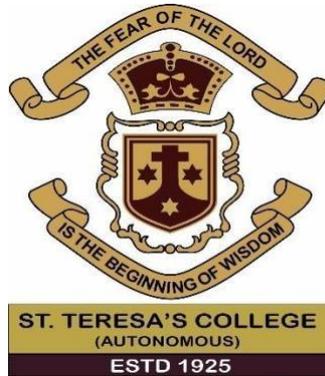


**GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT: A FEMINIST STUDY OF
*THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS***



*Project submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
English Language and Literature*

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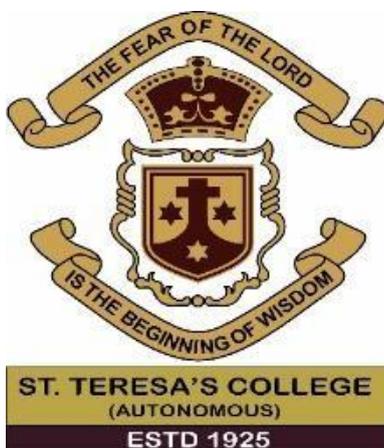
Department of English and Centre for Research.

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I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Gender as a Social Construct: A Feminist Study of *The Forest of Enchantments*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Centre for Research, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title of recognition.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Gender as a Social Construct: A Feminist Study of *The Forest of Enchantments*” is a record of bona fide work carried out by Arsha Margaret Augustine under my supervision and guidance.

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March 2023.

An Abstract of the Project Entitled
Gender As A Social Construct: A Feminist Study of *The Forest Of Enchantments*
By
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Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American feminist and poet. Her work, *The Forest of Enchantments*, is a retelling of the great Indian epic *Ramayana*. The work is a re-narration of *Ramayana* through Sita's perspective.

The project analyses the characters in the novel through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and gender construction. According to Butler gender is performative and is constituted by the society. Therefore, gender is an unstable identity and is capable of being constituted in a different manner. The work analyses the characters in the novel to see whether they are constituting gender differently and are constructing their own unique identities; or whether they remain to act according to societal gender norms, perpetuating the gender binary. Through this analysis the work attempts to prove that gender is a mere construction and that each character irrespective of their sex and gender possesses both masculine and feminine qualities (however, the rate at which they are present may differ from person to person).

The thesis is divided into three chapters: The first chapter, "Introduction to Feminism and Gender", deals with the theories of feminism and gender. It also introduces the theorist, Judith Butler, and their theory of gender performativity. The second chapter, titled, "Censuring the Pativrata Ideology", analyses the female characters in the novel. The third chapter, "De-naturalizing the Notion of Masculinity", analyses the male characters in order to examine how they respond to the concept of "gender". The Conclusion sums up the findings of the study.

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Introduction

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian-American author, poet, and activist. She is a feminist writer who portrays strong and powerful women characters in her novels. *Arranged Marriage*, her short story collection won American Book Award in 1996. Some of her major novels include *Sister of My Heart*, *Palace of Illusions*, *Queens of Dreams*, and *Mistress of Spices*. Some of her works were adapted into films. *The Palace of Illusions*, a novel that was published in 2008, retells the story of Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, from the perspective of Draupati. It is one of the best-known novels of Divakaruni and was a national best-seller in India for over a year. Ramayana is an ancient Indian epic that narrates the story of Ram, the legendary king of Ayodhya. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest Of Enchantments* is a novel that regenerates the story of *Ramayana* through Sita's (Ram's wife) perspective. She began her literary career as a poet. *Leaving Yuba City* and *Black Candle* are her poetry collections.

The Forest of Enchantments, published in 2019, is a feminist retelling of the Indian epic *Ramayana* authored by Valmiki.

In the prologue of the novel, Sage Valmiki, in whose ashram Sita was living with her sons, gives her his magnum opus *Ramayana*. Since it was the story of her husband King Ram, the sage wants her approval. Sita after reading the book finds that the work has not portrayed the real pain she had suffered. When she shared her feelings about the book with Valmiki, he asked her to write her own story. Therefore, Sita decides to write a book that includes not only her story but also the stories of Urmila, Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Mandodari, and all other women who have been misunderstood, trivialized, and forgotten. A book that will give voice to the women characters of *Ramayana*, *Sitayan*.

At the beginning of *Sitayan*, Sita takes us back to Mithila, her kingdom. She describes the beauty of her kingdom and its gardens. Sita harbored some magical powers that could heal the plants and trees with her mere touch. She cured the illness of people using different medicinal plants and herbs. Thus, the people in Mithila saw her as the earth goddess. Sita narrates how Sunaina, her mother, taught her martial art lessons in secret since teaching martial arts to a girl child was against the traditions of their kingdom. Once when she came to know about the fact that she will get married only to the person who can string the great bow, Haradhanu, she maintained a special relationship with the bow. Their relationship was magical, the bow talked to her. It taught her and even warned her. Many kings from the neighbouring and faraway countries of Mithila came to string the bow but all of them failed, even the powerful rakshasa king, Ravan. 'The bow was waiting for the right man' (Divakaruni 13). Then came a young prince Ram, the Prince of Ayodhya, accompanied by his brother Lakshman and sage Vishawamitra. He, with no effort, strung the bow and even shattered it into pieces. Soon Sita got married to Ram. Since Ram had promised his brothers that they will get married together, Urmila (Sita's sister) and her cousins Mandavi and Shrutakirti got married to his brothers. They were then taken to Ayodhya where the real story of Sita and Ram begins.

King Dasharath had three Queens Kaushalya; Ram's mother, Kaikeyi and Sumitra. Sita carefully dealt with the queens. Her efforts refilled happiness in Kaushalya's tragic life. It was when Dasharath decided to crown Ram as the king of Ayodhya, the tragic story of Sita's life begins. Kaikeyi came up with two boons which King Dasharath had promised her when she saved his life at the war front. One, Bharat should be made the king of Ayodhya, and two, Ram should be banished to the forest for fourteen years. As per the boons Ram was banished to the forest. He was accompanied by Sita, who forced him to take her with him, and also by Lakshman. Urmila, the wife of Lakshman, was left behind as an abandoned wife.

Sita's deep affection towards her sister Urmila made the departure more difficult for Sita. However, her love for her husband forced her to accompany him. Though forest life was risky and treacherous, Sita, who was very fond of trees and animals, enjoyed her life in the forest.

It was when they met Sage Gautam in his hermitage, Sita came to know about the miserable and tragic tale of Ahalya (Sage Gautam's wife). Her story haunted Sita throughout her journey. Towards the end of their banishment period, Ravan abducts Sita in order to revenge his sister Surpanaka's sufferings caused by Ram and Lakshman. For one year Sita lives in captivity, in Lanka. Her life in Lanka is characterized by sorrow and fear, however, the memories of Ram gave her strength to endure all those hardships. With the help of Hanuman, Sugreev, and other monkeys, Ram and Lakshman kill Ravan in order to rescue Sita. However, Instead of taking Sita with him to Ayodhya, Ram rejected her proclaiming that she was impure since she had spent one year in Ravan's palace. From outrage and pain, Sita forces Lakshman to build a fire for her to perform the Agni-pariksha ritual to prove her purity. She tried to burn herself in the fire but Agni, the Fire God appeared and declared her innocence. Ram apologized to Sita for his harsh words and took her back to Ayodhya (Sita, though, forgave Ram for his brutish behaviour, the incident kept on troubling her mind). After returning to Ayodhya, Ram gets crowned as the king and Sita as the queen. But her life in Ayodhya became unpleasant since people began to question her chastity when she got pregnant. Ram, who was so much involved in his duties as a king, banished pregnant Sita to the forest. Sage Valmiki gave shelter to her in his ashram. Ashram life taught her endurance. She soon learned to endure her sorrows and hardships. Her unending sufferings made her strong. She brought up her sons Lav and Kush, with the help of Valmiki and Indra, and molded them into strong, skilled boys. However, Fate united Ram and his sons. When Ram recognized his sons, he accepted them and declared them as his heirs. Sita was brought back

to Ayodhya as per Ram's orders. But there too her fate was painful. Ram asked her to undergo Agni-pariksha to prove her innocence to Ayodhyan citizens. But Sita who no longer wants to remain as a subject of male dominance refused to participate in the ritual. She was sure that if she does what Ram demands of her, society will use her action to judge other women. That is the women will have to carry the burden of proving their innocence even when they aren't guilty. Protesting her innocence, Sita asks mother Earth to aid her, "O Mother, O Father, all my life I have suffered and endured and been wrongly accused. If I am indeed blameless of what the gossipmongers whispered, give me a sign" (357). As a result, the earth under her feet cracks open and Sita plunges into it. Just before vanishing into the earth, Sita calls out Ram (her greatest joy and her greatest sorrow) and tells him that she has forgiven him.

"One is not born, but becomes a woman", is an important argument put forth by Simone de Beauvoir. However, it is necessary to note that it is not just a female who "becomes a woman" but also a male. Both boys and girls growing up in a patriarchal society are moulded into "men" and "women" respectively. Each and every action of a man and a woman can be associated with the concept of gender construction since they act according to the gender roles they are expected to perform. Along with women, men are also victims of patriarchy that pressurize them by forcing them to perform certain "gender roles".

The Forest of Enchantments, authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a novel that helps in understanding how patriarchy induces gender roles in the lives of men and women and how it forces them to act and behave according to strict patriarchal behavioural codes. According to the notions of a patriarchal society, a woman's role as a mother is considered central to her identity. Motherhood is seen as something that gives women an identity in society. We could consider it as a gender role society expects women to perform. If they fail

to become “good” mothers or wives they are considered something of no use. Motherhood can also be interpreted as a tool to control women and restrict their freedom.

In patriarchal Indian society, “it was obligatory; a girl was “trained” to be a good wife and a good mother and was blessed with the motherhood of sons” (Bhattacharji 1). The mothers in addition to being “good” were also expected to produce male offspring. It is important to note that even during the period of anti-colonial movements many colonies including Palestinian Islamic resistance considered women as factories to produce men.

The novel provides instances that prove the above-mentioned claims. In chapter five of the novel, Sita’s mother, Sunaina, expresses her unhappiness in her failure “to produce a male heir to whom he could pass on the kingdom” (Divakaruni 46). In one instance, Sunaina explains to Sita how Sumitra, the youngest wife of Dasharath, fell out of favour with him (Dasharath) just because she failed to give him the male heir. Also, in another instance when Ram narrates the tragic story of his mother Kaushalya, tells Sita how Dasharath gave away his daughter (Shanta) born out of his marriage with Kaushalya, to King Romapad. Though this act upsets Kaushalya “she took comfort in the belief that she’d provide her beloved husband with a male heir soon” (67). This instance shows the fact that even women were influenced by the patriarchal norms that gave importance to male children. It also portrays the extent to which patriarchy and its gender roles have enslaved the minds of men and women.

The novel also provides the reader with occasions where the conventional norms and gender roles are deconstructed. Before the novel’s beginning Divakaruni has incorporated a note thanking the three men, her husband, and sons, for teaching her love. This very first note subverts the notion that men are incapable of showing love and affection and are meant to be insensitive.

This paper analyses the major and minor characters in the novel in order to understand Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and gender construction. Butler puts forward the ideology that gender is performative and is constituted by the society. Therefore, gender is unstable and is capable of being constituted in a different manner. The work analyses the characters in the novel to see whether they are constituting gender differently and are constructing their own unique identities; or whether they remain to act according to societal gender norms, perpetuating the gender binary. The project attempts to prove that gender is a mere social construct and that each character despite of their sex and gender possesses both masculine and feminine qualities.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Feminism and Gender

French Philosopher, Charles Fourier coined the term feminism (*féminisme*) in 1837 and it originally meant “feminine qualities or character” or “the state of being feminine”. Later however the term got associated with women’s rights. Feminism refers to a range of social and political ideologies and movements that are aimed at establishing equal rights for women. It is the belief in political, social, economic, and cultural equality of the sexes. Feminism is an outcry against the continual subjugation of women and suppression of their talents by male authority. Toril Moi classifies the feminist movement into three phases: Feminine, Feminist, and Female. He defines “ ‘feminism ‘as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characters” (Belsey and Moore 116).

A long history can be attributed to the term Feminism. The trajectory of the growth of feminism can be divided into four waves:

The first wave of feminism focused on the suffrage movement and antislavery movement. It emerged in the United States and the United Kingdom during the 19th century and extended till the 20th century. Margaret Fuller, Lucretia Mott, Susan B Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the important feminist activists of this movement. Virginia Woolf wrote her famous work, “*A Room of One’s Own*” (1929), during this period. Mary Wollstonecraft published “*A Vindication of The Rights of Women*” in 1792.

The second wave of feminism emerged in the late 1960s and focused on evacuating gender inequalities prevailing in society by giving women proper education. It focused on issues associated with family, sexuality, domesticity, reproductive rights, and the workplace. It is believed that Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* paved the way for this movement.

Important activists of this movement include Betty Friedan, Simon de Beauvoir, and Kate Millet. This wave resulted in the emergence of three types of feminism: radical, liberal, and cultural.

The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1990s in the United States. Third-wave feminists embraced diversity and individualism in women. Earlier feminist movements ignored women who belonged to marginalized minor classes. Therefore, the third wave of feminism focused more on these silenced minorities. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, an anthology published in 1981, deals with the experiences of black women.

The Fourth wave of feminism which began in 2012 is associated with the use of social media and is focused on the empowerment of women. According to Kira Cocrane this wave of feminism is “defined by technology”. The key feature of fourth-wave feminism, which focuses on intersectionality, the use of internet tools, and interlocking systems of power, is internet activism. Rebecca Solnit’s *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014), Jessica Valenti's *Sex Object: A Memoir* and *The Vagenda* by Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett are some books associated with fourth-wave feminism.

Feminist activists and other women writers used literature as a weapon to fight against the patriarchal norms that subjugated them. They used it for their self-expression. Feminist critics aimed at destroying the patriarchal system which is the root cause of women's subjugation. The feminist theory examines women’s and men's lived experiences, social roles, chores, and interests in order to understand the nature of gender inequality.

The social and cultural construction of gender is a theory in feminism. Developed during the 1970s and 80s, gender theory analyzed femininity and masculinity as cultural and social constructs. A social construct is something that is invented by society. In her work, *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir states “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (Beauvoir 301). She reveals the fact that sex is different from gender. “Sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation” (Butler 35). Therefore “gender” is something unnatural and dramatic unlike “sex” which is a biological aspect. The constructivist believed in the fact that the nature and characteristics of males and females cannot be determined.

American philosopher and gender studies writer, Judith Pamela Butler, questions the notion that gender is natural. As a lesbian Butler prefers to use 'they' or 'them' instead of 'she' or 'her' pronouns. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, is one of their best-known and ground-breaking works which challenges the conventional notions of gender. In this work, they introduce and develop their theory of gender performativity and argue that “gender is performatively produced” (24). They, in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, define gender as a “stylized repetition of acts” (519). It is a kind of performance, like a theatrical performance, put on by male and female subjects in order to please the patriarchal society in which they live. Men and women are trained to act according to their gender, masculine and feminine respectively. Hence, they are “doing gender”. Butler argues that a girl, in order to become a woman, should compel her body to conform to a historical idea of ‘woman’. Therefore, one’s body becomes a “cultural sign” (522). Society expects women to be childlike, half-wit, capricious, nurturing, erratic, fickle, and sacrificing while men are expected to be independent, “manly”, strong, self-sufficient, egoistic, and witty. Gender becomes a social construct that attributes to men and

women certain specific roles - gender roles. As a child grows up she/he is exposed to an environment that will continually force her/him to behave in certain ways. Even the way the parents treat their children will lead to the imbibition of gender roles into the psyches of the children. A boy is always taught “not to cry like a girl”. Boys are expected to be brave, confident, and mature. Contradicting this notion, girls are insisted to play with dolls and are trained to become caring, loving, sensitive, and sacrificing mothers and wives.

“To be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile. The girl is supposed not only to primp and dress herself up but also to repress her spontaneity and substitute for it the grace and charm she has been taught by her elder sisters. Any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness” (Beauvoir 348).

Judith Butler also argues that discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler 522). Patriarchal society characterizes women as feminine and men as masculine according to the gender roles they are expected to perform. If a girl fails to become a woman by performing her gender roles she is branded as evil and is sometimes even ostracised from society. If a man doesn’t embody masculinity, he is considered an abnormal being. It is the society that moulds boys and girls into men and women respectively. Hence, the societal construction of gender roles and norms is responsible for the perpetuation of gender inequality. Through imposing gender roles, society controls its people, especially women, and enforces gender binary and patriarchal ideals.

Gender roles or gender stereotyping is potentially harmful not only to women but also to men. Especially men who belong to the beta male category find it difficult to follow the gender roles that are forced upon them. The beta male is the one who belongs to marginalized

or subordinate masculinity and the alpha male is the “real man” who is strong, aggressive, domineering, and confident.

Raewyn Connell classifies masculinity into four categories: Hegemonic, Complicit, Subordinate, and Marginalized masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a dominant masculine form characterized by a middle-class, physically strong, heterosexual white man. Complicit masculinity refers to men who tend to admire or do not challenge hegemonic masculinity, even though they themselves do not belong to that category. Marginalized masculinity is attributed to men who belong to marginalized groups and represent ‘failed’ or nonconforming masculinity. Subordinate masculine lack the qualities displayed by a hegemonic male and they tend to be more effeminate. Men who belong to this category embody some feminine characteristics.

Society solely encourages hegemonic alpha masculinity and complicit masculinity and marginalizes all the other masculine varieties. Even if a man belongs to other masculine categories, he is forced to display alpha male characteristics. According to Connell, masculinity always exists in contrast with femininity. Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue, it meant ascendancy achieved through cultural, institutions and persuasion (Connell 832). Though, the one who embodies hegemonic masculinity is honoured by society as a “real man”, the majority of men fail to perform or enact it. Masculinity helps in understanding the way in which men position themselves through discursive practices rather than representing a certain type of man. In fact, it is a social construction that is conceptualized as something “natural” or “normal”.

In India during the Vedic age, women played a significant role equal to men. They were independent and powerful. The Rig Vedic women were educated and even entered the

field of politics becoming administrators and rulers of their lands. Therefore “femininity” got equated with “Shakti” meaning strength or power. However, during the Later Rig Vedic period, several systems including *Sati*, child marriage, and polygamy resulted in the subjugation and oppression of women and altered the meaning of “femininity”. Indian society became highly patriarchal and discriminated against women. They were expected to be submissive to their husbands. Society restricted their freedom and autonomy. Indian women lost their identity and individuality since they were always identified in terms of their relationship with dominant male figures. Women were also forced to act according to their gender roles and were regarded as weak beings capable of only cooking, cleaning, nurturing, caring, and looking after their children. Self-sacrificing women who were devoted to their husbands became the symbol of the “ideal woman”. A woman should possess all the qualities of an ideal *bhadramahila* or gentlewoman, that is, an educated submissive wife and a “good” mother. The Indian patriarchal society began to believe in the notion that women were naturally meek, calm, weak, and sacrificing (feminine qualities) in nature unlike men, who are naturally aggressive, strong, and assertive (masculine qualities) in nature.

Judith Butler, through their work including *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1990), and *Undoing Gender* (2004), argues that genders, that is, masculinity and femininity, are neither natural nor biological, rather, are social and cultural constructions. According to them, a person can have both feminine and masculine identities regardless of his/her “sex”. Gender is performative according to Butler, this ideology, however, implies the idea that gender is something unstable. The repetitiveness of gender performance had made people believe that gender is a stable identity. According to Butler, gender is not stable. It is constituted by society and, therefore, can be differently constituted. One is capable of constituting gender in a different manner contradicting societal expectations and, thereby, one can alter his/her

identity. According to Butler, the repeated performance of gender constructs gender identity. The majority of human beings act according to the gender roles constructed by society and hence, the gender binary and inequality perpetuates. The aim of socially constituted gender is the enforcement of patriarchal norms. For example, Butler in their work *Gender Trouble*, states how the term “women” is always associated with or refers to a common identity. They argue that each woman has her own identity which is unique. Gender norms generalize both women and men. However, if a person gains the confidence to contradict the gender norms and act according to his/her nature, he/she could change their gender identity and could destruct the prevailing patriarchal and gender norms. Hence, gender is a social constitution that can be dismantled and constituted differently.

Chapter 2

Censuring The “Pativrata” Ideology

Sita is the focus of the novel *The Forest of Enchantments* since it is the retelling of *Ramayan* through Sita’s perspective. People often portray Sita as a goddess but the researcher would like to analyze Sita as an ordinary woman who is a victim of patriarchy and is subjected to different patriarchal norms, just like all other women. Sita often serves as a “role model” for every woman in India since she “played” the role of an ideal woman, the so-called “pativrata”. The ideology of “pativrata”, which literally means the “virtuous wife”, has dominated the lives of women in Indian society throughout history (Thomas 27). Therefore, in the process of gender construction, the concept of “pativrata” becomes a gender role, Indian women were expected to perform. Beauvoir states, “We are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women” (Beauvoir 13), because of the fact that patriarchal society won’t let women display their true identities. By hiding their real identities and characteristics, women put on a mask of “femininity” (feminine qualities women were expected to “perform”) in order to survive the harsh patriarchal environment. However, Divakaruni’s Sita is a woman who won’t give up without a good fight. Her actions and thoughts delineate the fact that she is irritated by and wanted to fight against the preconceived notions of womanhood, that has been induced by the patriarchy. Sita, attempts to constitute gender differently. She doesn’t want to encourage gender binary and patriarchal norms constructed by the society. She makes an attempt to act according her own nature. Though, contradicting her beliefs, she sometimes accepts certain gender role that the patriarchal society expects her to perform, she is confident enough to put some effort to question the naturalness of gender. Through examining Divakaruni’s Sita one could understand what Butler meant when they argued that gender is an unstable identity.

In the prologue of the novel, before Sita begins to compose *Sitayan*, she notices the colour of the ink that the sage (Valmiki) offered her in order to write her life story. It is red, a colour which stays so close to womanhood. It is the colour of menstruation, marriage mark, and childbirth, three factors that are very important in a woman's life. These same factors, however, may weaken or burdens her life. "Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" (Beauvoir 15). In Sita's life, even her pregnancy turns out to be a burden for her.

When Sita was about to write *Sitayan* she hears some voices. It was the voices of Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Urmila, Mandodari, and Surpanaka, women characters in the epic *Ramayana*. They said: "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners, trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten and used as cautionary tales" (4). Sita agrees to write their stories too because without them her story would be incomplete. Therefore, it is clear that through this novel Divakaruni is trying to give voice to every woman character, portrayed in the great epic *Ramayana*, who was marginalized and suppressed by patriarchal society.

Divakaruni's Sita, in her work *Sitayan*, doesn't just confine to the stories of silenced women, instead, she also reveals the reality behind men being portrayed as domineering, aggressive, and insensitive. Analysis of the work makes it clear that male characters often tend to display an alpha male status because of the fact that they are forced by society to behave in such a manner. Though some men enjoy their dominant position and patriarchal encouragement of male dominance, others find it a burden that haunts them.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sita is not completely an ideal woman, she is the one who tries to question patriarchal norms that subjugate women. Her mother Sunaina has taught her lessons in self-defense secretly since it was against the gender norms. Sita, contradicting

feminine qualities, “loved the idea of being a warrior” (9). Warrior is a concept that is often associated with masculinity. Patriarchal society won’t encourage a woman to become a warrior because it considers women as weak creatures unable to defend themselves. Sita’s excellency in self-defense and her desire to become a warrior, however, deconstructs the patriarchal belief that women naturally are feminine in nature (because as mentioned above “being a warrior” is considered a masculine quality not feminine). Here we see how Sita constitutes gender in a different manner by revealing the fact that she wished to become a warrior. She is, in Butler’s words, “undoing gender”.

In some cases, though protests crowded Sita’s mouth, she is being silenced. One of the pieces of advice given to Sita by her mother is notable. She says “If you want to stand up against wrongdoing, if you want to bring about change, do it in a way that doesn’t bruise man’s pride” (Divakaruni 46). Sita immediately tries to protest because she finds truth more important than a man’s pride, but she is being silenced. This instance exhibits that women themselves have deeply ingrained the patriarchal culture that gives more importance to a man’s pride. Society had conditioned women in such a way that they have conceived the ideology of male dominance and gender roles as something natural. Butler, in her essay *Bodies That Matter*, reveals the fact that gender is a socially constructed ritualized norm. They argue that women and men tend to conceive it as natural because it is imposed on them at a very young age. According to Butler, gender is a historical product that is reified as natural over time (Performative 525). In another episode of the novel, Sunaina tells Sita about the custom of Mithila that doesn’t allow a woman to rule the country, “it’s built upon an age-old belief the citizens of Mithila hold: no woman is strong enough-or wise enough-to guide them” (14). This case also helps us understand the fact that it is the conditioning of society that compel people to accept the idea that women are weaker than men and are incapable of

ruling a kingdom. However, Sita through her thoughts and actions manifests her anger and frustration in such beliefs and norms. She refused to be conditioned by society.

When Dasharath, Sita's father-in-law, refused her request to allow Urmila to share her palanquin, she tried to argue with him but her mother pressed her arm as a warning to stop the argument. This gesture of her mother reveals the fact that even a strong woman character like Sunaina fears the harsh criticism that the patriarchal society may subject a woman to if she voices her argument or refuses to obey the dominant male figure. Therefore, Sunaina wants her daughter to obey her father-in-law without questioning him. This episode delineates how a woman's family, especially the mother, and her social environment moulds her into an "ideal woman" by compelling or convincing her to act according to the feminine gender roles. Therefore, as Butler states, certain gender norms originate within the family and are enforced through certain familial modes of punishment and reward (Butler 526). An ideal woman is always expected to be calm, kind, and submissive. This idea is reinforced in the statement made by Ram when Sita asks him to order the soldiers not to harm trees while they were traveling to Ayodhya - 'you are tender-hearted, my dear. I can't fault that. It's right and necessary that women should be so' (56). Although gender roles are actually forced upon a woman, the patriarchal society attempts to define them as something natural. It is not necessary that a woman should be tender-hearted but there are certain general assumptions that society uses to define women. Ram is blinded by patriarchal norms and therefore he tends to generalize women as tender-hearted and feminine. Patriarchy and gender norms compel women to be submissive. It controls and corrupts her life. 'Every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity' (Beauvoir 13). It is true that Divakaruni's Sita is tender-hearted but she also possesses certain masculine characteristics. Each person regardless of their sex possesses both masculine and feminine characteristics but the amount of "femaleness" and

“maleness” present in each varies. Therefore, no woman can be wholly characterized as feminine. Sita, by revealing her masculine side, is “undoing gender”. Analysis of Sita helps in proving Butler’s ideology that gender is an unstable identity. It is not necessary that a girl should exhibit “femaleness”. “There is nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed, there is on the other hand, a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that are being expressed and still need to be expressed” (Butler 531). Therefore, gender doesn’t matter, it is a mere constitution.

In the prologue of the novel Valmiki shares his ‘life’s work’, *Ramayana*, with Sita in order to get her approval. “I’d like you to be the first to read it, he said.. After all, it’s your story, too”. His words express how important Sita is in Ram's life. He is aware of the fact that she is the one who provides Ram strength to overcome the hardships he faces. Sita was aware of the obstacles that were waiting to embrace her after marrying Ram since the priest in the Temple of Goddess Parvati had given Sita and Urmila warnings about their marriage. However, her obsession with Ram and the strange familiarity she feels toward him gave her the confidence that she would be able to fight all the obstacles that might block her way. The novel portrays how the intimate relationship that she shares with Shiva’s bow gave her the strength to lift it with ease. People may find it difficult to grasp this episode where Sita lifts the bow that even the strongest King Ravan failed to lift. Through this instance, though it is blended with magic realism, Divakaruni makes an effort to exhibit the strength and power of Sita. It reveals the traits of masculinity she possesses. When Sita asked the bow to delineate the relationship between Lord and his Goddess, ‘the bow said, “Ah the relationship of Shiva and Shakti!”’ (28). It is important to note that the bow refers to the goddess as “Shakti” which means strength. Ancient Indian beliefs regarded Goddesses as the embodiment of strength. This ideology indicates that Indians in some way believed that women embody strength, which is actually a quality attributed to men. However, in order to control women and to keep

them submissive, the patriarchal society forced upon them gender roles that conditioned women to suppress their aggressive, masculine sides. Throughout the novel, Sita shows an urge to protect Ram. For instance, when Kaikeyi asks for two boons in which one was to banish Ram to the forest for fourteen years, Sita was horror-struck, however, she decides to push all her sorrows and fear away in order to help “Ram get through this challenge” (106).

The inner strength and courage of Sita are portrayed in the episode that narrates her struggles to escape from the strong grasp of the Rakshasa King, Ravan, “I ignored the burning pain in my arm and shoulder and aimed a sudden kick, with all my strength, at the back of my captor’s knees. It was one of my favourite martial moves, guaranteed to make an opponent lose his balance and fall on his back” (167). Though Sita fails to win over him, as a woman who would never give up without a good fight, she puts her maximum strength to escape from Ravan.

Sita is intelligent and brave. Even though according to patriarchal norms women aren’t allowed to voice their grievances and are expected to remain silent, Sita, who refuses to follow such norms, shows courage to break the silence. She questions Ram when he rejects to marry her because of the promise he had made to his brothers, that is, the four brothers will get only married together. She courageously criticizes him for not informing him about the vow before he strung Shiva’s bow. She also intelligently solves the problem by bringing in her unmarried cousins Mandavi and Shrutakirti so that the other two brothers of Ram can marry them. Though, Sita claims that it was not her who acted in such a manner instead it was the Goddess in her, the researcher would like to claim that this Goddess is present in each and every woman and it represents the “Shakti” (strength), anger and courage that each woman tries to suppress due to the enforcement of gender roles which will not tolerate women exhibiting such qualities which society considers as masculine.

Sita bravely decided to endure the torture that Ravan inflicted upon her when she got abducted by him. This is because she thought that he has the right to avenge her sister's distortion in the hands of Ram and Lakshman. But the question is why she should suffer for the wrongs done by her husband and his brother and why should she endure the punishment for someone else's wrongdoings. It is nothing but societal conditioning and gender construction that makes a woman think that she is the one who is responsible for her husband's wrongdoings.

When Kaikeyi puts forward the two boons, Sita bursts out in rage breaking the codes of silence that society imposes in womanhood – “How can you do this? I cried, my fury making me forget all the lessons in caution that my mother had taught me. It's wrong in every way. We all know that Ram would be a better king than Bharat” (105). Here Sita not only breaks the codes of silence but also speaks for her beloved Ram and becomes his voice.

Sita devoted all her life to her husband Ram. Even when she spends her life as a captive in Ravan's Palace in Lanka, it is Ram's memories and her love towards him, that help her face all the hardships and give her strength to reject Ravan's sexual advances. However, Ram who rescued Sita from Lanka rejects her and banishes her to the forest just because some people gossiped about her chastity. Sita, though, left with a broken heart and was not ready to give up. Patriarchal norms fail to consider women as independent selves. Just as it constructs and imposes gender norms, it conditions people to believe that women aren't capable of leading independent lives. Women are portrayed as something that requires male protection and these ideologies are further strengthened by gender roles. Butler views gender as “the overwhelming history of patriarchy” (Butler 531). It is a tool used by society to enforce patriarchal norms. However, Sita subverts all those gender ideologies by proving herself capable of living without her husband's protection even in the wild forest along with her children. After getting abandoned in the forest, pregnant Sita says to her little babies

trembling inside her belly, “I’m going to live for you. I’m going to guard you with my last breath. I’m going to love you enough for mother, and father both, so you feel no lack” (317). Her words express her confidence and courage and it contradicts the patriarchal norms that portray the woman as weak. By being both father and mother to her children, Sita once again subverts the concept of gender roles.

The final part of the novel portrays a Sita who had come back to Ayodhya after getting called by Ram who had recognized his children. However, when she realizes the fact that Ram had planned to make her perform the agni-pariksha to prove her purity and innocence in front of the kings, sages, and ministers of the court, she refuses and cries out in agony and rage,

‘O King of Ayodhya! I address you in this way because you’ve always placed your role as a king ahead of your role as a husband. Did you act justly when you sent me away to the forest, knowing I was innocent of what gossip-mongers whispered?, Were you compassionate, the way a king is meant to be, when you banished me without telling me what you were about to do, without allowing me to defend myself or choose my destiny? Were you fair to your unborn children when you sentenced them to a life of hardship, perhaps even death, in the wilderness?..... You who care so much about the citizens of Ayodhya, did you think of the impact your actions would have on the women of the city? That man would punish their wives harshly or even discard them for the smallest refractions, saying King Ram did so. Then why shouldn’t I? ‘O King of Ayodhya, you know I’m innocent, and yet, unfairly, you’re asking me to step into the fireif 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 themFor the sake of daughters in the centuries to come, I must stand against this unjust action you are asking of me Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, No more!' (356 – 357).

These words can be seen as the strongest manifestation of Sita's strength and courage. Through her sharp tongue, she not only questions the patriarchy and male dominance but also breaks the codes of silence and subservience. She also becomes a voice for the women who find it difficult to break away from the strong clutches of patriarchy. Her words also reveal the fact that women are always under the surveillance of society and therefore she doesn't want other women to suffer for what she does. In this episode, Sita along with refusing to "act" her gender, encourages other women to undo gender. Agni- pariksha symbolizes the punishment designed by society to control women who contradict its norms. In many instances, we see Sita being punished by society, in some way or the other, for refusing to act her gender. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect (Butler 528). If a patriarchal society's prying eyes detect in a woman any kind of failure to perform her gender roles or any violation of patriarchal norms, she becomes an object of extreme hostility. Butler in her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, delineates the fact that any person who refuses or fails to conform to societal gender norms is punished regularly. The young washerwoman's experience depicted in the novel gives a clear understanding of how society treats a woman who seems to violate its norms. Once one of the washerwomen who works for Sita came to her for aid. She told Sita that her husband had beaten her and thrown her out of their house for the trivial reason that she came home late, after midnight, since she was spending some time with her best friend who was giving birth to a baby. Her suspicious husband accused her of unfaithfulness and was not ready to believe

her claims. When she went back to her home, even her father didn't allow her to stay claiming that a married daughter who leaves her husband's home. brings shame on her family (306). Though the woman hadn't done anything wrong, she was accused by society just because she had overstepped her limits. It is through such attitudes and conditioning the patriarchal society succeeds in silencing women. However, Sita's inner strength and courage provide her confidence to fight against the conventional norms that subjugate women. She also kind-heartedly allowed the washerwoman to stay in the palace.

All the above-mentioned instances associated with Divakaruni's Sita help in understanding the fact that she possesses the qualities that a patriarchal society defines as masculine or attributes to men. She subverts the belief that women are naturally inferior to men. According to Aristotle "female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities," (Beauvoir 5) and St. Thomas states that female nature is "afflicted with a natural defectiveness" (Beauvoir 16). These statements including the one put forward by the great philosopher, Aristotle, reveal how the idea of female inferiority was embedded in the minds of people and how society transformed those ideologies through such great men to the younger generations. However, this in-depth analysis of Sita has revealed that she is not inferior but equal to a man in every term, considering her intelligence, inner strength, and confidence. Dasharath proudly tells Ram that Sita, his daughter-in-law, has the brain of a warrior. She proves her intelligence and problem-solving abilities by wisely solving the issue regarding Ram's pact with his brothers that affected their marriage and by miraculously refilling happiness in Kaushalya's tragic life.

It is her 'masculinity complex' that prevents Sita from accepting women's subjugation and the discrimination between women and men. Therefore, as Judith Butler argues, gender is not something natural or biologically determined because women cannot be solely characterized as feminine in nature just as in the case of Divakaruni's Sita.

Sunaina, Sita's 'keen-witted, elegant, laughing mother' (14), is portrayed as a strong woman character, who had gone against the traditional norms in order to teach Sita lessons in self-defense. Sita reveals that she had listened to her mother advising her father in their private chamber. It is Sunaina's advice that helped Janak to solve even the complicated problems that appeared in his court. Sita seeing her mother's intelligence and abilities wondered why people in Mithila hold the belief that women are not wise enough to guide them. Sunaina is a strong, intelligent, and confident woman who is emotionally stable. In the part where Sunaina instructs Sita on how to deal with her new in-laws, Sita narrates "Her eyes were damp, and this was unusual in my pragmatic mother" (44). The word "unusual" indicates Sunaina's emotional stability. Although the thought of marrying off her daughters made her emotional, soon she becomes calm and practical and began informing Sita about the House of Raghu (Ram's palace). Another instance that reveals her emotional stability and sternness is when she provided her weeping newly wedded daughters confidence, to endure all the challenges they may face in their new lives, through her strong words while they were about to depart to Ayodhya with their husbands. At this point, unlike how "typical mothers" (associated with the patriarchal portrayal of mothers), she doesn't weep instead she sternly asks them to pull themselves together and maintain their inner strength even in the face of hardships. Her words provided Sita with the confidence and power to face all the hardships and obstacles that bruised her path.

All the features mentioned above are, however, not something society perceives as feminine instead they are considered masculine qualities. Sunaina, therefore, possesses the qualities that the patriarchy perceives as masculine.

Sita's account of her mother reveals that Sunaina is wise, strong, and more capable of ruling the kingdom than her husband, King Janak. However, patriarchal conditioning and its deep-rooted beliefs persuade people to think that women aren't strong enough to rule a

country or guide its people. Even Sunaina, like Janak, is not ready to upset these beliefs. Though she shares the royal duties with her husband, she does not support the idea of women ruling the country, because, she thought it would affect the stability of the kingdom. It is true that Sunaina is a strong woman but society had conditioned her mind in such a way that it made her believe it is wrong to usurp the dominant position of a man. She had inspired Sita to be courageous and taught her not to tolerate wrongdoing (46), but at the same time, she was aware that society won't appreciate such qualities in a woman, because, they are not 'feminine' in nature. Therefore, in order to protect Sita from the harsh clutches of the patriarchy she taught her not to bruise a man's pride while voicing against wrongdoing. This instance helps in understanding Butler's ideology that gender is a "repeated performance". It is something that is passed on from one generation to the next and everyone regardless of sex is expected to "enact" or "perform" their gender. Sunaina could be seen as a woman who fails to undo gender. She though refuses to accept certain gender norms, is not ready to subvert "gender" ideology. Therefore, like any other woman, Sunaina is also "doing gender"

Sunaina is the one who taught Sita the importance of the word "endure"; 'what you can't, you must endure' (54). Sita gives special importance to the word 'endure'. She believes that it is a word upon which a life can be built. While Sita was banished to the forest, she saw a dream in which she saw her mother, Sunaina; Sage Gautam's wife, Ahalya; Kaikayi, Mandodari, and Sarama; women characters who played an important role in Sita's life, speaking to her. They too asked her to endure. They said "Endure as we do. Endure your challenges" (322). Sita, when she stepped foot in Ayodhya, promised the land that she is ready to sacrifice her life and happiness for the Ayodhyan kingdom, her new home. Indian Women especially the married ones are always taught to sacrifice and compromise, these words are forcefully imbibed in their psyche. Even today the word keeps on haunting women. Endurance and sacrifices are important in order to live a peaceful life but it becomes

problematic when women become the only ones who are taught to carry this burden of suffering. Society considers it as something feminine and does not expect such endurance and sacrifice from men. It conditioned men and women to believe that the ability to endure is something every woman possesses naturally. However, the novel also provides an account of women who do not possess certain qualities that society considers feminine.

Kaikeyi is a woman who possesses masculine qualities than feminine ones. She is a fearless charioteer; who drove the chariot of Dasharath at war, a miraculous healer, Dasharath's counsellor, and “the most powerful person – male or female – in the palace” (50). She is even good at martial arts though Sita proves more talented than her.

The character Surpanakha or Kamarupini, Ravan’s sister who belongs to the Asura clan, is portrayed as a powerful rakshasa woman who is strong and courageous. However, her beautiful face was distorted by Lakshman, following Ram’s instruction, though her only fault was that she openly declared her love for Ram.

Both Surpanaka and Kaikeyi can be considered as two women who refuse to act according to the gender norms of patriarchal society. However, society considers such women who do not possess, what it conceives as, feminine qualities, as “fallen” or “bad”. This is the main reason why both Kaikeyi and Surpanakha serve the role of the villain. When Surpanakha tried to take revenge against the one who mistreated and distorted her, she was given the title of villain. Kaikeyi's desire to make her son the King of Ayodhya granted her the status of villainy. She is denounced and imprisoned by her own son.

These women have succeeded in “undoing gender” and constituting it differently. However, they were severely punished. Whenever a woman tries to deviate from the roles allotted to her by the patriarchal society, she turns out to be a “bad woman” or a “fallen woman”. She is even marginalized or ostracized from society. This is how society uses gender stereotypes

and norms to subjugate and control women. “Culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be signed enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (Butler 528). Therefore, these punishments themselves prove the fact that gender is a socially constructed, unstable identity.

Chapter 3

De-naturalizing The Notion of Masculinity

Ram, Sita's greatest happiness and her greatest sorrow, is portrayed as a man who exhibits certain alpha male qualities. He displays all kinds of masculine qualities the traditional patriarchal Indian society expects from a man. However, an in-depth analysis of Ram helps us understand that inside his tough exterior lies a sweet, kind-hearted boy who has his own fears and sorrows.

In chapter four of the novel, Sita delineates how confused and nervous Ram was when he himself broke Shiva's sacred bow, 'the stern abstraction was gone from Ram's face, and he looked young and confused so that I wanted to protect him' (33). This instance shows that a young, innocent boy is hidden inside Ram's brave, strong, and confident masculine exterior. Though he tries to hide such emotions, since society forces him to, in some cases like the one mentioned above it reveals itself making Sita want to protect him.

In the episode that depicts the first private conversation between Ram and Sita, she narrates how nervous and uncomfortable he was contradicting his valiant warrior nature. He apologizes to her for his initial rejection of marriage and even reveals how he regretted the rash vow that prevented her from marrying Sita. Ram displays himself as a "man" who will neither go against his promises nor give priority to his personal desires over societal norms. Both these features are considered masculine and kingly according to Indian patriarchal society. The same Ram, however, reveals to Sita how he had desired to push away the vow that he thought might prevent him from marrying her. He divulged to Sita that he was too "weak" to inform his vow to her father fearing that Janak might not let him string the bow if he learns about the vow. Strong, masculine Ram calling himself weak is something people might consider weird. However, it seems that by exposing himself to Sita, he is removing the

mask of masculinity he has put on in public space since society expects him to exhibit masculine qualities.

An analysis of his relationship with Sita and their private conversations helps us understand the fact that what Ram displays in front of the public contradicts some of his real nature. Ram expresses to her how much he regretted killing Tarhaka and other rakshasas, 'I was forced to cut them down, It gave me no pleasure though' (70). His words reveal that he is pressured by the societal and gender norms which force him to perform his duty as a "man" by embracing masculine qualities. Butler does not associate gender with inner truth, instead, they consider it as a product of repeated gender performance. Therefore, according to them, gender is an enactment or performance. The above-mentioned instances associated with Ram prove this concept of Judith Butler.

Sita is the only person before whom Ram reveals his original self and nature. Sita in the narration of her story expresses how Ram had shared with her all his fears and sorrows, 'he told me about sorrows and fears which, judging from his calm daytime demeanour, I would never have guessed' (66). Her words suggest that Ram is hiding his emotional side and is putting on a masculine identity when he is in public space. However, during the night hours, when he spent his time with his beloved Sita, he lets out his emotions because he is aware that it is the only time that is safer for him to reveal his real identity since he is free from the surveillance of society. This concept can be connected to the ideology put forward by Judith Butler on gender construction. She defines gender as a "stylized repetition of acts". In the case of Ram, what he portrays as his nature or identity before society is revealed as something different from his true nature.

Ram's desire is to become a 'good king', whom he defines as someone 'who follows the laws perfectly, even when his heart might beg him to do otherwise' (66). So, he himself

reveals that in order to become a 'good king' one has to hide his true feelings and should blindly adhere to societal norms. The patriarchal society always expects a king to be masculine and believes that it is his true nature. However, Ram's own words suggest that it may not be necessary that the actions and conducts exhibited by a king in the society are part of his true nature. It can be understood as a performance one, even if he is a King or an ordinary person, enacts in order to please society. However, people might conceive this gender performance as something natural because of the continuous conditioning of the patriarchal society. Judith Butler defines gender as a "constructed identity, a performative accomplishment that the social audience along with the performer has come to believe and performs it as the truth" (Butler 520).

Several instances in the novel delineate the fact that Ram acts according to societal expectations. In one such case, Ram refuses to return to Ayodhya and ascend the throne before completing the banishment period of fourteen years though Bharat and Shatrughna tried to persuade him by announcing what sage Vasishtha has informed; Dasharath's death had cancelled his boon and therefore it is not necessary that Ram should have to continue his forest life. The reason behind Ram's rejection is important in order to understand the concept of "performance". He states, "I can't risk people thinking that I looked for a loophole in the vow because I coveted the kingdom. There can't be any stain on me when my kingship begins" (124). His words make it clear that he is obsessed with the idea of being a "good King" and therefore, will only act according to the way society and its people expect. Therefore, it could be admitted that Ram does not give much attention to what his mind desires, since, he refuses to travel back to Ayodhya though he himself longed to return.

In the episode, where Ram and Lakshman tried to justify themselves to Sita who criticized them for demoting and disfiguring the Asura woman, Surpanakha by attacking her, Sita delineates how men justified their actions even wrongdoings without accepting them as

fault or inferior: 'Their belief in the superiority of their own ways was too deeply ingrained in them' (151). The word "ingrained" can be associated with social conditioning. The patriarchal society had ingrained in people the notion that men are superior to women. The societal construction of gender helps in adding strength to this notion. Patriarchal society corrupted the minds of young men and women by making them believe in and accept gender stereotypes as something natural. It is this conditioning of society that made Ram and Lakshman believe that their roles and actions as superior to women. According to Butler the social constitution of gender has resulted in the oppression of women. They argue that the reproduction of gender identities sustains the gender binary which results in male superiority and female inferiority. Undoing gender is the only way to destruct female oppression and gender inequality.

In the novel, though we see Ram consoling Sita who was heartbroken and enraged by the two boons demanded by Kaikeyi, Sita notices that Ram was worried too. She, therefore, decides to support and help him get through these challenges by pushing aside all her fears and sorrows because she was aware that he couldn't face it alone. As already analyzed Ram, though he seems to be masculine in nature, is not a person who possesses all masculine qualities. Society considers a man as someone who is brave enough to not worry in the face of hardships and challenges because it believes him to be someone who possesses masculinity. Patriarchy attempts to generalize each and every man in the single term masculine. Ram's nature proves that even a strong, brave man may worry or becomes nervous in tragic situations. However, society tends to associate such features with femininity, casting women as emotional creatures. Therefore, we could say Ram possesses some characteristics that society considers feminine.

He is forgiving in nature and ‘loved all whose hearts were pure’ (119). Forgiveness is often regarded as a feminine quality. Ram forgives Kaikeyi and even instructs Bharat, who had denounced and imprisoned her (his own mother) for her unforgivable sin, to forgive her.

When Sita explains their departure from Ayodhya to the forest, she mentions how she noticed the tears that filled Ram’s eyes, though he didn’t look at his weeping father. Since patriarchal society treats and regards a “crying man” as feminine and weak, Ram tries his best to hold back his tears but fails. Another instance where Ram cries out in agony is when Sita disappears into the earth, ‘Sita! He cries desperately’ (358). In this episode, Ram becomes emotionally unstable since he knows that it is his own actions that resulted in breaking Sita’s heart. The belief that women are more emotional than men is one of the strongest gender stereotypes held in Western cultures (Brescoll 415). However, contradicting gender norms or stereotypes, both Ram and Sita exhibit somewhat equal mental stability. This subverts the concept that gender is natural. Many instances had revealed the fact that Ram possesses characteristics that contradict masculine identity. However, the question is whether he is undoing gender or not. Ram’s analysis has delineated that he reveals his true self only in front of Sita. His public image remains “masculine”. He successfully enacts the role that society has assigned to him. Butler states that various acts of gender create the idea of gender. Men, like Ram, by repeatedly performing their gender; construct, stabilize, and naturalize masculinity. Therefore, masculinity is being constructed through “repeated performance”. Ram, whether he likes it or not, is doing gender and is hiding his true self.

Indian society hails Ram as the “ideal man” who is brave, intelligent, confident, and strong. He is considered an embodiment of virtues and good values. However, Divakaruni depicts Ram as an ordinary man who has his own strengths and weaknesses. He is a man who is tortured by the clutches of a patriarchal society. Though the episodes that delineate how Ram harshly treated Sita soon after he rescued her from the hands of Ravan, by killing him,

and how, in the last part of the novel, he inhumanely pushed her to undergo the ordeal of agni-pariksha after calling her back to Ayodhya, may compel one to conclude that Ram embodies toxic masculinity. The instance where in he banishes pregnant Sita to the wild forest will also force one to arrive at the same conclusion. However, the in-depth analysis of Ram had already proven that it is the pressure from society that compels him to act against his wishes. He was well aware of the fact that Sita was pure and innocent, but, what bothers him is the society and its people. The patriarchal society's obsession with feminine chastity and 'honour' haunted and pressurized Ram, which in turn forced him to behave in such a manner. His last words, which Sita heard as she was disappearing into the earth that cracked open underneath her feet, convey his pain and agony in letting Sita live a tragic life; 'Forgive me dearest. No matter what I did, no matter what I prioritized, through everything, I've always loved you. Forgive me, though I don't deserve it' (358). The words, along with conveying Ram's love and apology, also show how much he regretted his wrong decisions that tortured Sita and left her heart broken.

Though one cannot justify Ram's wrongdoings that led to Sita's tragic end, it is important to note that he alone cannot be blamed for what he had done. As already mentioned, it is the patriarchal society and its gender norms that corrupted his mind and forced him to act indifferently.

King Janak, the ruler of Mithila, is Sita's beloved father whom she says had taught her the 'first lesson on the nature of love' (6). Gossip has revealed to Sita the fact that she was a child abandoned in the forest and the King who noticed the child, swaddled in gold fabric finer, had taken her with him and brought her up as his own child. No king would have done such an act of kindness, especially when living in a society that considers women as a burden. For instance, King Dasharath gives away his own girl child, Shanta. It is in such a context, king Janak, brings up an abandoned girl child and treats her as the princess of

Mithila. This incident serves as evidence that reveals that Janak, unlike other Kings who display hard-core masculine qualities, is kind and lovely in nature. However, these are feminine qualities that society often attributes to women, and men are expected not to express such emotions, especially, a King. Therefore, to some extent, King Janak is “undoing gender” by acting according to his true nature. However, the analysis has depicted that he too is taunted by society for not following its gender norms.

In his, Kingdom Janak gave her daughters, Urmila and Sita, all kinds of freedom. This freedom even allows her to question Shatanand's (chief advisor of King Janak) knowledge of rakshasas. However, he wasn't pleased with the way Janak had brought up his girl child because society has conditioned men to believe that a girl should be disciplined and taught not to overstep her limits.

King Janak exhibits a fondness for nature similar to what Sita displays. He rejected Shatanand's advice of cutting down the forest in order to safeguard the kingdom from rakshasas whom he claimed to be human eaters. His fondness and love for nature, its forests, and its beauty is something the patriarchy considers as womanly. Society tends to associate men with violence and strength, alienating the concepts of love and kindness from their very nature. However, King Janak is kind and loving which makes Sita long for a life where she could spend whole her lifetime with her 'saintly and affectionate father' (13).

In the episode where Sunaina narrates to Sita about the traditions and beliefs of Mithila that do not allow women to rule the kingdom, she reveals to Sita that her father even if he desires to pass his kingdom to his daughter will never do that because he doesn't want to upset the deep-rooted beliefs the people in Mithila hold. Though it is not directly revealed, Janak may or might have had the desire to throne her daughter as the heir to the kingdom of Mithila. However, even if such a desire exists, he wouldn't be able to fulfill it because he is

well aware of societal norms that restrict women from the public sphere. Society and its people influence men and women. They are conditioned to behave or act according to the demands of society. The awareness that, if someone does something against the patriarchal norms or if one fails to act according to one's gender roles they would have to face harsh and bitter criticism from society, prevent men and women from behaving the way wish.

Parashuram, when he brought Shiva's bow to the Kingdom, called King Janak a "gullible fool" when he failed to understand the joke Parashuram said. The way the sage had addressed King Janak cannot be ignored as something trivial. It in a way represents how patriarchal society treats a man who fails to display the expected alpha male gender role. King Janak tends to exhibit some beta male characteristics, though he is a King. Sita narrates the way her father stood pale in contrast to Ravan's Kingly demeanour when he came to Mithila to string Shiva's bow. This case exposes Janak's failure to display "kingly" masculine hard-core.

He 'is a saintly man' according to his wife, Queen Sunaina. She, while instructing Sita to be vigilant with her in-laws, mentions how her husband was different from other Kings, especially, whom she regards as Janak's opposite,

"He was never interested in expanding his kingdom, either through war or marriage alliances. Thus, I have the good fortune of being his only wife, loved by him even though I failed to produce a male heir... He cherishes Urmila and you as much as he would have cherished sons. You don't know how rare this is in royal families!" (46).

Her words suggest King Janak's loving, caring, and affectionate nature. All these instances help to prove that King Janak possesses some qualities that society considers feminine. Hence, he could not be considered a man who possesses only

masculine qualities. Therefore, gender, which associates masculine qualities as the natural characteristics of men and claims that men are masculine and women are feminine, proves to be a mere construction of society. For Butler, gender is an unstable identity, and whether to enact it or not is a mere individual choice. Janak, by refusing to enact gender, proves Butler's ideology that gender is performative and can be altered according to individual choice.

King Dasharath, Ram's father, is a "great warrior" who had won many wars. He is an alpha male figure, "impetuous, wild-tempered and loved the excitement of combat" (47). Like a typical Ruler, he had multiple wives and numerous concubines. He is, however, powerless in front of his courageous and strong wife Kaikeyi when she asked for the boons. The episode that narrates the departure of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman to the forest, depicts the desolate and heart-broken father, Dasharath, "Ram, Ram, he cried so loudly that I thought his lungs would burst... running down the common road behind our chariot on faltering feet, crownless and dishevelled" (118). The notion of a strong and powerful King crying desperately contradicts the gender norms and the societal expectations pertaining to a King. He could no longer hide or suppress his tears, so he let out his true self. This again conveys that gender roles aren't something natural. Every man has his own strength and weaknesses. He is not an all-powerful entity. The same is the case for women. Therefore, we couldn't brand all women as weak and all men as strong.

However, similar to Ram, King Dasharath, also tried to maintain his masculine status. It is only towards the last moment of his life when he lost his beloved son, he refused to enact his gender. Compared with Ram, his father, Dasharath, had more successfully enacted the role of masculinity. Though Ram, who had witnessed the harmful effects of hegemonic masculinity displayed by his father, decided not to reproduce such qualities, he ended up being a masculine figure. Society compelled him to reproduce and maintain the masculine

role enacted by his father. Both, Ram and Dasharath, belong to the category of men who construct, reproduce and maintain “gender” and thereby sustain gender binary and female oppression.

Conclusion

Ramayana, one of the great ancient Indian epics, portrays Sita as an ideal woman, a model of supreme love and sacrifice, who devotes her life and happiness to her husband, Ram. This epic depicts the perspectives of Ram but fails to portray Sita's inner agony and pain. Through the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, Divakaruni carries out an attempt to regenerate *Ramayana* as *Sitayan* in order to provide Sita a voice of her own. The word 'Ayanam' means journey, hence, *Sitayan* depicts Sita's life journey. In the novel, Sita herself narrates her story, revealing the real pain, hardship, and suffering she endured.

The novel is a re-narration of the ancient Indian epic, *Ramayana*, therefore it also provides a glimpse into the patriarchal structure of traditional Indian society. The hardships endured by women characters in the novel depict the real condition of Indian women, their subjugation, and oppression under the dominant patriarchal rule. The beliefs such as, women are not strong enough to rule a kingdom, and that they are submissive to men and should be always calm and kind-hearted, had prevailed in the country. Women were trapped in the midst of such norms and beliefs.

Divakaruni's Sita makes attempt to deviate from the so-called "ideal woman". She protests against wrongdoings and violations of justice. Towards the end of the novel when Sita bursts out into protest, we come across a confident woman who strongly voices against the subjugation of women by male authorities. Sita's desire to become a warrior, her intelligence, bravery, courage, and her love for her husband, sons, and nature, prove that she possesses both feminine and masculine qualities. The analysis reveals certain instances where we see Sita protecting and helping Ram. By refusing to enact socially constructed gender roles, she is "undoing gender". Sunaina is a strong woman who challenged the patriarchal norms of society by letting her daughter, Sita, learn martial arts. Her intelligent advice had

helped her husband solve even the most complicated problems that appeared in his court. The analysis of this character has proved that she too possesses certain feminine and masculine qualities. However, the analysis also shows how this same woman instructs Sita not to bruise a man's pride. This reveals the extent to which the conditioning of the patriarchal society has affected women's thoughts and perspectives. Ram is viewed as an "ideal man who possesses all the qualities attributed to a man. The deeper examination of the character has revealed that his characteristics are also blended with certain qualities that society attributes to women. He is patient and enduring and finds his life meaningless without the love and support of Sita. However, he maintains a masculine identity in public. Therefore, he is "doing gender". The analysis of the character clearly reveals the fact that he is haunted by gender and patriarchal norms and is forced to act accordingly. Janak is a kind-hearted man who embodies several feminine qualities. Analysis of the other characters including Dasharath, Surpanaka, and Kaikeyi also helped in proving that gender is "performative" and is the reason behind the oppression of women in a patriarchal society. A woman who is bold and brave enough to reveal her true self, which includes both feminine and masculine qualities, is branded as "evil" by society. She becomes a villainy character similar to Surpanaka and Kaikeyi.

Through analyzing the major characters of the novel, this project has revealed the extent to which women and men are conditioned by gender and social norms. Gender roles have imprisoned both men and women characters in the novel. Some characters including Ram, Dasharath, and Kaikeyi believe in the notion that gender is something natural. Through a deep study of these characters, the project has, however, proved that they are suppressing their real, original selves in order to "act" or "perform" according to the gender norms of society. As Butler argues, men and women are "doing gender". It is a "performance" enacted by people. The examination of the female and male characters has revealed how some

characters “undo gender” by refusing to act according to gender roles. Butler states that gender is constituted and therefore, can be constituted in a different manner if one attempts to do so. Characters including Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpanaka, and King Janak are those who have refused to act according to societal gender norms. They attempt to constitute gender differently contradicting patriarchal gender norms. Another set of characters including Ram, Dasharath, and Sunaina are “doing gender”. However, these characters are hiding their true self while in public, in order to maintain their gender identity and please the patriarchal society. The analysis has also revealed how society punishes those people who refuse to act according to their gender. The concept of punishment helps in understanding the fact that gender is a mere social constitution. If it was a natural phenomenon, the concept of punishment would have made no sense.

Therefore, this project has also helped in understanding Butler’s theory of the “performativity” of gender. The project through the analysis of the characters has proved that both boys and girls growing up in a patriarchal society are moulded into “men” and “women” respectively. Each and every action of a man and a woman can be associated with the concept of gender construction since they act according to the gender roles they are expected to perform. Hence, as Butler claims, gender is a “stylized repetition of acts” (519). Along with women, men are also victims of patriarchy that pressurize them by forcing them to perform certain “gender roles”. To conclude, it is not necessary that every woman should possess feminine qualities and that every man should exhibit masculine qualities. This paper, through analyzing and deeply studying the characters in the novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, has proved that every person irrespective of their sex, possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. However, the rate at which these qualities are present will differ or vary from person to person. Therefore, gender, which associates men with masculine qualities and women with feminine qualities, is nothing but a mere societal construction.

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