

Breaking the Silence: Sita's Journey of Transformation Through Repressed Memories in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*

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Abstract—In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019), repressed memory plays a crucial role in Sita's emotional and psychological transformation, a character traditionally depicted as the epitome of devotion and sacrifice in the Ramayana. In this retelling of the Ramayana, Sita's journey is shaped by the memories she consciously and unconsciously suppresses, particularly those linked to her trauma, betrayal, and societal expectations. This research article explores how Sita's repressed memories—ranging from the trauma of her exile and the Agni Pariksha (trial by fire) to the emotional pain of her separation from her sons—serve as catalysts for her empowerment and self-realization. Through recollection, Sita confronts the buried pain and injustices she has endured, allowing her to reclaim her narrative and redefine herself beyond the confines of her traditional role. Divakaruni's portrayal of Sita as a complex, introspective woman demonstrates how repressed memory can serve as both a psychological burden and a path to healing. This research paper suggests that Sita's transformation depends on her ability to face and accept these repressed memories, which in turn challenges the sexist limits imposed on her identity. The paper concludes by emphasizing the transformative power of memory as both a personal and collective tool for challenging historical silences and redefining female agency in contemporary literature.

Index Terms—repressed, memories, transformation, sacrifice, trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning Indian-American author, poet, and professor known for her vivid storytelling that often explores themes of identity, migration, and women's lives, particularly South Asian women. Born in Kolkata, India, and currently residing in the United States, Divakaruni's work bridges cultural divides, shedding light on the experiences of immigrants and the complexities of balancing tradition and modernity (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, 2021). *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, published in 2019 is a reimagined retelling of the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. Rather than focusing on Ram's heroics, the novel centers on Sita's emotional journey as she navigates love, loyalty, and heartbreak (Chandran et al., 2021). As Sita endures her abduction by Ravana, her trial by fire, and eventual exile while pregnant, she evolves from a dutiful wife into a self-aware woman who challenges traditional expectations of obedience and purity. As Sita revisits these memories and confronts her suppressed desires, disappointments, and fears, she undergoes a transformation that reshapes her understanding of herself. Divakaruni portrays Sita as a resilient figure, exploring her inner strength and determination in the face of betrayal and societal judgment (Chatur et al., 2024).

Repressed memory is a psychological concept where an individual unconsciously blocks out painful, traumatic, or distressing experiences, effectively burying these memories deep within the subconscious. This idea, introduced by Sigmund Freud in his work on psychoanalysis, suggests that the mind suppresses distressing or harmful memories to protect the conscious self from psychological pain (Freud, 1915). Repression is among the most unsettling notions in psychology. An alarming event occurs, prompting the mind to relegate it to an unreachable recess of the unconscious. Subsequently, the recollection may surface into awareness. Repression constitutes a fundamental pillar of psychoanalysis (Loftus, 1993). These memories are particularly evident according to Freud because they don't seem to be the result of the individual's actions; rather, they seem to be the result of an individual's fate, a string of traumatic experiences that they endure and that appears to be completely beyond their control or will (Caruth, 1996, p. 2). Memory researchers have often claimed that the very problem with traumatic experiences is not that they are repressed and forgotten, but that they remain vivid and cannot be forgotten (Loftus, 2003). Freud's notion of repression has had a lasting impact on literature,

with numerous authors using repressed memory as a narrative device to deepen character psychology and develop themes related to trauma, identity, and recovery.

This study aims to analyze Sita's transformation in *The Forest of Enchantments* by examining how repressed memories, once confronted, become a vehicle for her empowerment. By exploring pivotal moments of repression, resurfacing trauma, and emergent agency, I aim to demonstrate how Divakaruni's Sita transcends her mythological role to become an emblem of feminist resilience and transformation. This analysis will utilize psychoanalytic theory to highlight how Repressed Memory plays a prominent role in Sita's psychological transformation in the novel.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this research paper on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* focuses on scholarly works that examine repressed memory, feminist retellings of mythology, and the portrayal of female agency within epic literature. Divakaruni's reimagining of Sita aligns with feminist literary efforts to reframe epic heroines. In Indian mythology, Sita traditionally symbolizes purity and loyalty, yet modern interpretations seek to unpack the psychological cost of such ideals. Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (1991) explores various adaptations of the *Ramayana* across cultural contexts, highlighting that reinterpretations of Sita's story reveal different values and societal norms. *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Divakaruni, a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Draupadi's perspective, serves as a parallel text, illustrating the author's sustained engagement with feminist reinterpretations of mythology. Other retellings, like Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which reexamines Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, depict how such narratives redefine agency and voice by delving into the repressed memories and unspoken thoughts of mythological women (Atwood, 2005). These texts aim to give female characters a complex voice and agency, challenging their traditionally passive or submissive roles. It seeks to situate Divakaruni's novel within the context of psychoanalytic and feminist frameworks, analyzing how these lenses inform interpretations of Sita's character. The review also discusses studies on the role of trauma and memory in literature to highlight how Divakaruni employs these themes to reconstruct Sita's voice and autonomy. The concept of repressed memory has been widely explored in literary studies, especially in narratives focusing on trauma.

Early psychoanalytic theory, particularly the idea of repression, has influenced literature, framing traumatic memories as psychological burdens that are often buried to shield the self from pain. Scholars argue that trauma frequently manifests indirectly, revealing itself through symbolic representations or emotional conflicts. There has been a significant interest in retelling mythological epics, particularly those that provide alternative perspectives on female characters traditionally portrayed within patriarchal norms. Feminist scholars suggest that by reclaiming women's voices in myths, authors can challenge entrenched gender roles and bring forth suppressed experiences and emotions. The research gap for this paper on *The Forest of Enchantments* lies in the limited scholarly analysis of Sita's repressed memories and trauma as mechanisms for personal transformation and feminist empowerment within the novel. While feminist retellings of mythological characters have been extensively studied, Sita's character has traditionally been interpreted through the lens of her loyalty, purity, and sacrifice, with fewer studies delving into her psychological journey through trauma and memory repression.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research paper employs a qualitative methodology to explore the theme of repressed memory in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments*, focusing on Sita's psychological journey and transformation. This method combines literary analysis with psychoanalytic and feminist literary criticism to figure out how Divakaruni uses Sita's repressed memory as a plot device and how it affects her growth as a person. Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression and the unconscious, provides insight into how Sita's mind manages traumatic memories by unconsciously burying them. Freud's notion of repression suggests that traumatic memories are often pushed into the unconscious to protect the self from overwhelming pain (Freud, 1915). This paper uses Freud's theory to explore how Sita's traumas—such as her abduction by Ravana, her trial by fire, and her exile—are not fully processed but rather become dormant forces that influence her behavior and decisions. Feminist literary theory is central to understanding how Divakaruni reclaims and reconstructs Sita's voice, which has traditionally been marginalized in patriarchal retellings of *The Ramayana*. Feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offer theoretical tools to analyze how women's voices are historically suppressed and how reclaiming these voices can subvert traditional gender roles (Cixous, 1976; Spivak, 1988). Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, or "writing the feminine," which encourages female writers to reclaim female experiences through narrative, serves as a key lens for interpreting Divakaruni's retelling. A close reading of *The Forest of Enchantments* is conducted to identify moments when Sita suppresses memories of trauma and emotional pain. The text is analyzed to examine how Divakaruni's language, narrative style, and symbolic imagery reflect Sita's repressed memories, especially concerning events such as her abduction, the trial by fire, and her exile while pregnant.

Psychoanalytic theory and feminist literary theory, along with additional support from trauma studies, form the foundation of this research paper's theoretical framework. These frameworks provide a foundation for examining how repressed memory functions in *The Forest of Enchantments* and how it shapes Sita's identity, autonomy, and resilience.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression and the unconscious, provides insight into how Sita's mind manages traumatic memories by unconsciously burying them. Trauma theory, particularly as developed by scholars such as Caruth, Judith Herman, and others, provides a framework for understanding the psychological and narrative aspects of trauma in Sita's life. Trauma theory suggests that unresolved traumatic experiences often resurface through symbolic representations, flashbacks, and emotional conflict (Herman, 1997).

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"The essence of repression lies simply in rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (Freud, p. 105). Repression is a defence mechanism (Freud et al., 2001). Both conscious and unconscious processes could be to blame (Erdelyi, 1985). An individual can actively control the repression. Individuals protect themselves from the conscious recall of the experience and its repercussions by preventing the memory from entering their minds. However, Freud believed that repressed memory can still have an unconscious impact on the person. Furthermore, buried memories might eventually resurface in consciousness (Erdelyi, 1985). The *Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni retells the epic Ramayana from Sita's perspective, depicting her as a nuanced and dynamic figure. The deep psychological effects of buried memories are at the heart of Sita's quest. A key component in Sita's development throughout the book is repression, a psychological process in which painful events are unintentionally repressed to shield the person from extreme distress. Divakaruni uses this subject to examine how Sita's repressed feelings and memories influence her experiences and act as triggers for her ultimate freedom and self-awareness. This paper explores how Sita's repressed memories affect her perseverance, fortitude, and ultimate reclaiming of agency during her metamorphosis.

According to Michael Billig, in his book, a person is said to be unable to remember an event or a wish if they have suppressed it. In a sense, they have forgotten the experience or desire. Freud occasionally believed that forgetting might be associated with, however, this is not always the case. People believe that someone who suppresses something has a reason for forgetting. Therefore, Billig (1999) asserts that repression encompasses purposeful or deliberate forgetting, even if the willing is considered unconscious. Sita, the protagonist, in the same manner, forgets her painful memories, which in her later life surface when triggered. Mandodari, Ravana's wife, once meets Sita and reveals a secret that Sita is her daughter who was once carried away as it was foretold that the daughter would bring death to her father Ravana. Even though Sita was not able to believe Mandodari and tried to forget it, this story surfaced in her mind often during the whole abduction period when she says, "I tried to purge her story from my mind, but disturbingly, it kept coming back" (Divakaruni, p. 194).

During periods of severe suffering in *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita must suppress her feelings to maintain her sense of stability and composure. Her abduction by Ravana is one of the most notable examples of repression as she describes in the following lines, "IN CAPTIVITY, DAYS AND NIGHTS blurred for me. Some of this was my own disorientation, and some was rakshasa magic, which kept me from seeing the sun for weeks on end" (Divakaruni, p. 187).

Sita experiences extreme dread, loneliness, and powerlessness after being kidnapped from her home and imprisoned in Lanka. But according to Divakaruni, she is unwavering and will not give up when she says "Each morning I told myself, I will not give up" (Divakaruni, p. 188).

Sita suppresses her emotions of fear and rage to uphold her honour and faith in Rama's future deliverance. According to some therapists, people frequently suppress traumatizing memories to protect the victim. However, these memories may only come back years later and perhaps only after intense treatment (McNally, 2005). Repression frequently serves as a defensive mechanism, enabling people to break down painful experiences to safeguard their emotional health, claims Herman (1997). Similarly for Sita, this repression becomes a survival strategy, enabling her to endure captivity while preserving her inner strength. Sita's repression does not, however, come without repercussions. An accumulation of unresolved emotions lingers beneath the surface, even though it enables her to survive the immediate suffering. Divakaruni gently alludes to the psychological effects of this repression by showing how Sita's unspoken suffering turns into a dormant force that shapes her ideas and behaviour. At pivotal points in her journey, these repressed emotions surface, laying the groundwork for her eventual transformation.

Sita's choices and reactions stem from courage, though often it is a quiet courage, easy to mistake for meekness. It is the courage of endurance, of moving forward in spite of obstacles, of never giving in. It is the courage that has been reflected for centuries in the lives of women. Hers is the courage that speaks its mind at vital points in her journey, no matter what the cost—just as Indian women are now doing. In the final amazing and heartbreaking moments of her life, Sita demonstrates this courage that refuses to compromise, no matter how much is at stake. (Divakaruni, p. ix)

Following Sita's rescue, Sita is put through a trial fire to prove her innocence, one of the most significant scenes in the entire text. A test of virtue, the Agni Pariksha signifies the triumph of innocence over suspicion. Women's chastity was intricately linked to their social identity and family honour in ancient Indian society (Sharma, 1984). In the original text of *The Ramayana* by Valmiki, this practice is portrayed as a godly ritual by Sita to prove her chastity following her rescue from Ravana. Sita, in the words of Divakaruni, bravely enters the flames but with a heavy heart as she says "While

everyone stared in horror or cried out to me to stop—everyone except my husband—I stepped into the blaze” (Divakaruni, p. 245).

Rama, the man she loves and has remained faithful to, challenges her chastity, making her public struggle a painful betrayal. In this segment, Divakaruni portrays Sita's inner struggle, emphasizing her emotions of sadness, rage, and humiliation. Sita suppresses these emotions despite the emotional destruction to play the part of the obedient wife. She represses her anger to preserve her public character, placing Rama's reputation and social norms above her suffering. The social forces that shape Sita's behaviour is reflected in this repression. According to Chodorow (1978), patriarchal systems frequently force women to internalize their suffering and put the needs of others before their own, which results in the repression of painful emotions. Sita's decision to suppress her sentiments of betrayal highlights the cultural values of selflessness and perseverance she has internalized. But this act of repression also exacerbates her emotional scars, leaving her with unresolved trauma that still influences who she is.

Ram abandons Sita during her second exile while she is pregnant with their twins, highlighting the long-term impact of her buried memories. She is forced to face all her earlier traumas, including the agony of being kidnapped, the fire trial, and her husband's rejection, because of this incident. Divakaruni examines Sita's journey of self-discovery and reflection during this time of seclusion. Separated from the shadow of her love with Rama and the social expectations of Ayodhya, Sita begins to comprehend her repressed emotions. According to trauma theorists like Van der Kolk (2014), people can access and process buried memories when they are isolated and removed from painful situations. Living in the middle of the forest becomes a life-changing experience for Sita, allowing her to examine her past and confront the emotional scars she has long repressed. During this period of exile, Sita begins to live free from societal expectations. She leads a blissful life with her twin sons, Lav and Kush, in the ashram of Valmiki. In this phase, she also saves Ram once from unconsciousness despite her anger and pain. Sita faces the human price of her sacrifices and starts to regain her sense of agency, Divakaruni portrays this introspection as a slow and agonizing process.

I remembered the terror of my abduction,
the endless nights under the sorrow tree in Ravan's garden, where even in the
In the midst of despair, I trusted that Ram would save me. And then his heartless
rejection of me, the fire into which I stepped, hoping to end the burning in my
heart. (Divakaruni, p. 319)

When Sita decides to turn down Rama's offer of reconciliation and instead descend back to earth, it is her final act of transformation. This choice represents her freedom from the responsibilities of being a wife and a queen and her defiance of the social norms that have governed her life. After years of burying her painful emotions, Sita speaks up for herself and future women. Her repressed emotions turn out to be her vehicle of transformation when she says,

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 after to judge other women.
Even when they aren't guilty, the burden of proving their innocence will fall
on them. And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. (Divakaruni, p. 356)

Sita takes control of her destiny by confronting and relinquishing the burdens of her repressed memories. In addition to Sita's personal development, this moment of autonomy has wider feminist ramifications. Divakaruni portrays Sita as a woman who asserts her independence and redefines her identity, challenging the conventional picture of her as a docile and submissive figure. Feminist academics like Rich (1979) stress the significance of opposing patriarchal narratives and reclaiming voices that have been silenced. Sita's transformation supports this viewpoint, as she embraces her strength and value while overcoming the limitations of trauma and repression.

In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni examines suppressed memory and emphasizes how it can be both a cause of pain and a driving force for change. Repression gives Sita the ability to endure the short-term difficulties in her life, but it also generates unresolved tensions that propel her quest for self-awareness. These memories' reappearance forces her to face her suffering and, in the end, gives her the ability to regain her autonomy. Divakaruni provides a complex depiction of Sita's metamorphosis by examining her journey through the prism of buried memories. The psychological and cultural factors that influence women's lives are reflected in Sita's experiences, as are the fortitude and resiliency that come from facing and conquering tragedy. In this way, *The Forest of Enchantments* addresses more general issues of memory, trauma, and empowerment and reimagines Sita as a multifaceted and complicated protagonist.

V. CONCLUSION

Through Sita's journey, the novel critiques the societal norms that demand silence and endurance from women, emphasizing the importance of confronting and processing past wounds to achieve healing and empowerment. Sita's story offers a powerful exploration of the human capacity for resilience and transformation, making her journey a poignant and inspiring narrative of self-discovery. *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a profound reimagining of Sita's journey from trauma and repression to self-awareness and empowerment. Through her struggles, sacrifices, and moments of introspection, Sita's character evolves from a figure of idealized devotion to a woman who reclaims her identity and agency. This transformation is deeply intertwined with her experiences of trauma, which Divakaruni uses not only to explore the emotional complexity of Sita's character but also to critique the cultural

expectations that silence and marginalize women's voices. Sita's journey ultimately demonstrates that, while repression may provide a temporary means of coping, true healing and empowerment come from confronting and accepting one's past. This analysis of Sita's transformation not only redefines her as a character but also resonates with broader themes of resilience, self-liberation, and the importance of self-empowerment. Divakaruni's narrative challenges traditional portrayals of Sita, offering readers a layered and empathetic understanding of a woman who rises above trauma to achieve inner peace and agency. Sita's journey, as depicted in *The Forest of Enchantments*, is thus a powerful testament to the strength of the human spirit and the liberating potential of self-awareness and acceptance.

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