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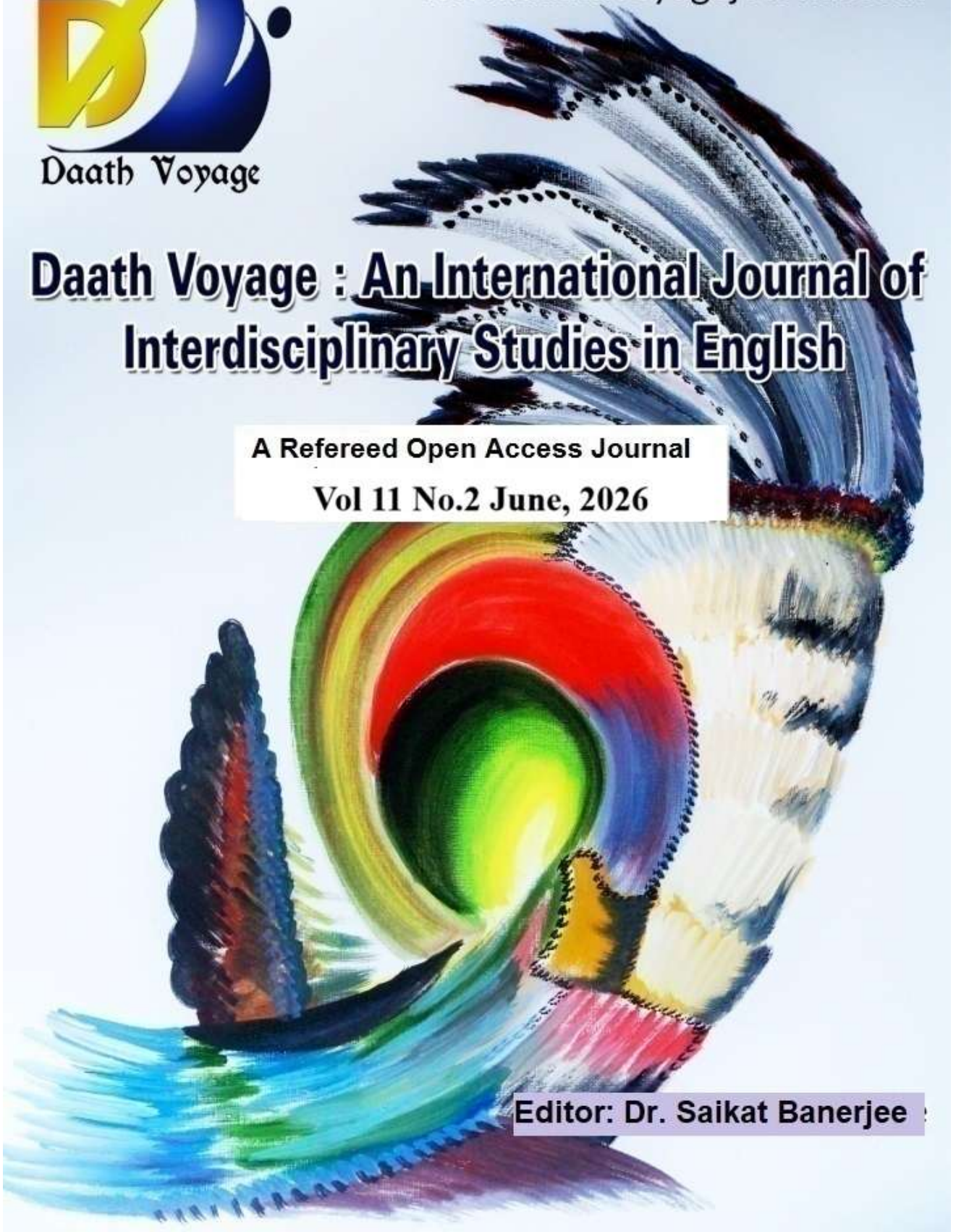

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Beyond the Angel and the Monster: Reimagining Sita and Draupadi in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* and *The Palace of Illusions*

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Abstract: This paper examines contemporary feminist retellings of Indian epics against the framework of angel/monster (madwoman) binary as referred to in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This concept of binary is taken into consideration to study *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to argue how these mythological novels challenge patriarchal representations of women, predominantly through Sita and Draupadi, in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* respectively. Sita in the former novel emerges as a questioning and self-aware narrator, while Draupadi's anger and ambition in the latter are portrayed as a form of resistance rather than moral failings. The paper demonstrates how feminist retellings revise and update traditional myths by recovering marginalized female voices and perspectives and also redefine womanhood beyond such patriarchal binaries.

Keywords: Binary, angel, monster, retellings, patriarchy.

Introduction

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* occupy a central position in shaping cultural understandings of gender, morality, and social order within the Indian and Southeast Asian literary traditions from time immemorial. For centuries, these epics have shaped ethical thoughts, religion and literary productions. Both the epics consist of various characters but in modern literary discourse, it is very common to find their female figures being singled out by various authors to be interpreted and reinterpreted in modern social contexts. These narratives have never existed in fixed forms. Different regions have their own versions of the epics, which are significantly influenced by the societal and cultural norms of the particular region. A.K. Ramanujan in his landmark essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (1987) famously mentions that the *Ramayana* tradition contains "many Ramayanas," each shaped by different historical, linguistic and cultural circumstances (134). Similarly in the case of the *Mahabharata*, as mentioned in Module 9: Lecture 33: "Rewritings/Retellings of Indian Epics I: Mahabharata" of NPTEL, there are various retellings of the epic where, "The basic storyline was

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the same in all the versions, but the perspectives from which the story was told was different" ("Retellings in Other Languages"). This plurality allows modern writers to retell the epics through present-day concerns.

One of the important concerns is the representation of women characters in the canonical texts. Feminist literary studies have always tried to focus on recovering female voices that were often marginalized and overshadowed by the dominant male characters in the earlier versions. Specifically, this involves re-examining characters like Sita, Draupadi, Urmila, and Mandodari to highlight their resistance, and psychological complexity beyond stereotypical portrayals (Kulkarni 58). In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, a strong framework has been proposed to understand how patriarchal literary traditions often construct women through a binary opposition of an angel and a monster which is known as the angel/monster dichotomy. They argue that "women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts" ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"). They believe that literature written by male authors tend to idealize the woman who is "sweet, ignorant, passive," while portraying "the other both artful and active" as "an undeniable witch" or monster ("Toward a Feminist Poetics").

What is important to mention here is that, "whoever is telling the old story tends to make it new" (Sharma 148). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), does the same while directly engaging with the problem of the representation of female in the classical epics. By retelling the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective and the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni attempts to reclaim the voice of the characters by providing them a narrative space that was historically framed through an androcentric narrative tradition. Paula Richman propounds a similar argument in her essay on epic reinterpretations where she believes that retellings often reshape traditional stories in order to address contemporary cultural concerns (9). Although, Divakaruni's novels belong to the long tradition of retellings and reinterpretations of both the epics across different parts of India and Southeast Asia, yet they offer a much broader perspective by transforming the epic heroines into narrators of their own experiences.

The Angel/Monster Dichotomy

The Madwoman in the Attic (1979) refers to how patriarchal literary traditions have historically shown women in two opposite archetypes of the angel and the monster. Gilbert and Gubar believe that these figures reflect broader patriarchal attitudes toward femininity. By categorizing them into these binary identities, women in literature are either idealized for their obedience or condemned for showing autonomy. The angel represents the

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ideal image of womanhood conforming to the patriarchal ideals who is portrayed as pure, obedient, selfless, nurturing and extremely devoted to the needs of others. Such a woman is celebrated as she conforms to patriarchal value systems without challenging it. Gilbert and Gubar observes that, "the ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is quite literally and angel" ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"). In contrast to that, the monster or the madwoman is symbolic of rebellion against patriarchal expectations by a woman. A woman who displays anger, ambition, sexuality, or independence is presented as irrational, dangerous, or sometimes as morally unstable. Their refusal to conform to the submissive ideal makes them appear threatening as Gilbert and Gubar claims that, "the monster-woman, threatening to replace the angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster)" ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"). Hence, women are trapped within a limiting binary where conformity is rewarded and resistance is problematized.

Gilbert and Gubar also emphasize the need for women writers to challenge and subvert the dichotomy by rewriting inherited literary traditions. They highlight how female voices are gradually emerging in literature. Rather than reproducing the binaries which are not only patriarchal but also an oversimplification of their personality, female writers must create characters with psychological depth, contradictions, desires and agency. In order to do so, Gilbert and Gubar claims that, "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her" ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"). Such reinterpretations expose patriarchal limitations while recovering women's voice in literature.

Hence, this framework provides a crucial platform for studying contemporary mythological retellings, where authors revisit traditional narratives from a female perspective. By reimagining silenced or marginalized women characters, these retellings question the patriarchal constructions of femininity by providing a more emotionally layered representation of female identities and subjectivities and offering the characters a more authoritative voice of their own.

The Angelic Ideal through the Silencing of Sita

In the traditional narrative of the *Ramayana* by Valmiki, Sita is portrayed as "an ideally dutiful wife" (Bora 56). She is a manifestation of feminine virtue who is celebrated for her devotion, purity and obedience. She is believed to "love and regard her husband more than her own life and her fidelity towards husband is even in most trying circumstances, were simply exemplary" (Bora 56). However, such traditional depictions often overlook the

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intricate psychological and social dilemmas that Sita confronts, thereby reducing her to an ideal archetype rather than a complex individual dealing with challenging circumstances (Basfore 18). Such portrayals closely resemble the angelic archetype as described in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Gilbert and Gubar believe that patriarchal literary traditions idealize women who embody moral perfection, purity and passivity. Within this framework, Sita emerges as an idealized image of a perfect wife, a woman whose identity is largely shaped by her sacrifice, devotion and loyalty to her husband.

Feminist studies have pointed out that such ideals often reflect social expectations that are imposed upon women in a patriarchal society (Nisha 49). In the case of the *Ramayana*, this is particularly visible in the instance where Rama asks Sita to remain in Ayodhya during his exile and fulfil her duty, to which she refuses and declares: Do not think me obstinate. My father and mother have instructed me in dharma. What you tell me is totally opposed to what they have taught me. To go with you wherever you go – this is my only course. If you must go to the forest today, then today I go with you. (*Ramayana* 63)

In the above lines, it is quite clear that Sita's understanding of *dharma* (duty) is shaped by the expectations that a wife's primary duty is to remain beside her husband regardless of hardships. Uma Chakravarti argues that ancient India texts predominantly try to construct normative models of womanhood based on obedience, chastity, and domestic virtue, and tries to reinforce patriarchal authority within social structures (Chakravarti 45). Within this context, Sita's representation in the epic extends beyond that of a literary character and becomes a cultural model of idealized femininity.

However, in *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells Sita's story by providing her a distinct narrative voice and greater psychological depth. The novel opens with Sita's powerful assertion of narrative authority where she says, "In red ink I began to write – in crooked, effortful lettering because it had been so long since I'd composed anything – the Sitayan" (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantments*, "Prologue"). This becomes a crucial moment in the book because rather than remaining a figure remembered primarily for her virtue and wifely devotion, Sita narrates her experiences through her own side of the epic events. Here, Divakaruni challenges the male-centered narrative through a more personal representation of Sita.

Throughout the novel, Sita critically reflects on the expectations that shape her role as a wife. There is a point where she recalls that her mother advises her "to be polite and respectful to all and don't take sides" (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantements*, Chapter 5). This instruction which seems simple reveals the patriarchal values where

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women are expected to remain accommodating, restrained and compliant with their in-laws in order to maintain harmony in the family. Her recollection shows how patriarchal values are internalized from an early age. Mousumi Basfore in her essay observes that traditional epics often portray women as "embodiments of ideal womanhood" which is shaped by patriarchal expectations and not by autonomous individuals (18). Divakaruni in her retelling challenges this notion by allowing Sita to reflect upon and question the value system that is imposed upon her.

The novel also highlights the gendered double standards that govern the lives of women in a patriarchal society. The tension appears more clearly when Sita realises that a woman's honour could be questioned in ways a man's can never be, when Rama declares, "The virtue of the Queen of Ayodhya has to be above all suspicion" (Divakaruni, *The Forest of Enchantements*, Chapter 25). This statement shows how a woman's worth and legitimacy are tied to the idea of purity and moral perfection. Sita is repeatedly compelled to prove her virtue to the society. In this context, Divakaruni reconstructs Sita as a moral subject and "reject her imposed identity as a chaste wife" in order to "emerge as a woman of self-respect, creative expression and ethical clarity" (Basfore 19). Through these reflections, Divakaruni reveals the psychological consequences of the angelic ideal described by Gilbert and Gubar. Sita here does not appear as a silent symbol of virtue and sacrifice but emerges as a reflective narrator who is conscious about the societal structures that seek to define and limit her identity. By allowing Sita to interpret her inner conflicts and struggles, Divakaruni challenges the narrative tradition which represents her through patriarchal notions of femininity and reclaims her voice within it.

The Madwoman Archetype and the Anger of Draupadi

While Sita represents the angelic ideals of the epic tradition, Draupadi portrays a more complex position within the *Mahabharata*. Unlike Sita, she is remembered as a character with assertiveness, intelligence, and emotional intensity, even in the time of injustice. She is vocal throughout the epic and her strong sense of dignity is evident during the dice-game episode where she boldly questions the legitimacy of her humiliation to her husband by asking, "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (*Mahabharata*, "Draupadi's Grief"). Although traditional narrative presents her as the "most unfortunate of queens" (Rajagopalachari, "Author's Preface"), her strong personality often unsettles patriarchal expectations of ideal femininity. Within the framework proposed by Gilbert and Gubar, Draupadi's representation in the epic mirrors the figure of the rebellious or monstrous woman whose anger challenges patriarchal authority, which brought all the injustices upon her. As a result, she is depicted in contrast to the demure, passive sufferer embodied by Sita (Nayek 2).

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In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Divakaruni retells the story of *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Draupadi herself. By employing a first-person narrative technique she makes Draupadi an interpreter of the events that shaped her life. Early in the novel, Draupadi reflects on her desire to shape her own life by imagining that her life would "unfurl uniquely" rather than following the predictable path assigned to women within her society (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chapter 4). This shift in perspective from the traditional versions foregrounds her emotional and psychological complexity. Mousumi Basfore in her paper observes that contemporary retellings transform the female characters from "passive archetypes to active, thinking individuals" (20).

In the traditional version, Draupadi's experiences are largely mediated through patriarchal expectations. She is described as the one who accompanied the Pandavas into exile as their "devoted wife" (*Mahabharata*, "Ganapati, the Scribe"). By repositioning her at the centre of the narrative, Divakaruni creates a space "not just to speak but to write, feel, doubt, and dissent" (Basfore 19). The most significant turning point in the novel occurs during the infamous episode in the Kaurava court, where Draupadi is publicly humiliated before the assembly when Duhsasana attempts to disrobe her. Reflecting upon the event later, she remarked that, "Half of her died the day when everyone she loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chapter 27). The incident reshaped her understanding of herself and the world around her. The episode exposes the failure of the patriarchal structure that claims to protect her honour while remaining silent during violence against her. Divakaruni frames her anger as a response to betrayal, violence and humiliation.

The novel further highlights Draupadi's refusal to internalize shame by remembering Krishna's words that, "no one can shame you… if you don't allow it" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chapter 25). She realizes that the victim should not be ashamed because shame belongs to those responsible for the injustice and the one who were silent. Her humiliation gradually transforms into her anger and a deep desire for justice which can be seen in the lines where she pictures the revenge through "a fire-strewn battlefield… the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies" (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, Chapter 26). This is evident of the fact that feminist retellings humanize mythological women by allowing them to experience "grief, rage, love, jealousy, and introspection" (Basfore 21). While Gilbert and Gubar believe that the "madwoman" often represents suppressed female rage within patriarchal literary traditions ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"), Divakaruni's retelling transforms

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Draupadi's anger into a form of resistance that challenges the structure responsible for her humiliation and presents her as humane whose resistance emerges from her lived sufferings and emotional truths.

Narrative Authority and Feminist Revision

From the above arguments it can be seen that both *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) challenge the rigid angel-monster dichotomy that is described in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Through the narrative voice of Sita and Draupadi, Divakaruni reclaims the voices of the female characters who were largely marginalized in the traditional versions of the epics. In *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), Sita is no longer presented as an embodiment of an ideal wife and devotion. Instead, she can be seen as an emotionally complex and self-reflective woman who questions the expectations that are imposed upon her as a wife and a queen. Similarly, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) re-imagines Draupadi not as a disruptive woman but as an individual whose life is shaped by her humiliation, desire, anger, and moral conflicts. By retelling the epics through female perspectives, Divakaruni participates in a broader project of literary revision as done by the likes of Kavita Kane, Pratibha Ray, Koral Dasgupta, Namita Gokhale and Volga.

In both the novels, the act of storytelling itself signifies the assertion of agency and narrative authority. Sita and Draupadi emerge as multidimensional individuals whose emotions, doubts and struggles make them deeply relatable. As Gilbert and Gubar argue that women writers "must kill" the restrictive binary archetypes of angel and monster in order to reclaim suppressed female voices ("Toward a Feminist Poetics"), Divakaruni's novels beautifully exemplify this process by transforming epic women from passive symbols into active narrators of their own story.

Conclusion

Through *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni does more than merely retell the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* respectively from a female lens. Both the novels expose the patriarchal mechanisms through which women in the epics are historically idealized, silenced or condemned. While Sita is shown as the image of a self-sacrificing and extremely obedient wife, Draupadi is associated with disruptive female anger and ambition. While read through Gilbert and Gubar's framework in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), these binary representations reveal how the literary tradition which is highly patriarchal, shows women either as idealization or through suspicion towards female autonomy.

By challenging male-centered narration and granting narrative authority to Sita and Draupadi, Divakaruni shifts the focus of the epic away from masculine heroism towards emotional experience, memory, suffering and resistance. The novels reveal that silence and anger are not natural feminine qualities as claimed by the conventional traditions but they are responses shaped by patriarchal expectations and violence against women. As the speakers of their own experiences, Sita and Draupadi reinterpret the idea of morality by challenging the authority of the traditional versions that marginalized their perspectives under the guise of moral duties of women and their *dharma*. Divakaruni's novels therefore showcase that mythological narratives continue to remain relevant in the modern times not because they are fixed and sacred, but because they can be constantly reinterpreted in the context of the present society to recover voices that are suppressed and question cultural values.

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