

**Draupadi and Sita: The Women Leaders of the Contemporary
World in the Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

Akshaya A

(21PEN001)

A Thesis submitted to

Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women,
Coimbatore 641043

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

May 2023

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Signature of the

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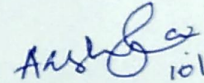
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10/5/2023

Signature of the

Head of the Department

DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis entitled "**Draupadi and Sita: The Women Leaders of the Contemporary World in the Select Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**" submitted by me for the degree of Master of Arts (M.A) is the record of work carried out by me during the period December 2022- May 2023 under the guidance of Dr. (Mrs.) Chitra Sivasubramaniam, Associate Professor, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women and has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or other titles in this University or any other similar institution of higher learning.


10/10/2023

Signature of the Candidate

CERTIFICATE

I declare that the thesis entitled "**Draupadi and Sita: The Women Leaders of the Contemporary World in the Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**" submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (M.A) by Akshaya A (21PEN001), is the record of research work carried out by her during the period May 2021 – May 2023 under my guidance and supervision. This work has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree, Diploma, Associateship, Fellowship or other Titles in this university or any other similar institution of higher learning.

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Signature of the

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Chapter I

Introduction

Literature represents human experiences and the beliefs of people. It carves the essence of the history, culture, religion, and geography of the land. It is the mirror of society that encompasses various literary genres like prose, poetry, drama, novellas, short stories, and novels. The genres fall under two categories namely, fiction and non-fiction. Prof. M. K. Naik in the book *Dimensions of Indian English Literature*(1985), comments that, "...one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of story-telling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the West" (99). Novel replaces other literary forms in modern times because of the realistic portrayal of human thoughts and experiences. It also provides the details of the history and philosophy of human life. W.H. Hudson in the book *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*(1991), comments on the philosophy of life presented in the novel as,

Directly or indirectly, and whether the writer himself is conscious of it or not, every novel must necessarily present a certain view of life and of some of the problems of life; that is, it must so exhibit incidents, characters, passions, motives, as to reveal more or less distinctly the way in which the author looks out upon the world and his general attitude towards it. (130)

The origin and development of literature in the Indian sub-continent is called Indian Literature. Indian Literature is written in varied regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Kannada. It deals with varied subjects like Indian myth, tradition,

culture, customs, and lifestyles of Indians. People celebrate the mythologies and folklore of Indian culture which formulates a periodical development of Indian society. The cultural development of a society is recognized by the art and literature of the particular time period or age. The writing of Indian literature in English emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries due to the impact of British colonization.

The writing of novels changed from broader subjects narrowing down to the changing of positions, roles, and issues faced by women. The women's movement emerged as a social reform where they started demanding liberty, recognition, and equality to create an equitable society that is free of gender bias. The focus of the movement shifted from society to the individual because right from birth, women have been brought up with restrictions. In the Vedic times, the status of women in Indian culture is highly respected. Vedas, the most adored Hindu scripture, show no discrimination between man and woman. All four Vedas allow women to live in a society with respect and protection, and give the opportunity to reach their real potential in life. Rig-Veda says, that a woman is the winner of enemies; Yajur-Veda says that women are eligible to be the rulers as they are considered to be equal to men; Sama-Veda speaks of rights to education for women and grants full opportunity to women to become scholars and attain knowledge; and Atharvana-Veda considers women as source of knowledge and guidance for the whole family. Krishnaveer Abhishek Challa in an article "The Role of Women in Indian Epic Literature" (2015) says that,

May women be united with handsome husbands. They should never be widows and never be in tears. May they be very prosperous and rich! May they wear pretty garments and beautiful ornaments and may they wish

totake rebirth in human yoni (form) to maintain perpetuity of humanity. A husband is supposed to request and praise her wife and get her voluntary consent if he wishes to have sexual union with her. (581)

The *Upanishads* emphasize that men and women are equal participants in sharing knowledge. In the ancient scriptures men and women are not judged by their gender but by their ideal qualities. The equality of men and women is clearly pictured with evidence of Lord Shiva whose body consists of two halves – one half is male and the other half is female which expresses the idea of gender equality. It is believed that God resides in the place where a woman is worshipped. This vision of women reflects the rich cultural heritage of India and represents the significance of Indian epics.

Epic literature has mostly been composed of mythological characters. Myth has always been exerting and has an enduring impact on Indian literature. A myth is considered to be the true nature of humans, which explains right and wrong things. The definition of myth in the dictionary is a traditional or legendary story usually concerning some being or hero or event with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities, and supernatural elements and explains the practice, events, and customs of the Indian culture.

Life in India gains its current form from the torrent of myths and their relevance to individuals and communities. The impact of myth is quite evident in poetry, drama, prose, and novels in the long tradition of Indian writing in vernacular. There is a belief in society that the stories of myth are the base of culture and tradition and sow goodness in the minds of people but the mythological stories also reflect male domination, treating women as a weaker sex, who are enmeshed in the societal norms. The two great Indian

epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* portray the rich cultural heritage and sanctity of the country. The epics are moral teachings and sacred discourses which constitute the enduring foundation and magnificent edifice of Indian culture and civilization. They are considered to be a bouquet of perception, learning, and reasoning.

From ancient times, women are highly esteemed for the roles played by them in the family as well as in society. In ancient India, women occupy a very important position, in fact, a superior position to men because it is said that a woman is the originator and sustainer of life not because of her motherhood to bear a child but because they are worshipped as the mother of gods. The three major women goddesses such as Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Parvathi are to guide men under the light of wisdom, to provide happiness and prosperity and to be a shield to protect them. In the Vedic world, they are recognized as the consort of the three male deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Women are the form of Shakti and men are the reflection of women's powers. A woman is represented as 'shakti' which means 'power' and 'strength' and it is believed that a female stands as the power of a man. It is said that a man who respects a woman will be noble and powerful in society as well as obtain bliss, knowledge, and happiness. Literary evidence suggests that men are destroyed because women are disrespected and ill-treated.

The portrayal of women in the epics represents the feminine status and reputation in the patriarchal social setup. Patriarchy is predominant in Indian society where women acclaimed great esteem in ancient times but with the passage of time feminine integrity started to decline and women are attributed as subordinates to men. Male domination is not a recent snag because, from the epic period, society starts to control women and make them weak. The values and characteristics of women like sacrifice, purity, softness,

excessive endurance, series of adjustments, silence, and self-effacement are the demands and desires of patriarchy to accept them as a whole feminine. Women suffered as victims at the hands of men which curbed their freedom, talents, and potential to achieve greatness. Indian English Literature of women writers revolves around the themes of injustices perpetrated against women.

The women writings give a new definition and dimension to women's liberation and women empowerment, but in reality, the women feared to come out of their homes in order to strongly establish their identity. The literary works started to showcase women's issues faced by women like female infanticide, child marriages, domestic violence, gender discrimination, and lack of education. Women are denied access to education in the male-dominant society which paves way for gender disparity in the family and society. Gender discrimination in the family is due to the preference given to the male heir, who is believed to pass on the family fortune to future generations whereas in society women are not given equal status to men in the professional arena and are treated to be inferior. The framed patriarchal dictates favour men but seize women's identity, opportunities, and basic rights. Men try to suppress women's talents by claiming that they are superior despite the fact that women possess equal capacities, skills, and intelligence. There is a lack of realization that, it is not the woman alone but the entire human race that would suffer due to the oppression of women.

Indian women writers employ their literary skills to explore gender-related issues and problems. The women novelists in Indian English literature of this era have dealt with the themes like the importance of women's education, love, marriage, loneliness, family and search for identity in their writings. They have portrayed women and their

stories with the consciousness of the injustice being meted out to them by the social-patriarchal order. In correspondence with women's marginalization, the literary endeavours of women writers were underestimated due to patriarchal assumptions and it has also been viewed as insignificant and peripheral in a hegemonic world where artistic creativity has traditionally been regarded as a masculine monopoly. The critical response to women's writing in India has been either resistant or dismissive. Despite the challenges, the women as writers fought against the male-dominated society to mark their feet in the literary field.

The most striking feature of contemporary Indian English writing has been the emergence of feminist literature which gives voice to the anguishes, aspirations and assertions of women. The world of women and the forthrightness of their lives are projected in the feminine outlook through the literature of the time. The literature produced by Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shoba De, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a powerful instrument for modernism and feminist writings in India where women are raised in position to assert their distinctiveness and freedom. According to these women novelists, feminism means putting an end to the perpetual difficulties of women in silence. The emergence of these women writers has given new power to the women folk because they put forth the strong significance of the role of women in the family as well as in society. Their writings have given new hope to the concept of feminism in India.

The women novelists Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai probe into the unexplored psyche and the psychological turmoil faced by the

women in all walks of their life. Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni give an artistic expression to the problems and predicament of Indian women who are subjugated in the patriarchal society. The writers have moved away from portraying traditional enduring norms of self-sacrificing women to emancipated and enlightened souls. Instead of making their women characters belittled with suffering and suppression, they start negotiating in the social context. An exalting spirit of courage, dignity, responsibility, independence, and identity is encouraged and glorified by contemporary women writers.

The women writers construct the plots to project the recurring female experiences in the socio-cultural matrix and the cultural role of women in Indian society. They probe deep into philosophical and psychological ideologies and install a positive sense of identity in their women protagonists. The women characters rebel against the unjust social set-up and openly discard the idea of being submissive. Their rebellious voice epitomizes the modernization of the Indian feminine psyche and fights for individual autonomy, and economic independence along with the free and frank expression against gender stereotypes, domestic violence, and male governance. The significant characteristics of the women's writing style are the impressive mark of language, the true state of the position of women in Indian society, the family set-up and the authentic presentation of contemporary India with all its cultural, traditional, and regional variations. Through their writing style, women writers have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age-long control of male domination.

The ancient writings of literature and the epics which are interpreted from the masculine point of view draw the characteristics of women to be meek, docile,

submissive, and unstable, both, physically and economically. In recent times, women writers step into questioning the myth and analyze the mythical stories that resulted in the retelling of myths. The retelling of mythical stories is an effect or a mirror image of the period to which they belong. The new mythological novels written in Indian English are experiments, unpredictable, revolutionary as well as subversive. The revival of Indian myth in Indian fiction in English is one of the major phenomena in the history of Indian literature.

Both, male and female writers of Indian English literature have written the epics from different perspectives and their works are rewritings or refractions. The novel retellings of *Mahabharata* are Shivaji Sawant's *Mrutyunjay* (1967), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1984), Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), Anuja Chandramouli's *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince* (2013), Anand Neelakantan's *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan -Roll of The Dice*, (2013) and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*(2014). The retellings of *Ramayana* are Devdutt Pattanaik's *Hanuman's Ramayan* (2009), Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar's *Sita's Ramayana* (2011), Vayu Naidu's *Sita's Ascent* (2012), Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014) and *Lanka's Princess* (2017), Aashish Kaul's *The Queen's Play* (2015) and Amish Tripathi's *Ram Chandra Series* (2015-2022). These novels portray the same mythological characters to reveal the socio-cultural problems. The writers challenge caste and gender biases prevalent in society even today. The aim is to articulate the intricacies of the lives of Draupadi and Sita that are conveniently overlooked and disregarded. The

novels are intricately woven sagas of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat.

The writings of women in Indian English literature emerged to represent the feminine potential to carve a niche for women's identity in the patriarchal society. The writings of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni based on the two great Indian epics demonstrate the importance of female rights and their courage to retain claims of individuality. It mirrors the bafflement of tradition with modernity that encounters new notions of womanhood to bring about a change in the traditional roles of men and women. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, born in India in 1956, is an award-winning contemporary Indian English women writer. She emerged on the world literary scene in 1990 as an Indian American writer and established herself as a prolific and extremely discerning writer. She is also a first-generation Indian immigrant and a woman between cultures and traditions. She draws her own experiences and those of immigrant Indian women to write novels. Her notable short story collection, *Arranged Marriage* (1995) is a winner of the American Book Award in 1996 and the list of her novels are *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Lives of Strangers* (2007), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Oleander Girl* (2013), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *The Last Queen* (2021).

The novels, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) retell the mythological story and narrate the myths from a female perspective. They are new mythological novels that are refractions and rewrites the ancient myths with a contemporary aura. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in both the novels abolish the

gender bias and has given importance to the female characters to showcase their individual identity. The select novels highlight the role of the protagonists, Draupadi and Sita as well as the other women characters in the epics. The novel, *The Palace of Illusions* subverts the myth of Draupadi from the ancient epic, *The Mahabharata*. It raises the issues of caste and gender. The novel also reveals how the ideology of male-dominant society operates in framing the destiny of princess Draupadi. The novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, accords Sita's parity with Ram, reveals the inner strength of women and the tragedy of failed marriage. It is a novel of feminist brilliance and voices the anguishes of women through the life experiences of princess Sita.

The novels signify the marginalization of Draupadi and Sita, who suffer as victims at the hands of their husbands despite their status as the queens of Hastinapur and Ayodhya, respectively. Draupadi and Sita choose their husbands in the 'swayamvar' arranged by their fathers and they remain as *Pativratastree* – a woman for whom her husband is the entire world. They are the epitomes of ideal wives and mothers but their virtuosity is tested when Draupadi is compelled to accept a polyandrous marriage and be the wife of the five Pandava brothers while Sita has to undertake 'Agnipariksha' to prove her chastity. Both, the princesses save their kingdom from slavery and disgrace but Draupadi is humiliated when the Pandava brothers put her life at stake in the game of dice, and Sita, as a pregnant woman, is exiled from Ayodhya.

Draupadi and Sita undergo trials and tribulations in the family and society to empower the entire female race. They both are legendary beauties whose grace has caused great kings to desire, covet and even kidnap them. Draupadi is coveted by Duryodhan and Sita is kidnapped by Raavan. Great wars have been fought for the sake of

Draupadi and Sita where they have proved their valour of women's strength. Draupadi has destroyed the kuru dynasty while Sita is responsible for the downfall of the Lankans. Draupadi and Sita are immensely strong, virtuous, and intelligent heroic princesses of the epics, who stand against evil and fight for justice in the patriarchal society. They are worshipped even today for their feminine traits as they are believed to be incarnations of Goddess Lakshmi and for upholding feminine integrity. They are presented as bold characters, who wish to be the change markers of change to reform the subjugated status and position of Indian women in the stereotypical society.

Draupadi and Sita experience *Swayamvar*, which has severely tested the participants' valour and skills. Draupadi has five husbands but is equally loyal to them all, but on the other hand, never allows herself to go through any kind of humiliation at the hands of her husbands. Draupadi's disrobing is the moment that tests her character but her commitment to Krishna is revealed when he responds to her call by providing her with the endless sari is a testament of her faith. Draupadi devotes herself to Krishna. She stands tall and prays to achieve a transcending quality that forces men to recognize the fact that the strength of women is literally beyond men.

Sita is married to Ram and is always devoted to him. She endures the abduction by Raavan and withstands his horrendous advances only to come back to Ayodhya and walk in the fire to prove to the citizens her purity, for them to take her back. She is submissive to Ram and goes through the *Agnipariksha* without a shadow of protest. Draupadi and Sita are humiliated and they both have suffered trials and tribulations throughout their marital lives. They have accompanied their husbands in exile. The *vanvas* life of Draupadi lasts for thirteen years while Sita's exile is for fourteen years. In

the epics, Draupadi and Sita challenge the male authority structure in different ways. Draupadi in her own style questions why a woman is seen as an object. Sita is known for her devotion to lord Ram but refuses to stand by him and leaves Ram alone when she is not welcomed back to Ayodhya. The powerful women begin their journey by questioning and making decisions of their own. This incident gives a pathway to the modern emerging women, that they should not be depend on men but to take a stand on their own. This is pictured in both the novels, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee.

In the novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, the mental growth of a woman is stressed. Paanchali, the major character in the novel grows in a patriarchal society where a woman is pictured as a dependent of her father, husband and finally her son. Draupadi, as a courageous woman raises questions against the norms followed in the society. She is not a woman to accept the rules drawn by someone, which makes the society to be comfortable to make a woman dependent on a man. Draupadi respects her father, Drupad and does everything according to his wish but she does not tolerate the inequality between a man and a woman. She grows by questioning her father's attitude in all his acts. She accepts her name given by her father but chooses a name that really suits her for the journey in life. Draupadi believes that the soul is one but it dwells in the form of a man and a woman. Thus, she fights for her education and achieves to study along with her brother. She respects her elders and her Guru, who are placed next to god and are is considered as the most superior of all but she is not a woman to be submissive and accept what is taught by them, instead she is one who questions them with firing anger if anything is taught against women's rights.

Draupadi accepts the *swayamvar* arranged by her father since she does not want to damage her father's reputation. In the *swayamvar*, though she is given the choice of selecting her husband, it is only for namesake since the bridegroom is selected by her father. The happiness of Draupadi in selecting her life partner is crushed into the flame of ashes and feels that the freedom given to women in selecting their husband is not for the sake of women but for the sake of the deciders who decide the life of a woman in a patriarchal society. She screams out of anger because a woman is not a puppet to dance according to men's words. She fights for her rights against all the patriarchal norms to respect women as a living soul in every family. Draupadi knows that she can restrict the rule in her marriage and no one can force a woman to marry unwillingly but as a daughter she fulfils her duty and marries the man chosen by her father only to keep up her father's glory.

Draupadi is celebrated for her mental strength to accept five men as her husbands by following the order of her mother-in-law. She accepts Pandavas as her husbands and does not care about the society but becomes the pillar of her husbands in all tough circumstances. The equal treatment of Paanchali to her husbands have kept them united till the end. She is humiliated and put into tough tolerance because of her husband in the dicing event by disrobing her but she never leaves them, instead supports them as a virtuous wife. Draupadi knows that she is a woman chosen by god to destroy the adharmis on earth; she stands as Shakti, the eternal power of god with her husbands to make them to win their victory in the war of Dharma.

Draupadi proves that men are dependent on women to make the future generation learn to respect women. Even at the event of the game of dice; it is Paanchali who fights

to get all their kingly life back from slavery even though her five husbands fail to protect her at the time of dicing. The unity and victory of Pandavas is only because of the presence of Draupadi in the epic as a righteous woman. She follows tradition and is a boon for Pandavas and a curse for the Kauravas because she is against injustice.

Paanchali challenges as a thunder bolt and silently achieves her duty as a daughter, wife, mother and a queen to show a path for the future generations who are going to be a part of worldly affairs and the harbinger of the great battle to be fought for injustice. She proves that, in the process of learning to grow as a capable individual, women never leave their domestic life and are ready to face the vicissitudes of life.

Paanchali in her tumultuous journey rises beyond her personal stigma. She places herself as an archetype for the female empowerment and bears the courage to break from the shackles of patriarchal hegemony. Kunti and Gandhari are the other two women characters in the novel who fight to achieve their unfulfilled duty. They both are wise to advice men to make them lead a life in the path of dharma. Kunti is a woman who considers her duty as her only dharma and struggles to achieve it without the support of a man. She breaks the rule and proves that a woman can tackle her life even without the help of her husband and can educate and protect her sons till her last breath. She is a strong woman to stand alone to raise her sons and trains them as the future rulers in the path of dharma. She knows that her sons need a strong support for their victory and decides to make them marry the same woman, Draupadi whom she believes as the strength to hold her sons' unity till their victory is achieved. Kunti stands as an ideal example for men because as a woman she continues her dual role as a mother and a father to groom her children.

The novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* deals with the struggle of women to achieve victory. Sita, a mythological character is given a complete warrior appearance that suits the present age. Sita's first achievement is her survival as a baby in the forest for several months in a dangerous situation. Sita grows by self-learning. She experiences everything according to her own way. She never doubts her strength even when the opponent is more powerful than her. She grows as a real warrior princess to achieve her destination in life. She has a very strong mental understanding to accept anything for her solid achievements.

Sita learns all the martial arts which are meant only for men and also has self-educated herself to become a queen. She believes that physical strength never matters to achieve success in life. She enhances her skill and achieves her second victory when her guru chooses her as the next Vishnu. She is the real ruler, who is praised for her valiant skills and her caring attitude. She wins as a queen by achieving success in the lives of poor people in her country. She has enhanced the lives of the people of her kingdom through her valuable service and this is achieved by her, because of her mother's advice and struggles to enrich her life.

Sita chooses her husband, Ram knowing that he is her powerful opponent warrior who tries to achieve Vishnuhood. She takes great care of her husband which is celebrated by the Ayodhiyans not because she is the consort of Ram but for her own nature. She has a chance to live a queenly life but she stands as a real support for her husband during his exile for fourteen years with all her womanly qualities. She has achieved her success by finally making her husband to reveal that she is perfect to become the next Vishnu. Sita has triggered fear in the heart of Raavan, the king of demondynasty. Sita's valour has

made him hesitant to fight directly with her, and he fails because of her valiant skills. Sita never waits to get support from anyone in order to save her. She raises the sword in the crowd of Lankans and Raavan, which shows the real spirit of a warrior. The incident gives Sita a way to prove her skills to the world as a woman warrior.

Women of the present time need to look up to someone who takes firm stands during tough times so that they can easily tackle situations and take good decisions for better prospects. Women in both epics have proved that they are independent warriors to win victory for their struggles in their life. In *Mahabharata*, the glory of Pandavas is known to the world, through the flame of struggle by Draupadi, and in *Ramayana*, Ram's glory is known to the world through the life of Sita. Draupadi and Sita have been placed in thousands of years of literature because they are the women relevant across empires and eras as the embodiments of an enduring Hindu culture. They represent the ideal Hindu women. The powerful women come from the bygone epochs; their lives are the living examples who lead the way of the future modern Indian women to gain their respect in both their career and in the family. Women are tested in all the ages; they are put into the test of tolerance. Women being patient, proves their chastity and tolerance and creates their own identity in their society. No one can oppose the word that the women are caregivers and caretakers of a family; they build respectful relationships.

Women are the pillars to carry the culture of their society for their generations. Chitra Banerjee's *The Palace of Illusions* makes the readers to accept that women intend to retain the claims of individuality. The novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, pictures the power of women by their achievements in their life. Draupadi and Sita are integral parts of the Indian Woman's psyche. At every stage of an Indian women's life, their name is

invoked. Though the epics hail from thousands of years ago, they continue to shape and reshape the thinking of the entire culture. Women have a will of their own; they wield power and influence in their own manner. It is perhaps to suggest they are psychologically pure and untainted. They learn to sublimate their ego to reach a higher level and they finally win their independence and their identity by leaving their lives as footprints for modern women.

The present study narrates the lives of Draupadi and Sita, who are iconic women of the two great Indian epics as well as the select novels of Chitra Banerjee and the role models for modern Indian women. The thesis entitled ‘Draupadi and Sita: The Women Embodiments of Chitra Banerjee’s *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*’ represents the female experiences and the journey of women towards self-realization. Chapter I titled ‘Introduction,’ presents the overview of Indian English literature, the emergence of Indian women’s writings, the retellings of the epics, the introduction to Chitra Banerjee and the select novels, and the framework of the study.

Chapter II titled ‘Voice of Draupadi’ pictures the struggle of princess Draupadi to achieve her identity in the patriarchal society. She is a courageous daughter, an ideal wife to the Pandava Brothers, and a brave Queen of Hastinapur. She is a strong and powerful woman, who tolerates, sacrifices, and stands alone to regain an honorable position for women in the male-dominant society. Her life experiences are the footprints for modern emerging women to strive for gender equality. She proves that women possess the courage to wage war against injustices and reform the destiny of women.

Chapter III titled ‘Voice of Sita’ pictures the mythological Indian woman Sita, who succeeds in her life as a noble queen. She guides her people toward the path of

dharma and serves as a virtuous wife. She reveals her moral strength and supports her husband during tough times. She is a brave mother, who raises her sons single-handedly and provides them with good education to make them know the value of dharma which would help them carry forward the legacy of Ayodhya on the right path.

Chapter IV titled 'Conclusion' concludes stating that it is because of women, that Indian epics have gained universal popularity. The mythical women characters are celebrated and respected for their courage, confidence, and valour. They guide modern women toward achieving self-identity. Sita and Draupadi serve as epitomes of bravery to voice out the underheard predicaments of women and protect the universe from the grips of evil. They have redefined the status and position of Indian women from the ancient times until the present day.

Chapter II

Voice of Draupadi

Draupadi, the protagonist of the Hindu epic, *Mahabharatha*, voices the significance of women's freedom and rights in the patriarchal society. The novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, is a narration through Draupadi, the fire-born princess, and unveils the important contribution of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the presentation of women as powerful, courageous, and determined beings who are able to change history. It depicts the situation of women in the ancient period and reveals the brave nature of women, and their determination to live a happy life. The female characters of Divakaruni are bold, confident, and determined to achieve the desired goal in her life. She is able to create a history that one remembers even years after. She has given a stronger role to the women in her novels. The women characters are represented as equals to men in the patriarchal society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni draws inspiration from the epic Mahabharata to portray her women protagonist, Draupadi, to establish her identity as Paanchali, the women epitome of the Kingdom of Paanchal rather than the daughter of King Drupad. She explores the character of Draupadi and represents her unique qualities like mental strength, courage, determination, adaptability, and nobility. The novel narrates Draupadi's unpredictable journey with an extraordinary birth, unusual marriage, unprecedented molestation and finally bringing the most terrible war in history. Renuka Narayanan in the *Hindustan Times* (2008) writes about the novel, *The Palace of Illusions* as,

Told in the first person, Divakaruni's tale takes us through the epic in Draupadi's voice. From being born of the sacrificial fire (thus her beautiful name 'Yajnaseni', though the author doesn't use it, preferring 'Panchali'), to her strange, lonely childhood, her tricky marriage to have men with a persecution problem and a control freak mother, her own, lovely home at last, and then the unbelievable traumas that follow that nobody should have to go through (but millions of refugees do)(12).

The birth of Draupadi is unwelcomed by her father because he preferred a male heir. The birth of Draupadi from the sacred fire in the *Yajna*, may not be true literally but is significant in the Indian epic as it symbolizes her character that she is not a passive woman but one who will be fiery.

Dhai ma, the nurse and the caretaker of Draupadi fulfills the role of parent and she is the one who gives a graphical description of the birth of the prince, Dhristadyumna and princess of Panchaal. She narrates that,

Even before we'd finished cheering and clapping, even before your father had a chance to greet your brother, you appeared. You were as dark as he was fair, as hasty as he was calm. Coughing from the smoke, tripping over the hem of your sari, grabbing for his hand and almost sending him tumbling, too- (4)

She voices the spell of omens as, "...Behold, we give you this girl, a gift beyond what you asked for. Take good care of her, for she will change the course of history" (4-5) as the birth of Draupadi is unexpected. Her 'unnatural' birth elevates her from common human beings, who are born from their mother's womb, but such a birth brings her closer

to nature as she is considered to be the child of Mother Nature. Draupadi is happy that her life even at the time of her birth is unique and auspicious.

Draupadi is a beautiful princess of Panchaal, who has eyes like lotus petals and faultless features endowed with youth and intelligence. Her physical attributes are much like that of the earth from where she has emerged. For Draupadi, nature acts not only as a source of identification but also as companionship, comfort, solace, guidance, and training for future hardships. Though the king, Drupad protects and takes care of Draupadi, she feels deprived of her paternal love and care. She identifies the palace to be a prison house to her and she expresses her wish to recreate an alternative reality that will reform the misery of her existence:

Starting down from the rooms at the bare compound stretching below, I'd feel dejection settle on my shoulders like a shawl of iron. When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of color and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flitting among jasmines, and in the midst of it – but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take. Would it be elegant as crystal? Solidly precious, like a jewel studded goblet? Delicate and intricate, like gold filigree? I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (7)

Draupadi tries to put an end to the dreadful monotony of her existence as she believes that her birth is as significant as her brother.

Draupadi gains the love and affection of her brother, Dhristadyumna, who is born out of the same sacrificial fire. Her zeal and enthusiasm to change her life history leads

her to Veda Vyasa's hermitage to know more about the secrets of her future. She fights to get her right to education and joins her twin brother, Dhri to study *Shastras* and laws of governance, which are typically associated with the notions of training male children. She is aware of the importance of women's education and expresses that, "These were the lessons... that conferred power. They were the ones I needed to know if I were to change history" (27). Brought up amidst affluence, orthodoxy, and luxury, the daughter of King Drupad has grown up to be an aggressive woman who speaks her mind in a world where women suffer in silence.

Draupadi critically analyses the names that are given to her brother and to herself. Dhristadyumna means 'destroyer of enemies' and her name merely means 'daughter of Drupad'. Ms. PVL Shailaja and N. Ramakrishna, in the article "Rediscovering the Early Years of Divakaruni's Draupadi" (2011) state that, "The name, Draupadi would link to her father whose control and authority represented the crimes of patriarchy while the name Panchaali would bestow her with a unique identity connecting her to the land in which she was born" (108). Chitra Banerjee calls Draupadi as Panchaali as she is the princess of the kingdom of Panchaal rather than Draupadi, daughter of Drupad. The protagonist categorically states that "...Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (26). The strong desire to have an identity of her own is seen in her dislike of her name Draupadi. Draupadi is unhappy about it because she feels a woman who has been created to change the course of history must have been given a better name. The name Draupadi according to her smacks off patriarchy and so says,

Dhri's name fell within the bounds of acceptability— though if I were his

parent I might have picked a more cheerful appellation, like Celestial Victor, or light of the universe. But Daughter of Drupad? Granted, he hadn't been expecting me, but couldn't my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history? I answered to Draupadi for the moment because I had no choice. But in the long run, it would not do. I needed a more heroic name. (5)

Draupadi gives herself a heroic name as the 'offspring of vengeance or the unexpected.' The fancied name turns out to be true when the *Mahabharata* war takes place and changes the course of history in India. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as the maker of her own history. Draupadi is considered to be the feminine form of Lord Krishna and is given another name – 'Krishnaa'. She has a platonic friendship with Lord Krishna, who has a towering influence in her life. Lord Krishna plays the role of a mentor, counsellor, and guide to Draupadi; he is always present beside her in times of trouble and saves her from distress. He advises Draupadi saying, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself" (9).

Draupadi is trained to suit herself to be qualified as the princess and the bride as it is the time to learn much about all the circumstances as she is now fully grown as a beautiful *yuvathi* or a young girl of marriageable age. Her lessons begin with how to sidestep questions that she does not want to answer, how to dress as a queen without the help of her attendants and she practices un-queenly skills like lying on the floor at night and to wear the cheapest and most abrasive cotton saris. She undertakes penance, fasts, and practices yoga that fills her with energy to tune her body to survive for days

without food. She learns to cook with the meagre available ingredients and learns medicinal values to cure one's illness with no help. She is now groomed to face different situations that may or may not appear in a princess's life after her marriage.

King Drupad organizes the '*Swayamvar*' for Draupadi to choose her husband, which is an ancient practice of royal families in India where the ceremony is conducted by the father of a princess to give his daughter the freedom to select her husband. The *swayamvar* being a pre-fixed event leaves Draupadi with few choices. It is a political strategy devised by king Drupad and she is merely a trophy, a prize to be won. Draupadi is excited when Dharmarajya conveys the message about the arrangements of her father for her '*Swayamvar*'. King Drupad invites the princes of other kingdoms, from Bharat to Panchaal, and among the invited grooms Draupadi could choose a man whom she wants to marry. Among the competitors, the Pandavas, disguised as Brahmin priests, and Karna, the orphan son of Kunti and the Sun God, are also present.

Draupadi is filled with exhilaration to share about her *swayamvar* with her brother and tells him that, "I can't believe I'm going to pick my own husband! I cried, Why didn't you tell me? ... You're just jealous that I get to choose my own spouse when you don't!" (54-55). She gets to know from her brother that before the wedding a skill test would be conducted and the man who wins the test will be the one whom she will garland. She hears that it is an extraordinary test for the suitors, who have to pierce a metal fish revolving high on the ceiling of the wedding hall using *Kindhura*, the heaviest bow in existence where only a handful of warriors can lift and string it. She is unhappy when she gets to know that her *swayamvar* is for a namesake and there is no choice for her to choose a husband to her liking. She vehemently questions "Why even call it a

swayamvar, then? I cried. Why make a spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry" (56) and feels that she is "...nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (57).

Draupadi hides her love for Karna, who wins the contest in the *swayamvar* but he is declared to be disqualified when she rises to garland the groom. Lord Krishna stops Draupadi stating that Karna is the son of a mere charioteer and he cannot be chosen to be the groom since he hails from the low caste. King Drupad is shocked and suspicious because he had designed the test in such a way that only Prince Arjun of Hastinapur would be able to succeed. Karna leaves the court in anger and vows to declare his vengeance. He never forgives Draupadi, King Drupad and the Kingdom of Paanchal, for bringing him disgrace while Draupadi's conscience pricks her throughout her life, for deceiving his valour.

Draupadi is coerced by King Drupad, Lord Krishna, and her brother, Dhriti to choose Arjun as her husband in the *swayamvar*. Arjun, the student of Drona, a valiant archer, performs efficiently in the test of skill, and wins the hands of Draupadi. Draupadi is happy to start her new marital life but her destiny becomes melancholic when her mother-in-law, Kunti, asks his sons to equally share among themselves the prize of Arjuna's victory. Kunti, who is unaware of Arjuna's prize, puts the life of Draupadi at stake. Without the consent of Draupadi, she is compelled to accept a polyandrous marriage when Kunti does not take the word back that is promised to her five sons. The emotions of Draupadi are suppressed and it reveals the position of an Indian woman, who is forced to obey the dictates of her mother-in-law.

Arjun never likes to share Draupadi with his brothers because his wife is unique and exclusive but as an obedient son, he has nothing to say but to abide by the words of his mother. Draupadi favours Arjun over others and secretly has a fondness for him. Draupadi decides to be the wife of the Pandavas but has one condition to all her five husbands, that she will never share her household with anyone and that none of her husband should bring another woman to share her place while she is in InthraPrastha but in course of time, due to situations, Arjun marries Subhadra and Chitrangada; Bheem marries Hidimba and Valandhara; Yudhisthir marries Devika; Nakul marries Karenumati and Sahadev marries Vijaya.

Draupadi cannot be criticized but is a woman to be appreciated as it is not her choice to marry all the five brothers. At this point Draupadi has to be well understood that it is a great sacrifice on her part to accept the wish of her mother-in-law, Kunti. Draupadi has become the wife of Pandavas not out of desire but by accidental circumstances. She hears from Krishna that in her previous birth, she has been the daughter of Nala and Damayanthi, named Nalayani. She then prays to Lord Shiva to grant her a husband with fourteen desired qualities. Lord Shiva is pleased with her devotion and grants her the wish but also says that in her next birth she will have fourteen husbands. Hence the fourteen qualities are present in the Pandavas, who are considered to be former Indhras and they are individually imperfect but collectively perfect.

The five Pandavas have unique characteristics. Yudhisthir is known for his wisdom of dharma; the powerful Bheem is known for his strength that exceeds for a thousand elephants combined; the valiant Arjun is known for his courage and knowledge of the battlefield; and the exceedingly handsome Nakul and Sahadev is known for their love.

Draupadi questions Lord Shiva whether her marriage to the Pandavas is a boon or a curse. This is a boon since the Narada purana and Vayu purana claim Draupadi as the composite avatar of goddess Shyamala (wife of Dharma), Bharati (wife of Vayu), Shache(wife of Indra), Usha (wife of Ashwins) and Parvathi (wife of Shiva) who has married the earthly compartments in the form of five Pandavas.

Lord Shiva promises that Draupadi will regain her virginity each morning when she takes bath. This is an evolution of a special code of martial conduct to keep harmony among the five brothers and is considered a special boon of virginity granted to Panchaali as she is concerned about the day-to-day life as a wife of five different men. She is worried that there might be misunderstandings and jealousy if she is not able to express her affection or divide her time equally among the Pandavas. Krishna, as a friend, provides Draupadi with a solution to spend one year with each of the five brothers starting with Yudhishthir, the oldest, and at the end of the year, start to live with the next one. When she lives with one brother, the other brothers would be barred from entering her room. Thus, Draupadi begins her marital life. Her smartness is revealed when she serves as the wife to five husbands. The Pandavas after their marriage with Draupadi becomes bold enough to come out of hiding and demand half of their inheritance from their uncle, Dhritarashtra. The Pandavas often seek Draupadi's guidance and approval in matters related to reigning the kingdom. Draupadi is widely recognized for her aggressive attitude and her enemies are wary of her power.

Draupadi is pushed immediately into household work by Kunti and since she has well practiced living a queenly life before her marriage, she allows herself to adapt to her surrounding to do all the work allotted by her mother-in-law with no regrets and

proves herself as the perfect wife for her husbands. Soon they all move to Hasthinapur and begin to build their new kingdom, Indra Prastha in Khandava forest. The name Indra Prastha has a reference to the residence of Lord Indhra, the king of gods. The name Indra Prastha is chosen by the Pandavas, who are believed to be Indhra's in their former life but Panchaali wants to call it as 'Palace of Illusions' as this place is going to be envied by every king in the universe.

The palace built by Mayasura, is the most magnificent dwelling on the earth made of marbles and magic; composed of excellent materials, furnished with golden walls and archways, and glorified with many varied pictures. The palace is well-built and has many specialties such as the surface of a pool of still water. Pandavas invite Duryodhan for attending the *Rajasuya Yagna*. Duryodhan is amazed to see the wonderful illusions in the palace. He envies the imperial court which is excellent in its puzzling artistic workmanship. Mayasura places a peerless tank of lotuses with leaves of dark-coloured gems and its bank is overlaid with lakhs of costly marble set with pearls. Apart from this he also adds that "I give you more: floors looking like rivers, waterfalls looking like walls" (145). Many kings mistake it to be land and fall into it and Duryodhan is one among such kings who falls into the pond. Seeing this, Draupadi, who along with her attendants burst into laughter and gives a drastic comment that, "It seems the blind king's son is also blind!" (173). She is a brave woman who would not think twice before insulting anyone. As a consequence, there is a bad phase in her lifetime, when she is disrobed, insulted, and humiliated.

Duryodhan makes a vow that he will take revenge on Draupadi for humiliating him. Duryodhan and his uncle, Sakuni, start thinking of a devious plan to oust the

Pandavas from Indra Prastha. Soon Panchaali and her husbands are invited to a feast in Hasthinapur. Kunti wants Yudhisthir to leave Panchaali behind as they are invited by Duryodhan. Yudhisthir replies to his mother that, “You’re always imagining the worst. Panchaali will be just fine. In fact, she’ll make sure that the rest of us don’t do anything imprudent” (178). The words of Yudhisthir express the power of Paanchali. Being men, the Pandavas feel that Panchaali will be the protector to take care of them if anything happens at the palace during the feast.

A marvellous feast is arranged to welcome Draupadi and her five husbands, but she does not know that she is about to fall into Duryodhan’s trap. After the feast, a game of dice is announced. According to a long-standing pact of Kshatriyas, a king could never say no to a game of dice and thus the Pandavas accept the invitation. During the dicing event, Sakuni comes into the play for Duryodhan devising a scheme to rob Yudhisthir of all his possessions. Yudhisthir’s ineptitude, addiction to the game, and inability to resist the challenge gambles away his entire kingdom, his wealth, his four brothers, and even his wife. There is a dramatic change of fortune for the Pandavas and Draupadi. Yudhisthir challenges to play the game of dice but he loses everything and in the end pawns Draupadi.

Draupadi, who is an empress, is now suddenly reduced to the status of a Dasi, a slave maid. She is horrified when she learns that she is staked in the game of dice and has become Duryodhan’s slave. She is not able to accept herself as a slave since she is the wife of the Pandavas and not anyone’s possessions to be gambled. Paanchali ventilates her passion after she knows about the failure of the Pandavas and says that, “The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave” (190). When she is called

upon in the courtroom she refuses to go because, if Yudhisthir has lost in the gamble, there is no way that he could gamble on her as she is not only the wife to Yudhisthir but also to the other four brothers as well. When the attendant comes to Panchaali's chamber to summon her to the saba, she interrogates, "But women never go there! And why would he and not my husbands sent for me?" (189). She is informed that her palace has also been lost in the game. Draupadi becomes wild with passion and challenges the authority of her husband, "My palace?... He had no right!" (190). The act of losing the palace of her husband cannot be tolerated by her because her husband has lost it without her consent. This shows that she has equal rights in all aspects to that of her five husbands.

Draupadi instead of feeling nervous gets a fresh realization of her identity and screams that, "I'm a queen. Daughter of Drupad. sister of Dhristadyumna. Mistress of greatest on earth. I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl" (190). Draupadi gains the support of Vikarna, the younger brother of Duryodhan but he is silenced by Karna, stating that he is too young. Draupadi screams to everybody to rescue her, but it is in vain. Draupadi argues and questions the legality of staking her but she is forcefully dragged into the court; she describes her situation as, "...The worst shame a woman could imagine was about to befall me – I who had thought myself above all harm, the proud and cherished wife of the greatest kings of our time!" (193). Duryodhan humiliates Draupadi in front of the five Pandava brothers as well as many well-known dignitaries of the time.

Panchaali implores help from all the elders – Bheeshma, Drona, and her husbands but it proves to be of no help to her. It explores the sensual apathy that society can set down the norm but it cannot provide protection against the ignominy of male arrogance.

On the realization of her position, Draupadi almost becomes wild with anger and mentions that, "...I demanded help from my husbands. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed. I could see that in their minds they were already Duryodhan's vassals, chained by Yudhisthir's word" (191). Now she has no choice but to be the slave of Duryodhan. At this point Paanchali stands alone even though she has five husbands, who are speechless and can do nothing in order to save her life. This shows that these men have not honoured her life as their wife and have gone to an extent of losing her, who has come to sanctify their life. Duryodhan as revenge of his humiliation in *The Palace of Illusions* takes the chance to hold Draupadi by her hair and drags her in and further orders her to sit on his lap. He and Dussasan despicably try to disrobe her to nudity.

Draupadi finds that a hundred male eyes are burning to see her disrobed, so cries out and challenges every man who never cared to provide protection for a woman. She says, "Let them stare at my nakedness, I thought. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed for shattering the bonds of decency" (193). Draupadi knows the only one who can provide her consolation against uncompromising dismay is Lord Krishna. She closes her eyes and surrenders herself to Lord Krishna for help and he helps her in such a way that the Kauravas fail in their misadventure. Lord Krishna, who comes to her rescue says that, "No one can shame you, he said if you don't allow it" (193). She worships, trusts, and believes him, and in turn her friend, Lord Krishna stands up to her at all times. Immediately a miracle occurs when Dussasan starts to unwrap layers and layers of sari and is forced to stop, due to exhaustion. It is then that Draupadi vows that she will not wash her hair until she first washes with the blood of Dussasan and Duryodhan. Kauravas have lost and Pandavas are full of shame as this is nothing but declaring war.

Draupadi actually wins as she stands clothed while Dussasan gets exhausted and fails miserably. Draupadi with the fire of anger shouts in a voice like a block of cracking ice that,

All of you will die in the battle that will be spawned from this day's work.
 Yours mothers and wives will weep far more piteously than I've wept.
 This entire kingdom will become a charnel house. Not one Kaurava heir
 will be left to offer prayers for the dead. All that will remain is the
 shameful memory of today, what you tried to do to a defenseless woman.
 (194)

These words of Draupadi are so significant because what Draupadi says or does, is not so much for herself but more so for the whole female kind. She warns the Kauravas not to mess with women and their chastity, dignity, and integrity.

Draupadi verbally eviscerates the entire court threatening that if her father hears about his daughter's insult, he would tear Hastinapur to the ground. Just as she is about to curse the Kuru dynasty, Gandhari, the wife of king Dhritarashtra intervenes. Gandhari is a remarkable woman; very brave and rooted in her own convictions unable to bare the harsh treatment of men towards Draupadi in the *saba* interrupts in order to rescue Draupadi. She knows that they cannot undo what has already been done but offers Draupadi with three boons. Draupadi with the respect towards Gandhari accepts the boon. For the first boon, Draupadi asks for her five husbands to be freed from bondage so that her sons will not be called *Dasas* (servants). For her second boon, she asks to restore all the wealth that Yudhisthir has lost in the game of dice. She does not make the third wish thinking that the two boons are enough to make up for her loss and leaves the hall.

Panchaali is ready to accept anything that is said by Gandhari who is admired for her patience though she is from the enemy clan but is a real warrior, who has fought throughout her life to make her sons follow the path of dharma.

Gandhari serves as the pillar of man's life. Without the presence of Gandhari, her husband, her brother and the whole Kaurava clan would have been destroyed by the Pandavas. Gandhari never gives up her duty as a wife and a mother. She often insists her husband and sons about the ideal path of humans to be followed to achieve moksha and to serve God. She is a woman who has been chosen by God to give moksha from the earthly life. She knows that a man's life will be drawn into darkness without the presence of dharma and thus she drags her family towards the path of dharma in order to save them. She is celebrated as an ideal consort till the present, for her solid sacrifice by blinding herself when she comes to know that her husband is visionless. She never regrets for her son's death as she knows that their life will fall under the feet of Pandavas as they are dharmis and the victory falls on the side of dharma. Both Kunti and Gandhari have played equal roles. They both are blessed by God for their endless sacrifice. They stand as a symbol for Draupadi to make her follow them in her life; to learn tolerance; fight for their rights. Women are considered as the gift from God. They are the real blessings of God to enrich a family. They shower their love and care to their family and expect nothing in return. They are the social warriors to protect their family from all the evil power. The followers of women are considered as the followers of God; the follower of dharma. Thus, man is dependent on women to achieve the glory of success in his life.

Pandavas again waste Draupadi's boon by accepting another game with modified rules which states that the loser of the game would go into exile for twelve years followed by a year of anonymity. The Pandavas once again loses and Draupadi accompanies them into exile for thirteen years. Draupadi has never been able to forget the insult heaped upon her in the dice-hall. She often laments that Yudhisthir's obtuseness and the other husbands' worthlessness are the roots of all her misery. Yudhisthir tries on many occasions to console her. Bheem, too, repeatedly vows that he will not let matters rest till he has drunk Dussasan's blood and breaks Duryodhan's thigh. The other three also often try to tell her that thirteen years will pass soon and hope to see good days again. But all in vain, Draupadi, unable to suppress her anger, finally stops talking to them. She has never been able to ignore the grief of losing the kingdom. Draupadi vows that she would not tie her hair until she first washes them with the blood of Dussasan and Duryodhan. Bheem takes her side and makes a pledge that he will pluck Dussasan's arm and kill him. This stand taken by Draupadi is so significant. She does not confer with her husbands, or her brothers or even Krishna, she knows exactly what she has to do.

The forest life of the Pandavas and Draupadi begin. Draupadi immediately adapts to the forest life by giving up her royal life style. Draupadi's beloved friend, Lord Krishna visits to make them aware of their duty on their exile and also promises Draupadi that he will visit when she is in need of help. The Sun God gives an *Akshaya Patra*, the magic vessel, which would not become empty until Draupadi has had her meal. She does not hesitate to give food to those in need even at the time of their exile, which shows that she is generous and compassionate. One day while walking in the forest she plucks a fruit in the tree and when she is about to eat, her Sakha, Krishna stops her and says Sakhi,

this fruit is supposed to be a sage's fruit to break his twelve years fast by eating this fruit that day. If he does not find it in the tree, he will be angry and will curse all. So Draupadi asks Krishna for help and he says that when each one of the Pandava tells the truth, the fruit will move two feet upwards and finally it will take its original place. When each of the Pandavas tells the truth, the fruit moves two feet upwards but when it is Draupadi's turn, she professes her love for the Pandavas, but the fruit does not move upwards which means that she did not reveal the truth. She later laments that if she had married Karna as per her wish, she would not have suffered such miseries. Draupadi, on revealing the truth, the fruit goes back to its place. This is an instance that gives a chance to Draupadi to share her thoughts and feelings but the Pandavas are shocked to hear the truth.

Draupadi has many challenging times in the forest. She is the temptation and a terror of man. Jayadrathana, the son of Vriddhakshatra and the husband of Duryodhana's sister, Dussala, in order to fulfill his desires, asks Draupadi to desert her husbands, who have fallen upon bad times but she points out that it is wrong on her part to desert one's spouse when they are in difficulty and tells him the kind of time he will have to face when they return. Draupadi is abducted by Jayadrathana and when the Pandavas are after him, she is left free. Another incident is when Keechaka, the brother of Sudeshna, and the commander of King Virata's forces, is filled with lust when he sees Draupadi and asks her to marry him. Draupadi refuses saying that she is already married and that her husbands are very strong and he will not be able to escape death at their hands. He ignores her words and tries to molest her but Draupadi escapes and later is consoled by

Arjun. Arjun and Bheem hatch a plan to kill Keechak and they do so since he is an adharmi and no longer a man to live, as he is a man who mistreats women.

After twelve years of exile, the Pandavas have to spend their last year in anonymity. It is a condition that during the last year if Duryodhan discovers them, they have to endure another twelve years in exile. So, Draupadi charts a plan and asks her five husbands to be in disguise in the palace of Virat, the king of Matsya country.

Yudhishthir disguises himself as a pious Brhamin in the name of Kanka Bhatta; Bheem as Ballav, joins to serve in the kitchen; Arjun, as Brihannala, disguises as a eunuch to teach the art of dancing to the princesses; Nakul with the name Granthi, joins as the supervisor of the royal stable and Sahadev as Tantri Pal, looks after the palace dairy.

Draupadi in the name of Sairindhri introduces herself to the Queen Sudeshna, as the wife of five Gandharvas, who are divine musicians. She also mentions that she has been the hairdresser of Draupadi. Knowing that she has attended Draupadi who is the most fashionable modern girl of that age, and a woman of extraordinary beauty with fiery temperament, the Queen Sudeshna immediately accepts her as the maid. After the period of their disguise, the king, Virat and the queen beg pardon for treating them as their labourers.

After the completion of thirteen years of exile, the Pandavas ask Kauravas to return their five villages which they refuse and send a messenger to the Pandavas advising them to live a life of alms under Duryodhan's rule. The unfair game and the public shaming of Draupadi are the reasons for the Kurushetra war. The war is an attempt to establish the rule of just. At the time of war, Draupadi is present in the camp on the eighteenth day and the last night of the great battle, when she loses all her five

sons born to each husband and her victorious husbands are in the camp of the defeated enemy. In the end, Draupadi repents the loss of all her sons in the war and thinks that it should not have taken place but she makes herself strong to accept death in her own family as it is the only way to attain dharma.

Indian women are usually passive and silent in nature, but when injustice arises in the world they become furious as fire, abandon their tolerance, and burst out their emotions as Goddess Kali. Draupadi damns the Kauravas when she says, “I lifted up my long hair for all to see. My voice was calm now because I knew that everything I said would come to pass. I will not comb it, . . . until the day I bathe it in Kaurava blood” (194). Draupadi’s vow gets fulfilled when Bheem kills Duryodhan and she washes her hair with the blood of Dussasan. Panchaali at her final journey says “I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable—but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I’m truly Panchaali” (360). Draupadi is physically no match to men but makes a good match mentally. She mentally handles the situations which most women cannot and these are the experiences that make her stronger.

Draupadi is a great administrator. She feels her destiny is fulfilled by ruling the kingdom in the path of dharma and by gaining a respectable position for women by breaking all the restrictions in a patriarchal society. She is conscious enough about her responsibilities as a wife. She says “I’d played a crucial role in bringing them to their destiny. I’d shared their hardship in Khandav. I’d helped them design this unique palace, which so many longed to see. If they were pearls, I was the gold wire on which they were

strung” (151). She rescues her husbands like a boat that is drowning in a sea of sorrows.

Draupadi is the first female of Indian mythology, who starts with women power, self-being, and to be self-confident. She never claims herself as a weak woman of her time. Draupadi is aggressive and spoke her mind always – be it her wedding courtroom discussion or during war. Although Draupadi is desperate for revenge on those who humiliated her, her distinction between the right and the wrong is rarely clouded and she is always in pursuit of justice. She remains unparalleled in personifying womanhood in its wholesomeness and uniqueness with all its glory, honour, retaliation and resilience. Draupadi in all her tragedy proudly stands as a dignified lady; strong, determined and exceedingly powerful. Women draw inspiration from Draupadi, as she is a person, who relied on her inner strength and unwavering faith. Draupadi and womanhood are inseparable in a woman’s journey from the immediate present to the remote past.

The other known women characters in the novel fight for their duty to be fulfilled. Kunti and Gandhari, the mother of Pandavas and Kauravas respectively, are the two powerful women who influenced the turn of events in the epic. As a young child, Kunti pleases the sage, Durvasa and so he teaches her a mantra that enables her to invoke any god of her choice and have a son born out of him. Out of curiosity, Kunti decides to test the power of the mantra and she recites and invokes the Sun god. Kunti asks for a son who would be born with golden armour and earrings. She gives birth to a boy, Karna before her marriage. Except for Kunti’s foster mother, no one knows about this and so with her foster mother’s help, in silent misery and guilt, Kunti floats the baby away in the trunk on the Yamuna River.

Soon, the marriage of Kunti is arranged by her father, when she attains the

marriageable age. She happily marries Pandu, the prince of Hasthinapur. Kunti is a woman of tolerance and begets her husband with five sons by her unique mantra when her husband falls into the curse of incapability to be a father of his own child. Later the queen of Hasthinapur carries out her maternal responsibility of bringing up the five Pandava princes who are very young at the time of their father's death. This act of Kunti prizes her self-effacing behaviour as a mother.

Kunti wants her brave husband's name and glory to be presented and her sons to get their due. She stood all alone to raise her sons in the forest without expecting anyone's support. Kunti goes to Hasthinapur to live there with her sons as she has her rights to live in her husband's palace. Kunti has no interest in the kingdom but accepts their invitation regarding her sons' welfare. She lives an ordinary life in the palace and happily serves the king and the queen. She loves and cares for the Kauravas more than her sons which reveal her impartiality toward her family and the kingdom. Kunti teaches the lesson to the woman's community that they should be impartial in order to bind the family and maintain togetherness within the family.

Kunti also places herself as a supporting pillar for the queen, Gandhari to rule the kingdom. Kunti finds her sons in danger and begins to protect and guide her sons from the treacheries plotted by the sons of Gandhari. As part of her way in bringing up her sons, she exposes them to experiences at all levels of living. She is appreciated for her maturity, the ability to observe life, to learn from experiences and take swift decisions. Kunti sends her son, Bheem to fight Balasura, the monstrous eater as she feels that it is the king's duty to protect his people and it is an act of dharma. This act of Kunti picturizes

her as a kshatriya women who does not fear for the death of her husband or son in the war, but prays for the welfare of the people who believe them to be their shield. Her sons are her shadows, who follow her path and are ready to sacrifice anything for the word of Kunti which makes them marry Paanchali against all social norms. The respect and implicit obedience of her sons is a tribute to Kunti and her motherhood. This is something that Gandhari fails to achieve.

Gandhari, the beautiful princess of Gandhar, is an ideal consort who hides her attractive eyes behind a scarf by knowing her husband is blind. This shows her love and respect towards her husband as a wife. She never lets her husband fall into difficult situations in the kingdom, instead, she does her duty as a queen. She has the skill to be aware of a war which is unannounced and has the ability to manipulate all the difficulties.

She is a

single woman army to fight against the adharmic act of her husband and sons. She enjoys her royal life but never steps back from her duty and continuously struggles to make her sons to follow the path of dharma. She equally loves Pandavas and treats them like her sons. She often praises them for their brave achievements in the war in which her sons fail to be the winners.

Gandhari believes that the people of the kingdom follow the path of the king and stands alone in the crowd of the adharmic to continue her duty as a noble queen in the righteous path.

Gandhari never tolerates her sons act to disrespect a woman in the virtuous king's court which is a place that provides justice for the people. She accepts

Paanchali's curse for the whole Kaurava clan as she knows that it will be the lesson for the future men to respect women. Even at the time of war, Gandhari blesses her sons that the victory falls where virtue stands. This shows that she is a queen who holds her dharma and ready to accept her sons' death. As a mother, in order to ensure the safety of her sons, she humiliates herself, reveals the misdeed of her youth and begs Karna to join the Kaurava brothers.

Gandhari by her strong blind meditation, gifts her son Duryodhan a shield which cannot be broken or cracked by anyone, but he wastes her boon by his foolish act and dies in the hands of Bheem. Even when Gandhari loses all her hundred beloved sons because of Panchaali's curse and the owe of Bheem, she does not curse Panchaali and Bheem for their act but instead welcomes them and praises them for their victory. This act shows that she is a woman of justice. She wishes that the kingdom should be ruled by Yudhisthir, who has no desire for pleasurable life. Gandhari with no desire to live the life of queen in the palace starts her journey to the forest with her husband to live a peaceful life. Kunti gracefully recedes to the background and lets Draupadi take over the duty of taking care of her sons. As a mother she protects and guides her sons in every way and guards them amidst all the venal politics of the Kuru court. She is ready to go along with the former king and the queen to serve them. This act of sacrifice expresses her dutiful mind as it is her duty to take care of her husband's brother and his wife in the absence of her husband.

Women play various roles in their life as daughter, wife, mother, sister, friend as depicted in the novel. Unlike the epic, *Mahabharata*, the novel, *The Palace of Illusions*

throws light on the causes, sufferings and challenges of female characters. It highlights their role in domestic life and makes one to understand that they are part of the worldly affairs and the harbinger of the great battle. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee breaks the silence of all the prominent women characters whose silence and subjugation provide them the strength of will to challenge the existing systems that are a burden to their human identity. Hence Draupadi is one of the celebrated women characters of ancient India.

Chapter III

Voice of Sita

The epic, *Ramayana* is an enduring literary classic and serves as a guide for social practices, which have a great deal of influence even today. *Ramayana* is about satisfaction, sacrifice, honesty, and destruction of greed and indiscipline. The epic pictures the birth of goddess, Lakshmi as an avatar to rescue the earth and to destroy the evil kings, who plunder the resources and destroy life through bloody wars and evil conduct. Sita is one of the significant characters in the epic, *Ramayana* who is considered to be one of the *Panchkanyas* and respected as the epitome of all womanly virtues for Hindu women. *Ramayana* depicts women as warriors in domestic life and the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, depicts the incredible journey of women in a patriarchal society and pictures the struggle of modern women to achieve their identity in both their families and society. Chitra Banerjee in *The Forest of Enchantments* explores the characters of women and brings out their qualities like their moral strength and urges them to attain their destiny. The novel brings out the importance of women's role in both their family and society.

Sita has been placed in literature for more than thousands of years because she is a woman relevant across empires and eras as the embodiment of an enduring Hindu culture. Sita can be viewed as a multi-faceted woman who has created an identity in her life and has proved the sanctity of wifedom and womanhood in a patriarchal society. Sita is the central female character of the Hindu epic, *Ramayana*, and the protagonist of the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*. The novel narrates the idyllic life of Sita in Mithila as

the favourite daughter of King Janak which is a retelling and continuation of the original epic *Ramayana*.

Even as a child who is unknown of the world and other matters, Sita's survival, shows the strength that the woman gender holds. Sita's life has been at risk and there has been a chance that the child may have died or been taken away by some evilcreatures or could be eaten by animals in the forest until king Janak and queen Sunaina find her. The survival of Sita at such risks proves that she has been sent to the earth by Bhomidevi in order to glorify the essence and power of womanhood through the life of Sita.

Sita is believed to be an avatar of Goddess Laxmi and is believed to have miraculous healing powers over Nature. She is the daughter of *Bhumi* (The Mother Earth)in reincarnation because the childless King Janak finds her while ploughingthe field as part of a yajna and adopts her as his daughter. She is named Sita which means 'from the furrow' and symbolizes the fertility of the soil. She is brought up as a warrior princess, who is trained in martial artsunder the guidance of a skilled female warrior with a prediction that Sita's future would be challenging. She is the first princess to get an opportunity to learn all the arts and Vedas apart from the usual guidance, which helps her to be defensive. She possesses the qualities of tolerance, kindness, and passion. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni portrays Sita, not as a coy and a docile wife but as the one who combats several challenges to rise from a great transformation of an adopted orphan to a brave warrior princess and ultimately a goddess by breaking the barriers to achieve her great destiny, which is to rule the world.

Sita is one of the *ayonijas* or those not born from the womb of the mother. She is called Janaki, and also is referred to by the name Mythili, as King Janak is the ruler of Mithila. Queen Sunaina readily accepts to adopt the girl child from mother earth. Sita loves and respects her foster-mother Sunaina, who is an epitome of grace, royalty, and sensibility. Sunaina possesses utmost prudence in matters of domesticity and state and has assisted her husband, the King of Mithila, but never superseded him with an awareness that the people of their kingdom laid their trust in the male ruler. As a mother, she tutors Sita that “If you want to stand up against the wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn’t bruise a man’s pride. You will have a better chance of success” (46). She prepares her daughters in a way that they could maintain peace with the sexes and teaches them that, “Pull yourselves together... we come into the world alone and we leave it alone. ...Draw on your inner strength. Remember, you can be your own worst enemy – or your best friend. It’s upto you. And also this: what you can’t change, you must endure” (54). She plays a major role in moulding Sita and her sisters as brave warriors.

Sita and her sister, Urmila enjoy a blissful life gamboling around the palace of Mithila and its extensive gardens. Sita gets married to Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, who wins her hand in the *Swayamvara* as he is the only person able to string the mighty bow of Lord Shiva; her sister Urmila is married to Laxman, the younger brother of Rama. After the grand wedding, Sita encounters numerous hardships as the issue of patriarchy versus women’s liberation is featured strongly in Divakaruni’s novel. Valmiki’s Sita is surrounded by piety and upheld as a goddess of sacrifice while Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Sita is a questioning being, falling prey to the deepest of doubts and bouts

of hopelessness. In the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni voices the grievances of Sita and the other ostracized women characters.

Sita enters the phase of married life fraught with palace intrigues and jealous politics between the three queens of Ayodhya. Kaushalya, Sita's mother-in-law is a conventional and docile woman. Her devotion and affection towards her husband, King Dashrath is marred by his love for the other two queens, Kaikeyi and Sumithra. In a way to stand against the father's polygamist choices, Rama pledges never to marry another woman. Kausalya as the eldest is neglected for her age and is always in deep sorrow and finds her place in the place through her adjustment. Being the mother of Ram, Kausalya becomes the centre of Sita's life and both perceive their role as a queen with a polite attitude as Sita justifies with her interpretation of the word- "Endure . A word solid as a tree trunk. A good word upon which to build a life, I thought. I would learn it, and it would"(73).

Kaikeyi is a charismatic and courageous woman, the mother of Bharath is known as the bringer of calamity to the kingdom. She has always wanted her son to be the king. She symbolizes aggressive feminism through her barbaric and unwomanly manipulation when the King decides to crown Rama as the King. She locks herself to gratify her ambitions and toys with the decisions of her husband. Divakaruni remarks about Kaikeyi as,

Did you know she has an anger chamber in her quarters? I don't understand how Dasharath allows it. He certainly wouldn't have let me have one—not that I've ever wanted something so barbaric and unwomanly. Anyway, Kaikeyi threw off all her ornaments and silks and

refused to eat or drink anything until he apologized and promised that Manthara could stay in Ayodhya as long as she wanted.’ There was outrage in Kaushalya’s voice—that a mere wife should be able to do this. But underneath that I heard a trace of longing. (73)

Kaikeyi exhibits her arrogance by denying to surrender before her husband. She has been severely ostracized on account of her transgressions when her son imprisons her in the palace and the Kingdom plunges into an epoch of darkness as the king passes away and Ram along with Sita and Lakshman is forced to undertake *vanavas*. It is a blind maternal love that coaxed Kaikeyi to sow the seeds of conflict and it is expressed as,

From the veranda, which ran along one edge of the palace, we could see the bordering street. The music was louder here. Men and women danced on the street, strewing flower petals. A ceremonial gate decorated with bright fabrics and coloured flags had been erected. I guessed that Ram and I were supposed to begin a chariot-procession from there. Manthara stopped for a moment, rising on her toes to observe the festivities. ‘Ah, the stupid masses. They’ll soon be dancing to a different tune. Truly, ignorance is bliss, is it not?’ Her words sent a chill through me. I wanted to ask what she meant, but I knew that was exactly what she wished me to do. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. (84)

Kaikeyi is eventually a loser, takes the vow of silence, and begs for mercy.

In the epic, soon after Ram marries Sita, he is exiled to the forest for fourteen years because of a vow that his father had made years earlier to his favourite wife, Kaikeyi. Sita knows that the duty of a wife is to follow the path of her husband and

be with him in all circumstances. Sita has the choice to live the luxurious life in the palace, but she opts to be with her husband because of her sincere love and devotion towards him. She has made up her mind to be brave in the uncertainty and insecurity of the forest life and support him in all hurdles of life. It is her obligation that turns into her choice and finds happiness to live with her husband and support him in all possible ways. Sita immediately gets ready to sacrifice her royal life-style and readily joins Ram on his *vanavas*. She takes challenges and stands by her husband as an ideal consort like Kaikeyi.

King Dashrath marries Sumitra, his third wife and the princess of Kashi, as his other two wives remain childless for a long period of time. Sumitra, the mother of the twins, Laxman and Shatrughna is considered to be the wisest among the other two queens. She is a highly righteous queen and has great equanimity of mind. She has an optimistic outlook in life and faced difficult situations with fortitude. Though younger in age, Sumitra has the maturity to console the senior queen, Kaushalya when the latter plunges into sorrow. She is the first to realize that Rama is the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Sumitra values her role in the family and commits herself to her role as mother and directs both her sons to follow their brothers. She readily sends her sons to support Ram and Bharat in all their endeavours and always protects them, “She’s (Sumitra) waiting at the door when he gets back from helping Ram with governing problems. She’s the one asking if he’s tired and offering him a cool drink. She’s the one serving him food, and asking if he wants second helpings” (97). Sita finds Kausalya as the person who plays the most effective role of a mother who teaches both of her sons the value of dharma and brotherhood. Sita is able to endow Sumitra’s teaching to her sons and is able to forge a stable familial bond between them.

Sita comes across as a sensible, sensitive and intelligent woman who pauses to reason out and find appropriate solutions to the variety of issues that crop up in her life as princess of *Mithila* and daughter-in-law of *Ayodhya*. Her mind is alert to all kinds of patriarchal discrimination that pose obstacles and she does not acquiesce very easily without a critical analysis. Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* is able to articulate her thoughts like “The problem was clearly with the king, but it was the queens who had to pay the price for it”(89).Sita takes up cudgels on behalf of other wronged women like Ahalya and her own sister, Urvashi. She does not stop short of a little manipulation too with the best of intentions if it could help sort out the difficulties of another woman, like in the situation between Kaikeyi and Kaushalya. Sita’s response to the women in her life is very humane and realistic. Her meeting with Ahalya fills her with female compassion and feminine outrage at the wrong done to Ahalya by her husband,Gautam and the lord Indira. Sita finds Ahalya’s story thought-worthy as she visualizes herself with Ahalya :

..., the beautiful, was created by Brahma himself, who then gave her in marriage to Gautam, the ascetic. Things went well— Gautam busy with his austerities, Ahalya devoted to taking care of him—until she came to the notice of Indra. As king of the gods, Indra believed that such a beautiful woman should belong to him. He approached Ahalya, promising her luxuries and pleasures beyond imagining, but she was a virtuous wife and rebuffed him. Indra wasn’t ready to give up, however. He waited until a day when the sage went deep into the forest to perform a special yagna. Then he transformed himself magically and, in the guise of Gautam, came to the ashram and took Ahalya to bed. Returning late at night, Gautam ...

realized what had happened. In his fury, he cursed Indra...(and)...Ahalya
 ...For betraying her sacred marital vows for the sake of bodily
 pleasure, she would be turned into stone.(161)

Sita is petrified of the misguided actions of a learned rishi like Gautam. After knowing the story Sita is amazed at Ahalya's forgiveness of her husband and asks Ahalya how it would be possible to love someone after they distrust one in spite of their faithfulness, "Your husband—he condemned you even before he gave you a chance to speak. You'd been his faithful wife for many years. ...I understand that he did it in anger, that in anger we can lose ourselves. But you—when you were turned back into a woman, you forgave him. ... And do you still love him? (166). Ahalya's answer is cryptic when she tells Sita that she must figure out the answer through her own life's challenges which would be upon her soon. Sita also learns an important lesson about love – once wounded it cannot be healed again. Sita, like Ahalya is bonded with love to Ram and Ahalya's advice helps Sita to make crucial decisions while facing Ram's acquisitions.

Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita is on the lines of feminist ideology. The issue of patriarchy versus women's liberation features strongly in Divakaruni's presentation. Sita's rejection of Ram's appeal to come back to *Ayodhya* after she has been subjected to the humiliation of the *Agnipariksha* and final banishment from the kingdom touches the highest point of feminist independence where there is no compromise in the refusal to appease the male ego and where there is a complete rejection of the need for male support. Ahalya's decision to adopt silence for the rest of her life is small compared to that of Sita to subsume herself into the lap of her mother earth and walk proudly away from her role of wife and mother. This final act of self-respect on the part of Sita is

admirable. Sita's tragedy is brought out more as a personal one, a tragedy of love rather than purely a public one. Before taking her final exit Sita tells Ram that: "I accept your priorities, and understand why they are so important to 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...balance duty with love" (356).

Esteemed as a paragon of virtues, Sita is an ironical mixture of the martyr and the victim. She questions her husband that,

'If you reject me now, word will travel all across Bharatvarsha, and men everywhere will feel that they, too, can reject a wife who has been abducted. Or even been touched against her will. Countless innocent women—as innocent as I am—will be shunned and punished because of your act. Is that dharma? Is that what you want?' (243-244)

The name of Sita is evoked by Indians to inculcate self-sacrificing virtues of sacrifice and acceptance in young girls of marriageable age and yet no one wants their daughters to have a life like Sita. Sita's life is a cursed one; after her grand wedding to the scion of Ayodhya she has to face (with her husband) the jealous wrath of her stepmother-in-law, Kaikeyi, and gets banished from the kingdom thereby sacrifices the luxuries of royal life and is compelled to live the life of ascetics in the forest for fourteen years. Subsequently, she gets abducted by Ravana, King of Lanka after which Rama wages a war to get her back. She has to give an *Agnipariksha*, a test through fire, to prove her purity. The anguish of Sita is revealed as,

Ram's hand tightened around my wrist, his grasp like iron. I knew I'd have a bruise later, but that was the least of my concerns. Stand up against

this huge injustice, I wanted to say. But he shook his head, indicating he didn't want me to speak. I obeyed, but in my mind I begged him. Protest. If nothing else, remind your father of his kingly duty to the people of Ayodhya. (105)

Sita maintains her strength as a hostage in the hands of Raavan with the support of his loyal and faithful wife, Mandodari. She wants to lead her husband down the path of righteousness. It is a great challenge to her when her husband, Raavan kidnaps Sita. She knows that her husband's lust is too great to overcome, and so uses her power to save Sita's life, when Raavan tries to behead her when she refuses to marry him. She tries her best to make a better person out of him, which is extremely admirable and brave. She never becomes jealous of Raavan's affection for Sita. The strength of her character parallels that of Sita in every way.

Mandodari knows that her husband's lust would bring downfall to their lives and so repeatedly advises Raavan to let free Sita. She gives a lot of hope to Sita saying that she will be rescued by her husband. Sita admires Mandodari for her kindness and boldness in all her actions. Mandodari remains the most ardent woman in the novel, who according to the author is the epitome of queenly virtues. She obeys her husband and when she encounters crucial circumstances, she stands firm to confront the dangers with her wits. She counsels in the royal decisions and encourages women to exercise the power that they hold to protect themselves. She even stands against her husband to protect Sita stating that:

The woman made a prophecy that Lanka will be destroyed by her husband. You will die—our sons will die—no one would be left even to

cremate the dead. That's exactly what I dreamed last night. I was trying to tell you about it earlier, but you wouldn't listen. I saw the entire city in flames. I saw on the ground the severed head of my beloved son, your heir Meghnad. I saw the goddess Chamundi who protects our city ascending to the heavens, her face turned away from my pleas. ...Send back this witch, this bad-luck creature, before she brings ruin on us all. Please, ... I'm begging you. (216)

Mandodari considers Sita to be her abandoned daughter and tries all the means as a mother to save her daughter rather than the kingdom. She goes against all odds to help Sita to escape from the Ashoka Forest. Mandodari's support gives a way of sunrise to Sita when Hanuman, the great devotee of Ram comes to rescue Sita, and carry her home on his back, but Sita refuses the offer knowing that it is the sole destiny of Ram to overcome Raavan and rescue her. Sita suggests that Ram should come to her rescue since she feels that people will ridicule the valour of Ram saying that he could not rescue his wife by himself.

Sita encounters the tortures of Rakshashis, who causes threat to break her thoughts and physique: "They made a game of poking at me with sharp nails that bruised my skin just when I fell asleep, or suddenly transforming themselves into horrifying monster-shapes to startle me, or rushing at me, teethbared, as though to devour me"(226). The Rakshashis' constantly try to lure Sita into the belief that the death of Ram. Surpanakha, Ravana's sister for whom Sita, is captured for vengeance lurks to threaten Sita and she foreshadows most of the dreads Sita undergoes in the future.

Sarama, Vibheeshan's wife and Ravana's sister-in-law guides Sita through the turmoil. Sarama shares her role as the wife of the traitor. She is worried about the life of her husband and son which makes Sita wonder "... love's contradictions, how it fills us with joy but also with worry for welfare of the loved one and pain for his suffering"(229).Sita learns the ordeal of a woman thoroughly when she is rescued from Lanka and Ram decides to leave Sita stating that:

I have rescued you, Sita,..I have built a bridge over the ocean and crossed over it with my allies of the monkey nations. My followers and I have suffered greatly in the process, for the rakshasa army was a powerful one. Now we have slain Ravan, and set you free. Here ends my duty to you, and my responsibility. Go where you will to live out the rest of your days...But I cannot take you back to Ayodhya with me. Ravan abducted you from my home. You've lived in his palace for a year now. Who knows what kind of relationship you've had with him—' (288-289)

Sita is furious when she hears the harsh words from Ram and fears losing her reverence that could tarnish the name of her parents. She defends herself from the acquisition and fights for her dignity. She prays to *Agnidev*, the holy fire, to prove her chastity and innocence. The gods deliver Sita unscathed to Rama but they affirm her purity by reproaching Ram for his distrust. Though Sita is not literally sacrificed during her *Agnipariksha*, her willingness to submit to the trial by walking into the fire and the subsequent praise that she receives for her willingness substantiates her as a sacrificial woman. She makes women understand their unconventional role of self-sacrifice.

Ram apologizes and Sita forgives him. She in the process is “...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” (294) and she becomes the light of hope for all the women. She embraces the role of the queen and dutifully takes the responsibilities of a wife, daughter-in-law, and motherly figure to Ram’s brothers and Hanuman. Sita becomes more equal to Ram in solving governmental and familial issues.

The final blow comes to Sita and now pregnant is finally exiled from *Ayodhya* by her husband on hearing derogatory words from a washerman about her chastity. Her anger is towards Rama for banishing her is revealed as,

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. (357)

Sita stands against all the cruelties committed against women and stands as a role model for the world population to review their actions towards women. She wishes to die rather than tolerate the repeated need for a woman to prove her innocence. She reproaches the idea of women being tested and asks women to stand up for themselves.

The power structure of the king plays a critical role in shaping society’s perspective. It is because the king is seen as the representation of God and has control over what is just and unjust for his people. Sita protests against her husband because she thinks that her husband has the power to change this injustice in society. Sita realizes the

structural power and argues that the king should be more considerate of his actions and words. It is a part of Sita's struggle against oppression that happened to herself and is aware that other women could experience the same situation. In feminism, it is important not only see the inequality of ours but also the other women. The more important is to save other women from the punishment that they do not deserve. Women, who are harassed should be treated as the victim, not the perpetrator, but in fact, society still thinks that women should be accountable for the harassment that they experienced.

In the forest at Valmiki's ashram, she gives birth to the twins Luv and Kush and finally reenters the earth, the womb of her mother to escape from the cruelties of this world. Her unresisting acceptance of the decisions imposed upon her by others, she has been immortalized as a paragon of duty, devotion, and sacrifice. Divakaruni retells the story of Sita and Rama, trying to give it a more human and realistic account, making Sita less of a Goddess and more of a woman with natural and human instincts; that make her laugh with joy, that make her heart beat with love and passion, that make her weep in frustration and grief. Divakaruni says that the story of Sita haunts her for three reasons, firstly, because Sita is intensely human, secondly, because her choices and reactions stem from courage (though it is easily mistaken for meekness because she is not assertive) and thirdly, because of Ram and Sita's tragic love story. Thus, in the author's note, Divakaruni writes:

I'm going to write the story of Sita, I said, 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 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.

(vii)

The novel begins in the ashram when Sita reads the Valmiki's *Ramayan* from the man's perspective and she feels dejected and says "...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"(12). Sita with Valmiki, reasons and analyse the need for women to understand each other as Valmiki "...haven't understood a woman's life, the heartbreak at the core of her joys, her unexpected alliances and desires, her negotiations where, in the hope of keeping one treasure safe, she must give up another"(13). Sita is urged to write her version and the story begins from a women's perspective, *Sitayan*.

Revisiting the facts, in the prologue to the novel, Divakaruni gives an exposition to her *Sitayan*. Living in exile in the ashram of the sage Valmiki, Sita is given the manuscript of the work he had been composing for decades, for her approval because he says that it contained her story too. But the name he has given his work brought mixed feelings of rage and sorrow to Sita's mind, for Valmiki had chosen to call his story the *Ramayan* – the story of Rama. Finally, Sita decides to take control of her life, for once. Sita tells the sage Valmiki that he has captured everything beautifully, the histories of heaven and earth, the wars, the weddings, the farewells and betrayals, the palace and the

forest, everything in superb poetry, sublime descriptions and perfect rhythm but, scarcely able to control her anger, she says, "...what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't even know my exhilaration, how it felt- first, in the forest and then in Ayodhya-when I was the most beloved woman in creation" (2). Valmiki tells Sita that, she must write the story herself, "...for only you know it" (2). Sita starts to write her own story and revisits her lesson from all the women in her life:

Kaikeyi, second queen of Ayodhya, who wrested our throne from us out of blind devotion to her son, only to be hated by him for it; Ahalya, her beauty turned to stone by a husband's jealous fury; Surpanakha, wild enchantress of the forest, whose gravest crime was to desire the wrong man; Mandodari, wife to the legendary demon king, forced to watch her kingdom fall into ruin and her beloved son perish because of her husband's obsession with another woman; Urmila, my sweet sister, the forgotten one, the one I left behind as I set off with blithe ignorance on my forest adventure with my husband. (14)

Sita feels a sense of need for the other women in her life, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, Ahalya, Mandodari, and her own sister Urmila as she feels them asking her to, "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten-or maligned and used as cautionary tales" (4). Sita promises to write their stories too because without them her own story would be incomplete, and thus composes the *Sitayan*.

In the modern context, Sita's story as revived by Divakaruni, is one that falls into the category of issues like victimization and single motherhood. Divakaruni's attempt is to relate mythology into an identifiable reality recognizing the need to build a narrative that breaks the norm, though she has not tampered with the original story-line.

Divakaruni follows the original story-line faithfully without any fictional additions to the plot or characterization. The only thing Divakaruni has done is to tell the story from the view point of Sita. She says that it is unmistakable that "...the story of Sita and Rama is one of the greatest and most tragic love stories-not just in our Indian culture but in the world" (ix). In the process of writing, *The Forest of Enchantments* she realised that 'the novel became a meditation on the nature of love'(ix), and it is her endeavour to be able to do justice to both Sita as well as Rama:

...I hope that, while focusing on the many wonderful, exciting and surprising layers to Sita's character. I've simultaneously been able to portray Ram as the complex being that he is: noble, earnest, devoted to his wife, but beset by challenges of his own and forced to choose between his public role of king and his private role of husband and lover. (ix)

Chitra Divakaruni sets up the context very skilfully in the prologue of the novel. As Sita reads the manuscript of Ramayana is handed over to her by sage Valmiki, she realizes that it is no doubt a poem that is superb, with sublime descriptions and perfect rhythm, but at the same time, she points out to the sage:

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 I felt.... (2)

The injustice in the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments* reveals the unfair treatment caused by the oppression which is repeatedly experienced by women. The unjust treatment of women is portrayed as,

'O king of Ayodhya, you know I'm innocent, and yet, unfairly, you're asking me to step into the fire. You offer me a tempting prize indeed—to live in happiness with you and my children. But I must refuse. Because if I do what you demand, society will use my action forever to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving the innocent will fall on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. (356-357)

Sita is a woman, who crafts her relationships and imbibes motherhood from four great women like queen Mandodari, Ahalya Bhoomidevi, and queen Sunaina. Sita is considered to be a sign of power by each female. She is remembered for her virtuous nature, which is a clear reflector of qualities received from the four legendary ladies. Sita is a brave woman of extraordinary brilliance and immeasurable patience. Traditionally, Hinduism has championed Sita as the role-model and epitome of domestic wifely duty towards one's husband. Sita is identified as a goddess and she is approached by worshipers not as deity who provides blessings, but rather as an intermediary figure who can petition her husband for the dispensation of grace upon human beings.

Sita is a central character in a number of popular Hindu festivals. Rama Navami, the final day of a larger nine-days festival called *Vasanthotsavam*, the festival of Spring, which is considered the wedding anniversary of Ram and Sita. Hindus worldwide direct their prayers to Ram and Sita, as well as their close companions. Sita is also widely acknowledged alongside her husband during the ten-day *Vijayadashami* festival, appearing as a major character in a dramatic performance of the *Ramayana* called the *Rama-Lila*, which is performed throughout India. Furthermore, during Diwali, the Festival of Lights, lamps and candles are customarily lit in order to reenact the legend when oil lamps are lit along the path to Ayodhya to guide Ram and Sita back home after Raavan had been defeated.

In the epic, *Ramayana*, Sita's character embodies an exalted philosophical and creative alteration. Sita is related to Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Parvathi, the three powerful goddesses for her supreme muse of artistic inspiration and for her capacity to nourish all creatures through the Earth, and the yogini, who can renounce and transcend all limitations. Sita learns to accept or sacrifice anything to achieve her destiny on the path of dharma from her three mothers-in-law Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra. Kaushalya is the powerful woman in the epic. She is the eldest wife of king Dhasrath and the mother of Sita's consort, Ram. She is born the *Manushatrupa* in her previous birth and her tough penance and deep reverence for Lord Vishnu have pleased him. Vishnu has then blessed her to bear him as a child in her next incarnation and so Vishnu is born to her as Ram. Kaushalya is a woman of great character and penance. When Dasharath marries Kaikeyi and later, Sumitra she has no malice in her heart. She accepts them without any negative emotions of jealousy or pretense of acceptance. In fact, she assures them that they would

both be like her sisters. Kaushalya loves the sons of her sisters, Kaikeyi and Sumitra equally. She has never differentiated between the heirs of the Ayodhya kingdom.

Kaushalya serves as an example for an ideal mother to raise her son, Ram in the path of dharma. She proves that a woman moulds the future of man. She does not mourn when her own son is sent to exile, instead, she accepts the situation and also supports the king's decision to make Bharat, the ruler of Ayodhya. Sita learns from her to accept or to tolerate anything without complaint. Thus, she accepts Ram's decision when she is sent for exile to the forest during her maternal period. She raises her sons as noble warriors and fulfills her duty as a mother.

Kaikeyi, the second mother-in-law of Sita is pictured to be a shield of King Dashrath by breaking all the stereotypes that only men can protect his wife because he is physically strong rather than a woman. She never steps back to fight for her kingdom even when the opponent is a glorious warrior. She accompanies her husband at the time of war because she has learnt the martial arts and is ever ready to fight for her kingdom. She is not a woman to accept her fate and Sita too learns the same. She never fears to fight for her rights in the patriarchal society. Sita learns to accept her fate but tries to be brave and fights for her rights. She is ready to face death, when Ram asks her to undergo the fire trial to prove her chastity.

Sumitra, the third mother-in-law of Sita is the wisest among the queens of Ayodhya. Sumitra is considered equal to Kaushalya in status. She is serene, sweet natured and courteous and therefore a favourite to all. She is balanced in her outlook and friendly with everyone around. It is because of her friendly disposition that she earns the name Sumitra, a good friend. She treats Kaushalya and Kaikeyi, the other two queens,

with sisterly love and they too respond to her unselfish affection. She never steps back in a helpless situation and is a strong woman to find solutions for the most hazardous problems in the kingdom. She serves as a supporting pillar for king Dashrath to rule the kingdom.

Sumitra holds the position of a king, who holds the glory of Ikshvaku dynasty. After the death of the king, she never expresses her grief but trains Bharat to rule the kingdom in the absence of the king and Ram. This immense strength is seen in Sita as well, especially when she is prisoned by Raavan. Ayodhya is ruled by Ram with Sita's advices to enhance the kingdom and expressed a great concern for the people in the kingdom. Thus, the three great mothers-in-law, share an amicable relationship and stand as the role models for their daughters-in-law, especially for Sita.

The three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Shrutkirti serve as the glorified daughters-in-law of the kingdom by following and helping their mothers-in-law and also by supporting their husbands to follow the path of dharma. The novel gives voice to the silent muffled or stereotypical voices of the women in the epic. The three younger sisters of Sita, or otherwise the daughters-in-law of Ayodhya, live in the palace, yet they live the life of vanaprastha, after their sister's exile into the forest. These sisters enjoy their life as the princesses of their kingdom, only after Sita's return from the fourteen years of exile.

Urmila, the immediate sister of Sita, gives the courage to her husband and sends him along with Ram and Sita. She lives up to her role of being a *Dharampatni* by helping her husband tread the path of righteousness as Sita does for Ram. She lives vanaprastha life in the palace. Urmila's sacrifice for her husband is the actual Tapasya, a real understanding of life, which makes Lakshman so strong that he is able to kill Indrajeet

Meghnath, son of Raavan who is a strong warrior. Urmila is known to be a great scholar and a talented painter. She spends the entire fourteen years by painting the scene of Sita's wedding. This act shows her love towards her sister and brother-in-law. She is a significant contributor to the events in the story and one of the strongest characters. It is Urmila who comes out as the most influential character – outspoken yet respectful, headstrong yet calm, strong in the face of adversity, a learned scholar, with an ability to forgive, and to forget the wrong thing. She is pictured as an incarnation of silence.

Sita conjures up the image of a chaste woman or an Ideal woman but in the modern times the chaste ideal becomes negative when a woman is victimized and oppressed. She obeys her husband's commands, remains faithful to him, follows him and serves her in-law, raises her children and does the duty whether she likes it or not. It all depends on how one perceives Sita as an ideal wife. Sita can be related to the modern woman as she is seen as a liberated woman despite her complicated life. She is outspoken, had the freedom to express herself, asserted herself whenever she wanted to get her way, loved her husband, was faithful to him, served her family well, faced her suspicious husband, tries to appease him, reconciled her marriage and later accepted her separation and raised her well-balanced children as a single mother. Despite the terrors and temptations and complicated life, her greatness stands out of her ability to remain true to her principles. Chitra Banerjee rightly concludes in the voice of modern Sita that it was time when women need not prove their "...innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!"(421).

Women fulfil their duties as ideal wives by respecting and supporting men's decisions and never expect men to praise their virtue. Today's women make men to believe and agree that they have aspirations, abilities, and qualities better than man. Women are the driving force of social change. Thus, the happiness and prosperity of the men in the epic are caused by the noble qualities of women. The women characters gave their husbands, tremendous support to achieve their destinies. The glory of men cannot be highlighted without the presence of women characters in the epic.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

In the Vedic culture, women have always been given the highest level of respect, freedom, protection, and safety. It is believed that if women live in grief, the family will perish. The houses, in which female relations are not duly honoured, pronounce a curse and perish completely. Hence men should seek welfare by honouring women. The honour towards women should be maintained in everyday life. In Vedic dharma, women stand as a decisive force in spirituality and the foundation of moral development. She is the harbinger of good fortune and health. The embodiment of women is present in both the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The two epics centre on the stories of two women, Draupadi and Sita. They are the torchbearers of women's rights. They both play a vital role and both have to endure a specific level of challenge in their marriage life.

The Palace of Illusions is Draupadi's narration of the epic, *Mahabharata* while *The Forest of Enchantments* is Sita's version of yet another epic, *Ramayana*.

Divakurani's attempt to shift the narration voice to Draupadi and Sita not only allows multiple perspectives and possibilities but also a step towards realist and ironic fiction from myth and epic. With a semblance of truth and human interest incorporated in mythologies and fantasy, readers are allowed to interpret the epic and fictional world. The novels reveal how the accepted 'norms' of patriarchy have an impact on women, and also explore the hidden possibilities of subtle and obvious bonding of hatred and attraction which were overlooked. The social interaction in the two contemporary novels are not assumed to be fixed positions of good and evil, of right and wrong, but rather the

dynamics of the tensions of relationships, as reflected in conflicting emotions of love, hatred, humiliation, and self-esteem, whether in a male or female. Draupadi and Sita are symbols of Indian women representing chastity. Draupadi is *Agnija* or born out of the fire and hence she is wrath incarnate and shows her fiery nature in all that she does while Sita is *Ayonija* or born out of the earth and is Bhoomidevi's daughter hence shows patience and perseverance.

Divakaruni in the novels, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments*, has tried to bring out the past into the present in a different way by showing the story of love, betrayal, revenge, war, freedom, and friendship. The life of Draupadi and Sita seems to break the shackles of the stereotypical concept of women's subjugation. Divakaruni portrays Draupadi and Sita as contemporary women, who want to express their thoughts and ideas to the world. She reimagines the story of the epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* while she reimages the portrayal of Draupadi and Sita. By their voice of protest and resistance at various junctures of their life, Draupadi and Sita have positioned themselves as an equal thus empowered in the patriarchal society, in Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, and *The Forest of Enchantments* respectively. The novels examine the relationship between women's exploitation and nature, as well as the conflict between civilization, nature, man, and woman. In addition to that, through the myriads of Sita and Draupadi, *The Palace of Illusions* and *The Forest of Enchantments* focus not just on her spiritual being but their identity as a woman.

From ancient times, the restrictions and liabilities that are imposed upon girl children, related to their upbringing and finding a suitable match are immensely contradicting. These assumptions often have had a great impact on society and social

norms. In the great epic *Mahabharata*, the institution for the education of girls is rarely depicted and is often at home. Divakaruni presents a learned discussion on the status of women from the Brahmanas, sages, and hermits who are presented in the novel.

Divakaruni defies the general norms to represent the girl children, who sit at her father's knees and listen intently to the discussions of the learned guests and gathered knowledge. The girls have filled corpus of knowledge, not only about social sciences and religious codes but also about the lives of historical personalities and customs of different countries.

Draupadi and Sita are the greatest princesses, who used their knowledge to the betterment of the world. They are naturally curious, intelligent, logical and ethical compared to their male counterparts. They have analyzed the actions of everyone and had always acted according to Dharma. They are endowed with intelligence and qualities of goodness. They have presented women with self-confidence, dutifulness, morality, modesty, discipline, and selflessness for which they received appreciation and praise from others. They are the epitome of the dharma, who have followed the societal rules and have helped others to navigate the path of morality.

Sita and Draupadi are completely feminine, insofar as they stand for everything that a woman can be. As narrative figure their actions and speeches create the movements of the epic and they are unique. Draupadi has a certain highly charged anger about her, which is unconditional and not to be mitigated. Her lust for revenge is distinctive among the other women in *Mahabharata*. Draupadi has an astounding beauty too. She combines in her person both astounding, unearthly beauty as well as a devastating and overwhelming capacity for vengeance.

The insult of Kaurava's in the sabha is a severe abnegation and abjection of Draupadi and her husbands, which drives the narrative from this point to the end. The wrath of Draupadi is the fuel that propels the epic toward the massive destruction of Kurukshetra. The scene is not simply that of humiliation, but of debasement. Dharma has been completely abandoned in the interests of domination and rivalry. The burgeoning conflict between rival sides in the novel supplies the primary terrain for the clash between the cousins, who struggle for power and sovereignty. Only a rather perfunctory description of Draupadi's innate desires, aspirations, and frustrations is portrayed in the epic. The remarkable 'Virgin', never asked anything for herself. Born unwanted, thrust abruptly into a polyandrous marriage, she seems to have had a profound awareness of being an instrument in bringing about the extinction of an effective epoch so that a new age could take birth. Being aware, Draupadi offers her entire being as a flaming sacrifice in that holocaust in which Krishna is the presiding deity.

Draupadi's entire life is spent on longing for the love of Karna, for respect, for love from her husband and for a simple life devoid of crafty politics and lecherous enemies. She has a sequence of questions in the end, some of which are answered according to the norms of the social status of a woman and some were just left unanswered because the male authority never considers them to be significant. She traverses through the grandeur of the queen with her heroic husbands. Her disrobing in the Kuru Hall and then exile, and finally returns to the kingdom only to witness her relatives being wiped out of the most vicious war. In the same respect, it is a journey of women in some parts of the world even today – spent a lifetime of efforts just to be recognized as a human being and not just as an object of lust for power brokering.

The novel traverses through the social injustice done to Draupadi and the author's objective is to depict the real story of Draupadi and her character, so that it brings her the honour she deserves for holding Pandavas together and being an agent of change during her times. The underlying mysteries of Draupadi's mind, the innumerable strains of modern life, the alienation of individuals, the domestic philosophy, and corruption in the narrow lanes of politics and moral degradation, are depicted in Draupadi's own perspective in the novel. The novel can be considered to be a complaint from Draupadi on the justice denied by the world. On the last journey, when Draupadi is in isolation, she realizes that there is no reward for her lifelong struggle to strengthen Dharma. Affection, love, sacrifice, and surrender, is what Draupadi tolerates to preserve husbands Dharma, but she always received the world's mockery, sneers, innuendoes, scorn, and slander. In the novel, Draupadi presents all the deeper aspects of her mind that lay submerged in her. Draupadi is represented as the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion, and power.

Divakarunipicturizes the emotional or psychological reasons behind the action of Draupadi. Draupadi's transformation from a headstrong eager princess to embittered vengeance-seeking queen is quite reasonably put down to her public shaming and the loss of her fame. Draupadi's psyche is revealed as victimized and she resists the power of male control. Her characterization marks her temper and capacity for vengeance. She endures a fierce civil war, domestic power struggles, and the perils of attraction to elusive men. She brings a feminine sensibility to her magical birth in the fire to her final moments as she brings an end to adharma.

Draupadi bears witness to her fate with significant observations and a powerful heart. While Draupadi's destiny remains as the main theme of the novel and her secret love for Karna is another theme. In this respect, the author shifts far away from the storyline of the great epic, *Mahabharata*. Draupadi is enslaved by desire and hatred. Brimming with betrayals, religious and war-torn streets, *The Palace of Illusions*, is a journey experienced from the vantage point of Panchali, a powerful woman, driven by love, honour, and in the end, a fate that unfolds despite her resolve. Her fears, her insecurities, outbursts of temper, love for brother and unequalled love for Karna – all makes her a modern, natural, distinct woman. Her unrequited love for Karna and her heartbreak at his indifference, her quiet rivalry with her mother-in-law, and her pain at not being able to capture Arjuna's heart – all these give the picture of an ordinary woman far removed from the mythical character.

In the novel, Draupadi's reactions are that of a normal person, a woman who has been much maligned and misunderstood. Draupadi is a fiercely loyal wife and a hot-tempered critic of her five husbands and her father too. Once she remarks that she and her brother were mere pawns to be sacrificed by for king Draupad. The cause and effect of the pattern of the epic are most evident in the novel. Draupadi in the novel is a fiery female redefining the world of warriors, Gods, and the ever-manipulating hands of fate. It is the fire and energy in Draupadi, the spirit to fight injustice, and her multifaceted presence that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman of all ages.

In the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's banishment from the oppressive setting that suppresses her voice and individuality to an enchanted journey in the forest, a

realm of possibilities and freedom enables her to voice her side of the truth. This is an act of progress and a test that leads to individual empowerment. In the article “Hindu mythology in Indian Comics and Animations for Young People,” Anuja Madan says about how Sita’s decision of fire trial affects women in the recent times as, “Sita’s embodiment of the *pativrata* ideal has led ordinary Indian women to protest the Sita model. Now we must refuse to be Sitas. By becoming a Sita and submitting to the fire ordeal, a woman loses her identity. The fire ordeal is imposed on women today in every city, every home” (36). Sita sacrifices her wishes and self-respect in order to obey her husband’s words which leads women to take up different types of fire trials in recent times.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni opens up with lots of complexities and strengths of Sita’s character. She is an active decision-maker with a lot of inner strength in difficult situations. She has added to her character, the elements that she believes make them timeless, interesting, and a complex woman. She has made the changes based on her understanding of the original epic. The description of Sita is an eternal portrait. The writer has attempted to reveal her inner being, her motives, feelings and heartbreaks.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Forest of Enchantments* provides a space for the misunderstood, misjudged, and marginalised women in *Ramayana*, one of the renowned Indian epics of all time to speak and liberate themselves. This proves that fictions demand analysis and attention, especially reinterpretations of myths. Divakaruni changes the one-sided and blinded vision and shifts the gaze on other, women and nature. Sita constantly reweaves and challenges the boundaries of social and moral norms in *Sitayan*. Divakaruni’s attempt to shift the narration voice to Sita not only allows multiple

perspectives and possibilities but also a step towards realist and ironic fiction from myth and epic. Conclusively, Sita's banishment from the oppressive setting that suppresses her voice and individuality to an enchanted journey in the forest, a realm of possibilities and freedom enables her to voice her side of the truth. This is an act of progress, a test that leads to individual empowerments. Through her voice of protest and resistance at various junctures of her life Sita, has positioned herself as an equal thus empowered in the patriarchal society.

Since birth, the psyche of an Indian woman is shaped with the ideals of Sita but society has misinterpreted her qualities and wisdom. She is remembered by posterity for her forbearance and ethereal nature because of which the dictums of society expected each woman to emulate the attributes of her character. The patriarchal setup never recognized her actual strength and always assigned her ductile image to match. The author of the novel portrays her character more convincingly. It is our society for whom a woman is ideal till the time she is suppressed beyond her individuality and existence has no meaning. The darkness of patriarchal society fails to understand the real qualities of Sita. She is the one who raises questions not only for her own rights but for those who are the muted sufferers. In Lanka, she guards herself against evil eyes and break conventions to sustain her identity. She is more assertive about the decisions she makes in her life. She knows how to be mild in any relationship without losing one's honour. *Sitayan* as a whole is the poignant thread of narratives that imparts lucid magnitude into the lives of contemporary women. Her autonomous voice sheds new insight into the name 'Sita'. When a woman is blessed with the old saying "may you be like Sita", it reflects that a

woman must possess both sides of her nature— of sublimity, of humanism and at the same time furious to preserve her honour and dignity when it is in jeopardy.

The retelling of Sita's story is a continuation of the original but marks a departure in the way it is told. Valmiki's Sita is surrounded by piety and upheld as a goddess of sacrifice but Divakaruni's Sita falls a prey to the deepest of doubts and bouts of hopelessness. In fact, *The Forest of Enchantments* creates a rounded-off character more endearing to our hearts. Divakaruni's Sita becomes more relevant in the new world of feminism. The issue of patriarchy versus women's liberation features strongly in Divakaruni's presentation. Sita's rejection of Ram's appeal to return to Ayodhya after she has been subjected to the humiliation of the *Agnipariksha* and final banishment from the kingdom touches the highest point of feminist independence where there is no compromise in the refusal to appease the male ego and where there is a complete rejection of the need for male support. Ahalya's decision to adopt silence for the rest of her life is small when compared to that of Sita to subsume herself into the lap of her mother earth and walk proudly away from her role of wife and mother. This final act of self-respect on the part of Sita is admirable. Sita's tragedy is brought out more as a personal one, a tragedy of love rather than purely a public one.

In ancient Vedic literature women are elevated to Devi (Goddess), and they are turned in to myths and legends. Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence, while Sita absorbs all harshly imposed desolation and mortification of the male ego. As protagonists, Sita accepts, accommodates, and withdraws while Draupadi resents, rejects, and involves herself in the process of life. They have been used as a functional device or a mere tool in the hands of patriarchy. In spite of their strong

standing in the social hierarchy, she has no freedom or choice and hence no agency. She has been repeatedly blamed for several incidents in the epic and they remain as one of the most tragic figures of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

While delineating a character of Sita from mythology in the current times Divakaruni feels that she teaches women to stand up for their rights without hating those who cause pain. Indeed, Sita, a mature character, is the epitome of motherhood and one who possesses all the good qualities that a traditional Indian woman is expected to possess. She is the first single mother in literature, who gives birth to twins in the forest and raises them up all alone without any support from her husband or father. The author continually strives for symmetry between kindness and wickedness; love and wicked longing; nobility and unrestrained pride; individual and worldly, while evolving each of the women characters. Divakaruni's judgment of Sita strengthens her image as a virtuous woman.

Draupadi and Sita are inherently and instinctively highly potent figures, who wish to revolutionize the patriarchal dictates and societal norms. They function as a living repository of law and perception and are the ones who design what is to happen or should be done next. They can be viewed as a representative of both the modern woman and equally that of the marginalised sections of the society. *Sitayan* commends the significance of womanhood. It talks about mindfulness, enlightens the dull mind by giving intelligent thinking, a sort of guide dependent on the compassionate ground, and empowers contemporary women.

All the marginalized voices, regardless of their social foundation, combine and structure a feeling of interconnectedness. The tale encourages the female network to

shield their honor and nobility and solicits them to be individualistic while yielding their lives for their friends and family. Divakaruni establishes the personae of Draupadi and Sita by retelling the tale of both characters, which exhibits a kind of self-interpretation. Both struggle throughout the novels for their self-respect and identity in the patriarchal world and come across as exceptional, multifaceted, and motivating in their quiet strength.

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