

Sitayana: An Analysis of Nandini Sahu's Sita: A Poem

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Abstract: *The poem titled "Sita: A Poem" by Nandini Sahu revisits the Hindu epic Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. Sita is the narrator of the epic poem. It is based on the eponymous character's life which is marked by movement from place to place. Hence, the study is titled Sitayana which means "Movement/Journey of Sita". She exiles herself willingly to accompany her husband to the forest at first to perform her duty towards him. Her next exile is imposed on her by the same husband for whom she had sacrificed the pleasures of the palace. She is abducted and it is her abduction and stay in the Ashoka Vatika for a year that entails her first trial-by-fire which she stands successfully. But an allegation by a washer man drives a wedge between "the soul and the absolute", i.e., between the divine incarnations of Vishnu and Lakshmi (Rama and Sita). The present paper is an attempt to analyse the story of the Ramayana from the point of view of Sita whose unblemished chastity and absolute loyalty towards Rama earns the applause of all, while Rama's rejection of hers tarnishes his image as a Maryada Purushottam. The study takes into account how Sita undergoes all the trials and tribulations of life while remaining resolute and faithful to the one who doubts her chastity. The paper endeavours to highlight that Sita is not only a mythical character but also an ordinary woman with a delicate heart that aches when she is subjected to humiliation time and again. Sita's invocation of the Mother Earth to take her back is a message for women to choose liberation and salvation when the pain of humiliation seems unbearable and unending.*

Keywords: *Sita, Rama, Trial-by-fire, Valmiki, Mother Earth*

Introduction

The long poem "Sita: A Poem" by the eminent poet Nandini Sahu offers a different perspective to look upon this great mythical figure. In the poem, she appears as a protagonist around whom all other characters revolve. Traditionally, it is the male characters who hog the limelight, be it any genre of literature or mythological story. In the Ramayana, Sita occupies tertiary significance after Rama and Ravana. The character of Rama is glorified and

he is referred to as *Maryada Purushottam* and his rule over Ayodhya is described as *Rama Rajya*, during which Ayodhya becomes an ideal state where nobody lives in dearth and penury. But his own wife, the queen consort, is asked to undergo an ordeal to prove her chastity. She is forced to leave his kingdom just to maintain his *Maryada* as a king. All this seems illogical to Sahu who adores the heroic qualities of Sita who brings up her twin sons alone and lives

without her husband facing all the troubles and difficulties of life. Therefore, Sahu chooses to write an epic based on the life of Goddess Sita. The poem is divided into 25 cantos and all of them deal exclusively with the character of Sita. Everybody else is described only in relation to her. Therefore, the poem may aptly be titled *Sitayana* (Sita's movement). Sahu's Sita is "Everywoman" belonging to "the past and the present"(2). At the same time, she is the "new woman, resilient as the Pegasus"(2). She belongs to all places. She lives in "Sitapurs, Rampurs, Udaipurs of India"(1). The poet's Sita represents all the women of the world. She figures everywhere. The poet writes:

She is on the Internet, in T. V. soaps,

in households, streets, call centers, universities,
in temples
and churches, in Ceylon, in the back waters of
Kerala, in
your concealed perception, and in the Indian
Constitution (1).

Sahu finds a reflection of Sita in every woman, in the former woman Prime Minister of India, in the girl who was gang-raped in the Delhi bus and she is also to be found "in the hot, helpless tears of the poor"(2). Through this poem, the poet says, "I celebrate womanhood"(4). She dedicates the poem to the single parent to her sons Lava-Kusha who are christened *Sita-putra* (3) by Valmiki.

Valmiki puts Sita on a high pedestal in the Ramayana and says that the epic is essentially the story of the life of the noble Sita, *Sitayah charitam mahat* (5). She forms a sisterhood with such great women as Urmila, Mandavi, Srutakirti, Anasuya, Gargi, Maitreyi,

Katyayani, Lopamudra, Ahalya, Arundhati, Mandodari and Tara. She is the daughter of King Janaka and the divine consort of Rama. What distinguishes her from other great women is her holiness and chastity, the "Sitaness of Sita" (6) and her self-willed exile- her choice to quit the pleasures of the palace and go to the forest with her husband. As a woman, she performs her duties as a daughter, wife and mother in a way no other mythical character has ever performed.

Janaka-Nandini-Janaki's life has been miraculous from the beginning. She easily "picked and placed/ the Shiva Dhanush in place"(10) a task that "three hundred soldiers would do together"(10) because of which the Parashurama-gifted Dhanush became the precondition to her *swayamvar*. And only Rama could "lift, / set and shoot the arrow from the Shiva-Dhanush"(11) and win her as his wife. She feels blessed to be married to him. However, Sahu strongly believes that the decision of choosing a husband should be "the woman's prerogative"(10) and the physical strength of a man should not entitle him to "win a woman's heart"(11).

Her wedding life is fraught with difficulties and soon she finds herself accompanying her husband and brother-in-law to a forest to "serve an exile of fourteen years"(14). She is proud of her consort who in obedience to his father's order and for his honour's sake leaves the palace and willingly goes to the forest. Her sense of wifehood makes her follow him as his very shadow wherever he chooses to go. This shows her sense of sacrifice for her husband, makes her his soul mate and binds them together in an inseparable, unbreakable bond and their names are chanted together as "*Jai Siya-Ram*"(19). It

is out of her sense of duties towards her husband that overwhelms every other thought and she feels motivated to join her husband. Sahu beautifully captures it:

We were exiled. No my Lord! No one
Exiled me, your Sita. I have been the
audacious, unyielding, self-willed, self-
motivated woman, forever. I joined you,
because that was my dharma, my duties to my
husband (20).

Her soul knows no faith "except *Rama-Nama, Hari-Nama*"(15) that boosts her lifeblood. In the fourth canto, Sahu refers to Rama as "the cure of all urge, / cupidity, immodesty, desire"(16) who is the "channel to cross the deep-sea of life" (16) not only for Sita but for all human beings.

Her life in the forest is peaceful in the company of her husband and Lakshmana. But she is enchanted by a golden deer which leads to her abduction by Ravana and this makes her realise the truth of the saying "a woman's greed and a man's wrath has to be controlled"(27). She is guilt-stricken for not paying heed to the advice of Rama "to ignore the deer because Nature/ doesn't produce animals of gold"(28). She is sad that by going against Nature she has incurred "the wrath of Mother Nature"(28). Like a tender wife, she wanted her husband to come to her rescue when she was taken to Lanka by Ravana. She wanted him to cover her "with the pinafore of your care"(29) as he could easily have "emanated to/ sojourn the inevitable"(29). Her separation from him was like "the parting of the inherent soul from the absolute being"(30). She questions why women like Sita and Draupadi have been made victims to wipe out evil-doers like Ravana and the Kauravas. She painfully

asks "To boost someone's male-ego, violating a woman is a must"(32)?

In her thirteenth year of exile, she is confined to the tortuous life of *Ashoka Vatika*. It is like a curse. But she is not in the least afraid of the Rakshasa king and his men. All of Ravana's entreaties fall on deaf ears. She spends her time chanting *Rama-Nama* "breathing in your love my redeemer"(38). Ravana did not know that she was not a woman, but his "death incarnate"(36).

In the ninth canto, the arrival of Hanuman fills her heart with hope and happiness. The monkey-god hands her the "Signet-Ring"(41) of Rama and tells her their story of courtship, wedding, "exile, abduction, separation and pain"(41). He could take her back to Rama, but she wanted him to come and release her. She is amused to see Hanuman burning the tall buildings of Lanka with his tail fire. The meeting with Hanuman and his act of burning the buildings and towers of the demon kingdom gladdens her heart after a long span of time.

In the poem, everything is narrated by Sita herself who relates how the great war results in the death of the great demon and his vile clan at the hands of Rama and his forces. But when it becomes the time of the Rama-Sita reunion, Rama does not come in person rushing to meet her. Instead, he sends Vibhishana to "take Sita to Rama's presence"(68). She is "bathed, clothed, ornamented and perfumed"(68) for her reunion with Lord Rama. She is shocked to realise that her husband's mind is engaged in "purity-pollution debate"(68). After abduction by Ravana and spending a year in Lanka, she is treated as a political property of the Rakshasa kingdom. Therefore, the new king is sent to hand her over to him (Rama) as if she were a commodity being returned to the winning party.

Rama, "the archer who split Shiva-Dhanush"(72) to get her as his wife, now treats her simply as a "woman", and not as his erstwhile dear wife. She is further shaken when Rama admits to her that "the war was surely not for your/ sake, but to redeem my forefathers' honour" (69). He, who once held her as a chaste woman, now doubts her purity by referring to her unknown parenthood, and by alleging that she must not be pure now as she has spent a whole year in *Ashoka Vatika* with no man of her clan to protect her. What breaks her heart is his allegation when his holy tongue utters unholy words:

Ravana could not have left you unpolluted after all you are a fine- looking, desirable woman!

All glory and grace have left you now, you are besmirched (69).

This is a bitter realisation indeed for a woman who had put all her faith in him. Rama is condemning his wife for the blunder of Ravana and she, in spite of being a goddess herself, is looked upon as a defiled woman. After all, she is a woman, and A woman can never situate herself alone, she is ever a limerick, a running stream or a creeper. She needs a man every time to safeguard her (70).

If she had known that Rama did not love her and he was keeping his family honour ahead of her, she would have killed herself. But she endures everything in spite of being an incarnation of 'Shakti' as she had absolute 'Bhakti' in Rama. But the same Rama treats her like a trivial thing. She doubts that every act of Rama has been a way to prove his masochism and uphold the glory of his clan, including the lifting of the

Shiva Dhanush in the *swayamvar*, and they were not done for her sake. A woman's existence depends on men like father, brother, husband and then son(s). She has no "room of her own"(72), that is, she has no autonomy to exist alone.

Rama, a doting husband, becomes a doubting one now after her release from Lanka and he demands that she must undergo a fire trial to prove her chastity, which she, willingly, but sadly, does and comes out unharmed. But all along she feels like a deserted woman with no man on her side except Lakshmana who tearfully prepares her funeral pyre. Sahu poignantly describes her sense of loneliness after being abandoned by Rama:

There was no one, not a single man, to spring to my rescue, after all I was an abandoned wife! I had lost all rights and interests to life (73).

As a matter of fact, actual Sita was in the custody of Fire-God and Ravana held a fake one. So, there was no question of her chastity being violated by him.

However, their reunion is hailed by the gods as well as by a replica of his deceased father who urges him to establish *Ram Rajya* in *Kosla* and maintain the dignity and honour of the great *Ikshvaku* clan which he, indeed, does especially by taking care of the common people and giving them all kinds of freedom, including freedom of expression and judgement. And, then one day, a washer man criticises Rama for accepting his wife after rejecting her once and says that, as a rule, "An insipid, decadent wife must not find a place at home"(86). This hurts the ego of the great *Ikshvaku* king and he decides that "Sita cannot share the throne with him"(87). He forces his pregnant wife to quit the care of the

palace which she urgently required at the time and sends her away from the territory of his kingdom. Sita cannot believe that he can be more callous than an animal and asks:

You could desert me when I was most helpless!
Even a tiger takes care of the tigress when
she's pregnant, and you have no resentment
(88)?

Lakshmana leaves her in a gloomy place where Muni Valmiki receives and welcomes her smilingly. Her life in his ashram passes by without any difficulty under the guardianship of guru and father-like Valmiki. During the first exile, she was with Rama and Lakshmana, and now during the second, she is taken care of by the compassionate sage. Though she could not spend much time with Urmila, Mandavi and Srutakirti, she is happy to be in the friendly company of Trijala (who had accompanied her in the *Ashoka Vatika* as well), Vasumati and Nadopasini who all treat her like a sister. There, she gives birth to Lava and Kusha but she regrets that their father was not there to hold them in his arms. Sita, the first and last book of her sons, nourishes them singly. She submits them to the teaching of Valmiki. To her, Lava and Kusha became " my redemption, my salvation"(95).

Lava and Kusha grow up into mighty and disciplined boys who are on the cusp of adolescence. They learn by heart the story:

of the Swayamvara, the exile, Sita's abduction, the Rama-Ravana war, Rama's coronation, the peaceful Rama-Rajya, and Sita's second exile (97)!

They chant the tale of the Ramayana to the delight and bliss of every hearer. Sita has now spent twelve years in her second exile without her Lord by her side. In the meantime, Rama starts Asvamedha Yajna with the golden idol of Sita by his side. The horse is taken hold of by the twins and they defeat all the famed warriors sent by Rama which entails his own visit to the forest where he comes to know about the true lineage of his own sons through Valmiki. Sita's "salad days"(102) are a matter of the past now and, all along, her life has been "the battle of Sita with Sita"(103). She has spent her difficult days without Rama, though her soul is tied to his for seven lives. When she is present before him in the presence of Valmiki, he avoids looking at her as if she were still a deserted fallen woman. Her purity, he says, must undergo the trial-by-fire to assess her chastity once again so that she may be accepted back as his "queen and wife"(103) and mother of 'his' children. The *Maryada Purushottam* is so besotted with his duties as a king that he has been, for many years, oblivious of his duties as a husband and father. He never bothered to know how his wife might be leading her life or whether she is alive or not. Nor did he care to know when his pregnant wife gave birth to their children or what condition they are in. He has been basking in the glory of his *Rama Rajya* and taking care of the fundamental rights of his subjects, forgetting that his wife and children are also members of his subject. The question of "sin and purity"(106) keeps him separated from her. He considers that her body is his "private entity"(106), denying a woman her autonomy. Tired of trial-by-fire and rejection, she finally chooses to reject him once and for all. She calls upon the Mother Earth to receive her back and relieve her of her endless agony and "this burden of life"(107). Thus, Sita who

was rejected by Rama, chooses to reject him forever, leaving a legacy, for women, of not undergoing trial-by-fire every time the whim of their husbands wants them to. Rather, they should assert their individuality and feminine autonomy and choose to object to their unwarranted demands and wishes and reject them if they do not mend their ways.

Sita also questions how Valmiki, whose heart melted to see "the parting of two *kraunch* birds near/ the river Tamasa"(112), could envision the separation of Sita and Rama and write the Ramayana. This makes the epic a tragedy in which poetic justice is not done to Sita who is exiled, abducted, rejected, humiliated by subjecting her to trial-by-fire and is, finally, orphaned only to be owned by the Mother Earth.

Sita asserts that her life of suffering will surely have a cathartic effect. But she wants no tears and sympathy for herself. She stands for feminine autonomy and free will. She "embodies the 'shakti' and ', bhakti' without ever betraying that she is a victim of male chauvinism. She is loyal to Rama but she refuses to prove her loyalty on demand. She is a *satyagrahi* like Mahatma Gandhi having "self-control and self-reliance"(77) like him. For her sad life, Rama will be condemned forever. In her undeserved suffering, chastity and devotion, she resembles Draupadi and Savitri. But, the Sita of Sahu does not want to be remembered as a goddess, or a mythical character, but as a common woman. She stands for 'sitaness' of every woman. She says:

I am reborn as Mother Teresa, Florence
Nightingale, Lucy Grey, Helen of Troy,
Cleopatra,

Atlanta, Cordelia, Desdemona, Penelope,
Sylvia Plath,
Athena, Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Shakuntala
...

I live numerous lives, in women, bold and
beautiful (117).

In the poem, Sahu raises contemporary issues as well. She talks about "bride burning"(13), misery of girl children "female feticide"(13) and Nirbhaya kand of Delhi which all show that so many 'Sitas' are still "battered/ bartered, sold, wronged, cast away"(18). She refers to so many infants and kids being killed in the hospitals as well.

The poet makes an allusion to some important quotes to suit her purpose. For example, she refutes Shakespeare's quote from Hamlet "Frailty, thy name is woman" and says "Frailty, the name is not woman"(28) to prove that Sita's faith in Rama is firm, while Rama doubts her purity. She refers to the Holy Bible to draw parallels between it and the Ramayana in terms of making a passage through the sea. Indrajit, Ravana's dearest and ablest son finds himself in a "do or die" situation which instantly reminds of the situation of the soldiers in Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade': "Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die"(57). Sahu makes reference to Virginia Woolf's book 'A Room of One's Own' to point out that Sita has no autonomy, or no "room of her own"(72) in her life. Instead of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief", the poet describes Sita's mental status as "a willing suspension of doubts"(84).

To sum up, Sahu's poem may be read as a retelling of the Ramayana from the perspective of Sita. It is a tale of Sita who takes her life from

the womb of Mother Earth and is taken back by the same mother, establishing a close affinity between them. Her life has been a tale of long, undeserved suffering. It is interspersed with exile(s), abduction and trial-by-fire. But she endures it all heroically. But, when it is too much, she chooses to reject the rejector, thereby, gaining freedom, redemption and

salvation. Hers is the story that continues to permeate the life of every woman. Sita, thus, represents all other women of the mythology and the real world. She is ancient as well as modern. She will continue to live for ages and motivate women to assert feminine autonomy and free will in the face of patriarchy.

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