

# **FROM QUEST TO SELFHOOD: AN ERIKSONIAN READING OF CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS***

**- MOITREE CHAKRABORTY**

## **ABSTRACT:**

The question of identity has often been debated in literary works and has come to occupy a significantly dominant position in contemporary critical discourses. Literature more often than not intended to portray identity as a dynamic construct rather than a fixed entity. Nevertheless, in spite of its depiction as an active agent in the process of one's development, the concept of identity remains questioned and challenged at varied points of time. Such interrogations often gives birth to the concept of identity crisis- a concept given forth by Erik Erikson in his book entitled *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), foregrounded as a situation when the individual finds himself incapacitated to satiate the expectations of his surrounding society thereby experiencing a profound sense of confusion regarding his role, giving birth to inner conflicts and a sense of alienation. The present paper attempts to look at the character of Sita as portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her celebrated novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) from an Eriksonian lens of identity crisis. Drawing upon Erikson's psychosocial theory, the paper examines how Sita's crisis with regard to her identity is resolved by turning towards nature, redefining herself in the process, much beyond the patriarchal expectations of the society. Finally, it is the natural world that conjoins the fragmented and ruptured soul of Sita, thereby giving her life and identity a coherent sense much from an Eriksonian perspective of psychosocial integration.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity, Psychosocial, Integration, Nature, Patriarchal

Identity, defined significantly as the qualities, beliefs, traits and experiences that shape an individual and contribute in stabilizing their position in the society of which they are a part, is a long debated term in various disciplines. Derived from the Medieval Latin term *identitatem* meaning sameness, the concept of identity has now become a multidimensional one. From its very inception to the present century, the word has evolved rapidly and has come to occupy a larger dimension, in not only the personal and social sphere but also in the cultural, psychological as well as political facets thereby stressing the importance of the self in contemporary discourses. Innumerable definitions have cropped up since ages focusing pertinently on the complex and dynamic nature of identity. Nevertheless, what retains as the core meaning of the term makes it a juxtaposition of various factors such as the thoughts, feelings, longings, and social position of the individual. Though critics have taken much pain in explaining the authentic meaning of the word it is the definition put forth by Erik Homburger Erikson, the German-American psychoanalyst that has received much recognition. He referred to identity as “a configuration arising out of constitutional given’s, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favoured capacities, significant intensification, effective defences, successful sublimations and constitutional roles” (Erikson 163). Based on this definition, various theorists have come forward to reinterpret the term in manifold ways, which further intensified its meaning. In this context it is to be noted that when an individual becomes capable of fulfilling the roles that is expected from him, he is believed to have succeeded in creating an identity for himself in the society whereas inability in doing so gives birth to an identity crisis- a term first coined by Erikson in the 1940’s.

Identity crisis which, primarily refers to the ambiguousness developed in the mind of an individual when he finds himself incapable of standing up to the expectations of the society, is an integral part of human life and was initially developed by Erikson in

his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Drawing largely from the psychoanalytic theory of Freud, Erikson's theory of identity formation goes a long way in illustrating the process of self-development and the crisis that arise at every stage of life.

However, in opposition to Freud, Erikson based his theory on social factors rather than relying exclusively on the sexual aspect of human beings. In order to define the tensions that emerge across different phases of life, Erikson divided the life span of an individual into eight psychosocial stages and enumerated that at every juncture one or the other crisis crops up. However, amongst all the stages it is particularly in the fifth stage i.e., during the adolescent period in the life of an individual, he witnesses a central conflict regarding identity formation. It is at this stage of development that the child starts recognising himself as having a separate identity from that of his parents and when he is not able to assimilate himself with the surrounding, a crisis arises within him. Though identity crisis emerges at the adolescent period, Erikson emphasises that identity formation is not strictly constrained to a particular period; rather it resurfaces itself at varied instances throughout one's life span and especially during moments of upheaval and crisis. As a resultant factor, when such a crisis arises he initiates to resolve it in all possible ways and takes resort to various means in order to satiate the thirst of imbuing himself with a stable identity. In his attempt to find himself, the individual intends to align towards certain external factors thereby trying to find a reclus and validation of his identity there. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's famous novel *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) aptly captures this movement towards an external anchor in Sita's repeated and consistent return to nature whenever faced with an existential crisis. Sita being the chief protagonist of Divakaruni's novel, not only does turn towards nature in order to negotiate her identity crisis, rather nature becomes for her a liminal space - where her subdued and fragmented self finds coherence.

Standing in an era of ecological crisis, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni singles herself out by producing a text that uses nature not merely as a reclus for an individual, but as a space where she

rediscovers her authentic identity. *The Forest of Enchantments* is primarily a re-telling of the Hindu epic *The Ramayana* from the point of view of Sita, the chief female protagonist. The author here ventures to depict the life of Sita from her own perspective and wishes to create a “Sitayan” rather than a *Ramayana* where Sita became an embodiment of a docile and meek entity. The work also delves into the lives of other female characters of the epic, which includes Kaikeyi, Urmila, Suparnakha, and Mandodari. However, it is the life and trials of Sita that receive significant attention in the narrative since it is her struggles that align her in tune with Erikson’s psychosocial crisis considered to be essential in terms of identity formation. Throughout the narrative, the narrator reflects on various stages of Sita’s life in which she is portrayed as the embodiment of nature and its associated elements. She becomes one whose identity is re-constructed in her affinity with nature. Further, the narrative throws light on how being deprived of various materialistic pleasures Sita more often than not seeks refuge into the bosom of mother earth and is very cordially accepted by her. Thus, the retelling of the epic by Divakaruni highlights the inner conflict and ambiguities lurking within the heart of Sita that stands in contrast to her portrayal as a submissive and dutiful wife in the traditional *Ramayana*.

*The Forest of Enchantments*, whose very title itself alludes to its affinities with nature, is one of the most noteworthy creations of the author after her *The Palace of Illusions*, which was a celebrated re-telling of *The Mahabharata* in the voice of Panchaali. In the author’s note of *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni herself said that, “Just like Panchaali, my Sita will tell her own tale...She will tell us what inspired the crucial choices that directed the course of her life” (Divakaruni vii). Maybe it was this deliberate effort on the part of the novelist to grant Sita the agency of her life, makes her return to nature consistently and indulge in finding a safe haven for an identity constantly questioned and challenged. In a world, where mankind persistently ravages nature, this work translocates us to an ambience, where nature and humans dwell in serenity. The protagonist here does not look upon nature as a commodity that can be usurped to satiate her materialist thirst, rather she sees herself as

part of the independent ecosystem. Removed from the patriarchal strictures, Sita found in nature a mentor, a healer that fostered her courage, strength and made her valiant enough to withstand the adversities of her life. While combining literary ecology with Eriksonian psychology, Divakaruni dexterously represents nature not as a mere backdrop to her novel, but as an active force contributing in resolving the identity questions tormenting her protagonist thereby paving the path towards her self-reclamation.

From the very beginning of the text, the mild-mannered Sita sets out to narrate her life story in vicinity with nature. While she was insisted by sage Valmiki to record the story of her life, the medium that Sita chose to write was itself a part of nature i.e. the leaves of palm trees. The beginning of the story intertwines itself with Sita in multifarious ways. The history of her birth was shrouded in uncertainties, which kept her wondering as to where did she come from. Nature played a decisive role here again and soothed her disrupted soul. On being spurned by some unknown individual on a piece of land at her very inception, Sita was protected by the eternal mother before King Janak received her. This history entangles her with nature and paves way towards her later affinities with the former. T.H. Griffith in his translated version of *Ramayana* entitled as *The Ramayan of Valmiki* reflected on Sita's birth in the following manner:

A treasure and a pride for aye  
Once, as it chanced, I ploughed the ground,  
When sudden, 'neath the share was' found  
An infant springing from the earth  
Named Sita from her secret birth. (Griffith 261)

Quest of searching her roots in the grand palace of Mithila where she dwelt, often made her restive and panic-stricken. As the daughter of King Janak, she was the cherished princess of her father's kingdom, but the palace environment restricted her individuality. It was one of surveillance and conformity, which the princess of Mithila could not abide by. Rather the green world outside enthralled her and gave birth to the role confusion in Eriksonian tone within

her. She could not find any individual in the vast structure who felt and sensed the same bonding with nature that she shared. She herself said, “No one in my family felt the way I did about forests” (Divakaruni 8). Such confession congruously defines her search for her identity and later rekindling it in her relationship with nature. The forest, an integral part of nature, in Divakaruni’s narrative initially emerges as a space where Sita could exercise her powers that probably were unknown to the rest of her acquaintances. She stated:

My strange gift with plants was a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because like them, I was earth-born. Maybe for the same reason, when I touched a plant, I knew its healing properties. I could tell which grasses cured headache and colds, which seeds fended off infections, which herbs to give women when their monthly blood flowed too long, and which potions healed the shaking sickness or gladdened a long-depressed heart. (Divakaruni 7)

Through such a statement, she hinted at the inexorable power of nature that drew Sita towards it, compelling her to reflect on herself and thereby upon her identity as much beyond the princess of Mithila. Each rupture in the process of her development destabilizes her role and makes her question as to who she is beyond the imposed identities.

Divakaruni’s narrative highlights the role of nature as not only a solace or recluse for Sita but also as a site of deeper introspection. While in Mithila one of her favourite places was the garden which she nurtured with her own hands. It was in their company that she was able to reflect upon her own choices far away from collective judgment. Even when she arrived in Ayodhya after her wedlock with Ram, she could not resist her longing for the gardens. She persuaded the reluctant Dasarath who “wasn’t particularly interested in gardens” (Divakaruni 86) to “add a few of her favourite plants to the landscaping” (Divakaruni 86). So much was she aligned towards nature that she day dreamt about it while walking with Kaushalya.

She imagined having “creepers growing over the walls, white madhivilata or showers of pink coral vine to soften the forbidding lines of hewn stone” (Divakaruni 87). However, in Ayodhya, Sita realized that her role is restricted to that of a submissive and ideal wife, which threatened her individual identity and as Erikson believed that overtly relying on external validation marks the beginning of identity confusion, fragmentation of her rational self makes an appearance here. The seeds of crisis lay embedded within the structure that intended to celebrate her royalty.

The portrayal of Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments* becomes synonymous with nature’s perseverance and healing power. However, such a depiction at times invites an over-idealization that turns her into a symbolic extension of the natural world rather than a fully autonomous individual. Inhuman atrocities and cruelties afflicted on nature also do not enrage her easily. In spite of such maltreatment, that nature received, or better say is receiving from the human world, she has not stopped showering her blessings on them even today when she is on the brink of disaster. Much in tune with Mother Nature, Sita endures relentless suffering at the hands of various forces, yet her indomitable spirit remains unbroken; even the forest, once a site of anguish for her, fails to diminish her enduring love for the natural world. Such similarity between the natural world and our protagonist pinpoints the complexity of the character of Sita where disparate elements are integrated together- compassion for the forest as well as the strength to survive with the bare minimum being offered there. Sita’s character thus emerges as one, which goes far beyond the measures of public acclaim and rests on accepting psychological wholeness much in communion with nature.

Sita’s abduction by Raavan intensifies the crisis at a later stage of her life and heightens the need for external justification bereft of which as Erikson observed, evolution of one’s identity remains incomplete. However, it was under an Ashoka tree that Sita found her solace, within the embrace of nature. The large red flowers of the tree, a colour that linked her to nature, that accentuated her femininity, accepted Sita in moments of her deepest melancholy. The

roots of the gigantic tree provided her with a pillow, where she could lay her head and count the days of her escape, if possible, from the grasp of the demon king. Many times, witnessing the tears of Sita, the Ashoka tree too shed its tears by dropping flowers on her, for it was as helpless as Sita herself. The bolthole that the tree provided becomes a symbol of care and affection that Nature has to offer to humanity if not ravaged, if not divested with atrocities. Divakaruni has very subtly delineated the benevolent humane aspect of nature.

However, it was because of her stay in the “pleasure grove” of Raavan that her chastity was subjected to public scrutiny and this is where the discord between inner conflict and mass validation reaches its culminating point. Such an ordeal marks Sita’s transition and her return to a natural space- the hermitage of Valmiki. It was in the hermitage that Sita embraced motherhood much in her own terms- amidst nature, in a simple but soothing and serene environment. At a time when a woman needed much care and affection from her relatives, she was welcomed into the bosom of nature where she heaved a sigh of relief. In the honey groves of the forest, adjacent to the ashram of Sage Valmiki, Sita laid down her body. She tasted the honeycombs and found something ever since her banishment, to be satisfying. With a heavy heart, she pressed her cheek to the earth, and whispered, “Help me... You are my first mother. You kept me safe when there was no one to take care of me. Help my babies now” (Divakaruni 321). Nature too, reciprocated to Sita’s pleadings in her own way. Her voice seemed to echo in Sita’s ears and utter, “Endure... Endure as we do. Endure your challenges” (Divakaruni 322). Henceforth Sita turns out to be a character who embraces nature and is embraced by her in return, which significantly ensures her rootedness to the natural domain and marks her belongingness to the place.

The nomenclature of the sons of Sita- Lav and Kush- though done by Sage Valmiki contributes in no lesser way to enforce their amalgamation with nature. The elder twin had been named ‘Kush’ which symbolised the Kusha grass that Sage Valmiki used , to bless him on his birth, whereas the younger twin was called ‘ Lav’ meaning ‘ bit ‘ or ‘piece’, after the bits of grass stems which Valmiki

utilized for the same purpose. Grass, though a trivial but important element of nature, received prime importance in Sita's life. It was around her children that the life of Sita revolved as is obvious with most of the mothers. However, what makes our protagonist different from the others include her pain in bringing up her sons away from the royal palace and nurturing them within the forest. Such an act on the part of Sita transforms her motherhood from a dynastic responsibility to an act of guidance. On the birth of the children Sage Valmiki himself said in the text under study that, "these boys would be raised like no other. Their greatest teacher would be their mother. Their world would be the forest. Because of this their strengths would be unique" (Divakaruni 328-29). The children, too, become an intrinsic part of nature being born of a mother whose ultimate solace lay in the natural world. Thus, this communion echoes Erikson's assertion that identity becomes stable through one's interaction and intimate dialogue with the surrounding environment.

Even when Sita was bereft of her kingdom and "her greatest joy and greatest despair" (Divakaruni 3) - her husband Ram, nature did not turn its face from her. Cast off in the faraway hermitage of Valmiki, nature embraced her and soothed her aching soul. It was in rediscovering some of the herbs and berries that she used in Mithila, Sita got back her lost soul. Resettled from the gem-adorned bed of Ayodhya, to the bed of leaves in Valmiki's ashram, Sita receives relief from the stings of betrayal. Nature with all its aspects steadfastly shielded her from all the accusation that was directed towards her providing her a safe psychosocial environment that prevented the fragmentation of her identity. In a final act of identity resolution, Sita entered into fire and resonated, "I call on my mother earth and my father fire-... come to my aid. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign" (Divakaruni 357), and she was engrossed by it. By choosing her ultimate reunion with her source of origin, Sita asserted that her dignity and truth does not require further validation. Nature accepts her as a mother receiving her daughter returning home after battling with the external world and echoes the words, "Come, it is time. You have done your duty. You have suffered enough. It is time to return" (Divakaruni

358). Divakaruni's portrayal thus turns nature into a space where the identity crisis of Sita gets resolved and she emerges with a renewed sense of coherence much from an Eriksonian perspective.

Traversing through the passage of Sita's journey and re-reading it through the lens of Erikson's psychosocial theory it becomes visible that identity crisis in her life emerges not only from her birth to adolescent, rather it resurfaces at every critical juncture, compelling her to negotiate her sense of self and identity. Nature emerges as the space that enables her to reflect on her own strength essential to achieve womanhood in all its possible ways. Ultimately, in *The Forest of Enchantments*, the forest- an integral part of nature transforms into a site of empowerment, where the protagonist is restored her unity of self, leaving apart the society induced fragmentation exemplifying Erikson's theory of identity crisis.

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