From "Neti" to "Deathless Goddess": The Feminine in Nandini Sahu's *Sita* and *Shedding the Metaphors*

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ABSTRACT

In both *Sita* and *Shedding the Metaphors*, Nandini Sahu offers revolutionary interpretations of womanhood, effortlessly embracing nature, tradition, and modern cultural norms. She says she "pours" her own "image" and "personality" into her characters and stories, drawing on her own experience and interactions (Shedding the Metaphors, Preface, 13). Her approach embraces subjectivity and empiricism as well as her broad variety of readings, including both literary and academic works, even though it is not necessarily autobiographical. Nandini Sahu also makes Sita her own in Sita, revitalizing Sita's mythology in the process and giving her a strong sense of modern relevance in poetry that is never prosaic and is driven by argument. Her women characters emerge as strong and impressive, with a strong emotional maturity and a marked sense of empathy and morality but willing to reveal their raw emotions and spontaneity. Their exploitation by uncaring individuals is seen in keeping with a patriarchal society, that is destructive of both femininity and nature. The strong single mothers and single working women manage to draw on their capacity to love and take care of others to feed their strength. Her women are Goddess-like and like primal Nature: abundant, giving, strong, eco-feminist, and ready to break free from stereotypes and conventional metaphors. The subjectivity of Sahu's Sita is strongly Indian feminist and highly modern. She moves fluidly between the past, conceptions of the past, and present patriarchy, where female foeticide still haunts India, without missing a beat (of argument or metre). She probes into every facet of women's existence, connecting old conceptions of male supremacy with present clichés.

Keywords: Sita, Neti, Shiv Dhanush, femininity, Kali.

> "She must write herself, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history, first at two levels that cannot be separated" (Helene Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa, 880)

Nandini Sahu offers transformative versions of femininity, embracing nature, tradition and the contemporary cultural mores with ease in both Sita and Shedding the Metaphors. She draws upon her own experience and encounters, and claims that she "pours" her own "image" and "personality" (Shedding the Metaphors, Preface, 13) into her characters and stories. Though not always autobiographical, her approach celebrates subjectivity and empiricism as well as her wide range of readings: both literary and theoretical.

Her poem Sita presents a timeless and a very self-conscious Sita, who is painfully aware of cultural appropriation and acts of patriarchal oppression against women and nature. Stepping out of the haloed portals of a classical text, this character addresses her fans and critics, conservatives and feminists alike, and engages in a dialogue with them, alerting them that the fire test, the episode most associated with Sita's subservience and obedience, should not be used to justify the "low status of women" and a "tradition of silent suffering and subjugation."

(Sita 74). Sita "did not encourage women to charitably accept humiliation" (Sita 75). This is a Sita with a voice and agency of her own, rising triumphantly out of the mainstream and other versions of the epic.

It is always a bold task to engage with the protagonists of the Indian epics. For these texts are not just maha kavya and itihasa (thus it was) for billions of readers, they constitute a living tradition and a repository of cultural values. They often evoke massive emotions and a resistance to reinterpretation among readers and consumers of mass media versions of the epic. To complicate matters further there exist more than three hundred versions of The Ramayana written over centuries. Nandini Sahu makes the conscious and intrepid choice to compose a long poetic memoir of Sita: a character who has often been seen as synonymous with the ideal of Indian womanhood, with her endless capacity for fortitude, borne of suffering and injustice, and forgiveness. And yet Sita is inescapable: for Indian readers, including feminist ones, she engages attention. As Sahu points out:

> "there is bit of Sitaness in every Indian woman, which is what engages me in this narrative penned in twenty-five long poems of three lined stanzas." (Sita, Preface, vi)

> In the process of celebrating and contesting the various definitions of heroism in The Ramayana, Sahu ends up interrogating "the gendered stereotype of an epic as a masculine form" (Sita, Preface ix).

Sahu's entry point is the conflicting images of Sita that suffuse the epic. On the one hand is Sita the warrior who casually lifted the Shiv Dhanush (Shiva's mighty bow), the stubborn and determined lady who defied all to accompany her husband in his exile, who kept Ravana at bay, whose love for her husband was her strength, and the one who finally refuses to undergo a second fire trial/agni pariksha, thereby rejecting a patriarchal and oppressive practice; choosing instead to embrace the earth mother, who is literally her mother. The strong single mother Sita and the ardent eco-feminist Sita are both celebrated by Sahu. On the other hand, she acknowledges the longstanding association of this heroine with unquestioning obedience to her husband and a life of austerity and self-denial.

The defiant Sita, the one who "like Parvati raised her children single handedly" (Sita, preface, viii), was the one that lived on in the folk songs of Mithila. Nandini Sahu draws upon a range of eclectic sources, ranging from Kamban, R.K. Narayan, Tulsidas's Kavitavali (whose politics is different from that of Manas), Balaram Dasa's Odia Ramayana, Odia critics as well as popular discourses, the Puranas as well as some folk songs of India. The use of multi-lingual and multi-regional sources, along with her vast reading of powerful mythical archetypal women from western literary traditions: both classical and popular, add multiple registers and

perspectives to her reading and re-writing. Of special note is Canto XXIV, which with its evocation of all these sources and critical traditions adds metafictional and inter-textual notes to the poem.. Sahu's strength lies in the ease with which she takes up traditional tropes like Shakti, Prakriti and fuses them seamlessly with the sutradhar Sita, the all witnessing critical and compassionate Goddess who is timeless and speaks in polyphonous tongues (like Helene Cixous's Medusa, an inspiration for Sahu's other works). She speaks of being "utterly and unquestioningly in love" (Sita 5), while still questioning the subjection of women and the subordination of their stories to the larger narrative of glorifying the male heroes:

> "Tell me, oh
>
> Lord, why do we subject a woman,
>
> in every age, as a means to an end? To kill
>
> Ravana, to wipe out evil, was it indispensable to make Sita a
>
> Victim? To fight the Mahabharata war, was it required to disrobe Draupadi in the
>
> Dice Hall of Hastinapura? To make a society
>
> Of successful men, who are the so-called future supports
>
> To ageing parents, is it needed to conceive
>
> A female fetus, and kill her unborn?"   (Sita 32)

The subjectivity of Sahu's Sita is very contemporary and committedly Indian feminist. Without missing a beat (of argument or metre), she transitions effortlessly between the past, perceptions of past and contemporary patriarchy, where female foeticide still haunts India.

She asks questions about all aspects of women's lives, linking past pre-conceived notions of male superiority with current stereotypes. The Shiva Dhanush and swayamvara episode serves as one trope:

> "I ponder over the idea of father's choice of a groom for me-
>
> How could the Swayamvar be interrogated thus? The choice of husband should be woman's prerogative, not father's preconditions of the strength of a man?...
>
> Even today, parents beget daughters with the hope of a son;
>
> Girls queue up paving way for a boy; and one day, the girls are
>
> Married off to prospective grooms, whose stipulation could be
>
> A decent job, affluent family, a teetotaler, maybe, two horoscopes
>
> To be matched by a pundit, and family alliances." (Sita 10-11)

Sita's foray into comic social satire casually unmasks the unsaid assumptions that lie behind arranged marriages (in India), and that can constitute an erasure of true choice and agency for women.

The contemporary relevance of Sita never has to be stressed in the poem: Sahu's engagement with tradition seems like a very lived experience, straight from the heart and drawing on childhood memories of hearing the timeless saga as well as savage observations about contemporary cultural mores:

> "Sita dwells in
>
> The Sitapurs, Rampurs and Udaipurs of India;
>
> She is on the Internet, in TV soaps…
>
> She is the erstwhile woman Prime Minister
>
> Of India and the woman President; the
>
> Multi-tasking working mother and the
>
> Homemaker; the gang raped girl
>
> In the Delhi bus at night and the
>
> Battered baby girl in the AIIMS trauma center" (Sita 2)

Sahu also expresses eloquently the paradox of Sita's "own denial of the self", her "negative capability" (49) or neti (Not this not this). Even in the original epic she is despite her silence and amiable grace, the prime driver of action and a lesson to mankind:

> "In every age woman has given
>
> This message-adore her, she is Parvati,
>
> Laxmi, Saraswati. Overrun or jeopardise her,
>
> Civilization becomes forest. Kali descends
>
> On the chest of the fanatic; thus when woman
>
> Abandons her elegance, death descends.
>
> Why not ask the questions of fidelity to
>
> The chauvinist rather than just upholding
>
> The social value of fidelity on her?" (Sita 35)

Sita in this poem is Banadurga, brave, unvanquished, organic and one with nature, and able to cordon herself behind a single blade of grass. Her conviction and privation in the Ashoka Vana is part of her courage and resilience. Sahu's Sita is both every woman and "deathless Goddess, ever alive in each woman you encounter" (Sita 9), and therefore exists simultaneously as

warrior goddess and victim: victim of abuse, assault, kidnapping, abandonment (of girl child) and the mother Goddess who is self- sufficient and raises powerful offspring compassionately and fearlessly.

Nandini Sahus's fiction engages with multiple facets of feminine experience.The premise of her recent collection of short stories, Shedding the Metaphors, is that a writer like her writes without preaching:

> "Now I realize, one sheds all metaphors when life comes to a full circle. It is a new beginning, being inclusive, empathetic, universal, accepting, reconciling and persistent." (Preface, Shedding the Metaphors, 9).

This claim of arriving at a state of profound simplicity, of resilience and acceptance is paradoxically, both justified and complicated by Sahu's fiction. There is indeed a refreshing immediacy of perception and she confesses, that though drawn from real life, her craft makes each story her own, especially where femininity is concerned: "imparting my character traits, my femininity into my fictional protagonists" (Preface, 13). However, this simplicity is deceptive. Underlying it is keen social satire, often related to gender stereotypes, as can be seen in the wickedly funny story: "Alternative Masculinity(?!). At the beginning of the story Harihar, the academic, seems to be a hen-pecked, long-suffering husband but he confesses that this is a ploy he uses to manipulate his less educated wife. On the surface it seems like he is dominated by his wife but when called out by the narrator about his hypocrisy and lying to his wife, due to the unspoken bias against dining with single women, he lets out that he befools his "empty headed wife" into signing papers blindly, serving her husband devotedly and unquestioningly and securing her property. The husband uses the advantages offered him by an arranged marriage to dupe his wife and gain sympathy at the same time, by deceiving women academics.

Palimpsestic perspectives erupt in a disturbing and unflinchingly bold take on sexuality in a tale of child sexual abuse in "That Elusive Orgasm." The story revolves around the abused teen Jhumpa, who is scarred by sexual abuse perpetrated by her father, and confused because he convinces her through a pseudo religious ritual of Goddess worship, in which her mother is complicit, that she is the offering or prasada, who can be consumed by him after the ritual of sanctification and worship. Jhumpa is "rescued" by her Christian friend Grace, and her cousins. Confession, another religious ritual, from a different religion, facilitates her rescue and marriage to her colleague Abraham, in America. But the happy marriage, based on friendship and companionship, is unable to provide her with a satisfying intimacy, because her mind is

programmed to respond to her abusive father. In a tale with a twist, the readers watch in horror, with the narrator, as natural urge and family ties merge with paedophilic cultural appropriation and paternal domination to lead Jhumpa to be co-opted into incest. The story is ambiguous about agency, while at the same time exposing the failure of both parents to protect their child. The home becomes the site of violence and confused acquiescence by a victim who is groomed to find pleasure in her exploitation. The writer deliberately sets her story in Sonagachi in Bengal, " a place close to nature", a rich forest which is also "the largest red-light area in Asia" (102). Sahu indicates society's complicity in the exploitation and trafficking of women and children, and their failure to protect children from living and working in a "foul place" (102), both literally and morally foul; despite the varied religious and social mechanisms in place to ensure morality in sexual expression. The personal is invariably brought together with the political in a problematic story.

Sahu also explores facets of a woman in love in "A Very Different Story", which records the progress of love in a virtual realm. The exuberance, sensitivity, ambition, vulnerability and social consciousness of the heroine Madhvi, displayed in a socially forbidden relationship, which is carried out entirely through e media like email and text messaging, shows the paradoxical moods of a woman in love and at the same time shows the possibilities of an empowering friendship and love. The use of a male narrator, smitten by Madhvi's "wildness": "a queer mix of elegance, edginess, composure and versatility" (Shedding the Metaphors, 19), foregrounds admiration based on respect for the feminine. The narrative would have otherwise spilled into self-indulgence, had the story been told from the point of view of Madhvi. The focus of the love story is on an independent woman, who is caught in a sexless marriage of convenience, deprived of sexual fulfilment in real life but who finds it in a virtual dimension and rediscovers aspects of her personality with abandon. That such a relationship is equally empowering to her partner, who is separated from his wife, and lonely though busy, opens possibilities of a new kind of love based on mutual respect and admiration. Madhvi's portrayal reminds one of Helene Cixous's assertion:

> "At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her differences. I am for you what you want me to be at the moment you look at me in a way you've never seen me before: at every instant. When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking." (Cixous, Laugh of the Medusa, 893)

In the "Very Different Story", the other woman, and the other man, find their creative expression in an unconventional virtual relationship. The overflowing creativity of the woman, her desire to own her subjectivity does not emerge from a rejection or repudiation of the masculine. Both partners embrace their differences from each other and work towards a meaningful alliance with each other.

Sahu also provides a contrasting vision, almost as a reality check, in "Post- Quarantine", where the independent working woman, the "free-thinking" Joyita attracts a lover, the male narrator, who deceives and betrays her. Her generosity is abused by Jayant and his family, and her intelligence is unable to protect her from their hypocrisy and predatoriness. Set against the backdrop of the pandemic and lock-down, the story exposes the mechanisms used by both men and women to abuse sexuality and feminine charm to control individuals and seek material gains. The protagonist Joyita manages to rise above these mind games with grace, choosing instead to pursue her career goals. In another story of platonic love between two lonely individuals, in "Octopus", the male narrator realizes that his commitment phobia drives away the loving and intelligent Neelu, who he meets on a dating app. Sahu's heroines are strong single (and sometimes married)women in their own right, with a strong sense of justice and empathy, but often ending up emotionally vulnerable and lonely.

Sahu often uses metaphors (despite claiming to shed them) from the world of nature: the scarlet fly, the octopus, the forests and streams, rain and red ants being just a few of them. In "The Shadow of a Shadow," the consummation of a lesbian relationship between Suni and Ragini is described thus:

> "Both of them felt at the moment-that was so natural! Like leaves coming to a tree, like flowers blooming in spring or migrating birds reaching their destination every winter without fail." (91)

The two women pose a visible threat to the dominant culture, worded as "moral degradation" and "a violation of the laws of nature" by the fellow hostellers and the warden. This recalls Irigaray's's question about what would happen if the goods (women as commodities in a phallocentric order) refuse to go to the market and "maintain among themselves another kind of trade?"(Courtivron ed.,Irigaray, This Sex that is Not One 111).

It is this clash between nature and culture leads to partings and unhappy endings to some of the stories. Her women characters emerge as strong and impressive, with a strong emotional maturity and a marked sense of empathy and morality but willing to reveal their raw emotions and spontaneity. Their exploitation by uncaring individuals is seen in keeping with a patriarchal

society, that is destructive of both femininity and nature. The strong single mothers and single working women manage to draw on their capacity to love and take care of others to feed their strength. Some, who like the indolent Mami in "The Wild Stream", are taken in by the false promises of a politician, waste away their lives chasing empty dreams. But some forgive and move on to reach new heights, re-minding the reader that feminine kindness and empathy must not be mistaken for weakness.

In Sita, too, Nandini Sahu makes Sita her very own and in the process regenerates the mythologizing of Sita, investing it with great contemporary relevance, in poetry propelled by argument, without ever being prosaic. Her women are Goddess-like and like primordial Nature: bountiful, giving, powerful, eco-feminist and willing to move beyond conventions and received metaphors.

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