



THE COST OF UNHEARD VOICES

C. VIMALA

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, University of Mumbai.

Email: vimala.elengo@gmail.com



Article Received: 30/06/2022
Article Accepted: 23/07/2022
Published online: 29/07/2022
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.3.100](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.3.100)

Abstract

This Research article tries to look at Chitra Divakaruni's page turner novel *The Forest of Enchantment* from the lens of Cultural Studies. Out of all the tenets of Cultural Studies this research article primarily focuses on hegemony; the principles of power play, existence of power, subversion, marginalised voices and their sufferings. To throw light upon these features of Cultural Studies, tenets of ideology from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is used as the tool. There is ample evidence in the novel to prove that ideology plays a major role where hegemony is exercised due to which the other characters are marginalised. Through the mentioned incidents it is conspicuous that even if you are a member of an elite family still the power is exercised and subjugation takes place. The subjugated ones don't have an identity of their own but have to bear the identity which was given to them by the more powerful members of their group. When gender is considered, both male as well as female members have to bear subjugation, due to the ideology which is practised in the society. The one who is able to exercise his power and enjoy all the benefits of power is able to do so only at the cost of the members who are subjugated. The subjugated members have never been heard by anybody, their emotions never considered, their skills utilised for the sake of the powerful, they all had to follow what was told to them and to lose their identity to serve the one who is in power. To conclude, the cost of power is the unheard voices of the individuals below them.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Identity, Hegemony, Subjugation, Powerplay, Ideology, Gender

Introduction

Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most important and well-known epics in India. All the various versions of Ramayana hail and glorify Rama. The novel selected for the research *The Forest of Enchantment* enunciates from the perspective of Sita. In this masterpiece, novelist Chitra Divakaruni has not only narrated the novel from Sita's point of view, but also has voiced out in detail about the always misunderstood and relegated female

characters like Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, Sumitra, the generosity and sacrifices made by Urmila, Mandodari, Sarama and even Surpanaka. The beauty of the novel is it neither glorifies nor vilifies any individual but maintains a balance. It portrays all the shades of the characters. Unlike the other versions in which Sita is raised to the level of God, here the novelist has portrayed her as a simple human with all the wishes and longings a woman craves for.

Literature is the mirror of life and it has a great impact on the individuals and the society. Newspapers, magazines, articles, reports all reflect the facts whereas literature expresses the emotions and feelings. An individual is moulded by the experiences gained from society. These experiences transform the perception of an individual. This research article strives to analyse this novel *The Forest of Enchantment* in the light of ideology as mentioned by Antonio Gramsci in *Prison Notebooks*. Antonio Gramsci while discussing 'The Organisation of Education and of Culture' quotes,

Thus side by side with the type of school which may be called "humanistic" - the oldest form of traditional school, designed to develop in each individual human being as an yet undifferentiated general culture, the fundamental power to think and ability to find one's way in life - a whole system of specialised schools, at varying levels, has been being created to serve entire professional sectors, or professions which are already specialised and defined within precise boundaries. (165)

With this quote it is clearly evident that the individuals are conditioned with the norms of the society through which their ideologies are formed. Moreover, the subordinate class gives their consent to exercise power upon them which in turn leads to the existence of hegemony and thus ensures smooth functioning of society.

In this research using the novel *The Forest of Enchantment* it is an attempt to analyse and understand the power relations within the society. The main focus would be on the power relation exercised on the subordinate people. This subordinate class includes the people who are below the powerful ones, it might be their servants, relatives, or those who are less powerful. The power relation, ignored status of women, taken for granted attitude, marginalisation and subjugation are all analysed in this research. The main characters in this novel are the members of the royal family who are receiving this kind of treatment, in that case what would be the condition of the common people, is beyond imagination.

When Ram visits Mithila and according to the instructions of Vishwamitra, participates in the

Swayamvara and breaks the Haradhanu, when Sita was about to garland him, he blatantly ignores her without thinking about her emotions and speaks to her father, Janak. He informs him that he needs to take the permission of his father. Furthermore, he even adds that "I've promised my brothers that we'll get married at the same time - and into the same family, so as to avoid conflicts that occur so often among wives." (35). This is an apt example of the superior power relation held by man on woman. The woman for whom the swayamvar took place was not considered at all. This also denotes the upper hand held by Ram being the son of an emperor over a small kingdom, Mithila. Both Sita's mother and father are worried. "I've given my word, Sage. It can't be broken for the sake of convenience. That is not the custom of the House of Raghu." These are the words of Ram, who has already participated in the swayamvar and has broken the Danush. It is clearly visible that there is dominance of men over women and the powerful or elite people who are in the top layer of society. Janak being a king is unable to speak against Ram since the latter belongs to Raghu Vamsh which is more powerful than his own kingdom.

Throughout the novel there is numerous evidence of hegemony which plays a major role in almost all the important turning points of the novel. Before the marriage, queen Sunaina, Sita's mother, advises her to 'endure' whatever she has to face in Ayodhya. Sita, who is a princess and married to one of the most powerful kingdom's prince has to endure her life, is a crystal clear example of various dominance that prevails in the society. While they travel to Ayodhya when Sita wants to stop the soldiers from slashing and lopping off branches, she has to think twice and she finally calls her security and informs Ram. This indicates how she has to be extremely careful and alert about the consequences since she is a woman. Kaushalya, Kaikeyi both being the queen of the kingdom, are not treated equally. Kaikeyi has an upper hand above Kaushalya and Sumitra. Kaushalya feels embarrassed when Kaikeyi gives lavishing gifts to Urmila but Kaushalya is unable to do so and presents Sita with what her mother has gifted her. This shows how Kaikeyi is powerful and is handling the situations according to her own whims

and fancies, but Kaushalya is unable to get a new present for her daughter-in-law who reaches Ayodhya. Lakshman's decision to follow Ram to the forest, without even thinking about his wife or his duty and responsibilities as a husband, is an indication of how the decisions of the husband is accepted without questioning whereas a wife has to decide only after the consent of husband; Kaushalya's persists and remains silent even when neither her son nor her husband is able to spend time with her; are all exemplars of subjugations experienced by them. Lakshman, who is known for his anger, has to be quiet when Sita insults him and his intentions in the worst manner. Sita blatantly accuses Lakshman by uttering these words, "You want me for yourself. You're hoping that, if Ram dies, you'll make me your wife. Ah, why not? After all, he's only a half-brother. My poor Ram! Bharat has taken his kingdom. Why shouldn't you take his wife?" (160). Lakshman instead of getting angry, since it was his sister-in-law who had uttered these words feels sad and explains to her that he respects her like his own mother and wants to protect her. This is an example of how the power of relation is exercised upon the younger members in the family. Urmila, being the biological daughter of Janak and Sunaina accepts Sita as her elder sister wholeheartedly out of love is the manifestation of consent to be below the loved ones.

Culture and identity are mutually constitutive; they shape and are shaped by each other. Greenblatt points out that every culture is formed by the beliefs and practices of the individuals. He quotes it as, "The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within social behaviour must be contained,...". All the decisions are made by a man whether it is small or big, forget about consulting, the decisions are taken even without considering the wife, who has to just follow what is said to her. Dasharatha's marital alliances, ignoring Kaushalya, Sumitra and indulging in the palatial livelihood with Kaikeyi. Lakshman not informing anything to his wife about her own sister, taking a decision to accompany Ram to the forest and ignoring Urmila completely, Vibheeshan leaving his wife and children behind; joining hands with

Ram's army, Mandodari accepting Sita in their palace for the sake of Raavan, above all Ram who is hailed as the best person, doesn't even realise the harsh ways he has treated Sita are few evidences in which power is exercised. Ram wants Sita to prove her innocence for the second time in the palace of Ayodhya in front of his ministers and his citizens to save his own name and be indifferent to Sita's emotions. Sita didn't go to the forest on her own, it is Ram who has sent her to the forest. Multiple times, Ram who says he is not behind power, states that he wants to be the best ruler and provide a good rule to his citizens, but he is unable to fulfil his duty as a husband or as a father. In addition to that, he is not even aware of his errors and thinks he is the best ruler. These are all nothing but the ideology and the cultural conditioning through which an individual is conditioned to be subservient to one's husband, elder members of the family, follow the orders of one who is in power, etc. The wives are always following what was told to them by their husbands without a second thought. Moreover, husbands were considered as lords who had to be obeyed without any questions. All these illustrate the beliefs practised in which the wife is giving her consent to be ordered by husband or any family members' consent to be ordered by the elderly members of the family or the relatives.

Each and every individual longs to have an identity of their own. Identity is discursive and it is modelled and remodelled in multiple ways. In the essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* Stuart Halls asserts it as, "Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (110). If the identity changes according to the accomplishment of the individuals, it is a welcoming fact, but what happens here is that the identity of the members who are below the individuals who hold power are changing as per the orders, whims and fancies of the powerful. King Dasharath, due to the pressure of Kaikeyi, orders his son Ram to go to the forest so that Bharat could become the king. He was able to do this by using his power as the father and as the king.

Ram, Sita and Lakshman identities from the members of a royal family change into mendicants for the next fourteen years, because of the vow that Kaikeyi has taken from King Dasharat. After returning back to Ayodhya, when Ram becomes the king, Sita's identity changes into a queen, later when Ram sends her to the forest again she has to shrug the identity of a queen and lead a common man's life with the help and care of sage Valmiki. On account of Ravan's superstitious powers, Sita has to be a captive and spend more than a year in Sri Lanka. All the changes in their identities are due to the people who are in power and the powerplay exercised on them.

Hegemony is "dominance and subordination in the field of relations structured by power" quotes Stuart Hall. Power needs an attempt at subversion to justify its existence. One can notice multiple instances of power and subversion throughout the novel. The washerwoman who was in charge of washing the queens' saris, was beaten up by her husband since she stayed out of her house and moreover the husband accuses her of bringing shame to her family. This is nothing but the exercise of power on women by men. Not only the washerman but also Ram and Lakshman exerted their power on their wives. Lakshman has done this a couple of times, when he decided to follow his brother to the forest, without considering his wife; while being enraged and cutting the nose of Surpanakha. Ram has done this throughout the novel multiple times. He stops the wedding after the swayamvar, when he sees Sita after so many years without even smiling at her wants her to prove her loyalty to him and he wants Sita to do the same thing when she comes from the ashram too, without informing or inquiring Sita, he decides to send his pregnant wife out of Ayodhya to the forest all alone, since a citizen has raised question about the queen. Dasharath does this to his wife Kaushalya and Sumitra, Raavan to his wife Mandodari, Vibhishan taking the side of Ram, helping him to kill his own clan, including his son by revealing the secrets without having any consideration towards his wife Sarama are all evidences of the exercising the power of a husband on his wife. Almost all the male characters make use of their power on the female

characters and to the people who are not equal to them.

Surpanaka uses the power of her brother's love on her to take revenge upon Ram and Lakshman by kidnapping Sita. Ravan utilises his power as a king, brother, husband, father, uncle, etc. to order his family members and soldiers to take part in the battle. Therefore, these subversive sections of society directly and indirectly help the dominant section to survive.

Literary texts reveal the power relations and they are one of the most important sources through which we can examine the working of power in society. The ideological structures of society depicted in the novel defines what is natural and normal and thus constrains individual identities. Based on the tenets of Antonio Gramsci's ideology, culture as mentioned in his *Prison Notebooks*, this research article has brought out these examples under the light of ideology and culture purely based on power relations, hegemony, identity, subversion, marginalised voices and the ideologies in the society.

In this 21st century, most of the time the media and much of the mass media communication propagates that men and women are equal, women are treated in a respected manner, there is no gender racism; whatever is happening here and there are the incidents considered as an odd man out. The selected novel is one of the examples which breaks this myth. This novel based on the mythological work Ramayan has gained an unquestionable popularity among its readers. Even though there are multiple versions of this epic and the time period it was written is disputable based on the different versions, the readers are not able to locate the majority of the events as unfamiliar to them. This itself is evidence that practices such as multiple wives for a man, a wife enduring her husband, a wife silently following the rules laid down by her husband, people in power exercising their power on those who are below them, etc., are still prevalent in the society.

To conclude, power plays a major role throughout the novel. This is possible only because of the subversive sector of the society and power

was exercised on them. Knowingly and unknowingly they all endured it. Here, the voices of Sita, Urmila, Kaushalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi, Mandodari, Indrajit, Taranisen, Sarama, Kumbhakarna, Vibheeshan, when he is under Ravan; Dhoomrakshasha, Akampana, Prahasta, etc... are never heard or just ignored. It is done deliberately to show the supremacy of domination that prevails in the society; the male characters are not even bothered or embarrassed of their behaviour, rather it is taken as the normal practice. Those who are in power are living or cherishing their life at the cost of the unheard voices of the subjugated members. Chitra Divakaruni has vividly narrated these unknown unheard voices from the perspective of Sita, who was the most affected among all the female characters in this novel.

Works cited

- [1]. "Culture" by Stephen Greenblatt." *Bartleby*, <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Culture-By-Stephen-Greenblatt-F3HMYLTZS4FF#:~:text=Greenblatt%20says%2C%20E2%80%9CThe%20ensemble%20of,not%20stay%20inside%20the%20boundaries.>
- [2]. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Forest of Enchantment*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2019.
- [3]. Hoare, Quintin, and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, editors. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers, 1971.
- [4]. Lull, James. *Media, Communication and Culture: A Global Approach*. Columbia University Press, 1995.
- [5]. Mongia, Padmini, editor. "Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'." *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, Routledge, 1997.