

## Sita: A Poem

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The present study is based on the premise that Ramayana is relevant even today in the society. Writers find in the characters of Ramayana their alter egos and get inspired to revisit the epic for its ability to offer caution, guidance and solace. One such work which catches the attention is Professor Nandini Sahu's book, ***Sita:A Poem*** in which the poet has drawn parallels to the characters and situations in Ramayana or more specifically in Uttar Ramayana. The book makes a captivating study not only for its vastness of references to the ancient text which is a testimony of the in-depth epical knowledge of the writer but also for its application of that knowledge to the state of affairs in the present day world. The poet has invoked the beauty and the strength that lies within a woman and has not shied away from uncovering the ugliness which cozily lies hidden behind the so-called social institutions like marriage, customs and family.

As mentioned above, Ramayana has been told, retold, deconstructed and reconstructed in many ways and in different genres by people all through the ages. In recent times also creative imagination of writers rests quite often upon the perennially rife Ramayana themes but my selection for a diligent study has gone in favour of the above mentioned recent publication of poet and writer Professor Sahu for the simple reason that the poet has not dwelt upon the character of Sita as an ideal for women to emulate but has taken it as a metaphor only and has extolled them to rouse their courage to question and discard social prejudices and customs against them and also to defend themselves against the excesses not only of the Ravanas around them but of the Ramas also.

It is a first person narrative in the poetic form comprising twenty five cantos. The speaker is Sita of the Ramayana who is giving an account of her life as it comes to her. It is an account of a woman's life as she saw it and no male interpretation is allowed here. Analogies, inferences and parallels from Sita's life are drawn by the poet who is sometimes happily, and at other times, sadly surprised to identify many such Sitas in either different or similar situations all around her and throughout history. The character and predicaments of Sita assume an eternal reference point. The poet regards Sita not so much as a Goddess, rather she regards her as a human with her strengths and frailties, with her gentle form and iron will, with her unflinching devotion to her husband and at the same time with a high sense of self-esteem. She is a child of mother earth, a preserver of Nature and the 'first ecofeminist' in the words of the poet. Sita took her own decisions and faced their consequences with a stoic resolve. Sita is an embodiment of a complete woman - beautiful, strong, intelligent, compassionate and firm. She is a beautiful daughter, a loving sister, a devoted wife and a caring mother. Sita suffered from the sins committed by others, she stood the test by fire, went into self-imposed exile, suffered a second exile and became an embodiment of sacrifice when she chose as a single parent to rear up her children to the age of twelve years while she remained in a state of banishment. The poet found Sita to reflect her own situation and psychological state. She found that Sitas of the present day are still caught in the web of their social milieu. The Sita of this poem is definitely not a conservative and voiceless wife. She is a daughter who lifted Shiva's bow. So her father, proud of her physical strength, would not accept her groom to be in any way inferior to her; he should not only lift the bow but be also able to bend it and string it. She is the loving and caring elder sister of Urmila who was separated from her husband Laxman for no fault of hers for a long period of 14 years. Sita empathizes with her and feels sorry for her.

Sita represents every woman with an emancipated consciousness; she is there in the woman next door as well as in the woman head of the state; she is there in the blamelessness of Nirbhaya as well as in the innocence of Asifa. She is in the tears of the poor and in the fears of the weak. She is in the resilience of the new woman. The poet has focused on the Uttara Kand in her poem. Sita's tale is the tale of all single mothers. It is the "story of kinship, affection, loyalty, sacrifice and the social codes." The poet feels a "female - bonding" among all women of substance. There is a force and a grace that binds Ahalya, Anasuya, Gargi, Maitreyi, Katyayani, Arundhati, Lopmudra and even Mandodari and Tara with Sita. The poet talks about the 'sitaness' of every woman. Ram will have to build "a bridge over the sea to reach" Sita, writes the poet, hinting that it is a stupendous task to understand female consciousness. Sita's abductor is a ten headed predator. These Ravana's are surrounding Sitas in their multiple personalities today as well. In Adbhut Ramayana Sita is shown as the abandoned daughter of Ravana and Mandodari. Ravana's abduction of Sita hints at the incestuous advances of fathers towards their helpless daughters. In Ramayana, Ravana could not cross the barrier of a blade of grass and touch Sita. The poet writes, "This does not happen in the real world, women! Drunken fathers rape minor daughters, their mothers may not even protest." Sita in her incarnations of Meera, Radha, Laxmi is caught in the endless helix of mortal adventure, repeating the ancient cyclic world in occurrences of bride burning, female feticide, rape of an infant girl and abduction of a young girl.

Sita is the bearer of the yoke of Dharma, her duties and obligations she cannot renounce, yet she is mindful that the deep sea of life can be crossed in the barge of Ram Nama. Alluding to the myths of Anasuya and Ahalya the poet questions why the grace of a woman should redeem only with the touch of a man or wane with the fraudulent touch of another man. Prof. Sahu praises woman as an embodiment of purity, holiness, power, dignity, potency, magnificence, compassion and love and encourages her to be the harbinger of a time when Nirbhaya would stand firm despite a thousand scars on her body and soul; when no Kaikeyi, to boost her ego, would cast away Rama; when no woman would submit into being a "consumerist piece to be obtained, battered, bartered, sold, wronged, cast away." The poet further writes, "We talk of feminine frailty in expected hypothesis. Do we remember the courage and conviction of Sita, Savitri, Gargi, Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, Mother Teresa, Helen Keller, Florence Nightingale and Malala?"

The sages advised Sita, Ram and Laxman, the comely humans, to avoid Dandaka Aranya, the savage sphere where savages eat up for a penchant for the same breed. "What has altered in the society since then?" asks the poet. "Even today there are men eating flesh of kids and draining their tender bones in a drain in Noida." Many a demon hovered and wished to possess Sita like Kubera's treasure. A woman was and is regarded as an object of desire - then and now. Sage Suteekshna asked Ram to protect the ecology and the forests. Today, we do realise how important it is to preserve the forests. In Panchvati, Sita felt blissful in her hut amidst the Banyan trees, the roots and fruits, the vulture king Jatayu and his daughters, the galloping river Godavari, the deer, the peacocks, music and fragrance. Such ecological balance and harmonious living has been disregarded by man and he has paved the way for disasters. It is said that women's greed must be controlled. Sita acted like any ordinary woman when she pushed Ram into obtaining for her the golden deer and she paid back dearly for her greed. She took up the test by fire without a demur but after her second exile when Ram, in order to accept Sita with Luv and Kush into the palace and for the satisfaction of his subjects, puts the condition of another test by fire, Sita hurls at him a poignant question:

"I am untouched by anyone else because of my unmatched mystic powers; and then destiny was on my side. But it might not happen at every age to each woman. Is it an example you have set my lord that in future if a helpless woman's body be violated beyond her wish, then she must be deserted?"

Sita questions the righteousness of the Maryada Purushottam in his allowing Laxman to follow him to the forest without considering the injustice being done to the innocent Urmila. She questions him for the disregard shown towards her after the fall of Ravana; for his punishing the entire Lanka for the sin of one man; for his sending Sita to exile under the pretext of granting her the wish to visit the hermitage; for his cowardice to make Laxman reveal the real purpose which was her banishment

and not himself making his motive and decision known to her; for his injustice and callousness in abandoning a pregnant wife at her most vulnerable stage in her life; for his never bothering to even enquire about the safe birth of his own children; for his subjecting her to public humiliation of test of purity so as to save himself from any condemnation or accusation from his subjects.

Sita is a symbol of inner strength in the face of outward oppression both from the male partner and from the society on the whole. She refuses to feel miserable in the worst kind of situation as she knows that Truth is on her side. The book, *Sita (A Poem)*, is thus an account of Sita's life with her version of the Ramayana story wherein the poet uses Sita as a metaphor for the present day woman.

### References:

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