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## Thematic analysis of “*The Forest of Enchantment*” by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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### Abstract :

The present research paper, a thematic analysis of *The Forest of Enchantment* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a retelling of the great Indian epic, Ramayana from Sita’s point of view. This research paper explores important themes like female empowerment, love and devotion, identity and self-discovery, nature and environment, sacrifice and duty, feminism and gender roles, justice and morality, enchantment and illusion, and conflict and resolution.

The paper illustrates how the writer challenges gender norms, empowers the female protagonist, and tackles complex ethical dilemmas by analyzing Sita's Character and her hard journey in the forest. It will highlight the significance of retelling mythological narratives from a feminist perspective and contribute to the broader understanding of literature feminism and cultural reinterpretation. The objective of the study is to provide a source for interpreting works with more meanings and dimensions. And hypothesis of the study is a gateway to understanding Indian mythology from a contemporary point of view.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Retelling Mythology, Gender role, Identity and Self-discovery

### Introduction:

Mythology is an inseparable part of Indian culture. And it always influences the political, religious, and social life of an individual. It contains universal truths and timeless themes that resonate with different cultures and eras. Through retelling mythology authors can reinterpret and investigate these themes and make them relevant to contemporary readers through their creative writing techniques.

Retelling in Indian mythology is a fresh approach to writing in India retelling inspires readers to revisit the epic and myth. Retelling shows us various dimensions of myth and epic. Retelling is a favorite and very intimate for today’s readers. In this area, famous writers are Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anand Neelkanthan, Kavita Kane, Volga etc.

For this research paper, the researcher selected Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “*The Forest of Enchantment*”, which is the retelling of Ramayana from Sita’s perspective. She not only retells the famous epic but also challenges and reinterprets its themes. This research paper uses feminist literary theory to dissect key elements within the novel. Analysis to break down important aspects

of the book. Through an analysis of themes such as female empowerment, love and devotion, identity and self-discovery, etc. this research aim is to dissect Divakaruni's story and investigate the significant consequences of her feminist reinterpretation. The angle of this book is original and respectful to the text of Valmiki. Sita's life has so many challenges and through this book, readers can see how Sita deals with these challenges in a very elegant and courageous manner, we all could learn from that. She is very courageous, she goes through amazing ups and downs and she is never passive overall she has quite a strength, Divakaruni brings out on one hand the very human nature of Sita. It also brings out on the other hand that all women have goddesses inside of themselves so the writer wants women of today to read Sita's strong and then access the goddess the strength, the power, the shakti which have all women. This book gives voice to all female characters of Ramayana we already know about male characters of Ramayana, all battles, they have been glorified, they have been sung but all women are quiet, Such as 14 years life of Urmila and other women.

The study of the themes of this novel is not merely an academic exercise but a journey into the complexity of female agency, societal expectations, and the complexities of moral choices. Using feminist literary theory as its main theoretical framework, this research article critically examines the themes found in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments." Gender roles, power relations, and societal expectations are reflected in literature. These themes can be examined through the lens of feminist literary theory, which has its roots in the larger field of feminist studies. Key components of the theoretical framework include Feminism and Gender Roles, Female Empowerment, Love and Devotion, Identity and Self-Discovery, Nature and the Environment, Sacrifice and Duty, Justice and Morality, Enchantment and Illusion, and Conflict and Resolution.

### **Feminism and Gender Roles:**

Divakaruni challenges traditional gender roles through the depiction of Sita. Stereotypical images of women in the Ramayana are challenged by her brilliance, resiliency, and capacity to make decisions that go against social norms. The story inspires readers to consider gender stereotypes and find power in the variety of feminine expressions.

Sita is a wonderful icon for all women of many centuries in terms of how a woman deals with things. And teach us to speak against injustice and unlawful things.

*"I wanted to say, not all women are weak and helpless like you think. For all you know, I might be of help to you. But I remembered my mother's teachings, kept those thoughts to myself, and chose my words carefully."* (chapter 12 page no 111)

In this line Divakaruni shows Sita is not weak and helpless like Ram thinks, The perception of men was that women are not strong and they are helpless but here Sita is not like that which thinks Ram. She is strong but Ram's perception is that all women are weak, she says I am not helpless like you think, I might be of help to you. She challenges general perceptions about women through these lines. This line gives additional information about gender roles that is how her mother taught her not to speak or not use words that are hurt her husband, and women not allowed to speak reality because it hurt her man.

*'Lakshman refused to take me with him,' Urmila said. Her voice was calm and emotionless, and this frightened me more than if she'd been weeping. 'He said he had his hands full taking care of Ram, who was his first duty.*

*"Didi's going with you," I said. "Why can't I?" .....*

*"I'm ordering you to stay here and take care of the mothers," he said. "If you love me you'll do what I'm asking you. You'll do your duty."*

*. "Isn't it my duty to take care of you?" I asked him.*

*"No, he said. "Your duty is to obey me."*

*"What's your duty towards me?" I asked, barring his path.*

*"I can't engage in philosophical discussion right now," he said. He set me aside and left.' (116)*

This is the conversation at the time Ram is going to exile and it is almost done Lakshman will go with Ram.

But we had seen the scene as meekly following him even in all the pictorial depictions Ram is in front, Sita is in the middle and Lakshman is in the back. She is being protected she is just kind of going along but it is not here same case. Ram tells her please stay at home you will be safe and take care of your in-laws. Sita says no way I'm not going to do that she says I am married to you, my place is at your side, I don't want to stay here without you. She does argue and she wins that but not in the same case with her sister Urmila in the above part of the citation Urmila argues with her husband Lakshman, after he refuses her to go with him for exile then she says her sister Sita "Lakshman refused to take me with him." Her voice was calm and emotionless. But here Urmila raises questions against Lakshman. but he emotionally blackmails her. He said to Urmila, "If you love me, you'll do what I'm asking you. You'll do your duty." Then she said that what is his duty. She raises questions that are against patriarchy.

Divakaruni challenges traditional gender roles through the portrayal of Sita and other women characters in Ramayana. Sita's intelligence, resilience, and ability to make choices that defy societal expectations challenge stereotypical depictions of women in the Ramayana. The narrative encourages readers to question established gender norms and recognize the strength of diverse expressions of femininity.

Another theme is female empowerment in this novel. Sita's journey in the novel is characterized by moments of empowerment. Despite societal expectations and the challenges presented by exile, Sita makes choices that reflect her agency. For instance, her decision to accompany Rama into the forest challenges the traditional role of a dutiful wife, showcasing her independence and strength. Additionally, her resilience and resourcefulness in navigating the forest contribute to her empowerment.

Another theme is identity and self-discovery in this novel, Sita's journey becomes a quest for identity and self-discovery. As she grapples with societal expectations and faces challenges in the forest, she engages in introspection. The novel explores her evolving understanding of self beyond the roles assigned by society, emphasizing her identity apart from her role as Rama's wife.

*"It is my duty to rescue you," Ram repeated patiently, as though speaking to a child. '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 have had with him .....*" (242)

These lines tell the truth behind the war between Ram and Ravana, when Ravana is killed by Ram and Sita rescued from Ravana. Sita is delighted after seeing Ram because she hasn't seen Ram long time. It's a moving moment in the story of Ram, she has been separated from Ram, she has been dreaming about this day and Ram says to her in front of everybody, he says I have done my duty towards you, but you will be considered impure you cannot go back with me to Ayodhya, you go where you want and you stay with whoever you want to stay with. But I can't take it back with me. He says, I fought this war not for you, I fought for my honor of Kingdom, she is devastated after listening to her speak up I had no control over the violence that was done to me by taking me away I am pure and most important, I'm pure in my heart which is the only thing I can control and so she stands up and speaks against victim shaming which we think women have found over and over a lot of the problems with that #Me\_too movement the women who did not dare to speak up, then were afraid of this they were afraid of victim shaming and Sita centuries ago speaks up when she says it is not right to shame the victim for something that she had no control over and then she says you can't decide what I'm gonna do with my life I will decide and then she calls for the fire. And says light a fire I will step into it I live my life on my terms.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Forest of Enchantments" has illuminated the novel's nuanced exploration of feminist perspectives, cultural reinterpretation, and the seamless incorporation of magical realism. Through the lens of feminist literary theory, this research has dissected key themes such as female empowerment, love and devotion, identity and self-discovery, nature, sacrifice and duty, feminism and gender roles, justice and morality, and the enchanting elements of magical realism.

The novel emerges as a transformative narrative that challenges traditional gender roles, empowers its female protagonist Sita, and invites readers to reconsider the cultural and societal expectations embedded in the Ramayana. Divakaruni's skillful blending of the fantastical with the realistic, as seen through the lens of magical realism, adds an extra layer of enchantment to the narrative, creating a unique and immersive reading experience.

The findings of this research contribute to the broader discourse on feminist retellings of mythological narratives and the significance of cultural reinterpretation in literature. By unraveling the thematic complexities within "The Forest of Enchantments," we have gained insights into the evolution of characters, the symbolism embedded in magical elements, and the overarching message of empowerment and self-discovery.

As we navigate the enchanted forest alongside Sita, we find that the novel not only offers a fresh perspective on the Ramayana but also prompts contemplation on broader issues of justice, morality, and the intricate dance between societal expectations and individual agency. Divakaruni's adept use of magical realism elevates the storytelling, allowing readers to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves in a world where the boundaries between reality and fantasy are deliberately blurred.

In conclusion, "The Forest of Enchantments" stands as a testament to the enduring power of mythological retellings to provoke thought, challenge norms, and provide new dimensions to age-old narratives. As readers traverse the enchanted landscape of Divakaruni's creation, they are invited to reflect on the transformative potential of literature, the multifaceted nature of identity,

and the timeless relevance of feminist discourse in storytelling. This research invites further exploration into the intersections of literature, feminism, and cultural reinterpretation, urging scholars to continue uncovering the hidden enchantments within the pages of diverse and reimagined narratives.

This study emphasizes the need for more research in this rich area of the intersection of gender discourse and literature and gender discourse.

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