

## The Personal as Political: A Study in Nandini Sahu's *Sita (A Poem)*

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### ABSTRACT

When authors attempt to pen down their ideas on an issue relevant to the society, their own social contexts are bound to seep into their texts, with or without their awareness of the same. In that sense, all writing is political. Applying this dictum of the cultural materialists, this paper seeks, among other things, to study the meeting points of the personal and political in Nandini Sahu's groundbreaking epic-scale *Sita (A Poem)*. Focus will be on the analysis of the text's subversive potential, the demythification of Sita--the heroine of the epic Ramayana. How well Nandini Sahu's 'Sita' transcends the boundaries of time and space in the process of claiming her rightful identity will be addressed herein. The texts and contexts of Sita have always been a matter of great critical debate; critics, at all times, have constructed and deconstructed this character according to their own politics. Sita--the character from Sage Valmiki's Ramayana--is at once simple and complex. Patriarchy cleverly pushes to the sub-texts the 'behind-the-curtain' politics associated with the multiple texts, with almost singular narrative, that claim to be all faithful renditions of Sita's story. Her complexity can be understood only when a deeper reading of such sub-texts is properly presented. It should be interesting to find out how Sahu's narrative falls in or out of line with the popular narratives on Sita. And while observing this, the politics of Nandini's Sita will be attempted to be brought out through this paper.

**Keywords:** *Epic, Gender, Gender Politics, Body Politics, Patriarchy, 'Alternative modernity', Ecological concerns.*

We are the society. We construct, deconstruct and reconstruct everything pertaining to our society--the ethos of culture, moral codes, civil codes, system of governance and the rules thereof, gender stereotypes, etc.--mostly willingly, sometimes otherwise. The evolution of human society over the decades are investigated through various ways from time to time. History, literature, language, and other sciences have been instrumental in presenting to us our own history. What is interesting, however, is that not only do these tell us of 'what is' or 'what was', these knowledge systems also contribute to the making of the events they claim to be presenting. Writing, therefore, is not only registering politics, of several kinds, it is a political act itself. Sita's story- which is also the context of this paper- for example, has been written, and told for so many years and in so many ways now. What is common in almost all the tellings/retellings and writings/rewritings is that they are all from the point of view of the social context of their tellers/writers. It is interesting to note, however, how the same story is used to

create a different discourse when an author sits to write it down. Nandini Sahu's Sita is one unique attempt at reading Sita- the "sexual/textual politics" related to her- in the sense that her text is not just about adding another "fresh perspective", the story in verse is told from the perspective of Sita herself! Interestingly, the context, here, incorporates the socio-political conditions of Sita's as well as Nandini's era. Time is no boundary.

As Sahu confirms, at the very outset, her Sita is in no way any retelling of the epic Ramayana, "it is, rather, penned as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic, Sita, told in the first person narrative." (Sahu v) However, a close reading of the text suggests that Sahu's readings of the different versions of the epic gift her with the points on which Sahu's Sita departs from the established narrative point of view. She uses her readings to highlight the manipulation of narrative vis-a-vis gender politics. History has consciously crafted the Rama-Sita story. On the surface, it elevates the character of Sita to epic proportions and that is how it is read. How patriarchy naturalises the male dominance through cleverly creating the 'false consciousness', how gender stereotypes are created and reinstated, how women are denied their individuality, how the dreams of women get crushed under the burden of expectations, are important questions that are often left unexplored. Breaking the pretext of social order, in the guise of which all these issues are conveniently avoided, Sahu lays bare the hypocrisy of the social order that reigns supreme. Sita is a courageous venture into the realms of the theoretical debates pertaining to gender. However, unlike the conventional debates on gender disparity that lead to and end in no conclusion, Sita (A Poem) by Nandini Sahu presents a sensible discourse on this issue. Unlike the extremist feminist discourses that result in such conclusion that the best way for women to create a space for themselves is to remove all men from this world. Such worldview of an alternative reality, wherein a society is to be conceived where it is all women, leads the society nowhere. Sahu's Sita, on the contrary, seeks to offer a strong and sensible alternative modernity. In the name of freedom, Sita in Sita does not demand to be freed from responsibilities. She is a powerful woman who knows that with power comes responsibility and she is ready to accept it. She is dutiful, caring and compassionate. She has many roles to play—role of a daughter, a wife, a mother, a friend and a queen. But above and beyond this, she is a woman.

It is very interestingly that Sahu manages to keep the persona of Sita free from the shadows of power bestowed upon her by her status as a deity. Sita a simple individual around whom a discourse is woven. The beauty of this long narrative lies in the way past and present embrace

each other. The result is creation of a time matrix in which the presentness of the past becomes more credible than the past itself.

Sita begins on the note, Sita is “every woman”, that she has been there since the beginning of the beginning. Myth and history merge into each other just as the narrative begins. Sita is both a mythological character from the time period of King Janaka and a real woman of flesh and blood, as ordinary as one whose heart is enticed by a golden deer. Sita is the subject of male greed; at the same time, she is the revered. And Nandini Sahu’s Sita is “the erstwhile woman Prime Minister of India.” Nandini challenges the cliched portrayal of women through her Sita’s representation as on who is unadorned, unlike “Maheswari” or “Saraswati”. On the contrary, this Sita is the modern-day woman who is just “the tarnished, deflated doll, / the consumerist piece to be obtained, battered/ bartered, sold, wronged, cast away.” (Sahu 18) The multiplicity of images of a woman, as represented through Sita, resonates closely with a poem included as a part of the forward to Paulo Coelho’s *Eleven Minutes*:

“For I am the first and the last,  
I am the venerated and despised,  
I am the wife and the virgin,  
I am the mother and the daughter  
I am the arms of my mother,  
I am barren and my children are many,  
I am the married woman and the spinster,  
I am the woman who gives birth and she who never procreated,  
I am the consolation for the pain of birth,  
I am the wife and the husband,  
And it was my man who created me,  
I am the mother of my father,  
I am the sister of my husband,  
And he is my rejected son,  
Always respect me,  
For I am the shameful and the magnificent one.” (Coelho, 4)

Through her Sita, the poet touches upon a vast array of social evils like rape, molestation, denial of rights to women, etc. Spanning a space of XXXV Cantos, it is an amalgamation of various concerns raised and resolutions offered within a multiplicity of contexts. An eco-feminist

herself, Sahu delivers the epic character's connections with and concerns about ecology with such a delicacy and an authentic authorial authority that we get transported to a plane where it is almost impossible to decipher and tell Sita from Nandini. Sita becomes Nandini, Nandini Sita. The popular myth of Sita's birth from Mother Earth is duly noted. The myth also dictates that Sita submerges in the earth at her own choice. The first Canto, more than it introduces the character of Sita, celebrating her multiplicity: "Call her what you may – Sita, Janaki, Vaidehi, Ramaa", (Sahu 1) gives us a glimpse of the important issues that the coming Cantos would unfurl. The first canto acquaints us with the rationale behind this long poem, someone had to write this because:

"Sita—Sati Sita--she is not just the hypothetical or the  
historical substance of academics. She is truly animated to this living, present living;  
she is pertinent." (Sahu 2)  
"From a celebration of the  
Sita, the woman who translates the communal and the cloistered cosmoses in the  
society, controls remotely the kingship  
and the exile of Rama, creates the realization of the ethics of banishment, liability,  
assertion, loyalty and denunciation." (Sahu 3)

The narrative proceeds to explain Sita's subsequent acceptance of her role. While Sahu's 'Sita' is the woman claiming her rightful position from patriarchy, she is also the keeper of good faith in Rama her husband, her father Janaka, Lakshman her brother-in-law, among others. She does not dismiss men. And at the same time, she does not hesitate to question the intentions of her father when a 'Swayamvar' is planned for Sita. Sita, by questioning her father's precondition that lifting the bow has to be the test of manliness, questions the whole mechanism of patriarchy. Sita asks her father: "Shouldn't love be the/ agent to map the interplay of the future, text and context of a complete/ connubial?" (Sahu 11) Interestingly, at one point, immediately after Sita's questioning of the rationale behind the Swayamvar mechanism, Nandini writes, "Civility says, a man/ is her wife's protector and provider." What code of "civility"? Who manufactures these codes? In whose books are these codes maintained? These are questions that, perhaps, Sahu intentionally leaves to us to explore. It be noted that Ram is not an ordinary being:

"He is the cure to all urge,

cupidity, immodesty, desire; He is the  
channel to cross the deep-sea of life. He  
is the ménage of power,  
the curer

of all haze, the patron of magic,  
the congregation of rectitude, honesty.” (Sahu 16)

And Sita adores this extraordinary man, and she does so in both ordinary and extraordinary ways. But this could only be Sita who could accept her love for Ram this openly because “Ordinarily, for a woman in the public domain, such a professing of the personal would be unexpected, but as a careful perusal of the text will show, this is not the same as reverence for ‘Maryada Purusottam’ that pervades the epic. Rather it is the mark of Sita’s innate womanliness that Nandini designates as her ‘Sita-ness’.” (Mukherjee, 5) As a lover, Sita is just like any modern-day woman, rather franker and more outspoken than them, in admitting her love for her man. Ram as the “menage of power”, as the “cure to all urge” is an irresistible enticement to Sita and she has no doubt about it nor any hesitation in saying that out loud. She is a dedicated lover.

In her next role, as a ‘mother’, Sita excels as she single-handedly nurtures the couples’ two sons Luv and Kush respectively. Again, this is glorified to a proportion where it becomes a common-sense knowledge that motherhood is the synonym of love, care and patience. Men, however, are, again, for no reason, deemed free from at least one of the attributes viz., patience. Child bearing is a power exclusive to women, true, but child rearing is also a responsibility exclusive to women, why? Whatever the case may be, the epic by Sage Valmiki states that Luv and Kush were reared by Sita single-handedly and that is also, perhaps, why the Sage calls them Sita-Putras and not Rama-Putras but not calling them that (“Rama-Putras”) make them any less of Rama’s sons? Or, further still, any more of the sons of Sita? Neither seems true. And in that case, why this biased role divide? And what celebration in the name of naming? At a deeper level, this calling of Luv and Kush as ‘Sita Putras’ and not ‘Rama Putras’ is but a part of a bigger, darker scheme of patriarchy. A close reading of the text suggests that these are issues offered for public scrutiny with the kind of vehemence that is a characteristic trait of the vocal modern woman.

Counter-narratives (to this patriarchal narrative/false consciousness) occur too at all times in history. More ‘Sitas’ are born. In this our present text Sita, Nandini/Sita sets out to unmask the creators of the ‘false consciousness’ under the pretext of History, Myth, and Folklore. Naked realities parade before us dressed up in the finest of the fabrics of the language. An eminent folklorist herself Sahu sets out to tell the tale of Sita as Sita herself would, probably, have it. Sahu had rightly claimed that her Sita is no retelling of the epic of the Ramayana, it couldn’t be so, because it is an original, actual, tale. It be noted that this text de-mythifies the past, if at all it is to be read in association with the past versions, and not de-glorifies Sita. It takes courage to say, “whosoever has said that a woman’s greed and a man’s wrath/ has to be controlled, is true to the essential.” (Sahu 27)

Modern Sita is aware of the modus operandi of the chauvinistic patriarchy. She is aware also of her own choices and has the guts to ‘speak truth to power’, to look the system in the eyes and ask:

“Why not ask the questions of fidelity  
to the chauvinist rather than just upholding  
the social value of fidelity on her?” (Sahu 35)

She is, by no means hesitant to accept her limitations, open to learning. In the jungle, when she is all by herself, she learns one the most important lessons of life- which is also an art- ‘the art of depersonalizing, of detaching’ oneself from oneself. She accepts her part: “I have/ learnt, the feeble and freckle mind of a woman/ for the golden-deer became her hydra-headed monster.” (Sahu 28)

Eco-feminist concerns of the author of the present text stems somewhere from the ‘eco-feminist’ concerns of the character being delineated by her. Forests are addressed as “the paragon of all wisdom”, “the definitive store house in Vedic philosophy”, etc. Sita’s origination from and submersion into Mother Earth is another, among a long list, of mention that draws our attention towards the importance of nature. Nature—in its scenic as well as elemental forms—is at the core of this long narrative. A woman’s dependence on nature, especially in the pre-industrialisation era, for so many things e.g., fodder for hearth, cotton for clothes, is registered in so many ways and at so many places. Folk registers the relationship between a woman and nature in its most elemental form. Folk, from around the world, is replete with songs wherein women can be seen singing songs of praise of and/or prayer to nature. These songs can be about anything like a request for rainfall for a proper harvest, a request from the

rain god to stop excessive rain, a request for blessing some woman with a child/ request for procreation, etc. However, it may be argued that these requests are made to different Gods and Goddesses and not to nature, but then the elements of nature - the trees, the Earth, the Sky, the rain, the Sun, the Moon, the rivers, etc. are all but treated as physical manifestations of the Gods and Goddesses. Followers of the Hindu religion worship trees, and even some animals are deemed sacred and worshipped by the community. Rain, sea, trees, flora and fauna, permeate the poetry of Sahu (take example from other collections). Sita's and the poet's ecological concerns and connects have close links and are two of the major motivations, among others, behind Sita. In the preface to her Sita, Sahu clearly states that "it could perhaps be one of my most ambitious, endearing ecofeministic poems." (v) The very first canto sets the tone as Sita calls her own story "My epic, the center stage concert vis-à-vis/ the flora and fauna". (Sahu 7) Men and women including trees, rocks, rivers, clouds, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the comets have come to the 'epic' 'concert' to witness Sita's glorious history; they come to Sita as her confidantes to whom she will 'steadily' disclose her story. They are the testimonies to Sita's completion of the cycle of duties of daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood entrusted to her, as to every other woman, by nature. They also bear witness to her claim to 'sovereignty', after she is asked to take the second fire test, which she does 'by retiring from Rama'.

Story proceeds, Ravana is dead, Lanka has fallen. Technically, it should be a happy moment and all (on the side of siya-rama) should be marry but Canto XV brings before us a queer tension and it is in this tension that the most complex of questions is brought to the readers by Nandini/Sita. Mandoodari and her co-wives are lamenting the death of Ravana, their husband. There is a silent message in the tears rolling down the cheeks of these lamenting wives for Sita: "take a panoramic view of life sisters and mate." This is subtly suggestive of the fate to befall upon Sita too, only some time in future from this point. While Sita eagerly waits to get a glimpse of her husband, the Lord, Rama is busy complying to the rules of the Civic Society. To her surprise, Sita has to wait, be "bathed, clothed, ornamented and perfumed" by Sarama, and be escorted by Vibhisana, who is the now rightful king of Lanka after Ravana death, to her husband/the Lord of Ayodhya. All this is done ceremoniously, in full public view. There is a touch of commodification that is pushed to the sub-textual level by the intentional diversion of the consumers, us, by the clever "vates" of the myth/epic. An intense politics is at play, something Srideep Mukherjee hints at when he writes about the position of Sita at this point: "Post the fall of Lanka, her status too changes from a doting wife expectant of her husband's



embrace to a political prisoner whom the next king must hand over to the victorious general who is only incidentally her husband.” (Mukherjee 9) In one single stroke of the pen the poet paints such a picture of Sita that the many issues related to women start to surface before us: “purity-pollution” debate, commodification of women, indifference of a husband to her wife arisen out of a ‘thought’ that she is now ‘impure’, etc.

There is an unprecedented switching from myth to modernity; Sita in the authorial voice of the poet begins to address the women from the future, the propagators and practitioners of a theoretical vis-à-vis literary philosophy called ‘Feminism’, who would go on to label Sita as the weak, the docile, the submissive type.

“For some women, typically for the feminists and extremists,  
‘Sita’ is tantamount with willful torment and pain  
uncomplaining of women’s low status with humiliation.  
But they must read my story as the story of a woman  
rather than as mandate openhanded holy texts  
like the Gita, Bhagabat, the Bible or the Quran.” (Sahu 74)

The width of the spectrum of the text can be understood from the fact that it not only voices women’s concerns with the patriarchy in question it rather questions also the integrity and sincerity of the ‘extremists’ ‘feminists’ from a future which is, strangely, the present we live in. Sita, both as a woman and a subject/text, transcends all boundaries - spatial and temporal. Sita is beyond her Yuga while being in her ‘Yuga’ and ahead of this our modern time/Kal Yuga. Her claims of being the embodiment of ‘Shakti’ and ‘Bhakti’ only reinforces a woman’s intrinsic quality of being ‘non-violent’ like the Mother Nature. Elsewhere, extremist feminists have argued that Sita decision to take the fire test sets the grounds for exploitation of women that we witness today. Nandini Sahu takes an altogether different stand. She dismisses the superficial readings of Sita by such modern-day extremist feminists by calling them ‘one-dimensional’, and she claims that only a lock sided assessment would result in Sita being associated with all that she is not. Sahu vigorously defeats the idea that deems Sita as an intimidated, coerced and defeated woman. On the contrary, as is suggested by a deeper reading of Sita’s story, she stands tall and strong in situations that would otherwise easily break the morale of any human being. Her decision to take the first ‘fire-test’ is not to be viewed as an act of surrender, it was rather her rejection of Rama’s rejection of herself. She was aware all this while of the implications of her action in the future. Today, apart from the superficial



readers who fail to grasp the complexity of Sita's character, it is Rama's actions that are in question, not Sita's. It should be noted too that Sita did reject the second 'fire-test'. This, again, establishes her individuality, her autonomy. Sita's, in fact, is an approach [to injustice and discrimination] that would later be adopted by Gandhi and would win India its long-awaited independence from the colonial rule. Not responding to her humiliation with violence and harsh words only elevates Sita's character. Examples are set, benchmarks redefined. As for her feminine values and moral:

“Compassionate mother, self-assertive wife,  
dutiful daughter, woman on a special pedestal.

Sans all intellectual slavery, this is my feminine moral.” (Sahu 77)

It is common sense that women who do not fit into the categories like 'Sita types' (as dictated by the patriarchal discourses on Sita) or the 'Pativrata types' or of any 'types', for that matter, are also subjected to rape, domestic violence, workplace abuse, eve-teasing, molestation, to name some popularly accepted crimes against women, the list is longer though. And then there are other 'less' noticeable crimes against women like marrying them to men who are anything but their types, emotional blackmails by kith and kins for marriage at a certain age or within a certain age limit, etc. What is interesting is that Indian parents have logics for almost everything. We should understand, then, that: “Sitas and Savitris are never the victims of/ masculine and chauvinistic demeanor”, and that we should 'Trust' them “beyond the Western feminist politics and thought, this the need of the hour.” (Sahu 77)

Left alone in the woods with her two sons, Luv and Kusha, Mata Sita is now solely on her own. The only law to guide her from now on is the law of Nature. Like most single mothers, she invests her interest and energy in her two sons. Days pass and the two sons, oblivious to their father's existence, grow into fine young adults. Maharshi Narada pays a visit to the hermitage where dwelt Sita. All during his stay he is busy singing the praise of Rama, the Rama rajya, his righteousness and so on. This establishes the indifference of Ayodhya, Rama included, to Sita's existence. Sahu /Sita subtly remarks:

“Perhaps these things hardly matter when  
considered from a greater world view. Sita's glorified history  
and tiara of nobleness was enough to sojourn all trepidations.” (Sahu 96)

Busy with observing the so called ‘civil codes of conduct’ how conveniently a society ignores the existence, the trials and tribulations of its own victims- the ones like Sita. We tend to forget what possible causalities could have happened to a pregnant lady left alone in the jungles at the mercy of wild animals, trees and nature- that has a side which is ‘red in tooth and claw’. We tend to forget that the reputation of a woman has always been subject to male-ego. I have variously discussed in the paper how system fails Sita time and again, the compulsion of taking fire tests to prove her purity is one immediate example at hand. Sahu’s Sita raises a pertinent issue, here, that for the redemption of a woman why does the society necessarily need the approval of any archetypal Ram, or any male for that matter? An interesting parallel can be drawn between Sita and Ahalya, who is the subject from Sahu’s latest poem “Ahalya’s Waiting”. Like Sita who refuses to take the second ‘fire test’, Ahalya, in Sahu’s “Ahalya’s Waiting”, refuses to be redeemed by the touch of Ram: “I will not consent /oh Ram, to be redeemed by you for an offence/ that I have not committed.” (Sahu 24) She claims she is ‘untainted’, ‘confident’, and ‘clean’ and that no purity needs be bestowed upon her. Like there is in Sita, there is a “purity-pollution” debate that is in question in Ahalya’s story. Sahu takes a step further, here, and through Ahalya she talks about women’s right to their bodies, their sexuality. At first Ahalya completely dismisses the idea of being touched by ‘Ram’. Later, she agrees to be touched but only if ‘Ram’, ‘the archetypal Ram’ touches her not as some redeemer redeeming a sinner but as a man touching ‘the elemental woman.’ ‘Touch’ has been used as a powerful metaphor to demystify the body politics associated with touch as a physical act. As Sahu writes: “Your touch should be your creative language, / your behaviour, your basic attitude.” (24) It must be understood that Nandini Sahu’s poetry, unlike radical feminists, does not exclude men, as I have already discussed above. Sita seeks justice from Rama, and by extension, the social system that constructs and administers gendered identities, not only in the capacity of a wife but also as a subject of his kingdom. So, the issue addressed here, as also elsewhere, is not to be seen as man/woman binary. It is much more than that. To substantiate the argument, when Ahalya seeks to be touched like ‘the elemental woman’ she also claims that such a ‘touch’ will also complete the ‘archetypal Ram’ as a man. We see that Sahu has a holistic approach to both man and woman and she seeks to fulfil the gaps that arise out of politics of gender. And that is the politics of her poetry. And that is where the personal gets political.

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