

Re-routing/Re-mapping Identity and Belongingness Through Mythology and Folklore: A Critical Appraisal of Nandini Sahu's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Literature has time and again upheld the importance of looking back at our past and forging meanings through it. Myths generally offer us an insight into the essence and way of the world, its origins and destinies, the fundamentals of human existence and the philosophical burdens that accompany people, history and civilization. Both poetry and myth are metaphorical in their operation. A poet uses his/her creative impulse to make the intangible sensations of life more conspicuous. Nandini Sahu, a contemporary Indian poet employs various Indian myths and folklore in the pursuit of creating an identity of her own. She takes up the challenge of finding her own place in society by searching for her roots and identifying with the people of her own community. Through her poetry, she also aims to bring the myths and folklore at the periphery to center stage. This paper analyses some of her poems to foreground how she uses myth and folklore in establishing her own identity. It further argues that her notion of identity is varied and multifaceted and appeals for the inclusivity of all.

Keywords: *Identity, Indian mythology, Indian English poetry, Myths, Nandini Sahu, Odisha*

Introduction

The concepts of myths and identities find resonance with each other by virtue of their dynamic and flexible nature. The existential challenges of the contemporary world have uprooted the fixed ideas of identity and its formation. In order to move forward, literature has time and again upheld the importance of looking back at our past and forging meanings through it. The idea of linking myths, folklore and their function in forging identities is neither new nor absurd. According to Bruner, “[myths] provide, a basis for communion among men. What is out there can be named and shared in a manner beyond subjectivity” (175). Irrespective of the individualization of people in the present and coming of age, the idea of belongingness pervades the social matrix of society. Human beings seek meaning and their place in the world itself. History and tradition pave the path for humans to understand life and its complexity. Mircea Eliade, a prominent Romanian historian reasoned “humans interpret their world, their purpose, and their place in the world by means of narration, myth” (68). His theory and works chiefly imply the importance of understanding origins and cosmology. Myths generally offer us an insight into the essence and way of the world, its origins and destinies, the fundamentals of human existence and the philosophical burdens that accompany people, history and civilization. The human mind for all its capabilities and efficacy, still struggles with various

ideas and notions that cannot be ascertained rationally. How we identify the world also enforces our identification with oneself. Myths are attributed to the human's faculty of imagination and fancy. However, they shouldn't be associated only with the poetical or beautiful as expostulated by Kirk in his work *Myth*. Myths, folklores, legends, fables, and folktales form an integral part of many different cultures, traditions and histories. They are considered as rich cultural outputs that are narrated, transferred and recorded from generation to generation as part of the historical documentation. These also become a part of the collective consciousness of people in a particular society, nation or place. They are embedded in both our conscious and unconscious faculties of the mind. The stories that we tell and re-tell ourselves over generations impact our identities, how we perceive the world and how we struggle to situate ourselves within that framework. The word myth is employed as a narrative story which may neither be true nor false but facilitates itself as an integral part of our history and culture. Malinowski construes myth as, "a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force" (152). It is considered an active force because of its everlasting influence and imperishable standing. Myths, in fact never die but rather keep changing and transforming over time. They metamorphosis and are re-addressed, and demystified, their meanings are altered and can be analyzed in new light and dimensions. In a similar manner, identities are subject to continual changes. In studying myths, we engage with both the human and non-human entities of the cosmos including nature, gods, animals etc. It further discerns the hierarchy of humans with other entities; analyzing their relationship with Gods and Goddesses, nature and history. At the same time, myths can be studied beyond their hierarchical and paradigmatic order. Coupe in her book *Myth* contends the same, "it also carries with it a promise of another mode of existence entirely, a possible way of being just beyond the present time and place" (9). Therefore, they can be employed as powerful tools to confront society and its existential dread. It is thus considered a powerful and liberating tool that helps people of various ethnicities and nationalities to reroute their identities and belongings. Smith's definition of myth is indicative of the same, "Myth is the narrative that unifies us as a people, that structures our lives in relation to each other" (78). Myths allow a man to transcend time and communicate with people of the past who aren't so far removed from the present day. Bidney contents, "myth is not something freely invented but a necessary mode of feeling and belief which appears in the course of history and seizes upon human consciousness" (5). Unlike the sophists of the Greek Enlightenment, scholars like Cassier, Durkheim, and Malinowski believe that myths should be studied beyond their allegorical significations. They are to be interpreted literally and perceived

as part of cultural evolution. Bidney cites Cassier in his essay “Myth, Symbol and Truth” and argues that he maintains, “that the pragmatic function of myth is to promote social solidarity as well as solidarity with nature as a whole in time of social crises” (10). This kind of solidarity helps people in situating themselves and finding belongingness in the world. Shynkaruk in his research paper “Myth as a cultural phenomenon” has elucidated its importance in shaping the structure of our personality and culture. The values, beliefs, attitudes and phenomena of a culture are reflected in its literature. It also reflects and retrospects on the issues of identity, belongingness, class struggle and conflict within societies. Literature contests the idea of dominant cultures and their role in shaping identities. Lovely, in his article “The relationship between Mythology and literature” affirms myths to be an integral part of literature. For him, “Literature emerges as the supreme instrument for the transportation of mythical stories” (1). It wouldn’t be wrong to say Literature and myths are mutually dependent on each other. Some of the earliest works of literature may be traced back to a collection of tales; these stories, sometimes referred to as folk tales, demonstrate astonishing adaptability by crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries to exist in more than one civilization. Frye considers myths and folktales as different versions of the same corpus of stories. Folklores comprise of oral literature which is introduced to peoples in their childhood as part of their history and heritage. Kushner and Jean specify, “Most of the stories we call myths are ancient and arose in the period of oral tradition along with folktales” (184). Both myths and folklores contribute to the understanding of cultural, social and political legacy of one’s community.

The Mythic and Folkloric Tradition of Indian English Poetry

In the Indian context, mythology and folklore are predominantly associated with religion. Indians and their relationship with religion is considered a serious and sacred association. The rich cultural heritage of India is a treasure trove of various myths, legends, fables and folklore encompassing its history and tradition. For poets, myths act as instruments to not only tell and re-tell stories but also to express their views on the deepest issues of life. Both poetry and myth are metaphorical in their operation. A poet uses his creative impulse to make the intangible sensations of life more conspicuous. Myth and folklore have always been an important constituent of Indian English poetry. Nandini Sahu in her interview with Rita Saxena mentions A.K. Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra and Kamala Dass as inspirations for her poems suffused with myths and folklore. Apart from these, various other poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Toru

Dutt have been an integral part of the mythic tradition of Indian poetry. Das contends, “Indian poetry in English is Indian first and anything else afterwards” (25).

In Ezekiel’s poetry, the influence of western giants like T.S. Eliot, Yeats and Auden is evident and at the same time his preoccupation with Hindu mythology and philosophy is reflected. Through his ‘Tribute to the Upanishads’ he tries to reroute his search for identity and self by looking inward. The Upanishads are a set of ancient Hindu esoteric doctrines that focus on the awareness of self to deal with existential dread. Ezekiel further raises the issue of identity crisis in his poem ‘Urban’ where the protagonist struggles for truth and belongingness within his community. The image of the fallen city is reminiscent of Eliot’s *The Waste land*. The quintessential mythic hero of the traditional epics is replaced by modern man. Verma affirms this view, “Since the modern myth like the romantic myth is man-centered, the image of man as hero is neither a Titan nor a Don Quixote” (150). The protagonist of his poem feels alienated from his world and is unable to relate to the archetypal symbols of life and fertility. He, ‘never sees the skies’/ ‘he welcomes neither sun nor rain’ (Urban). Through poems like A Time to Change and The Third, he appeals to the modern man for identification with oneself and society. Toru Dutt is another poet whose work is suffused with Hindu myths and legends. Her treatment of myth is both traditional and unconventional. Her poetry collection Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan deals with the traditional Hindu mythos and folklores- those of Lashman, Jogadhya, Dhruva, Prahlad, Sita etc. Her Christian upbringing did not deter her from identifying her roots and heritage.

A.K. Ramanujan is a triumphant figure of modern Indian English poetry who employed mythic and folkloric strain in his poems. He utilizes various myths and legends from Hindu mythology as a resistant tool to deal with his sense of loss and dejection. A diasporic writer of Indian descent, Ramanujan invoked ancient Hindu myths to perpetuate a parallel between his past and present. He was deeply inspired by Ramayana and Mahabharata, the seminal texts of Hindu mythology and tradition. By invoking these in his works, he demonstrated his Indian sensibility in discovering his own identity and belongingness. Ramanujan invoked Lord Vishnu and his incarnations in his poems ‘Mythologies 1’, ‘Mythologies 2’ and ‘Zoo Garden Visited’. Although he physically remained alienated from the Indian land, his search for his roots and identification with the community is apparent from such poems. Through his work The Mother who married her own son, Ramanujan tries to bridge the gap between Indian and Western sensibility as he identifies with both. Taken from a famous Kannada folktale it is a re-telling

of the Oedipus story that situates the mother at the centrality of perspective. Another pioneer poet of Indian English poetry, Kamala Dass has extensively employed myths in her work. Her poems not only reflected her intense desire for freedom but also provided her solace and comfort to continue her struggle. She invokes Krishna in many of her poems to ease the pain of her marital life. Sahu writes as a therapeutic process, “Das mythologizes her search for true love and identifies herself with Radha or Mira Bai who relinquished the marital ties in search of Lord Krishna, the true and eternal lover” (39). Krishna is a revered figure and deity in Hinduism who represents eternal love for Dass. Das writes, “A poet may assume an identity by referring to national myths, so that when myths are employed, the link is immediately established in the minds of people” (41). Mythic characters like Krishna, Radha, Mira are embedded in the consciousness of Indian people. It not only helps her in her pursuit of eternal love and being one with God but she is able to identify herself within these mythic stories. She writes, “I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable” (84). Her poems like ‘Radha’ and ‘Maggot’ are evident of the same.

Jayanta Mahapatra is an Indian poet of Odisan descent who treats the myths of his origins in its varied forms. His treatment of myths is both traditional and modern wherein the quest for identity is a prominent strain. His poems exclusively deal with the culture of Orissa which he considers is a treasure trove of mythology. He writes, “Myth is there, history is there, and myth, history and rituals do become the stuff of poetry. Because that’s the way of life in Orissa and poetry is a way of life for me” (37). Mahapatra’s quest for identity and belongingness is evident in his poem ‘Myth’ wherein the priest questions him, ‘Are you a Hindoo?’ Like Kamala Dass his upbringing was Christian but his exploration and identification with Orissan rituals and myths confirm his search for rootedness. He demonstrates the importance of recognizing one’s origins as he proclaims, “I know I can never come alive/If I refuse to consecrate at the alters of my origins” (15). His poetry is enriched with the Orissan landscape, its architectural grandeur and Hindu temples are prominently mentioned.

Nandini Sahu’s Quest for Identity

Slowly I am becoming a myth
a vessel into which even a changeling
can pour his blue-battered soul (Sahu)

In the poem, Sahu reflects on her feelings of desolation and loneliness that has engulfed her days and nights. While expressing her vulnerabilities, she wants to become a myth gradually

so that she can narrate the story of her life. Sahu considers it to be sacred. And like myths, the sacredness of her life is invaluable. Sahu makes it evident in her interview, “Like any other immigrant poet living in Delhi, coming from Orissa, I initiate a process of rediscovery of myself in myth. Myth is my panacea” (Saxena). Poetry, for Sahu is not only a therapeutic tool but a medium to express the challenge of re-routing her identity by employing myths. ‘A story, untold, in bits and pieces’ is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s poetry, where he deals with the myth of modern man. In his poetic output, the challenges of the common man and his relationship with society are foregrounded. But, Sahu’s poetic framework is more characteristic of A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Dass, and Jayant Mahapatra. She takes up the challenge of finding her own place in society by searching for her roots and identifying with the people of her own community. She often reminisces about her childhood and the corpus of stories she heard from her mother and grandmother. She writes:

“My mother’s tales of far-off lands
And distant times whirl about me
making me a silent part, as though
an echo of the lost song, lost long ago”

The lines not only imply her deep and intimate connection to the mythic past but also a yearning to reconnect with these stories. Sahu maintains, “My poetry is the outcome of the dialectical interplay of my childhood and adult experiences on one hand and my sense of self and present experiences on the other” (Saxena). Her poem ‘Sita’ is an exemplary example of how the stories that she heard in the childhood paved way for her preoccupation with myths. She reminisces about them but at the same time questions and readdresses them in sight of new light. Her poems are a reflection of how she approaches life and questions of selfhood. She writes,

“The hour has come at last to quench all thirst
Only the point of living and death
Like Arjuna converging only the eye of the tiny bird”

She is ready to celebrate and bring color and joy to her lifeless journey that is full of sorrow. Like Arjuna, she is singularly focused on a particular goal, perhaps one related to her identity and selfhood. Sahu even questions her identity as an Indian poet writing in English, wondering, “How long shall I wear this elegant garland?” (392). It is through the use of the English language; that she is able to bridge the gap between her dual identity. She wishes to break down the boundary between English poets and Indian English poets as she writes:

“I am Indian, Odia by birth, with
Wheatish brown skin, dark eyes
I am just a poet-
‘English or no English- my taverns filled with the muse.’”

Sahu invokes the muses and requests them to make her poetry as “delicious as watered-rice-brinjal fry and dry-fish” (392). Language, for her, is a means to preserve her cultural heritage, to connect with her Indian and mainly Odian identity. The use of Indian myths and their exploration brings her closer to the identity she seeks and wants to preserve. The myth of Radha-Mira-Krishna pervades many of her poems. Sahu has acknowledged the influence of Kamala Dass in her literary career, “For both of us, the mind, like a kaleidoscope, offers diverse images of the same entity on different occasions” (Padhy). Both Das and Sahu extensively use the myth of Radha-Krishna, inviting their readers to the innermost recesses and desires of their heart. By identifying herself with revered women of Indian mythology like Radha or Mira, she feels closer to her mythic roots. Through her poems, she speaks to Krishna about her domestic affiliations, pain, and suffering and pleads with him to take her in his arms. Her love for Krishna transcends the boundaries of life and death. To embrace him is to embrace eternal love and peace. She envisions her son as an embodiment of Krishna:

“I shiver with the memories of my early pregnant dreams, of the statue of
Krishna flowing into my blood, flashing my soul”

The poems can be said to have been written in the same vein as Mira Bai’s devotional songs to Krishna. Sahu’s proclamation that she wants to become a myth is realized through this identification:

“Now this mortal body aches for your solemn touch
Oh Krishna, and pleads to
To turn this stone human and humane”

The existential dread and weariness of life intensify her longing for Krishna, the epitome of eternal love. She seeks a connection that transcends earthly life and transforms her lifeless being into a more compassionate and loving entity. One of her poems is titled “The world is not enough for me” and in her pursuit of transcending the ‘maya’ the illusory world, she cherishes the spiritual connections she seeks. She affirms this, “I connect so well with Indian mythology and folklore that I do not know who comes from what poet in me, the folklorist in me, the critic in me, the creative writer, the theorist. All my identities come together and one

identity in me completes the other” (Saxena). The mythological associations act as a therapeutic tool for Sahu as she writes of her turbulent marital life:

She returned home
From an ostensible honeymoon
Feeling so betrayed

For Sahu, dwelling on her past memories is a process of initiation towards discovering and re-discovering her own self. She writes, “To dwell on the past and look back in angst is one thing/ But, Oh, to look ahead, forgiving the grievances is something else.”

In the same poem titled “Something else”, she reaffirms her desire to become a myth:

“To follow dreams of commonplace yearnings, the crop of desire, is one thing,
But, oh, to be myths of discovery, Archimedes’ bathtub, Newton’s apple is
Something else”

The poem emphasizes the idea of inner transformation, implying a divine incarnation. The inner self being transformed into something greater just like a mortal being transcends the boundaries of life and death. The process of locating her identity isn’t constrained to the community or the nation, but finding her own self within the cosmos. As per the great ancient Hindu texts like *Upanishads*, only through inner introspection, awareness and transformation one can discover oneself. It creates a sense of belongingness towards humanity and everything that the universe holds.

Situating Peripheral Myths and Folklores

In many of her poems, Sahu speaks of the displacement, alienation and existential dread she feels in Delhi. The nostalgia and longing she feels for her ancestral place are delineated in poems like “Puri Beach”, “My home”, “Odisan landscape etc. In the poem “Odishan Landscape” she writes,

“Here, in Delhi,
I am wistful about the glow
The glow of Odishan landscape”

She contrasts the wistful feeling that she endures at her present home with the vibrant life and culture she experienced in Odisha. She proclaims that she will never get tired of speaking about the Odisan landscape. Sahu remarks, “I also look skeptically at my new homeland and as an outsider with a feeling of something having been lost in the process of growth...” (Saxena). In

the poem “Cotton tree” she reflects on the estrangement she feels at her present home, in Delhi. A sense of nostalgia and longing for the surroundings of her childhood seizes her mind. She reminisces about simpler times,

“I still try to feel at home, here in Delhi
Eyes closed, I
hallucinate.”

In the poem “My Home” she tries to find happiness at her present home while dreaming of her ancestral home, “at the foot of the hillock, flowers all over” (339). The memories associated with her childhood and subsequently her roots are rather indelible. Sahu asserts, “I’m so close to my Odisan background. I’m basically from Orissa living in Delhi for last 14 years. So my Odisan background comes to me in complex ways through my poetry” (Saxena). Through her poetry, she also aims to bring the myths and folklore at the periphery to centre stage. The most crucial part of her identity and belongingness permeates the Odisan background and culture she belongs. Sahu contends, “To comprehend the exchange between myth and folklore, one must first comprehend India’s geographical and cultural diversity, as well as the practical requirement of holy ceremonies” (1). In some of her poems, she employs the myth of Lord Jagannath Puri who is a revered deity in states like Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal etc. Her poem “Lord Jagannath, the God with half-done limbs” appeals to break pre-conceived notions and expectations of how a deity should be. The lines where she responds to her child’s query of why he doesn’t have limbs exemplify the notion of acceptance and embracing the differences. She responds:

“The Lord of the Universe, Lord Jagannath,
Sans complete limbs, with an ugly face,
Ogling, unblinking eyes and a dark skin, is
The charming, absorbing of all, the pious of all.
The most accomplished, the most adorable, most alluring.”

It is important for Sahu to highlight the importance of alternative myths as they form an integral part of her identity. She proudly writes of her “Wheatish brown skin” as a poet writing in English. The use of the English language or the colour of the skin cannot expropriate her identity as an authentic poet. Lord Jagannath is revered here, irrespective of the perceived imperfections and inadequacies. The poem reinforces the idea of looking beyond superficial appearances to connect with God on a deeper level.

Like poet Jayant Mahapatra she celebrates her Odian identity by retreating to her ancestral landscapes, myth, history and culture. In her poems, she presents the cultural and mythological aspects of Odisha. She successfully discerns her identity by recognizing her roots and establishing a concrete connection with them. Sahu affirms:

“Myth is an answer to lot of existential debates in me sometimes when I struggle between a paradisaical past and a present where so many identities are coming to me so many existential challenges are coming to me, I need to settle down I need to create an identity of my own I need to belong somewhere and that belongingness that sense of belonging comes to me through use of mythology and folklore” (Saxena).

The poem “Puri Beach” celebrates the beauty and allure of Odishan landscape. The lord of the universe, Lord Jagannath opens his arms and embraces everything. He is ever-present and never dies, “he goes through birth after birth, is reborn in you, me, him, her, we all glide in the ocean of love...” (364-365). The estrangement and alienation that she feels from her life is addressed through the mythic and spiritual connections she establishes in her poetry. She writes,

“My desire is to love the lotus-feet

The creator and the destroyer, his cubic foot”

The poet identifies herself as “the goddess of blue hills” intertwined with a transcendent divine power. The desire to love the lotus feet exemplifies her yearning to know about her own existence. The poem further foregrounds the duality of God that embodies both the creative and destructive attributes of life. The importance of looking at one’s past and roots is not novel in Indian English poetry. Sahu herself affirms, “I belong to that historiography of Indian poetry where AK Ramanujan and R. Parthasarathy talked about use of myth and use of past, we have to look at our roots and I make use of my original background...” (Saxena). Odisha is a hub of Hindu temples and the cultural history speaks for itself. Sahu in her poems mentions the exemplary significance of various temples of her ancestral land. In “Odisan Landscape” Sahu mentions the Konark sun and Puri temple of Lord Jagannath. She indicates that Orissa is enriched with so rich a cultural heritage that its glory is everlasting. The archaic beauty of the Odisan landscape endures even in moments of emptiness and destitution. The temples are representative of the ideals and values of Hindu mythological traditions. The animal figures at Konark have stood the test of time and aged gracefully. Sahu depicts her reverence and desire to preserve the cultural heritage of Orissa, ‘...the certainty, the closeness of the bonds which I’ve with my past, with my Orissan landscape they come to my poetry” (Saxena). She further contends that myth and nostalgia dictate her creative imagination and hence her poetry. The

Konark temple is representative of Orissan art and architecture. The poem “An evening at Konark” speaks of its glory and architectural magnificence that transcends time. The sculptures of the temple are representative of the mysterious beauty of Indian history and mythology. It holds within itself secrets of a forgotten past,

“The ancient tales of Odisha

The myth, history, songs and sonnets all carved on the stone”

It speaks to mankind in a universal language metaphoric of passing time and the impermanence of human life. The poet seems to convey that the enigma surrounding myths and history of a culture cannot be fully discerned. Her poem “Song of the Kondh woman” is an exemplary example of how she brings peripheral myths and folklore into the spotlight. The poet celebrates these tribal women of Orissa. She speaks of how they were denied history, language, home, an identity of their own and yet they sing songs of the happy heart.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Nandini Sahu's employment of Indian mythology gives her poetry more depth and complexity while also connecting it to India's rich cultural and spiritual past. Her poems demonstrate how mythology can be a powerful tool for exploring themes of identity and self. In her exploration of issues of identity, self-discovery, and empowerment, Sahu frequently uses mythical motifs and symbolism. According to her, immersing in the knowledge of local myths, folklore and history is equally significant for identification with oneself.

Nandini Sahu's use of myth in identity construction is an effective method for delving into challenging ideas of empowerment and self-discovery. Through her poems, she develops a sense of identity that is rooted in both conventional and local representations of her mythological past.

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Nandini Sahu's Poems:

A story, untold, in Bits and pieces

My Mother's story

The World's not Enough

Bridge-in making

For my pearly Son

To Reduce the Distance

She is that Woman

Something else

Odisan landscape

The cotton tree



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Lord Jagannath

My Home

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