

A Study in Subversive Literature vis-à-vis Sita and Ahalya in the poems of Nandini Sahu

Pushpa R. Menon
Former Principal,
VSSC Central School,
Thiruvananthapuram
Email: princi.menon@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are two timeless sources of inspiration for Indian folk poetry. Writers have attempted to reconnect with the past in an effort to lessen the poison of modernity and to restore aesthetic vitality through myth and folklore by re-reading them in the context of today. The characters have been scrutinized extensively and viewed through the prism of contemporary theories. Examples are Sita and Ahalya from Nandini Sahu. As renowned female figures, Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara, and Mandodari from the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are lauded. However, they occasionally experience subordination due to their gender. Although these characters have independent traits, a feminist spark, vigor, and rebellion, patriarchy has doomed them to submission and obedience. Indian epic-based literature frequently serves as a stage for subversive analyses of conventional stories. The values and tenets of an existing system are questioned in subversive literature, which also aims to change the patriarchal institutions and social norms.

Keywords: *Subversive Literature, patriarchal institutions, Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita.*

Indian folk poetry has drawn heavily from the eternal founts of the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. By re-reading them in the contemporary context, writers have sought to reconnect with the past in an attempt to diminish the toxicity of modernity and to restore aesthetic vitality through myth and folklore. The characters have been critically scanned and read under the lens of modern theories. Nandini Sahu's Sita and Ahalya are cases in point. The legendary heroines of the Indian epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* like Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara and Mandodari are extolled as iconic women characters. But they undergo moments of subjugation because of their gender. These characters display a feminist spark, verve and defiance and have independent traits but patriarchy has condemned them to submissiveness and obedience. Indian writings based on epics often provide a platform for subversive interpretations and critiques of traditional narratives. Subversive literature challenges the values and principles of an established system and attempts to alter the conventional social order and structures of patriarchy. It seeks to undermine the prevalent social, political, or cultural norms, values, and authority to promote changes within society. Not only are female characters subverted, unsung male heroes also figure in subversive literature. MT Vasudevan in his novel *Randamoozham* demythifies the character of Bhima in the *Mahabharata*. His narrative of subversion is an

example of post-modernist rewriting of the epic. Asura: Tale of the Vanquished by Anand Neelakantan offers a subversive take on the Ramayana. The narrative is presented from Ravana's perspective. Neelakantan humanizes the antagonist and offers an alternate interpretation of the epic's events. These works challenge established norms, question dominant perspectives, and explore the complexities of characters and events.

They demonstrate how writers have engaged with the epics to explore untold stories, challenge stereotypes, and offer alternative perspectives that question the established order. By doing so, they encourage readers to reflect on the complexities of these ancient narratives and the timeless issues they continue to address in contemporary society.

Sahu revisits and interprets the ancient text with alternate viewpoints to question prevailing social hierarchies, gender roles, racial discrimination, or other forms of social injustice. This paper attempts to bring in the inner textual elements that are evident in the myth of Ahalya and Sita vis-à-vis Nandini Sahu's poems Ahalya's Waiting and Sita (A Poem). In her poems Sahu attempts to break down, to quote Eagleton, "the complex structure of social perception which ensures that the situation in which our social class has power over the others is seen by most members of the society as natural or not seen at all". She interprets these characters in a way that makes them less divine and more human. Sahu invests her heroines with all human emotions including the weaker ones. Her narratives bring out the human side of the gods which make it possible for readers to relate to them effortlessly. She questions her characters, critiques and scrutinises them under the lens of modernity. Sahu weaves into her narratives the strands of sexuality and feminism. Her Sita and Ahalya are urged to end their silence and speak out. The post-modernist attempt at re-writing and re-reading of texts from a subverted point of view is the alternative modernity of myth. This paper will explore how the mythical personalities of Ahalya and Sita have been subverted by Nandini Sahu from the legendary text of the Ramayana presenting a study in alternative modernity of myth.

Ahalya, was extolled for nobility of her character and extraordinary beauty. She was placed in the care of sage Gautama, until she gained puberty and then was married to him. Ahalya was one of the most beautiful women. The king of gods, Indra besotted her. In the guise of Gautama, he seduced her. Ahalya yielded to his bidding believing him to be her husband. On knowing what transpired, she was cursed by her husband. Ahalya was condemned to live the rest of her life as a stone. She could escape the severity of the curse if Rama came and stepped on her. It was a male who cheated her, another who punished her and yet another who would redeem her.

Ahalya had to pay the price for a crime committed upon her. She was cheated and punished for being the victim.

Nandini Sahu's poem Ahalya's Waiting is a brilliant attempt to an alternative reading of Ahalya's character. Nandini Sahu breaks the concept of womanhood extolled by the mythmakers and encrusted on the popular psyche down the ages. She makes a bold foray in the concept of Ahalya as a woman, a victim who suffers albeit unjustly for a crime that she is not guilty of. Her Ahalya is not willing to accept toxic masculinity and silently suffer the punishment of petrification meted out to her by her husband. Nandini Sahu's Ahalya boldly disregards virulent patriarchy and sets out to discover her 'self' all by herself. Sahu uses the metaphor of 'Touch' for real liberation and independence. In the myth, Ahalya meekly accepts being returned to her husband sage Gautama after years of oblivion with the touch of Lord Rama. Sahu's Ahalya revolts against such unjust practices. She spurns Rama's touch as a gesture for her redemption from a sin she has not committed. She would prefer to remain a stone. For her, as for every woman that would be the ultimate liberation. Sahu's Ahalya is a woman of flesh and blood and not a mere concept of the myth makers. Her

"Ahalya is a woman
who had just had
her first ever orgasm, the fulfillment of her
womanhood through Indra" (Ahalya's Waiting)

She craves for Lord Rama to touch her not as a redeemer but, as an elemental man would touch an elemental woman. The touch that will complement both the man as well as the woman. She boldly asserts,

"I have the Indriyas, the five senses, inside me
so solid that I cannot be transformed to oblivion,
I am as inert as a stone.
While my acquisitive mind retorts, my steady mind waits." (Ahalya's Waiting)

Ahalya is uncompromisingly strong. She will not take Rama's touch to purify her as she asserts:

"I am untainted, confident and clean.
What purity on me will you assign?" (Ahalya's Waiting)

In Canto V, of *Sita (A Poem)*, the image of rocked-Ahalya who was "incontestably effervescent" is conjured. Sahu asks,

“Can the grace of a woman redeem only with the touch of a man?

And can the grace of a woman wane only with the fraudulent touch of a man?”

(Sahu, Sita (A Poem), 17)

Nandini Sahu raises the question of male gaze and touch both in the context of the myths of Ahalya, Savitri, Anasuya and Draupadi as well as in the modern context of Nirbhaya. Such questions overthrow male bastions and threaten male complacency and sense of superiority. Sahu retorts that deification is a ploy to tame and keep women under patriarchal reins

“I am my own possessor, proprietor, I am my woman.

Let me remain ethically upright on my own terms—

this is my ultimate liberation.” (Ahalya’s Waiting)

Ahalya waits for a time when society will be rid of the snares of purity-pollution. A time when social redemption lies not just in a male touch “but in zero tolerance of any marginalization” when every woman will find true liberation. (Ahalya’s Waiting) This according to Sahu is the alternative modernity of myth of Ahalya

Sahu’s delineation of Sita is also a study in an alternative modernity of Ramayana. Her Sita is a complete woman. She does not spurn her responsibilities and discharges the duties as a wife and mother with conscientiousness and diligence. She says to Rama,

“I have performed all my duties on earth till date

Given birth, educated our sons, served the elders,

Loved the youngsters, and cared for Nature” (Sahu, 109)

Sahu portrays her as an ecofeminist. Sita has been wronged but that does not prevent her from adoring Rama and acknowledging his greatness. She is a woman in love and adores him. To her, Rama is “the cure of all urge, cupidity, immodesty, desire...the curer of all haze...the patron of magic, the congregation of rectitude, honesty.” (Sahu, 16)

In the epic Sita is celebrated for her submissive and sacrificing and self-effacing nature though she was a woman with a strong and indomitable will. But she had to suffer the brutal consequences for displaying her strength and will. Sita suffered and paid heavily for having disregarded Laxman’s instructions of staying within the boundary drawn by him.

In the preface to her poem, Nandini Sahu writes that Sita has been seminal to her thoughts on life “fuelling the mind in all thought and action”. For Sahu, Sita is the epitome of modernity. She deconstructs the mythical Sita and hails her as self-willed, stubborn and confident. Sahu

attempts to place Sita vis-à-vis the modern woman. Sahu's Sita is truly modern in that she stands up for her ideals and principles against injustice. Sita is a successful single parent who "valiantly bears and rears her sons Lava-Kusha." She lives in our "collective consciousness as a powerful inspiration". Sahu's Sita does not resort to violence. She confronts patriarchy, like Ahalya, in silent and nonviolent protest refusing to sacrifice her principles at the altar of patriarchal condescension.

Sita, in Sahu's poem is a character subalterned by gender but is elevated to a position of a universal ecofeminist. She assumes the role of a witness and brings sweeping changes in social thinking of gender-driven roles, revealing depths of meanings and intense awareness. Sita speaks the language of peace and tolerance. She is the perfect blend of the oriental concept of interpersonal harmony and the western theory of structures. Sita believes in equal distribution and reaches out globally.

"Call her what you may – Sita, Janaki,

Vaidehi, Ramaa – she is Woman.

She is every woman, the propagated, interpolated role model." (Sahu, 1)

Sita transcends all space-time bounds. She refuses to accept the politics of deification. Through her the concept of gender sensitisation is redefined. Sita in Sahu's poem is not guilty of hyperfemininity or social conditioning of gender stereotypes. As Srideep Mukherjee states in his article 'The Concert of Womanhood': Reading Nandini Sahu's Sita (A Poem),

"all of it is cumulatively universalized by an almost neo-historicist perspective wherein the poet binds history (as myth) and textuality in perfect reciprocity, syncing the voiced concerns with all time... Sahu transcends any temporal barriers to the metaphor of Ramarajya and questions subalternity inherent in stereotyping of gender, in a way that has always been a nagging thorn at the heart of the evolution of the nation and its 'civil' society."

In the poem Sita is portrayed in modern terms as a progressive lady. The continuity of the flow in her poem, according to Srideep Mukherjee reminds one of Gordimer's phrase of "inward testimony". Sita is re-created to connect the epic with the modern and the past with the present. Sita tells her story in the first-person narrative in the style of witness literature. In the words of Alan Swingewood, demythification enables the writer to "create in the popular consciousness, an acceptance of the inevitable facts of class inequality and power" Sahu demythifies Sita so completely that Sita is every woman seen in every household. She is a Prime Minister and also the mutilated baby girl at the AIIMS Trauma Centre. She is the new progressive woman, "truly animated to this living, present living". Sita is the woman who

“translates the
communal and the cloistered cosmoses in the
society, controls remotely the kingship
and the exile of Rama and creates the realisation
of the ethics, of banishment, liability, assertion,
loyalty and denunciation.” (Sahu, 3)

Sahu’s Sita has “come back ... from the segments of Mother Earth,” to dwell “in the mass consciousness of the universe.” (Sahu, 1) as a mother, a protector and nurturer. Sita’s “professed duties of daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood” (Sahu, 8) reveals her acquiescence of her love as well as of the oppression of patriarchy. These dual extremes are the hall mark of the modern woman. She has the strength of giving her all and also of combating the tyranny of patriarchy.

Sita also is knowledgeable of the ecological concerns and looks upon the natural world of the flora and the fauna; rocks; rivers and clouds; the sky; the moon; the stars and the comets in beneficence and compassion. Her views on marriage are radical and logical. They stem from her own bitter marital experiences. She questions hypocrisy even in her husband, sees through his defects and still accepts him. Sita’s questions overthrow accepted notions of male superiority and female veneration. She voices the hypocrisy of patriarchy and refuses to be daunted by it. Sahu critiques the legitimacy of gender-based violence in contemporary society. The Nirbhaya case and the recent unprecedented sexual violence against women in Manipur are telling instances of how patriarchy is embedded in the social milieu and how violence against women is made legitimate.

Sahu places her text in the domain of witness and protest literature. She has created a foray into the *écriture féminine* in the genre of Indian folk poetics by putting herself as Helene Cixous says “into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.”

Sita’s story lends voice to the voiceless subalterns. Srideep Mukherjee rightly observes that Sahu’s gendered post-modern adaptation of the myth “interrogates the shared concerns over the ever-evolving relationship between a woman and her milieu simultaneously narrativising her many selves through ever renewing discourses”

Sahu uncovers the fierce and real spirit of Sita and Ahalya through her poems. Through them, Sahu explores the age-old philosophy of touch, purity, pollution and chastity. Her poems are

texts in progress deconstructing traditional understanding of the myths. To conclude, the subversion of the tales of Ahalya and Sita allows Sahu to trespass against accepted social and challenge dominant world view and organisational standards of ethics and have established what Charles Baudelaire calls, a 'correspondance' with the past. The contemporaneity of Sita (A Poem) and Ahalya's Waiting lies in the fact that they address a host of 21st century concerns.

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