

Trauma and Memory in Divakaruni: The Forest of Enchantments, viewed through the lens of Dominic La Capra

R. Ranjhana

Research Scholar, Department of English, The New College, Chennai, India.
ranjhanar11@gmail.com

Dr. H. Abdul Hadi

Associate Professor and Research Guide, Department of English, The New College, Chennai, India.
abdulhadi@thenewcollege.edu.in

  <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613514>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on August 5, 2026

Abstract: Indian mythology, mainly Indian epics, has viewed women's suffering as acts of love, morality and divinity. These epics are viewed as cultural heritage which is maintained and inherited and normalises women's trauma. Such pain and suffering are romanticised and aestheticised, which leads to further promotion. This article examines how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reconstructs the mythic suffering of women through trauma-based narratives in one of her most famous works, *The Forest of Enchantments*, by engaging with Dominic La Capra's theory of trauma. The story lays out the suffering of Sita in the form of trauma. Dominic's concept of trauma shows us that it is an experience which returns to us through memory and narration. He further conceptualises trauma as an act of compulsive repetition, which is acting out on it and working through trauma. This paper focuses on how Divakaruni re-vocalises mythic pain from the perspectives of women. This form of revoicing provokes patriarchy in mythology and turns cultural memory into a healing space and completely changes the context of feminist historiography.

Keywords: Trauma, memory, re-narration, Divakaruni, Dominic La Capra, Sita, Mythology, Feminist mythology, Indian epic re-narration

Introduction

Mythology is defined as a traditional narrative which carries down the tales of our ancestors, including their beliefs, values and memories. Myth also shows us how the world was made and how things emerged from it in different forms. Each country has its own vast mythology in its cultural version. They often feature Gods, Goddesses, Demi-Gods, the relationships between Gods and Humans, demons, monsters and whatnot. All these are not just fictional; far from it, they carry down cultural frameworks through which we understand different attributes of morality and values today. Mythology has also become a source of inspiration for many writers today, philosophically, morally and psychologically. Mythological narratives in famous epics, especially Indian epics, have long been viewed as cultural history passed down to generations to shape gender roles, moral values, and expectations. One such revered myth is the Ramayana, written by the great sage Valmiki in Sanskrit. It depicts the life of Lord Rama and was composed in 24000 verses during the Treta Yuga (the second, 1.296-million-year-long epoch in the Hindu four-yuga cycle). The Ramayana narrates the tale of Rama, the son of King Dasharatha and the Prince of Ayodhya, who was banished into the forest for fourteen years along with his wife Sita, the daughter of King Janaka of Mithila and his Brother Lakshmana, who was extremely devoted to him. The epic reaches its climax when Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the King of Lanka, which brings Rama to rescue her instantaneously with the help of Hanuman and his allies, Sugreeva and his Vanara army consisting of monkeys. This epic functions as a philosophical and moral text that has shaped many generations and taught the values of resilience, duty (dharma), friendship, kindness, and ethical conduct.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a contemporary writer who attempts to retell history and cultural myths, especially Indian myths and cultural traditions, through a modern lens. One of her most prominent works is the retelling of the Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. Most writers centre their focus on Rama's heroism. Still, Divakaruni pulls the reader's focus onto Sita as she narrates her childhood in Mithila as she advances into a young woman who voices her opinions strongly in inner monologues, and later on becomes the wife of Rama and the storyline follows to her life in Ayodhya, and also when she was banished with her husband and brother in law to the forest where she was abducted by Ravana, the king of Lanka in her final year of exile. It further reveals the challenges she faces during her abduction and how she navigates through them.

Female protagonists like Sita are worshipped as perfection or are defined as "The ideal woman" since they represent endurance, sacrifice and upholding virtue. This worship often overlooks the traumatic suffering and humiliation concealed. Their pain is defined as a sacrificial act instead of being interrogated and turned into a divine spectacle. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* disrupts this traditional storytelling by re-narration. This narrative focuses on the women's perspective, unforgotten memories, and the storm of internal dispute. Divakaruni presents the idea of suffering as fate as a lived experience and demands recognition. To

understand this further, Dominic La Capra's theory of trauma gives us a framework for understanding the transformation.

Dominic La Capra is an American historian and literary theorist who works on Trauma, memory and historiography. His notable work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* defines trauma and how its events are viewed in literature and history. He argues that traumatic events cannot be represented straightforwardly because traumatic events often disrupt memory and speech, making it difficult for the individual to talk about them in one go. He also proves how narratives help a person to process their trauma ethically. La Capra differentiates between "acting out" and 'working through'. By applying this framework, the article asserts that Divakaruni's re-narration moves Sita from agonising repetition into working through the trauma through narration, where her voice reframes her experience, thus giving the readers a different perspective.

Dominic defines trauma as an experience which returns through memory, narration and the way it affected the individual. Trauma disrupts reality in waves of temporality by appearing in the instance of flashbacks, in fragments and is repetitive. He further warns against aestheticising trauma and asks to take the ethical responsibility of representing trauma as it is without adding any dramatic flair or titling it as a symbol of endurance. *"One should be wary of turning trauma into a spectacle or aesthetic object."* (LaCapra,92.). He differentiates trauma in the form of acting out and working through it very centrally. Acting out is when the individual is subjected to reliving the trauma repeatedly, trapped in a state of repetition and is unable to move on from the past and differentiate it from the present. Dominick LaCapra describes trauma as a process of repetition in which *"in acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene"* (LaCapra,21). Working through it allows the individual to process the trauma in ethical ways through forms of narration, mourning, and reflection. *"One can recall that something happened back then while realising that one is living here and now with openings to the future."* (LaCapra, 22) This does not erase what has happened to them but gives a pathway for managing it ethically, thus letting the individual understand it and engage with it ethically. When this theory is applied to mythical narratives, it completely changes the perspective of these epics being viewed as an exemplary source of teaching how ideal a woman should be. This is because the trauma and suffering of Sita are viewed as a role model for devotion and unlimited sacrifice and upholding dharma across generations without addressing the suffering carried with it. Divakaruni's novels interrupt this repetition by acknowledging the buried trauma of Sita's in the form of monologues, emotional state definition and questioning her role throughout the entire situation, which enables the act of working through the trauma.

The suffering of Sita, in the Ramayana, has largely been viewed as utter devotion and a virtuous act and defined as an ultimate description of how wifely duties must be enacted. Her trial by fire, her abduction and exile are all viewed as tests of virtue to prove her loyalty and devotion towards her husband, Rama, rather than being viewed as acts of illegal abduction and violation of her self-respect. Divakaruni shakes off these perspectives by focusing on Sita's emotional state. Banerjee presents exile as a form of

abuse, loneliness and abandonment, not as a form of noble sacrifice or absolute obedience. Sita's memories of her exile in the forest are crystal clear and mark emotional reflection which emphasises the impact of isolation. In the epic, Sita is viewed as a helpless victim while being abducted by Ravana and is shown waiting patiently. But in the re-narration, she is not portrayed as a helpless damsel in distress who wants to be saved, but rather as a woman filled with resilience who fights fear, refuses Ravana's advances, and preserves her sense of self and dignity. Sita also questions the demand of the second trial by fire because she had already undergone the first trial by fire after being rescued from Lanka. This showcases that it led to the loss of trust and leads to questioning her identity. Sita's narration expresses her disbelief, hurt, and anger at Rama's public shaming, and her doubt about herself. Thus, she steps down from the epic's portrayal of her as an example of devotion by questioning the act that demanded proof of her virtue. *"I have already walked through fire once. I will not do so again to prove my purity."* (Divakaruni, 343)

La Capra's concept of working through is witnessed during Sita's second exile to the forest while pregnant. Instead of accepting everything silently and blaming herself, Sita criticises the society and her husband for reducing her to this state and imposing suffering on her. *"Why had I accepted so much without protest? Why had I remained silent when my heart knew that something was wrong?"* (Divakaruni, 356). Her decision to raise her sons independently and valiantly, and her refusal to return to her husband Rama, shows her as a strong woman with dignity and as a subject who was wronged unjustly, not portrayed as a helpless victim of social injustice. The novel showcases the transition of an individual acting out and then working through the trauma they underwent. The epics normalise the violence against women and the gender patriarchy. Divakaruni intervenes with this narrative by introducing the perspective of the protagonist, who reflects on her experiences, recalls them, questions societal rules, and enunciates her emotions. This fresh perspective of Banerjee also makes the reader a witness to all this ethical growth and reframes the epic differently. The reader also understands and connects with La Capra's theory of not aestheticising suffering by acknowledging it instead of justifying it.

Representation of Feminist Historiography

Divakaruni actively participates in feminist historiography by re-narrating mythological perspectives into trauma and challenges the patriarchy, which shaped cultural memory for decades and taught us that gendered suffering was to be normalised and viewed as wondrous acts. Trauma requires accepting the loss that comes with it and processing it without exaggeration. The Author exposes sanctified suffering in the Epics and portrays her protagonists as complex individuals, avoiding portraying them as victims or eliciting pity from readers. These narratives invite most readers to reconsider the traditional male-dominated narratives, which continue to normalise women's suffering and encourage them to understand social dynamics and societal development for the upcoming generations. The protagonist recalls everything from memory and narrates the fragments. The memories mainly consist of internalised pain and suffering and the hidden rage and unfairness faced. This recalling leads to the

character realising things and questioning gender norms and self-defining on a whole other level. La Capra also states that even if trauma is worked through, it does not give complete closure; it can only lead to acceptance of what has happened, but it leaves traces that cannot be fully resolved. Memory itself becomes a form of resistance. The endings of the characters prove so. Sita retires back into the earth as a final act of unresolved grief and refusal to accept everything without hesitation. This ending shows us the complexities of the persistence of trauma and goes against the original narratives.

Conclusion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments* gives a new reimagining of Indian Epics and their narrative style by challenging traditional patriarchal narration and foregrounding women's experiences, especially their suffering, trauma, and female subjectivity. Dominic La Capra's theory of Trauma aligns perfectly with Divakaruni by showing how trauma can be worked through in the form of acting out, normalising women's suffering without romanticising it, and then working through it narratively, where trauma is remembered, recalled, and represented ethically and thoughtfully. By granting a modernised voice to the characters, Banerjee transforms myth into a space for a feminist perspective where storytelling becomes a form of healing and trauma is recognised as a psychological experience which requires attention and recognition instead of being emotionalised and revered. This narrative challenges every perspective on the existing myth and encourages readers to question the once long-held beliefs, and also helps to evolve the cultural myth and view sanctified suffering from not just an empathetic point of view but to understand the voices of the silenced and further impart gendered equality lessons to the existing and future generations and end female gendered norms and suffering along with it.

Works Cited

- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantments*. HarperCollins India, 2019.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Valmiki. *The Ramayana*. Translated by Bibek Debroy, 3 vols., Penguin Random House India, 2016.