Sita were lost into deep conversations and at that point of time Rama confessed in front of Sita: "I was tempted, though. For the first time in my life, I regretted that rash vow. I wanted to push it away. My heart longed to remain silent so that I could place the betrothal garland around your neck" (Banerjee 41). After listening to these words from Rama and the intensity that he held in his gaze made Sita's pulse speed up as it wasn't just her fantasy or imagination, Rama loved her and wanted her from the bottom of his heart. She describes her emotions through words and writes:

> Ram took my hands in his. I was surprised at how rough his palms were. From archery, I guessed. I hadn't thought a prince's hands would be so calloused. I liked them far better than all the manicured, scented princely hands in the world. But what did I know of princes - or even of ordinary men? Ram was the first man to touch my hand. And in that fragrant, lamp-lit moment, I vowed he'd be the last (Banerjee 41).

In her story, Sita does not talk merely about a love between lovers and spouses but she also talks about a splendid bond of love shared by a mother and a daughter. The night before her wedding, Sita's mother summoned her to her chambers and when Sita reached out there, her mother pushed aside a pile of shimmery silver cloth from a bench and beckoned to Sita to sit by her. She wound her arms gently around her loving daughter and hugged her to her bosom. A sudden pang went through Sita after a realisation of a big change this marriage is going to bring into both their lives. A chain of questions aroused in the mind of Sita and she pens down this incident as such:

> Would we ever see each other again? Perhaps she felt something similar, for her eyes were damp, and this was unusual in my pragmatic mother. Or was it some other fear that brought tears to her eyes? After a moment, she took a deep breath. When she spoke, her voice was practical and calm as always. 'Don't mind me. Mothers always get emotional at their daughter's weddings. When you have your own daughter, you'll know. It's like a cord is being cut, a stronger one than the physical birth-cord' (Banerjee 44).

After the wedding, the procession started proceeding towards Ayodhya and all the newly-wedded daughters-in-law were provided with different palanquins to sit. When Sita asked the horsemen who rode by her side as her special guard to carry to Ram the message that his wife humbly requested to see

him, Rama was immediately standing in front of Sita. She describes this wholesome meeting with the usage of beautifully framed words and emotions:

> In a little while, I could see my husband - that dazzling, looming word I wasn't used to yet - riding toward me. His rapid hoof-beats matched the speeding rhythm of my heart. In his jewel-crusted prince's attire, wearing a rather official-looking coronet, Ram seemed very different from the young man in our temple garden with lithe and dusty grace. But his eyes were the same, flecked with that ancient recognition. At this moment they were concerned. 'Are you well, my princess?' he asked, moving the palanquin curtains aside to grasp my hand, not caring who saw him. 'Is the motion of the palanquin causing you discomfort? This is a dangerous part of the forest, but once we've crossed it, I can request my royal father to stop at one of the hermitages that lie beyond...' (Banerjee 53).

After getting to listen these words from Rama, full of care, concern, love and warmth, Sita's heart felt so full and contended. She writes:

> I was distracted by the warm pressure of his hand on mine, and his smell, a perfume I couldn't quite place but which I knew I'd always recognize now. 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. The words had hummed inside me like honeybees. I hadn't expected such a gift, that my husband would be mine alone (Banerjee 53).

With Sita's efforts and support, the differences between King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalya started being resolved and the bond that they had shared over the years started getting stronger and deeper. After getting compliments and admiration from her husband after so long, Kaushalya was transformed entirely and she started looking younger, happier and she kept blushing heavily when the king's eyes kept staring at her beauty and elegance. Rama was so glad to witness his parents having a beautiful time together and through this, Sita learnt the second lesson on the nature of love. She notes: "This incident taught me that the more love we distribute, the more it grows, coming back to us from unexpected sources. And its corollary: when we demand love, believing it to be our right, it shrivels, leaving only resentment behind" (Banerjee 67). After this incident, one day, Dasharatha felt so disturbed due to the strange dream full of bad omens that he had seen the previous night, two days prior to the coronation of Rama. While being disturbed when his face started appearing so pale and aged, Sita understood the third lesson on the nature of love at that point of time. She comments: "Ah, what a chameleon thing love was, lifting us up one minute, casting us down the next" (Banerjee 83). Furthermore, the bed omens conveyed to King Dasharatha were proved right when Queen Kaikeyi asked for the two boons as promised by her husband, Dasharatha when she had saved his life twice in the past, one of them being Bharata to be made the king of Koshala instead of Rama and another one was that Rama to be banished to the forest for fourteen years. After listening to these terms and conditions of Kaikeyi, Sita felt astonished and shocked and she ponders upon the fourth lesson on the nature of love: "If love and change so quickly into hate, I thought, looking at her face, what are we to depend on?" (Banerjee 93). After the departure from Kaikeyi's palace, Rama and Sita made their way towards the quarters of Kaushalya. While they were discussing on the things and incidents that they had just witnessed, Rama asked for support from his wife, Sita and she too pushed away her own sorrows and fears regarding

anything. She felt that her duty was clear and it seemed easier than that of Ram's as it consisted only of one thing - to help ram get through this harsh and tough challenge as smoothly as possible. Here she also gets to realise the fifth lesson on the nature of love:

> 'Whatever you decide,' I said to him, 'I'll support you. Whatever comes to you as a result of your decision, we'll handle it together.' I felt the energy flowing from my palm chakras into the whirling vortex in Ram's head. It didn't drain me as I thought it might. Instead, it invigorated me. Such was love's magic - the giver gained more than the receiver (Banerjee 94).

When Lakshman got to know about the boons asked by Kaikeyi, his face grew black with the fury and he started speaking out aloud that he would singlehandedly capture Bharat and drag him in the chains in the feet of Rama and whosoever would try to stop him whether a foot-soldier or a mighty warrior or his own twin brother Shatrughna with whom he shared his mother's womb, he would kill them all. Everyone was taken aback after witnessing Lakshman being so furious to this extent and after listening to what he had said, Sita learnt the sixth lesson on the nature of love and she writes: "I was looking at another of love's many faces. It made us ready to wreak havoc - even on people we cared for - in order to protect those whom we cherished more" (Banerjee 95). Further, when the things fall into place, it was decided that Lakshmana would accompany Rama when he would leave for his exile in the forest. At this moment, Sita felt a bit of jealousy after witnessing the precious bond between brothers and from the bottom of her heart she prays: "Help me, Goddess, I cried silently. Because my goal is not to win over Ram but to win him over" (Banerjee 97-98). When Kaushalya came to know that Lakshmana and Sita both would be accompanying her dear son Rama into the forest, she burst into tears and she tried her best to make Sita stay back at the palace by pointing out the special and terrible dangers the forest hold within itself. But when Sita tried to console her by justifying how she would be able to take care of Rama in the forest, eventually Kaushalya gets convinced about letting Sita go in the forest. This incident teaches Sita the seventh lesson on the nature of love: "So this, too, was true of love: it could make us forget our own needs. It could make us strong even when the world was collapsing around us" (Banerjee 101).

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana started passing their days in the forest merrily and peacefully. Suddenly one day they came to know about the arrival of Bharata towards the place where they were residing then, the Chitrakoot Mountain. When they beheld Bharata in front of their eyes, he was dressed not as a warrior or even a king, but in the white cotton dhoti of a mourning son, barefoot, his head shaven. This appearance of Bharata justified that he has not arrived in the forest to make sure that he would be the king of Ayodhya not only for next fourteen years but for a lifetime and by understanding the entire situation Rama too could not control his tears from pouring out of his eyes after knowing that his father, King Dasharatha was dead. When Bharata says to Rama, "He died just moments after you left, crying your name, his eyes darkening even before the dust had settled from the passing of your chariot" (Banerjee 106), Sita come to know about one more and eighth lesson on the nature of love that is: "It could kill. Sometimes it could kill instantaneously" (Banerjee 106). When Bharata apologised on behalf of his mother, Kaikeyi and started condemning her, the hatred with which he said his mother's name shook Sita completely as she knew how through all his life, Bharat had loved her mother so deeply and dearly. Even though he realised that what she had done so far had been for his sake alone, today when he spoke of her, there was only disgust in his voice. This experience made Sita realise the ninth lesson on the nature of love. She wonders:

> Could love, which I'd taken to be powerful and everlasting, be so frail as well? Could you pluck it out of your heart as easily as you'd pull a weed from a bed of flowers? I thought of my love for Ram - and his for me - which defined my entire being. It frightened me to imagine this happening to us. I'd never be able to survive such a loss (Banerjee 108).

One day, in her dream, Sita witnessed herself in the chamber made of iron that was windowless. It looked familiar yet different to her and at first she mistook it as empty but later on, she saw the woman slumping against the shadowed wall, her posture showing the defeat and despair that she had been carrying and it took a little time for Sita to recognise that it was Kaikeyi herself with the spirit gone out of her. Sita understood that Kaikeyi, banished to her anger chamber, which had now become her prison because there was no one left in her life to show care and concern towards her and to know whether she was upset and what she had been going through. After seeing such condition of Kaikeyi, Sita got to learn the tenth lesson on the nature of love:

> Kaikeyi who had gambled everything for the love of her son, and lost it all because she hadn't understood one crucial thing. This is what Kaikeyi failed to see: it's not enough to merely love someone. Even if we love them with our entire being, even if we're willing to commit the most heinous sin for their well-being. We must understand and respect the values that drive them. We must want what they want, not what we want for them (Banerjee 111).

When Sita came to know about the story of Ahalya and the injustice that she faced at the hands of her husband Sage Gautama, she was filled with great dissatisfaction. She surprisingly asked Ahalya why she had forgiven her husband after turning back into a woman from the stone in which she was transformed as a result of the curse by Sage Gautama for her mistaken infidelity. She forgave him not only for his jealousy and blind fury but also for not trusting her, his own dear wife and for immediately thinking the worse of her. Sita asked: "And do you still love him? How is it possible to love someone after they do something like that to you?" (Banerjee 117). Soon after this, Sita herself understood the eleventh lesson on the nature of love: "Ahalya hesitated. I tried to read her expression. Was there hurt in it? Was there forgiveness, because when you truly love someone how can you not forgive them?" (Banerjee 118). But soon thinking this way, Sita realised after watching Ahalya maintaining the vow of silence that she has taken for lifetime: "Once mistrust has wounded it mortally, love can't be fully healed again" (Banerjee 118). Furthermore, when Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were passing their days in the forest cheerfully, Sita was a bit afraid and doubtful that she could not have paid much attention to her dear husband Rama as she should have due to her own happiness-cocoon. But then she consoled herself and there she got to learn the twelfth lesson on the nature of love. She writes about it in her Sitayan as:

> Then I'd say to myself, Ram knows what he's doing. I shouldn't interfere. And, relieved with that decision, I'd snuggle closer into my husband's comforting embrace where I could suspend all concerns. Such is the seduction of love: it makes you not want to think too much. It makes you unwilling to question the one you love. (Banerjee 120).

When Rama and Sita passed ten peaceful years in togetherness in the forest, Sita, despite knowing that it was a kind of illicit desire, wished to conceive children. But Rama, considering the dangers of the forest, was not convinced to think about having and fostering children during his banishment in the forest and he also regretted about how his ill fortune has deprived Sita of one of the greatest joys of womanhood.

After getting such response from Rama, Sita never brought up the same matter again as Rama had already made a decision on his part that too, not based on emotion or impulse but on the unshakeable pillars of rightness and duty. She understood that talking further about this matter and by knowing about the depth of her unhappiness, Rama's heart will be filled up with only sorrow and grief. This taught Sita the thirteenth lesson on the nature of love: "That's how love stops us when it might be healthier to speak out, to not let frustration and rage build up until it explodes" (Banerjee 122). After few days of this conversation, the trio, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana got to face Kaamarupini, who was Surpankha, the younger sister of the demon king Ravana, in a disguise of a beautiful woman. When Rama and Lakshmana got a wedding proposal from Kamarupini respectively, Sita was surprised to witness a coordination between Rama and Lakshmana at this particular moment. Sita analyses this incident in a following manner and also reaches at the conclusion about her fourteenth lesson on the nature of love. She writes:

> Then I saw a lighting glance pass between the brothers. Lakshman's expression changed immediately, and I realized that the two brothers were in perfect synchrony, like a single soul in two bodies. Would I ever be able to reach that kind of understanding with Ram, no matter how much I loved him? Probably not, I thought, a bit sadly. Loving someone didn't necessarily mean you understand them. In fact, remembering Dasharath and Kaikeyi, I wondered if loving someone too much prevented you from seeing them less clearly than an objective bystander (Banerjee 127-128).

When Surpankha rushed at Sita to attack on her, considering her as the reason behind her humiliation by Rama and Lakshmana, the latter picked up his bow and in one swift of motion released an arrow that going through the air chopped off the ears and nose of Surpankha. After witnessing this in front of her, Sita got frozen with the shock and she was of the view that they had not needed to be so harsh and mutilate her so horribly because she was just an infatuated girl who could have been easily scared off. When Rama and Lakshmana kept justifying their actions regarding this, Sita was surprised that how in earlier times, Rama had expressed regret and remorse at having to kill rakshasas and what made him change over the period of time. Falling short of words, could not say anything further but here she points out the fifteenth lesson on the nature of love that she got to learn that day:

> 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. I blamed love, too, for my silence. How it makes us back down from protesting because we're afraid of displeasing the beloved, or because we're afraid that our disagreement is the symptom of a greatest disease: incompatibility of values (Banerjee 130).

After beholding a golden deer near the place where they were residing, Sita intensely craved for it too much like an addiction as it was merged with her hunger for baby that was carefully kept as a secret for Rama. Even if Rama and Lakshmana both tried to persuade Sita that they do not have good feeling about that deer and it makes them uncomfortable around it as it could be a rakshasa in a disguise, Sita was furious at them for spoiling her innocent pleasure and in that moment of anger, she spoke out the harsh words before she knew what she was saying and it was these words of Sita that forced Rama to go after that deer and catch it alive for his beloved wife. Afterwards, when Rama leaves the hut by allotting

Lakshmana a duty to take care of Sita, she felt an immense guilt in her heart for taking an abrupt decision, uttering bitter words and being so harsh on the ones who just wanted to protect her at any cost. When the time was passing too slowly, Sita got to learn the sixteenth lesson on the nature of love that is:

> How entangled love is with expectation, that poison vine! The stronger the expectation, the more our anger towards the beloved if he doesn't fulfil it - and the less our control over ourselves. Why else couldn't I stop myself when I knew very well that I shouldn't bring up the House of Raghu, and their pride in keeping their word? I was well aware that it was the chink in Ram's armour. I shouldn't have used my knowledge, born of intimacy, against him. But I did (Banerjee 136).

Lakshmana was forced to leave to find out his elder brother Rama after Sita insisted him intensely over and over again and finally used a sharp weapon of her harsh and bitter words that left Lakshman taken aback entirely. Once he disappeared down the same forest path that Rama had taken, Dashaanan, the demon king, appears in front of Sita in a disguise of a saint. Sita kept in her mind the strict instruction provided to her by Lakshmana that at any cost she was not supposed to step outside the Lakshmana Rekha that he drew with the sharp edge of his bow after whispering a mantra and this was the reason she requested the saint, a little embarrassedly, to come a little closer towards the hut to take the alms that she got to offer to him. This behaviour of Sita infuriated Dashaanan disguised as a saint and he started uttering harsh words, being furious about the values and morals of King Dasharatha as well as King Janaka. These words spoken by the saint left Sita swayed between her two choices, one of them being to break her illogical promise to Lakshmana and another being her duty to the guest, who was additionally a holy man. She kept thinking which was worse between these two by starting to consider what Rama would have wanted her to do. This made her realise the seventeenth lesson on the nature of love. She writes:

> At this moment, the face that rose in my mind, strangely, was that of my father-in-law. For the first time, I felt a deep sympathy for King Dasharath and the options he'd been faced with, far more difficult than mine, complicated further by the bonds of love: to break his words to his favourite wife, or to unfairly banish his dearest son. There are no easy answers, Dasharath's voice said inside my head. Especially when we want to please the one we love. That same love clouds our eyes and doesn't allow us to see what's right in front of us (Banerjee 141-142).

When Ravana succeeded in abducting Sita in the absence of her protectors, Rama and Lakshmana, he forced her to ride on his chariot and for a moment a completely distressed Sita thought of throwing herself out of the chariot and she also felt that it would be worth it, just to foil the plan of the demon king. But suddenly she realised something and she didn't act upon her thought and this was her realisation of the eighteenth lesson on the nature of love: "It wasn't that I was afraid of death. How could I be? I knew nothing of it. Still, I didn't want to die. Not without seeing Ram one more time. That's how the bonds of love tie us down" (Banerjee 146). After reaching to Lanka and passing her days in one of the gardens of the palace of the demon king with the wait for her beloved husband, Rama, Sita often shared a conversation with Lady Sarama, the wife of Vibhishana, who was the youngest brother of Ravana. One day, while conversing, Sarama talks about how her husband Vibhishana is quite sure about the upcoming war, how she is terrified that Ravana will exile Vibhishana one of those days and how

their son Taranisen would have to go on the battlefield as he was very much attached to Ravana and also very loyal to him, Apart from this, he was also a fine warrior although he was just a boy in his youth. Sarama felt so certain that if ever the war would become an inevitable force, her son will definitely volunteer to fight. After coming to know about all these matters, Sita reached on a conclusion about her nineteenth lesson on love: "The anxious love in her voice resonated achingly in my heart for the children I didn't - and probably would never - have. I thought of love's contradictions, how it fills us with joy but also with worry for welfare of the loved one and pain for his suffering" (Banerjee 161). While passing her days and nights being captivated in Lanka, Sita used to feel nostalgic about the pleasurable and cheerful memories she made with Rama during their exile in the forest. Being nostalgic, she tries to relive all those moments again and also points out the twentieth lesson on the nature of love from it. She comments:

> Tonight, after a long time there was a moon, full and golden. I don't know how it got past the rakshasa darkness, but I was thankful. I gazed at it longingly, remembering my nights with Ram in the forest, how the moonlight had rained down on our lovemaking, sometimes passionate, sometimes tender, in our little hut. How my husband's skin had glowed in its beam like shining honey. How afterwards - and this was just as precious - we conversed late into the night. We talked about everything: politics and statecraft, the roles of husbands and wives, what we'd eat the next day. When you loved someone, it didn't matter what you discussed; it was all fascinating. (Banerjee 169).

When Ravana tried to kill Sita under the influence of his rage, every single person present in the Ashoka Forest at that time, including Sita, held their breath. When Sita opened her eyes, she saw that Queen Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, was struggling with him and was trying to persuade him to spare the life of Sita, a defenceless woman. After pondering over this matter, Ravan finally handed his sword to one of the yakshinis standing near him and threw Sita a last, burning glance while leaving the grove, his arms around his beloved wife, Mandodari. After being a witness and victim of such incident, Sita points out the twenty first lesson on love that she has recently got to understand. She writes:

> Mandodari, too, sent me a glance as she left. It was quick and covert and complicated, but I saw the mingled love and pain and horror in it, and I understood. Whatever the truth of my birth might be, in Mandodari's mind, I was her long-lost daughter, her cherished and guilty secret. She feared the havoc my presence would wreak on her kingdom and beloved husband. Yes, she continued to love Ravan, no matter how many women he brought to Lanka. Sometimes the river of love followed a complicated course. At the same time, she couldn't help doing everything she could to protect me. And she was horrified by the thought that if she failed, Ravan might well force his own daughter, unknowingly, to his bed. Would she, at that point, have the courage to confess what she had done and suffer Ravan's wrath? Ah, love. Why had Vidhata made its nature so complex? Why did one love conflict, so often, with another? (Banerjee 172).

When Rama finally succeeded to be victorious in his battle with the demon king Ravana, he unexpectedly asked his beloved wife Sita to go where she would to live out the rest of her days because now he was setting her free from all the bonds as there ends his duty towards her. This statement coming

from his beloved husband left Sita uncomprehending and said to Rama that even if Ravana stole her away forcibly, even he hadn't insulted her as her husband did there that day. She says: "He [Ravana] respected me enough not to violate my body. And over my mind he never had control. But you [Rama] - you've violated by heart, which I'd given to you in love" (Banerjee 205). She kept sobbing while uttering her words and that day she prepared herself for the Agni Pariksha to prove her chastity to the people present over there. Once Agni, the Fire God himself appeared and declared her innocence, Rama embraced Sita, whispering apologies and love and begging her understanding for him forcing to do all that. On that day, she got to learn one more and twenty second lesson on the nature of love. She writes in her side of story:

> Truly love is the strongest intoxicant of them all, the drink of deepest oblivion. Else how could I have forgiven him so quickly for what he he'd done? No. 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 (Banerjee 207).

While their way back to Ayodhya in Pushpaka, the flying chariot of Ravana, which was snatched away by him from his step-brother Lord Kubera, after the completion of their period of banishment in the forest, Sita felt saddened thinking that what she had taken as admiration all these years had really been a kind of indulgence, the way one might praise a child for her childish achievements. She felt that the womanly skills that she had mastered over years were also important and intricate and they were by no means easy to acquire. She also felt that Rama did not understand and would never understand either that in order to obtain such skills, one requires deep intelligence, an intelligence of the heart. By realizing that Rama did not understand the complexity of the female existence Sita comments on the twenty third lesson on the nature of love:

> Earlier, I'd have believed that I had the ability to alter that, to make him see the world in a different way. But my year of captivity had taught me much. I knew now that love - no matter how deep - wasn't enough to transform another person: how they thought, what they believed. At best, we could only change ourselves (Banerjee 215).

On the day of his coronation as the king of Ayodhya, Rama shared the wonderful news of a little prince joining them very soon and the grounds erupted in cheers completely. Sita describes how she smiled and waved for as long as she could as the people would not stop applauding as well as how the musicians joined in with drums and trumpets. Among all this noise and chaos she felt a headache coming on and she tried to catch Ram's eye to ask him if they could leave the celebration midway. But after watching Rama enjoying the moment, looking out at the assembly with so much love in his eyes, she did not bother him at that time to spoil that special moment for him. Through this, Sita got to learn the twenty fourth lesson on the nature of love: "So what if I had to endure a little discomfort? I was happy to do it for Ram. Wasn't that what love is all about?" (Banerjee 250). While passing her days in the ashram of Sage Valmiki, Sita lost in the thoughts as well as beautiful memories of the past with Rama and how if Rama would ever arrive to take her back to Ayodhya to start their life anew, she would do that in an unhesitant manner and with all her heart. Here, she understood the twenty fifth lesson on the nature of love: "How willing I'd been to start over even though he'd wronged me. That's what you do when you're in love" (Banerjee 266).

Sita also shares her emotions and views on her role that makes her feel complete as a woman: motherhood. She kept playing her part in the education of the boys, teaching them about the medicinal herbs and teaching the self-defence that she learnt when she was at Mithila in her childhood days. She talks proudly about how her children were kind to all around them whether they are humans or animals. She also knew that they were not perfect by no means but with her and other elders of the ashrama, they were gentle and respectful. They brought Sita little gifts into the forest be it pretty stones, a garland woven by them, a chunk of honeycomb or a colourful weather. Sita liked how they hugged her often, not caring who might be watching and how at night they used to lay on the either side of her with their arms around her neck, asking for stories. While living as the mother, Sita got to understand the twenty sixth lesson on the nature of love:

> Sometimes I thought, it's true what people say: every darkness is edged with light. In a palace, bound by my royal duties, I'd never have had so much time for my children. We'd never have been so close to each other, known each other so well. Motherhood taught me something new about love. It was the one relationship where you gave everything you had and then wished you had more to give. (Banerjee 276-277).

Sita also presents her twenty seventh lesson on the nature of love when she returned to the palace of Ayodhya from the hermitage of Valmiki. When Urmila takes her elder sister's face in her hands and says, wonderingly, that she looks as young as ever, Sita says as per her understanding about the twenty seventh lesson on the nature of love: "Love does that to you, makes you see everything through a golden veil" (Banerjee 292). When Urmila tried to justify that there were many times when she thought of leaving the palace and going to the ashram to live with her sister but she could not leave the children and Lakshmana behind as she felt that he would have been so lonely without her because she was the only one to whom he could confide his doubts and sorrows. At that time, Sita consoles her younger sister Urmila and teaches her the twenty eighth lesson on the nature of love that she has recently witnessed. She says: "You don't have to explain...That's love - golden ropes that bind you and pull you in different directions" (Banerjee 292).

When Sage Valmiki took the boys, Lav and Kush, along with him to the yagna that was being performed in Ayodhya by Lord Rama, it was decided that there in the court of the king, after the end of the ceremony, they will be singing the Ramayana penned down by Sage Valmiki as his disciples. After that, when Sita reached at Ayodhya, the first thing she had heard when she entered the royal court was her boys singing, their high clear voices that lodge in her heart. She praised her kids that how their innocent yet powerful tones rise all the way to the high ceilings of the ancient room that has seen much already, both tragedy and triumph. Suddenly, Sita recognised what her boys were singing. It was not Valmiki's great epic! She realised that they were singing the pages she had written in her lonely darkness, out of the need to give voice to all the women whom she had come across and who were pushed to the edges. She knew how valuable it was, her truth, and the truth of the women whose lives touched her for better or worse, their laughter and tears, their triumph and suffering as well as their blessings and curses. At that moment she understood that Lav and Kush have conspired and taken the manuscript from their hut when she might have been busy elsewhere. She also made a guess that they must have practised singing it in secret and they must have decided to perform it in the honour of their mother, risking the anger of their guru as well as their new-found father to tell the world their mother's

side of story. At such a wholesome moment, Sita came to understand the twenty ninth lesson on the nature of love. She comments:

> I'm weeping as I listen to them sing the Sitayan. Their eyes meet mine, and they're weeping too. And this is one of the final things I learn about love: it's found in its purest form, on this imperfect earth, between mothers and young children, because there's nothing they want except to make each other happy (Banerjee 295).

When Sita, being tired of facing examinations and proving herself chaste throughout her life invokes her mother the Goddess Earth to take her along with herself, before she rides on the golden chariot, rising up from the darkness of Pataal to carry her away, she delivers the thirtieth and the final lesson on the nature of love. She speaks:

> I have one last thing I must do before I turn back from woman to goddess, before my new world - no, it is my original, forever abode - envelops me in pristine bliss, obliterating all complicated, contradictory human emotions. One last, crucial thing I must tell my husband. 'I forgave you a long time ago,' I say to Ram. 'Though I didn't know it until now. Because this is the most important aspect of love, whose other face is compassion: 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' (Banerjee 299).

Thus, in her novel The Forest of Enchantments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita's understanding of love as deeply human and grounded truth. Love, from Sita's perspective, is not an unchanging ideal but a living bond shaped by trust, pain, sacrifice, choice and mutual understanding. It grows through various tests and hardships, like a river that deepens as it passes over stones and shadows. By giving voice to Sita's inner world, Divakaruni reframes love as an experience but allows doubt without destroying devotion. This human-centred portrayal moves away from mythical perfection and instead highlights empathy, resilience, and emotional maturity. Thus, love emerges as both fragile and enduring, sustained by understanding rather than unquestioned loyalty. Therefore, love reveals itself as a tender yet lasting power, forged through challenges and maintained by patience, empathy, and steady inner strength.

Sita's Steadfast Wisdom: A Subtle Strength of Silence and Speech

When sage Valmiki hands Sita the manuscript entitled "Ramayana. The story of the glorious king Ram," the epic that he had been working on for decades, Sita felt a bit astonished thinking why the great Valmiki should want approval for her as she was a queen bereft of her kingdom and also an unlucky wife rejected by her husband at the heights of his glory. When Sage Valmiki claims that he wrote what exactly the divine vision had showed him through all the time, Sita replies in a witty manner in a figurative language. She says:

> It's very good...The poetry is superb, the descriptions sublime, the rhythm perfect. You've captured the histories of earth and heaven both, the adventures and the wars, the weddings and the deaths, the betrayals and the farewells, the palace and the forest...But 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...It must have been a god that brought it to you, then, and not a goddess...for you haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of the joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another (Banerjee 9).

After this incident and response from Sita, Sage Valmiki suggested Sita to write the real story of herself, the Sitayan, as it is only she who knows it all. For this task, he also made some necessary arrangements and handed Sita a sealed bottle of ink to pen down her side of story. Soon, Sita barred the door, sat cross-legged on the ground and arranged the palm leaves on the table. She says:

> 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. But of course. How else could I write my story except in the colour of menstruation and childbirth, the colour of the marriage mark that changes women's lives, the colour of the flowers of the Ashoka tree under which I had spent my years of captivity in the palace of the demon king? (Banerjee 10).

Just before she was about to enter into Ayodhya after her wedding with Rama, Sita awoke to the touch of an unfamiliar hand on her arm and a voice whispering apologies of her new serving-woman. The palanquin barriers had stopped to rest. Sita also stepped out of it and after that stretching her stiff limbs, she shook out the holds of her sari and washed her face in the scented water the woman poured for her. She tried to comb her hair and, as best as possible she could in the lowering dark, refreshed the sindoor on her forehead. Although feeling a bit nervous and anxious, She narrates the first story of her entering into her in-laws' house with the words that can be used only by a woman full of wisdom and understanding. She writes:

> I hoped I'd make a good impression on my mothers-in-law. We were on a hillock. Ahead of us lay a huge city, stretching beyond the limits of my sight. Ayodhya. My new home. I didn't hope to love it the way I'd loved Mithila. The land of our childhood is a special place, where we are cherished without question or expectation. But I was determined to do my duty by it. Duty! The word brought an ironic smile to my face. Already Ram's ideas were influencing me...I'll be a good princess for you, I promise Ayodhya silently, and when time comes, a good queen. I'll guard you and bring prosperity to you the way only a woman can. If needed, I'll sacrifice my life for you, and my happiness (Banerjee 57).

After her reunion with her beloved husband Rama almost after a year of her abduction by Ravana, when Sita was forced to prove her chastity, even though being shocked and disappointed with it, she decided to act on it instantly and later on while penning down her Sitayan, she describes this incident by giving her feelings and such a dreadful experience the shape of words. She writes:

> Here is one such thing: the terrible, maddening pain that engulfed my entire body when I entered the fire. I had to use every shred of willpower to keep myself from running out, screaming. The anguish with which I prayed for death to release me. The anger I felt that I, who was innocent, should be made to suffer

> in this way. My agony was timeless - I don't know, in terms of human measurement, how long it lasted. But I do know this: in that agonizing trial, I was transformed. Perhaps that was why I had to endure pain - because true transformation can only happen in the crucible of suffering. All impurities fall away from gold only when it's heated to melting. By the time the gods intervened, I was no longer just the Sita of old: daughter of earth, strong and silent, patient and deep, forbearing and forgiving. I was something else, too. The fire-god himself acknowledged this change. Daughter, he called me. Yes, I was now Sita, daughter of fire (Banerjee 207).

After being abandoned by her beloved husband, Rama, even after knowing that she was carrying their twins in her womb, Sita turned into a strong woman and decided to live and fight with the world for her unborn kids. On her way in the forest, being completely alone after making Lakshmana leave her midway, she felt that her innocent babies were trembling and clutching at each other, sensing something terrible had happened. She consoles them thus:

> 'Don't be afraid, little ones,' I whispered, pushing my way determinedly into the dark, even though I had no idea of what it held. Hot tears scalded my cheeks. 'I'm going to live for you. I'm going to guard you with my last breath. I'm going to love you enough for mother and father both, so you feel no lack. I'm going to teach you everything you need to know to be princes. But more than that, I'll teach you what you need to know to be good human beings, so that you'll never do to a woman what your father has done to me' (Banerjee 265).

While passing her days and nights at the hermitage of Sage Valmiki, Sita often pondered over the questions arising in her mind about the injustice done to her by Rama, from whom it was the least expected. She comments:

> Was that even a seed of doubt that had somehow remained in Ram's mind all the while, began to sprout? Was that when the whispers became so important to him? And then he'd sent me away without even having the courage or the consideration to tell me to my face what he was doing to me and why. Without asking me, his helpmate and queen, what I thought should be done, he'd banished me and his babies, all three of us equally innocent, because he believed that was his duty to his people. But weren't we his people, too? Didn't he have a duty to us? (Banerjee 266-267).

While living at the Valmiki Ashram amidst the majestic trees of the forest, Sita's endurance and wisdom flourished to the larger extent. She started taking things in a positive manner and being firm for her babies. She comments on her thoughts she had while roaming around in the forest near the hermitage:

> I stood up slowly, holding on to a tree trunk for support. I still felt anger towards Ram. His memory was a bruise that might never fade from my heart. But I was ready to focus my energies elsewhere. Living in the forest wasn't what I'd planned for myself or my babies. But then, had I planned that Ram should come into my life like a tidal wave and sweep me away? Had I planned to be banished to the forest on the eve of our coronation, to be abducted, or even rescued? Had I planned on the rumours upon our return, or Ram's harsh decision? All these happened without my choice, but I'd survived them. Wasn't that all we could do

> as imperfect human beings? I started home - it was time for me to start thinking of the ashram as home - with a more resolute step. I couldn't control what was done to me. But my response to it was in my control. All the way back, I pondered the word endure, what it meant. I didn't mean giving in. It didn't mean being weak or accepting injustice. It meant taking the challenges thrown at us and dealing with them as intelligently as we knew until we grew stronger than them. That was what I'd work on (Banerjee 268-269).

When Sita comes back to the palace of Ayodhya after a very long span of time, Rama expressed his wish to live with her and their children so that they can be a complete family but before that, she will have to go through a test by fire there in the courtroom itself, so that the sages and attending kings as well as ministers of the court can witness the fire-god vouching for her innocence and purity and in this way, he believed, the citizens of Ayodhya will be satisfied for good. After facing the same situation again, rages rose up in Sita until her body was scorched as, she believed, some kinds of burning do not require a fire. She was so disheartened for not getting a word of love, not even a word of apology for the sorrow caused by him and also not a word about the unjust and cruel way in which he sent Sita away. Apart from this, he did not even call Sita by her name. At last, Sita understood and it was clear to her then what she needed to do and that anger and self-pity are useless emotions. And this was the reason why she pushed them away and spoke calmly, even though her heart was breaking all over again. The words of Rama shook Sita completely from within and she could not resist herself from asking some of the questions she carried in her mind so long to the "king" of the Raghu dynasty of Ayodhya. She says:

> O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you've always placed your role as king ahead of your role as husband. In this court, which has been set up to dispense justice to all citizens, I ask you this, for I've been a citizen of Ayodhya too: Did you act justly when you sent me away in the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered? Did you stop to think - as a wise king would - that there would always be people who gossip, even in the best-run kingdoms, for it's their nature? Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny? Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness? And if you were not, shouldn't someone be judging you today? You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? That men would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions, saying King Ram did so. Then why shouldn't I? I accept your priorities, and I understand why they are so important to you. You're compensating for the mistake your father King Dasharath made when he gave in to the demands of his favourite wife and banished you, even though he knew it was bad for his kingdom. It left a deep mark on you. But I don't agree with you that the private life must be sacrificed for the public one. And that is the final advice that I leave for my children: my dearest boys, balance duty with love. Trust me, it can be done. (Banerjee 296-297).

At the end, before she invokes her mother earth and father fire, Sita makes her final address, full of wisdom and with a perfect use to rhetoric and figurative words. She speaks:

> For the sake of my sons, I made myself live when it would have been much easier to give up and die than to go through the pain of having the person you love most in the world abandon you. For the sake of my daughters in the centuries to come, I must now stand up against this unjust action you are asking of me. I wish you all happiness with my dearest Lav and Kush. I bless this land, its men and women. I bless my sons. And finally, I bless my daughters, who are yet unborn. I pray that, if life tests them - as sooner or later life is bound to do - they'll be able to stand steadfast and think carefully, using their hearts as well as their heads, understanding when they need to compromise, and knowing when they must not. (Banerjee 297).

Thus, in The Forest of Enchantments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita as a woman whose wisdom is revealed through a careful balance of silence and speech. Her silence reflects patience, reflection, and inner strength rather than submission, while her words, when spoken, emerge with clarity and purpose. Like a steady flame protected from the wind, Sita's resilience remains constant even in adversity. Through this portrayal, Divakaruni redefines strength as quiet endurance guided by moral insight. Sita's steadfast wisdom thus challenges traditional views of power, showing that true authority often lies in composure, self-awareness, and the courage to speak only when necessary.

Conclusion:

Thus, this particular study positions The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as a dynamic site of meaning where Reception Aesthetics, as proposed by Hans Robert Jauss, finds renewed and contemporary applicability. Through the concepts of Horizon of Expectations and Aesthetic Distance, Divakaruni's portrayal of resilient Sita reveals how literary meaning evolves through the interaction between the literary text and readers across ages and generations. The aesthetic gap between the traditionally mediated Sita and her modern re-envisioning does not disrupt the epic tradition; rather, it sustains its relevance by inviting reinterpretations. By foregrounding Sita's voice, the novel by Divakaruni encourages readers to reassess established notions of love, wisdom, duty and sacrifice as conscious, lived experiences rather than imposed ideals. This shifting reception demonstrates how mythic narratives remain alive through changing cultural and historical contexts. Ultimately, The Forest of Enchantments does not replace the Ramayana but engages in a dialogic expansion of it, affirming the interpretive richness of modern mythic retellings and the enduring power of Sita's resilience as well as her precious insights on love and wisdom. Through this reimagined reception, Sita's narrative unfolds as a living text where resilience is not merely endured but consciously articulated, allowing love and wisdom to emerge as interpretive acts shaped by time, readership and cultural memory. Thus, Divakaruni's resilient Sita stands not as a shadow of epic tradition but as a quiet flame - bearing love as her strength and wisdom as her path, illuminating the forest of enchantments with an unyielding inner light.

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