

## **NANDINI SAHU'S SITA (A POEM): A DISCOURSE IN MYTH, MNEMOCULTURE AND MASCULINITY**

---

Sagar Kumar Sharma\*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Nandini Sahu's Sita (A Poem) is one of those influential texts of our times that bare the pretensions of such long-standing narratives, perpetuated in the forms of myth, memory and critical discourses, that present the man-woman power dynamics in our society as one that is rightfully unequal. On the face of it, some attempts are made by the age-old narratives of patriarchy to show its initiatives for establishing gender equality, or at the least its willingness to do so but as one inquires further into the matter, patriarchy comes out unadorned and we witness some of the finest cases of illogical argumentation. Naïve explanations—men and women are biologically different, hence unequal, and should be so—follow. This paper tries to explain the importance of Sita (A Poem) as a text that offers an alternative modernity—a narrative not essentially counter, but genuine—that takes us beyond the usual feminist discourse, one that, while reinterrogating the myth of Ram-Sita, demythifies many associated folk narratives. Through a conscious deconstruction of this text, I also intend to bring to the table the subtle ways in which myth, memory and critical discourses fuse together to create a 'reality' far removed from reality.*

**Keywords:** Mnemo, Myth, Folklore, Patriarchy, Masculinity.

---

### **Introduction**

Not a re-telling of the *Ramayana* in any form, rather, "penned as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic, Sita, told in the first-person narrative", spanned over a space of XXV cantos, Nandini Sahu's *Sita* is a classic read in mythology, mnemoculture and masculinity discourse. A testimony of the poet's extraordinary ability to write sustained narrative poems, *Sita* is a mark of distinction in terms of poetic perfection. Over centuries of human history, patriarchy has created narratives that legalise male superiority through various modes of cultural production- fiction, history, myth, folklore, etc. Despite the fact that feminist movements are now not new phenomena, and that conscious efforts continue to be made by various women, in their individual capacities, to present their case through narratives of their own, many questions remain unexplored— the politics behind Sita's image of a devoted wife, an obedient daughter, and a caring mother; convenient ignorance of her tribulations in taking care of her sons, all by herself, in absence of their father, Lord Ram; the need to take the 'fire test', etc. The issue of taking the 'fire test' is one that is something very crucial to understand since it has been misinterpreted and misrepresented the most among other sub-texts of the 'Sita-narrative'. Many believe it to be a fault, on Sita's part, that Sita agreed to take the fire test thus giving power to patriarchy. As a matter of fact, Sahu suggests, Sita had unfinished roles to play, to contribute her share in her capacity as a wife, for which she agreed to take the first fire test.

Someone had to tell the tale of Sita—as Sita would herself have it— since: "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); hence this poem. As stated at the outset, Sahu's *Sita* is an exercise in a feminist narrative of its own kind—it does not exclude men; in fact, she admires men for the roles they play in her life. She has no hesitation in accepting the adorability of Ram, who is, "the cure to all urge,/ cupidity, immodesty, desire; He is the/ channel to cross the deep-sea of life...the patron of

---

\* PhD Research Scholar (SRF), School of Humanities, Discipline of English, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India.

magic,/ the congregation of rectitude, honesty.” (Sahu 16) Interestingly, Sita does not, also, hesitate to question the “perfectness” of Lord Ram—the king of Ayodhya, and not her husband. She is his queen, no doubt, but she is also his subject and Lord Ram failed her as a king because the whole ‘fire test’ was a one way affair. It is important to note that seeking freedom from patriarchy ‘this’ Sita does not demand freedom from responsibilities. She is a Woman, a Daughter, a Wife, a Mother, a Queen...she is aware of her powers and at the same time, of the duties entrusted to her. It is interesting to note that Nandini’s Sita is herself and also, every woman—of all times. The character has been so delineated that she is both, an individual and an archetype— sheer mastery of characterization. Unlike ‘Maheswari or Saraswati’, Sita is “the tarnished, deflated doll,/ the consumerist piece to be obtained, battered/ bartered, sold, wronged, cast away.” (Sahu 18) Sahu so fuses her own eco-feminist concerns with the myth of Sita’s birth that it becomes difficult to tell Sita from Nandini or Nandini from Sita, they become one.

Much different from the common myth kitty that often ends up nowhere, the text under discussion creates a room for Sita and the likes of her. Unlike the radical feminist ideology that offers ‘leading nowhere’ alternatives, ‘no men beyond this point’ type alternative, ‘change everything overnight’ type alternative, Sahu’s Sita seeks to offer a strong and sensible alternative modernity. Sita, in *Sita*, does not advocate freedom from responsibilities. Also, she has been portrayed as a woman with power who is very mindful of the duties entrusted to her. It is her ‘Sita-ness’ that allows her to collect this courage to speak in the face of unfairness— even if it meant speaking against one’s husband (which, in patriarchal parlance, also stands for ‘Swami’/‘Lord’/‘Master’/‘Owner’). Not only does she speak against her husband, she also questions the morphology of the so-called ‘*Swayamvar*’ that Raja Janak, Sita’s father, conceptualises. There is a deep investigation into the workings of patriarchy through the analysis of this episode. The context of the groom to be will be the one who can lift the Shiv Dhanush is: since it was some divinely blessed bow which so many of great warriors had failed to lift and which Sita had easily lifted, Raja Janaka made it a requisite for marrying Sita that only after ‘only after lifting the *Shiva Dhanush* from its place and stringing it’ could one think of marrying Sita. The heroine isn’t convinced with her father’s precondition; she is thinking “Shouldn’t love be the/ agent to map the interplay of the future, text and context of a complete/ connubial?” (Sahu 11) What is important to note that this is a question that not only concerns women. Even men are at the receiving end. It was a happy coincidence that Lord Rama and *Mata* Sita liked each other and that Ram had the physical prowess to win her in the ‘*Swayamvar*’ but that is not how all marriages happen. Sahu writes, ‘Civility says, a man/ is her wife’s protector and provider.’ Well, it be also asked that who created these codes of ‘civility’? The answer is simple: the same politics/patriarchy that drafted the other rules at hand. 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)

Sita adores ‘Him.’ But as Srideep Mukherjee, in his paper titled “The Concert of Womanhood: Reading Nandini Sahu’s *Sita* (A Poem)”, rightly observes: “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)

Another important question arises from this confession of love. She is “the woman in love.” She is rightfully so; any woman should be. But a man who is not a ‘menage of power’ is also the one not really appreciated by a woman and the onus is on the same politics that constructs gender stereotypes? Are we all, women included, free of judgements? No. Willy-Nilly, we are all part of this nexus. However, this is not to mean that the damage done to both the genders, by the legislators of “Civility”, is not equal in any way. It is this: the contours of the multiplicity of discourses on gender, or any discourse for that matter, is not well defined and thus cannot be compartmentalised. But we must talk, raise our voice like Sita, Nandini, and so many others. We must assert our identity. Sita was “the organic whole of womanhood.” (Sahu 34) The alternative modernity that Sahu offers with her *Sita* encourages the idea of new woman, a complete woman, a woman who is autonomous like the ‘Goddess Earth’, “formidable, / naked, fierce, uninhibited” (Sahu 34) like “Kali”, “elegant, tender, decorous, beautifully/ dressed, elegantly attired, and

standing for conjugal commitment" (Sahu 34) like "Parvati". She is the one that accepts all, is the epitome of inclusion. It introduces a new brand of modernity that upholds the idea that the new woman has her "sitaness" intact as she is, the devoted but not subservient (to her partner); the forgiving and fierce; Laxmi; Saraswati; Parvati; Kali. The acceptance of the duties of a daughter, a wife and a mother are not subdued rather it is only after the fulfilment of these that Sita takes the strict step of leaving the king that does not treat her queen as his equal. A step-wise deconstruction of the text at hand shows how Sita's actions reflect upon, and problematize, the chauvinist patriarchal structure. Ram is virtue personified and Sita finds him desirable, no doubt, but the precondition to the 'Svayamvar' definitely does not go unquestioned by Sahu's Sita. However, the precondition is accepted by Sita without much questioning as it is not of any negative consequence whatsoever, at least up till this point. Once married, it is time for assuming the role and responsibilities of a wife and which our protagonist does with elegance. From a grand reception on her first arrival at Ayodhya to her uncalled-for departure for the *Van-vasa* as a company to Lord Rama, a choice Sita makes on her own though, the aura of womanhood is intact. In all of this, the composure is maintained. Hers is the calmness of a sea. This calmness and serenity in Sita's behaviour has often been misrepresented as her acceptance to subordination. Consciously and cleverly, subservience is portrayed as a virtue and not only this, it is also established that the virtue is exclusive to women and that this is worthy of glorification. Glorification follows and 'subservience' becomes 'normative'. 'Silence' becomes 'acceptance' (and more conveniently so since, perhaps, it falls in line with the dictum 'silence is half consent'). 'Devotion' becomes 'duty'. 'Duty' becomes 'surrender'. 'Sacrifice' becomes 'Sita'. 'Sita' becomes 'woman'. Sita is, thus, not just personal but also political. She is at the centre of identity politics. She is at the centre of folk politics. She is at the centre of gender politics. She is at the centre of discourse politics. In the political is personal, personal is political. Sahu states her stance and the standpoints of different other agencies/cultural constructs: 'classical texts glorify Sita; folktales, folksongs and ballads associate sometimes her abiding dilemma with that of the lives of the marginalized tribal and rural women. And this is often a trope to conveniently cipher them as marginal and suffering, or the subaltern, as *Mata Sita* was!' (Sahu vi) Her personal mingle with the political when she seeks to offer alternative modernities, demythify Sita, to tell the tale of Sita anew, among others.

While reading Sita, for some strange reason, I am always reminded of the 'Hymn to Isis' (which I had first read as a foreword of Paulo Coelho's *Eleven Minutes*) which reads as:

"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)

Perhaps, it is the similarity of the purity-pollution debate attached with both Sita and the lady in Coelho's citation from "The Hymn to Isis" that reminds me of the poem. It is curious, however, how Sahu manages to keep her Sita a simple individual as she be while keeping her at the discourse centre which is woven around her from the past. Past and present melt into each other creating a time matrix in which the presentness of the past becomes more credible than the past itself. In a language lucid is captured a complex composite. *Sita* begins with an affirmation that Sita is 'every woman', that she has been there since the time of unrecorded history. Right at the beginning is presented a mingle of myth and history. Sita, here, is both a mythical character from the time of 'Rama rajya' and a woman from among us, not endowed with any godly prowess but a simple human being, belonging to the different clans and climes chosen randomly from along the timeline of the recorded and unrecorded history. She ranges from a subject of male indifference to the lustful want of man in all ages. She is the first lady as also 'the erstwhile woman Prime Minister of India.'

## Conclusion

Nandini/Sita deconstructs the consciously crafted patriarchal construct and studies the operational procedures of the subjugating forces in society from various viewpoints. The text presents a sincere criticism of the indifference of history to the real issues of Sita and the likes of her. Wrapped up in beautiful language is presented the purity-pollution debate: "Why not ask the questions of fidelity/ to the chauvinist rather than just upholding/ the social value of fidelity on her?" (Sahu 35)

The tale of Sita/Vaidehi/Janaki is not just a mythological or folk tale, it is an integral part of the mnemoculture (used in the title as mnemo) of India. It becomes imperative, here, to explain what I mean by 'mnemoculture'. Venkat Rao defines mnemoculture as the culture of memory. On minutely observing the problematic of collective memory as the basis of the cultural construct of a particular society, we see that any culture, and its manifestation thereof-through observance of certain customs, rituals, performances, etc.- is basically the collective memory of the past (culture) of a group of individuals. Sita too is a part of the collective memory of Indian society. And to mention it briefly, 'mnemo' stands for something pertaining to memory.

Based on the above discussion, we may conclude that Nandini Sahu's *Sita (A Poem)* is an important part of the present-day discourse on myth, mnemoculture and masculinity.

## References

1. Coelho, Paulo. "Hymn to Isis (3rd or 4th century AD)." *Paulo Coelho: Stories and Reflections*, 13 March 2012. <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2012/05/30/hymn-to-isis-3rd-or-4th-century-bc/>.
2. Mukherjee, Srideep. "'The Concert of Womanhood': Reading Nandini Sahu's *Sita (A Poem)*." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 7, Issue- 2, April 2016, pp. 137-150. <https://www.the-criterion.com/V7/n2/023.pdf>. Accessed 20 May 2021.
3. Rao, D.Venkat. "Futures of the Past: Mnemocultures and the Question of Inheritance." *Cultures of Memory in South Asia*, Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures, vol. 6, 2014, pp. 59-88. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-81-322-1698-8\\_6#](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-81-322-1698-8_6#)
4. Sahu, Nandini. *Sita (A Poem)*. The Poetry Society of India, 2014.
5. Sahu, Nandini. "Ahalya's Waiting" from *selected poems of Nandini Sahu*, Vol. 2, Signorina Publications, Spring 2021.

