

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Psychological Trauma and Female Agency in *The Forest of Enchantments***

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Abstract

The article examines how experiences of psychological trauma contribute to the journey of self-discovery in *The Forest of Enchantments*, highlighting the inner struggles and growth of Sita as portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The study examines how Divakaruni reimagines Sita not as a submissive mythical figure but as a psychologically complex woman who endures emotional, social, and physical suffering yet transforms that pain into inner strength and agency. Drawing on Carl Jung's theory of individuation and integrating literary analysis with psychoanalytical insights, the article analyzes how Sita's traumatic experiences like exile, abduction, rejection, and loss become catalysts for self-discovery and empowerment. Through close reading of key passages, including Sita's reflections on her identity and voice, the article illustrates how Divakaruni creates a modern archetype of feminine resilience. Ultimately, the novel becomes both a personal and political narrative that reclaims female subjectivity and celebrates the quiet heroism of choosing peace, compassion, and self-awareness over bitterness and vengeance.

Keywords: Trauma, Self-realization, Carl Jung, individuation, Female agency, Feminist retelling, psychological transformation.

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a modern retelling of the ancient Indian epic, the *Ramayana*, told from the perspective of Sita, the heroine. Unlike traditional versions that focus mainly on Rama, this novel gives voice to Sita's feelings, struggles, and experiences. Throughout the story, Sita faces many hardships and psychological trauma, such as exile, captivity, and betrayal. Despite these challenges, she gradually finds strength and independence, showing her female agency. This article will explore how Sita's trauma shapes her identity and how she moves from being a victim to a strong, self-aware woman. Using psychological theories by Freud and Jung, this study will analyze Sita's journey of suffering and empowerment in *The Forest of Enchantments*.

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The *Ramayana* is one of the oldest and most important epics in Indian culture. Traditionally, it tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita, highlighting Rama's heroic qualities and Sita's loyalty and purity. In many versions, Sita is shown as a silent and devoted wife who faces suffering without complaint. However, these portrayals often ignore Sita's inner emotions and struggles.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* reimagines Sita's story by shifting the focus to her inner world and personal voice. The novel allows Sita to express her feelings, doubts, and pain, presenting her not as a flawless ideal but as a psychologically complex woman navigating intense emotional and social challenges. This feminist retelling challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations of the *Ramayana* and brings attention to critical themes such as women's identity, trauma, and empowerment. By giving Sita her own voice, Divakaruni invites readers to rethink her role and to understand the emotional and psychological consequences of the injustices she endures.

In this narrative, Sita is not a passive figure of mythology but a woman shaped by suffering, endurance, and self-realization. Her experiences of abduction, abandonment, and repeated questioning of her purity cause deep psychological trauma, but they also lead her to reclaim her agency and assert her autonomy. As Nandini Bhattacharya notes, "Divakaruni reclaims the feminine from myth, turning symbols of passivity into voices of protest, endurance, and transformation." This transformation is evident in how Sita challenges the male-centered epic by narrating her own story and ultimately refusing to return to Rama. Her final decision to return to the earth is not an act of surrender but a powerful assertion of selfhood, symbolizing feminist resistance and psychological strength. Rather than being silenced by trauma, Sita transforms it into a source of empowerment, building her voice from the very pain that sought to suppress it.

Sita's life in *The Forest of Enchantments* is marked by deep emotional and psychological wounds that begin from the earliest stages of her life. Her mysterious birth, emerging from the earth rather than a human womb, casts a shadow over her sense of identity and belonging. Although her adoptive parents show her love, Sita internally wrestles with a sense of otherness. She reflects:

Was I truly a daughter of this house, or just a foundling the earth had thrown up? Did I belong here, or was I an outsider pretending at love and duty, terrified of being exposed? No one had said this to me aloud, but the silence had its own voice, sharp as a thorn. I'd always felt it press against my skin (Divakaruni 18).

The above passage reveals the silent but powerful fear Sita carries within a fear of rejection, of not truly belonging, and of being unworthy despite outward acceptance.

Carl Jung's concept of the *shadow* self-offers a compelling framework to understand Sita's internal struggle. Jung states, "The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real" (Jung, *Aion* 8). Sita's feelings of doubt, fear, and alienation are not simply circumstantial but stem from a deep psychological wound linked to her shadow self. Her internal conflict is a confrontation with these hidden aspects of her psyche, the unspoken insecurities and silent questions about her worth.

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Recognizing and eventually integrating these feelings becomes part of Sita's journey toward wholeness and self-realization. One of the first major traumas Sita experiences is her exile to the forest. Even though she chooses to go with Rama, the sudden change from royal life to hardship causes emotional stress. She suppresses her fear to support her husband, showing what Sigmund Freud calls *repression*, a defense mechanism where painful emotions are pushed deep into the unconscious.

Sita's kidnapping by Ravana is another turning point. Though she remains physically unharmed, the long period of isolation and fear leaves her with invisible scars. She suffers in silence, trying to protect her dignity. Her trauma is worsened by Rama's reaction after she is rescued. Instead of comfort, she faces doubt and humiliation. He demands that she prove her purity by walking through fire (Agni Pariksha). This moment is emotionally devastating. Sita feels betrayed not just as a wife but as a human being. Her identity is reduced to how others view her body and honour.

Later, when Sita is sent into exile again while pregnant, the pain becomes unbearable. She is abandoned without explanation, forced to live alone in the forest and raise her children without any support. This second exile, especially during motherhood, deepens her trauma. Freud's idea of trauma repetition means that painful experiences keep coming back in different ways. This can be seen in Sita's life, where her suffering doesn't end but continues in new forms at each stage of her life.

Despite all these experiences, Sita does not give up. She remembers her connection to the earth, which becomes a source of comfort and inner strength. Jung's concept of *individuation*, the process of becoming a whole and self-aware person, can be seen in how Sita starts understanding her worth beyond the roles of wife and queen. Even though Sita suffers many emotional wounds, she gradually begins to express her inner strength and make her own choices. This ability to stand up for herself and shape her own identity is called female agency. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Sita's voice becomes more confident as she learns to speak out against injustice, question tradition, and live according to her own values.

One clear example of Sita's agency in *The Forest of Enchantments* is her decision to accompany Rama into exile not out of blind loyalty, but from her own deeply felt sense of duty and love. Rather than being coerced or expected to follow, Sita takes ownership of the choice, stating:

I'll come with you," I said. "Not because I must, or because I'm your wife and it's my duty. I come of my own free will. I come because I want to be with you, wherever you are- even if it's in a forest, wearing bark, sleeping on the ground, facing danger and discomfort. I'm not made of fragile clay. I'm the daughter of the Earth. Hardship doesn't frighten me" (Divakaruni 47).

The above quotation reveals the depth of her conviction and autonomy. Sita does not see herself as a passive figure shaped by patriarchal expectations; she sees herself as strong, rooted in the Earth, and willing to endure pain and uncertainty for love that is consciously chosen. In claiming her strength and voicing her will, she redefines what it means to be a devoted wife, replacing

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submission with empowered partnership. Sita's most powerful act of agency comes at the end of the novel. After being abandoned again and asked to prove her purity before Rama and society, she refuses. Instead of repeating the fire ordeal, she calls upon her mother, the Earth, to take her back. This moment shows that Sita no longer waits for others to validate her. She chooses dignity over acceptance. This decision represents her full transformation from a silent sufferer to a woman who takes control of her own fate.

Carl Jung's theory of individuation helps explain Sita's transformation in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Through immense suffering, she gains self-knowledge and emotional resilience. Individuation, according to Jung, is the process by which a person becomes a psychological "individual"- a unified and whole being. As Jung explains, "Individuation means becoming an 'individual,' and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as 'coming to selfhood' or 'self-realization'" (Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 275).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents Sita's emotional and psychological growth through a moving reflection that illustrates Jung's idea of individuation and the reclaiming of agency through self-awareness: "I was no longer the girl who had followed her husband into the forest. I had lived through exile, abduction, war, humiliation, rejection. I had given birth in a hermitage and raised my sons alone. I had looked into the abyss and climbed out. I was Sita, daughter of the Earth, and I had survived" (Divakaruni 290). This powerful statement marks the culmination of Sita's journey toward individuation and self-realization. No longer confined by the identities of wife, queen, or victim, she reclaims a sense of self that is grounded in lived experience, emotional resilience, and moral clarity. Her words reflect not just survival, but transformation- she has faced suffering in all its forms and emerged whole. In declaring herself as "Sita, daughter of the Earth," she affirms a personal identity rooted in strength and self-awareness.

Carl Jung's concept of individuation offers a valuable lens for understanding Sita's psychological journey in *The Forest of Enchantments*. Individuation involves integrating all aspects of the self, including shadow elements such as pain, trauma, and suppressed emotions, into a unified and conscious identity. Sita's journey reflects this process as she confronts emotional abandonment, moral dilemmas, and societal expectations. Her choice of peace over bitterness is not an act of submission but a conscious, empowered decision that redefines her agency on her own terms. Through this, she embodies a form of heroism that transcends traditional roles and embraces the full complexity of womanhood.

The psychological transformation also aligns with Judith Herman's view that "the restoration of the sense of self and the creation of new connections are essential to the recovery from trauma." Sita's healing emerges not from vengeance but through her deep connection with nature, her children, and her inner moral compass. Her bond with the earth, both literal and symbolic, allows her to step away from socially imposed roles and reconnect with her true self. By refusing to return to Rama

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and choosing to return to the earth, Sita enacts a final, autonomous gesture of self-realization. Her recovery is not dependent on external validation but rooted in her ability to reinterpret her trauma and assert her narrative, transforming silence into strength and suffering into spiritual clarity.

Sita's agency is further reflected in how she raises her sons in Valmiki's hermitage, away from royal privilege, instilling in them values such as compassion, courage, and wisdom. Despite experiencing abandonment and public humiliation, she refuses to let her pain define her. As she powerfully states, "I will not let my sorrow twist me into something I am not. I will not let it make me cruel or vengeful. My sons will not learn hatred from me" (Divakaruni 292). This quiet strength-leading without authority and healing without revenge- reveals a unique form of heroism, often overlooked in male-centered narratives. Sita's journey toward individuation is not about conquest but about inner harmony and nurturing motherhood, showing that resilience and wisdom can emerge from suffering without giving in to bitterness.

Sita's story, retold from her point of view by Divakaruni, not only restores her voice but also offers readers a modern example of how a woman can rise from trauma to strength without becoming hard or hateful. Sita's agency is not about dominating others but about choosing dignity, truth, and self-respect. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores several powerful themes through Sita's journey, especially patriarchy, identity, love, betrayal, and freedom. All these themes are closely linked to Sita's psychological trauma and her growing sense of agency. One of the most compelling themes in *The Forest of Enchantments* is how Sita's traumatic experiences lead her toward profound self-realization. As she reflects on her journey, she says:

I had been shattered into pieces, each fragment sharp and jagged with pain. The exile, the abduction, the endless accusations- they left scars no one could see. Yet from those wounds, I began to gather strength, slowly weaving myself back together. I learned that survival was not merely enduring but understanding who I was beneath all the suffering. I was not just Rama's wife or a queen cast aside; I was a woman with her own spirit, rooted deep like the earth itself" (Divakaruni 288).

The quotation vividly captures Sita's emotional fracturing caused by exile, abduction, and societal rejection, traumas that leave invisible scars challenging her identity and sense of belonging. However, the quote also reveals a crucial transformation: her trauma becomes a wellspring of inner strength and self-awareness rather than mere victimhood. The metaphor of being "shattered into pieces" represents the dismantling of her externally imposed roles as wife and queen. Meanwhile, "weaving herself back together" symbolizes the psychological rebuilding essential to self-realization, a core Jungian concept. Rather than simply surviving, Sita embarks on a journey of self-discovery, embracing an intrinsic identity as "a woman with her own spirit, rooted deep like the earth itself." This connection to the earth signifies stability, growth, and natural wisdom-qualities reinforcing her individuation and wholeness. Thus, the passage portrays trauma not as an end but as a catalyst for Sita's emergence as a self-aware, empowered individual, perfectly illustrating Jung's idea of transforming suffering into self-knowledge and psychological integration.

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Another powerful moment in *The Forest of Enchantments* illustrates how Sita's trauma becomes a source of inner strength and self-discovery. She reflects:

I had been broken, yes, but not defeated. Each wound, each moment of despair, became a lesson etched into my soul. I learned that true strength was not in grand battles or loud victories but in the quiet acceptance of pain and the courage to keep moving forward. In that silence, I found myself-not the woman the world wanted me to be, but the woman I chose to become (Divakaruni 305).

The above quote highlights the transformative power of trauma in Sita's journey. Despite immense suffering, she refuses to be defined or defeated by her pain. Instead, her wounds become valuable lessons that deepen her self-understanding. The quote emphasizes that true strength lies not in outward victories but in the quiet resilience to accept pain and choose growth. This moment marks Sita's movement from seeking external validation to embracing internal acceptance, embodying Carl Jung's concept of individuation- the integration of suffering and conscious self-choice. Her empowerment emerges not from reclaiming social status or power but from reclaiming her own identity, shaped by courage and self-awareness rather than by societal expectations.

A deeply significant moment that captures Sita's transformation occurs when she reflects on her trials and the strength she gained through them:

They saw only a woman who had been wronged, a woman abandoned. But I was more than that. I had walked through fire-not just the flames of the pyre, but the fire of judgment, of loneliness, of grief. And I had emerged, not untouched, but transformed. The fire had burned away my fear. What remained was my truth, bright and unshakable (Divakaruni 298).

The poignant reflection underscores how Sita's experiences of trauma become a crucible for psychological growth. The repeated imagery of fire evokes both her literal trial by fire and the emotional trials of societal judgment, abandonment, and grief. Rather than emerging unscathed, she emerges transformed, a testament to her inner resilience. The fire, instead of destroying her, purifies her of fear and external expectations, leaving behind a self-defined truth. This perfectly aligns with Carl Jung's concept of individuation, in which the conscious integration of pain and shadow aspects of the psyche leads to a stronger, more unified self. Sita's assertion of her truth, forged through suffering, is a powerful reclaiming of agency and identity.

One major theme is patriarchy and how it affects women's lives. Sita's suffering comes mostly from decisions made by men, including her exile, her trials, and her separation from Rama. Even though she is wise, brave, and pure, society doubts her worth because she is a woman. Her voice is ignored, and her feelings are dismissed. Divakaruni uses this to show how deeply unfair rules and traditions can be, especially when women are not allowed to speak for themselves.

Another strong theme in *The Forest of Enchantments* is identity. Sita is not simply a wife, queen, or mother: she is thinking, feeling human being with dreams and questions. At first, her identity is shaped largely by others around her. However, through pain and reflection, she begins to

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define herself on her own terms. Her deep bond with nature, her strong sense of justice, and the inner peace she gradually attains all help her discover who she truly is. The journey of self-discovery closely connects to Carl Jung's concept of self-realization, which involves becoming aware of all aspects of one's personality both conscious and unconscious.

Jung argues that a person is not fully whole until they integrate these different parts of themselves, including hidden desires, fears, and potentials. The path to wholeness requires recognizing and accepting all dimensions of the self, rather than rejecting or ignoring the unconscious. Thus, self-realization is more than self-awareness; it is the achievement of inner harmony through embracing the full complexity of one's identity.

Sita's transformation reflects this process perfectly, as she moves from an identity imposed by others to one shaped by her own understanding and acceptance of herself. As she declares, "I am more than a shadow of the man I love. I am my own person, with a voice that deserves to be heard" (Divakaruni 312). This powerful statement marks a critical moment in her journey toward self-realization. It shows her breaking free from the traditional roles and expectations imposed on her as Rama's wife. By asserting that she is more than just a reflection of Rama's identity, Sita claims her individuality and agency. This aligns closely with Jung's idea that self-realization requires integrating the whole self, rather than being defined solely by external roles or relationships. Sita's acknowledgment of her own voice symbolizes her movement toward inner wholeness and identity, embracing her unique feelings, desires, and truths.

The theme of love and betrayal also plays a central role. Sita loves Rama deeply, but his decisions hurt her again and again. Her trust is broken when he doubts her purity and sends her away while pregnant. These betrayals cause deep emotional wounds, but they also push Sita to grow. She learns to love herself and find strength in her pain, which leads to healing. The novel celebrates the theme of freedom, not just physical freedom, but emotional and mental freedom. Sita's final choice to leave the world and return to the Earth is not a sign of weakness but a powerful act of liberation. She chooses peace and truth over living in a society that refuses to accept her. This moment symbolizes her complete freedom from pain, judgment, and control.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* powerfully reclaims Sita's voice by portraying her not as a passive mythical figure but as a deeply human woman who endures trauma, makes conscious choices, and emerges with agency and inner strength. Through her trials- exile, abduction, societal judgment, and abandonment- Sita evolves into a self-aware individual who refuses to be defined by others' narratives. This transformation is poignantly captured in her assertion: "They may write my story in a hundred different ways. Let them. I will still have lived it fully. I will still have chosen, suffered, rejoiced. I will still have been Sita" (Divakaruni 324). Here, Sita boldly reclaims ownership of her life and identity, rejecting the limited versions imposed by patriarchal tradition. The repetition of "I will still have..." emphasizes her deliberate embrace of both joy and suffering as integral parts of her selfhood. This moment reflects the essence of Carl Jung's concept of individuation, the conscious integration of life's pain and complexity into a unified sense

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of self. Divakaruni presents Sita as a woman who not only survives trauma but transforms it into a source of power, turning her pain into a pathway toward self-definition and agency. By linking psychological suffering with personal empowerment, the novel becomes both a deeply personal and political testament to female strength and voice.

The Forest of Enchantments reimagines Sita not as a silent and obedient figure, but as a woman who feels deeply, thinks clearly, and chooses her own path. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni gives voice to Sita's psychological pain and strength, showing how trauma can shape a person but does not have to destroy them. Using ideas from Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, we see how Sita's mind carries the weight of betrayal, loss, and injustice. Yet, through self-reflection, inner strength, and connection with nature, she transforms her suffering into self-awareness and power.

Sita's story is not just about pain- it is about growth, resistance, and quiet courage. Her ability to choose dignity and truth, even when abandoned and misunderstood, shows a new kind of heroism. Divakaruni also speaks for many women whose stories have been forgotten or ignored in history and literature by reclaiming Sita's voice. In this way, the novel becomes both a personal journey and a larger message about female agency, mental strength, and emotional freedom.

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