

Sita: The Hero of Nandini Sahu's Retelling of *Ramayana*

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ABSTRACT

Generation after generation has heard the story of Ramayana as the epic battle or *dharmayudh* between Rama and Ravana. Sita is mostly presented as the damsel in distress whose honour is protected by her husband and who is supposed to prove her chastity in order to find a place in society. However, her life before marriage, her natural gift, resilience, courage, and ability to detach from everything that is close to her are many times overlooked. The hero is Rama, and the villain is Ravana. Sita is the victim. Nandini Sahu's Sita is not a victim. She is the true warrior of the epic Ramayana who deserves to be called the hero. She is the faithful daughter, wife, and mother who performs all the three roles with devotion and dedication. However, most importantly, she is a woman of substance who never loses hope in adverse circumstances and resiliently faces every challenge that life throws her way. This paper is an attempt to reconstruct Sita's identity as the warrior of the epic instead of the victim by referring to Nandini Sahu's rendering of the story of Ramayana from Sita's perspective. This analysis will be done from the postcolonial perspective in which the story of the subaltern Sita will be the highlight, and her actual contribution to the action of the epic will be brought to the forefront to show that she is the hero and not the victim.

Keywords: *Sita, Rama, Postcolonial, Patriarchy, Ramayana.*

Introduction

There are several versions of the Ramayana in circulation all over India, each with its own version of the story of Rama, Ravana, and Sita. The reason Sita's name is mentioned last is due to the fact that Ramayana centers around the battle between good and evil and the eventual victory of good. This is followed by the model of perfect kingship, Ramrajya, that Rama's reign in Ayodhya strives to be. The story always revolves around Rama and his journey from childhood till the time he becomes the King of Ayodhya. Sita is presented only as his companion. The story is never told from her perspective or from the points of view of any of the female characters in the epic, like Urmila, Mandavi, Srutakirti, Mandodari, or even the three Queens of King Dashratha. There is a single section dedicated to Sita's struggle after

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being abandoned by her husband- Uttara Kanda- which also focuses on her children Luv-Kush. Thus, there is never an entire portion that presents her take on things. She is always shown in relation to one of the male characters, first her father, then her husband, and finally her children. Nandini Sahu's Sita is a long poem of twenty-five cantos that give voice to Sita, the seemingly powerless and timid female protagonist of Sage Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She does not limit herself to the Sita of the epic but takes the essence of her character and locates them in every woman who exists. She is the spirit of womanhood- not just a symbol of sacrifice but a figure of resilience, protest, satyagraha, and assertion, along with magnanimity, forgiveness, and unconditional love. She is not a victim or a weakling as she is mostly presented in the retellings of the original epic, including Tulsidas' *Ramacharitamanas*. She is a fierce female with a strong will and a mind of her own who can face the trials and tribulations that life throws her way, alone. In the last canto of the poem Sita says "I was never the subdued woman painted in Tulsidas' Ramacharitamanas. I was eternally pure, eternally chaste." (Canto XXV) This paper looks at Nandini Sahu's retelling of Ramayana in the voice of Sita from the theoretical approach of postcolonialism. The reason for looking at Sita as a postcolonial figure is that she gives an insightful chronology of the events that shaped her life in retrospect after detaching herself from the existing social order. She moves between the past and present. However, the important point is that she highlights her battle with patriarchy and proves that she has the courage to stand outside the system with her individuality. She becomes the 'other', the voice of the subaltern, and ensures that her side of the story is heard.

Methodology

In this paper, the key concepts of postcolonial theory like othering, resistance, freedom, hegemony, appropriation, and double consciousness, will be used to analyze the story of Sita. Each concept will be taken up individually and applied to the text to see if it accurately fits into the situations described in the poem. As the postcolonial approach is meant to tell the story of colonized or marginalized, it is appropriate for analyzing Sita's retelling of the story of Ramayana from her perspective. She presents the harsh truth and the severe impact of the turn of events on her life and being as well as gives voice to the other female characters who are never given the right to tell their stories. The concepts of postcolonial theory can help in understanding the plight of women. In the paper, after the theoretical analysis, the outcome of the analysis will be summarized in the conclusion.

Analysis

The general opinion about Sita's character is divided- she is either demure and timid or fierce and independent. However, the first perspective is the popularly held opinion, which is frequently cited to exemplify how an ideal woman should be. Every version of the Ramayana presents a different Sita. As poet Nandini Sahu points out in the preface to the poem, Sita is either glorified in classical literature or she is marginalized in folk renditions. Somewhere she appears as the most potent and most powerful character, and in other texts, she becomes the ultimate symbol of sacrifice, tolerance, and compromise. However, the important fact is that her character is interpreted in the way in which the reader relates to her.

The first canto of the poem begins with this idea- "Call her what you may- Sita, Janaki, Vaidehi, Ramaa- she is Woman. She is every woman, the propagated, interpolated role model." (Canto I) She is not a mythical character but a woman like every other woman in this world. The next few lines establish Sita's fiercely independent will and her independent position in the existing social order- "The woman who adopted a self-imposed exile; the woman whom time and again patriarchy finds safe to evict in her emancipated consciousness." (Canto I) The words to focus on are 'self-imposed exile' and 'emancipated consciousness,' which show that Sita has always taken her decisions and has a mind of her own. Her spirit cannot be curbed for long, and it shines through even in the darkest times to emanate a glow that spreads all around. Nandini Sahu pens this tale of Sita with the hope that both Sita and women, in general, are seen in a new light- as succeeding after suffering and never giving up. She believes that Sita is the role model for the new modern woman. Her anguish, banishment from the life of royalty that she was entitled to, public denunciation, and assertion of the right to live with dignity are all facts that make her seem like every other woman. Moreover, the poem gives due acknowledgment to other women of importance in the tale of Ramayana who have been sidelined or completely ignored in the course of the story.

In the second canto itself, Sita states that she has overcome 'patriarchal manipulations' and 'domestic blues.' It is her story that links the tales of Rama and Ravana. Their epic battle is impossible without her presence. Thus, she places herself right in the middle of the action instead of accepting any kind of marginalized position. She also highlights that her duties as a daughter, wife, and mother have been completed, and now she is beyond these societal roles that have been conferred on her.

Gradually she brings to light all the episodes of her life where patriarchal domination was clearly at work. However, her journey since birth has been unusual and she makes the reader

aware that she is a child of the Earth, not of a human. This is the fact that begins the process of ‘othering’ in her life. She is one of a kind, and that sets her apart from other human beings. Maybe, her unusual suffering and constant struggle are also because of that reason. She is never meant to fit into any existing structure for long and becomes the ‘other’ by getting separated from the conventional setup willingly or unwillingly. Although she loves her father a lot, she objects to her father’s condition for her Swayamvar. It is hardly her right to choose her future partner. The ceremony that is supposed to give her the freedom to choose a husband of her choice is made conditional by her father, and her right is taken away. Her marital life depends on the man who can prove his physical prowess rather than the largeness of his heart. Nandini Sahu compares it to the concept of arranged marriages in the present times, where girls are married off by their parents to a boy who meets their criteria of selection. Once again, a reference to modern times is given where Sita compares herself to the girl child killed and the bride burned because they are also victims of the social mindset and put through fire tests like her.

As she moves ahead with her story, she praises her husband who is the ideal man, and describes herself as the ‘dutiful, beautiful wife of Rama’ who starts a “self-surpassing contest en route for annihilation.” (Canto IV) He is her Lord as she points out several times in the course of the poem. This instantly puts him in a higher and more powerful position compared to hers. But her protest is evident when she points out that her husband’s compassion is missing in his treatment of Urmila. He allows Lakshman to accompany them in the fourteen-year exile, leaving his wife behind. She appropriates the terms like ‘Rama Rajya’ and prosperity, peace, justice, and happiness that are supposed to prevail in Rama’s presence to highlight the absence of everything in Urmila’s life. Next comes the discussion on Ahalya, Anasuya, and Savitri. The first one is a victim of the patriarchal mindset and has to undergo a transformation as punishment for being touched by a man other than her husband, although she is completely innocent in this case. It is Ahalya who informs Sita about Anasuya and Savitri. Anasuya is the perfect woman- the symbol of compassion and nurturance and the wife of Rishi Atri. Savitri is the mortal woman who brings her husband Satyavana back from the jaws of death through her determination and unshakable persistence. With these different stories, Sita questions her husband about the parameters for judging a woman’s character and deciding her place within or outside society. She is wary of the fact that the grace of a woman is redeemed through a man’s touch- specifically only of her lawful husband’s. At the same time, her grace and dignity

falter if she is fraudulently touched by any other man. Her character is measured in terms of her relationship with the other sex and, most importantly, with her Lord.

Nandini Sahu uses very strong words to describe the condition of women in a patriarchal setup in which the man-woman relationship is nothing short of a Master-Slave or Colonizer-Colonized binary. A woman is “the consumerist piece to be obtained, battered, bartered, sold, wronged, cast away.” (Canto V) The poet is skeptical of women being objectified and treated as commodities rather than human beings with identities of their own. In a later section of the poem, Sita also points out the same while referring to historical evidence and literary epics that have objectified women:

The civilizations have seen men fighting men over women. In the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *the Mahabharata*, and *the Ramayana*, a woman has always been a trophy, a guiding agent for men to show their bravado since time immemorial. Objectification of women has been there in Western and Eastern civilizations, in myth and folklore, in all the oral-written continuum. No wonder the good and the evil fought once again for a woman. (Canto XI)

Women’s fate being decided by their male counterparts is something that the poet does not approve of. In the poem, Sita clarifies that her decision to accompany her husband to the forest was a result of audacity and self-will. It was her dharma to do so, but she did it out of choice, not compulsion. It was her courage and conviction and not her feminine frailty that was to be noticed. However, she wasn’t aware that her independent decision would become the reason for her abduction and imprisonment and, later on her denunciation.

The objectification ritual continues as Sita states that she is an object of desire for many demons in the forest. When Shurpanakha expressed her desire for the brothers, her nose was cut off by Lakshmana to show her that she was overstepping the boundary set for women. Her appearance was affected which was supposed to be the defining characteristic of women in those days. Sita questions the reader- is a woman only the means to generate or eliminate negative power? She is supposedly a passive entity who has no agency and no means to act as per her free will. If she does so, she is to suffer harsh consequences, just like Sita, who gets abducted by Ravana when she gets enamored by the golden deer and compels her husband to get it for her. She crosses the ‘Lakshman rekha’ that is drawn for her by her brother-in-law. As she oversteps her boundary, like Shurpanakha, she is punished for it. This is clearly an example of patriarchal domination. The hegemony of the male-dominated society is exemplified here as the woman

is supposed to stay within limits. She is controlled by the male members of her family, and if she steps outside the boundary metaphorically or literally, she comes under the control of the outsider, who is also a male. Thus, she moves from one controlling space to another, with no change in her position but an instant denunciation and reduced dignity. Another very important question asked by Sita is:

“Both of you swore to destroy evil, in the form of Ravana, and release Sita. Tell me, oh Lord, why do we subject a woman, at every age, as a means to an end? To kill Ravana, to wipe out evil, was it indispensable to make Sita a victim? To fight the Mahabharata war, was it required to disrobe Draupadi in the Dice Hall of Hastinapura? (Canto VII)

Sita does not wish to be seen as a victim because she emerges stronger from all the struggles that she goes through and resists every attempt to be marginalized or suppressed. She also brings in the example of Draupadi to highlight how women have been subjected to public denouncement and humiliation to serve patriarchal interests. The statement by J. Nozipo Maraire holds true in this case- “Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter.” (Post colonialism quotes (16 quotes)) As mentioned earlier, Sage Valmiki’s Ramayana is the story of Rama and Ravana and the ‘dharmayudh’. It is meant to establish the concept of the ideal state and keep dharma above everything else. In the poem, she states explicitly that “Sita, a character eternally absent in the story of her husband? Making appearances momentarily, now and then!” (Canto XI) In the original story, Sita comes across as the victim who silently suffers and struggles through the different adversities that life throws her way. She is also presented as the ideal woman who accepts her fate and continues to perform her duties despite being denounced by her husband. This is the story of the hunter. When Sita starts explaining the events from her perspective, she no longer comes across as a victim but as an assertive force who resists patriarchal domination and independently takes decisions at the cost of solitude and pain. It then becomes the story of the lion. She uses appropriation to dismantle the claims of the patriarchal colonizers who consider women as commodities and offers her version of the truth.

A point to be noted is that even though Sita shows her fiercely independent side in her version, there are some statements she makes which show a kind of double consciousness. Although she resists any form of victimization, she does reinstate some of the norms of the patriarchal society when she claims that “a man is his wife’s protector and provider.” (Canto VII) Her husband did not perform his duty according to the norm. A few cantos later, she mentions that

“woman loves the fortification of her man, feels secure with him. This is her cipher of chastity, the glory of her feminine prosperity.” (Canto IX) This sounds like the thoughts of the ideal wife that a patriarchal society promotes. She also mentions that her husband’s concern for her is like that of a God for his devotee. This again puts her husband on a pedestal and leaves her in a subservient position at the mercy of her Lord. In the next few lines, she addresses this fact and clearly states that she has never been a cowered or subservient wife. There is a slight contradiction here which reflects a kind of double consciousness. Sita tries to dissociate herself from the patriarchal setup but also feels the lack of it sometimes when she deals with challenges all alone.

A common motif in any postcolonial literature is that of the jungle or the forest, which is a symbol of wilderness. Sita had emerged from Mother Earth, so she is a child of Nature. She is supposed to have a free spirit that is not shackled by any bondage. Her place is not in a civilized society, and that is why she is a misfit in the patriarchy. She can be Parvati and transform into Kali if the situation demands. With this, the cosmos can turn into chaos. Civilization can become wilderness as the colonized raise their voice against the colonizers. She claims her spiritual superiority over every other character in the story and states that she is Ravana’s death incarnate. When the time comes for her to reunite with her husband after almost a year, she is dressed up by others to make her appear in the best manner possible. However, doubt creeps into her mind about the fact that her husband decides to wait longer before meeting her rather than accepting the raw state that she is in. She is compelled to become civilized before appearing in front of her husband.

The most shocking part of the poem is the way in which she is denounced by her husband publicly. Her reputation and self-respect are questioned, and she is humiliated in the worst way by her husband, who supposedly loves her the most.

You were born of unknown parenthood thus, your purity was already half-challenged. Now you have lost it all; you must not be chaste anymore. 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. The dignity of a king prevents him from accommodating a wife and a queen like you, since you have crossed the ‘Lakshmana rekha’. (Canto XV)

She is openly abandoned by her husband when she needs his support and love the most. This is followed by her fire test, which, as she points out, is not an act of weakness but of insolence. She does not intend to promote “silent suffering and subjugation” among women. It is a way

to prove her purity and strength of character to the world through actions rather than words. This is not the end of her suffering. When the fire test is done, and she accepts Rama's offer of a reunion, she embarks on a new journey that is seemingly filled with bliss and prosperity. However, calamity strikes, and she is once again denounced by her husband when a washerman's doubts about Sita's character prompt him to take this harsh step. She is left alone with her unborn children in the forest this time. It is a return to her origin to state it in a good way. The forest becomes a space of acceptance, belonging, and non-judgment. Although she suffers immense heartache and a breach of trust, she continues to live among nature with the people who care for her without prejudice. She is the representative of 'bhakti' and 'shakti' just like her sisters who opt for detachment and withdrawal from worldly ties for survival. They are all independent spirits, some of whom exist within the system and some outside it. The Ramayana is not just Sita's story but of all these women who have sacrificed silently.

The Ramayana is not only my story, the story of solitary Sita. I have distinguished many a women in my lifetime whose silence is their power; withdrawing from joy, they enjoy. They are ultimate form of 'Bhakti' and 'Shakti'. (Canto XVII)

Sita is the castaway who is the hero of the story though she is marginalized. She is "the eternal orphan, the elemental sufferer, single-mother." (Canto XXI) Her children are called 'Sitaputra' and are not named after their father. She is a single mother who raises and educates her children autonomously and single-handedly. When she comes face-to-face with her husband after twelve long years, she has lots of regrets and complaints in her mind. However, the question that stands out is:

How many lesser mortals had to be crushed in their lifetime so that you could turn into 'great'? Your desire that you should never be gotten doing any wrong, your righteousness, made me and my children writhe. Your desire for perfection forfeited me. Your godliness made my life less than that of a common woman. (Canto XXII)

This once again brings up the idea of colonization, in which the more powerful person tries to take over every aspect of the lives of the colonized and tramples on them to reach his goal. In his desire for perfection and righteousness, Rama loses the most precious relationship of his life and also gets stigmatized for generations due to his treatment of his wife. The second fire test that he dares to ask for, and Sita's absolute denial of it, is the climax of the story. She decides to take the final drastic step to get relief from this perpetual ordeal of suffering as she is done with her duties as a daughter, wife, and mother. She returns to her birthplace, Mother Earth, witnessed by everyone, and before willingly giving up her life, questions the mindset of

society that blames the woman for any kind of violation that she is subjected to. The shocking reaction of the bystanders solidifies the patriarchal mindset when they curse Sita for arguing with her ‘master’ about her body which is supposed to be his ‘private entity’. She does not pay heed to any comments and shows the courage to give up everything willingly just to not be a part of the social structure anymore. She endures the journey from “royal extravagance” to “exile and privation, marginalization” (Canto XXV) and liberates herself by renouncing life itself. She has just one request to make- that her story should be retold as a tale of a strong and fierce woman who admonishes patriarchy and chooses a life of solitude and independence rather than docility. She requests for ‘Sita’ to be redefined through retellings:

Many Ramayanas have conveyed my loyalty, my docile character, I am illustrated as a one-dimensional character. Stop it. It’s time to terminate that image and resurrect me, alter the Sita-myth, talk of the progressive woman Sita, redefine Sita. (Canto XXV)

She asserts that there is Sitaness in every woman. Sita is not just a character but a force that is a part of all women. The poet describes this Sitaness in her preface to the poem when she talks about a woman who “keeps her beauty beyond bounds with the armour of knowledge and power!” This is the story of every woman in today’s times, and so each woman has a bit of Sita in her.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the poem in the previous section employs several terms associated with postcolonial readings of literature. Although Sita is an individual entity rather than a subject of a state that is colonized, she too suffers from patriarchal colonization of the female sex and decides to retell the story from her perspective rather than getting lost in the tale of Rama-Ravana’s ‘*dharmayudh*’. She has her shortcomings and flaws, but she is ready to face the world with them rather than seeking perfection that is impossible to achieve. There are limitations to the approach used in the paper because the narrator has not undergone colonization in the literal sense. It is a metaphorical one, but it is certainly present. Thus, the theory of postcolonialism cannot be applied entirely to this text. However, some terms related to it are directly used by the poet in the text, making a postcolonial reading of ‘Sita’ justifiable. She is not the victim but a warrior who retaliates to injustice and tells her story with confidence and conviction. As a concluding remark, it can be safely said that it is Sita and not Rama who is the actual hero of the epic Ramayana.

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