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ISSN: 2278-9529



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Canny and Decisive: *Sita*

The saga of the quintessential spirit of every woman

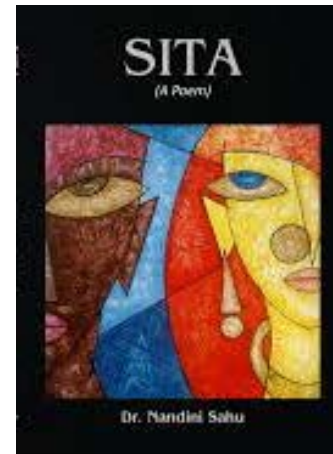
Dr. Nandini Sahu

ISBN 978-93-83888-19-1 (PB)

The Poetry Society of India

129 pages

Reviewed by,
Mrs. D. Sandhu



"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."
Charles Dickens: A Tale Of Two Cities (1859)

Introduction

This poem is by Sita, of Sita, for Sita. It is adorned with the mythical spirits and epical characters which are spoken about, everyday in India and some neighbouring countries. The people speak of the characters confidently and zealously as if they know the real saga. But, the question is that do they know the real story? Do they know what happened and why?

Sita calls the readers into her 'true abode, a land with no borders and restrictions' which 'Sita' s mind' a place to which the "only requirements for entry are unbiased ears, restless desire to know the truth and ceaseless urge to reach to the depth of the matter. Dr. Nandini' s problem solving attitude, creative thinking ability and writing deftness presents Sita' s feelings in present world.

This book 'Sita', long haiku poetry of 25 cantos is written in such a way that it talks thunder. Yes! It is thunderous with inherent benevolence of Sita' s heart epitomizing Mother Earth, kind and gracious. This poem is like whiff of fresh air in our minds—it is organic, alive, part of this very atmosphere we all live in. Dr. Nandini invokes Sita' s desire to be seen as in her physical presence, to share her personal experience of her relationship to the objects in the shaky, prejudice, temporal world and then offer explanations and explications for why her own impressions are vital and important.

About the title

As opposed to the title 'Sita' of the poetic narrative, this book is not only about Sita. Actually, shares space with each and every character of Ramayana. All personae have got a respectable and clear mention in the book. The title is chosen to be 'Sita' because the life of

the heroine in this great Hindu epic is described from her point-of-view. Amazed! Is it? Ecofeminist Sita has got a chance to speak for herself in the patriarchal society for the first time. Through this book the poetess flits between epical heroine of Ramayana 'Sita' and her modern reflection in every woman. She expresses her side of the story by keeping up the pace with the modern society and latest happenings.

About the book

This poem 'Sita' is mixture of lyric, narrative and descriptive styles of poem. The speaker of the poem 'Sita' expresses her thoughts and feelings in her life story, i.e. 'the Ramayana' and describes the world around the ancient Sita elucidating important events in her life and comparing them with present day events faced by modern Sitas.

These free verses sometimes haunt and at other times fuel the mind of the reader with thoughts and actions of characters in Ramayana. Through this poem, light has been shed at Sita's stance during her innocuous acceptance of trial-by-fire. (This is one of Sita's acts which has been misinterpreted time and again by many writers and poets. Its discourse is used as an instruction to all women of Hindu society. To be quiet, dutiful, kind and submissive just like Sita *Maiyya* at all times.)

The uniqueness of the poetess and the heroine of the poem are in the 'dealing of every event with utmost honesty' and 'not skipping any detail relevant to the epic'. The narrative does not shy away from her only mistake in her life (her greed for the golden deer). She mentions, opines and regrets it. She has the courage to talk about her wrongdoings, accept them and get along with them. According to mythologies, *even the gods have made their share of mistakes.*

The complete account of the feelings of the heroine is special also because in these 129 pages every character has got their fair space and mention. Be it Sita's three sisters (Urmila, Shrutakritini, Mandavi) or hunchback Manthra, various sages, Vayuputra Hanuman, the raakshasa and rakshasis namely- Mareecha, Indrajit, Trishira, Devantaka, Narantaka and Atikaya (Ravana's Sons), Vidyujjuha, etc.

Ancient wisdom and timeless treasures like "*Woman's greed and man's anger has to be controlled.*" have been proven and accepted. Vast amount of literature is beautifully weaved together and presented for the reader's delight. Comparison has been drawn between Holy Bible and Ramayana where the sea was divided to make way by Moses and Rama. (Canto XI, Pg 51). The resemblances between Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and Ramayana where the dilemma of 600 soldiers have been compared to Indrajit's (Ravana's Son) royal conduct (राजधर्म) as a warrior and also as a son. (Canto XI, Pg 57)

There is a significant mention of Jean Jacques Rousseau's "Back to Nature" as the heroine talks about nature as an ideal, the source of morals and healing, enlightenment and the pursuit of happiness. (Canto XIII, Pg 59). Sita's exemplary non-violent acts, self-control and self-reliance have been compared with Mahatma Gandhi's ways and means to give readers a better understanding of the scenario.

With ultimate self-control and self-reliance like Mahatma Gandhi

I fought with hostility. It was my courage and conviction.

Living sans my husband's protection was my triumphal win... (Canto XVI, Pg 77)

Many other versions and mentions of Ramayana have also been made and discussed in the poetry including *Adhyatama Ramayana*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Kundamala*, *Ramakein* (Thai Ramayana), *Ramayana Manjari* (Assamese Ramayana), *Uttararamacharitra*, *Dashavataracharitra*, etc.

Experience after reading the book

As the readers read on, their eyes will increasingly dilate. The dilation of eyes is the non-verbal gesture for the awe of the newfound insights through this book. These insights soon seek agreement in the reader's head with a nod. The simple language of the poem helps in quick absorption of the heroine's version of the epic. In the book, Sita's perspective, thoughts and life are presented in form of goddess's own words.

The exceptional feeling of listening to the goddess herself doing the talking is very exciting. Writers and poets have described umpteen thoughts about the goddess through their own looking glass. But through this book, for the first time Sita- the girl, the sister, the daughter, the wife, the mother has spoken what she felt, she thought, she went through in her life.

People have a habit of creating motifs, specimens and symbols. Sita is also said to have been created as a symbol of virtuousness, dutifulness, submissiveness, kindness. This literary work describes Sita's openness, her strong will, plight, mistakes, two exiles, feelings, survival in Lanka, her experiences as a *tapaswini* (तपस्विनी) and as a single mother in her own words. (The poetry is written in first person.)

*Women! When society asks you to be
'like Sita', and decides your future by
virtue of public mortality, forces you be chaste.*

and submissive, please redefine your lives... (Canto XXV, Pg 121)

Dr. Nandini Sahu's creative inputs about her perceptions of the happenings, mishap, ordeals and celebrations are wishfully worded to spread the message to the present day Sitas. She has voiced Sita's opinions with kid gloves about the present day world. This Magnum opus is a whole new *take on* the Ramayana as a poetic memoir of the non-violent, moral, patient and Ecofeminist heroine Sita. The comfortable language of the narrative tercets is very enticing for the readers as its simplicity empowers it to spread all the messages clearly.

Book in the present context

Crucial social issues of the modern day including female foeticide, bride burning, Nirbhaya rape case, etc. have been carefully interwoven in the seven *kandas* (कांड) of *Srimad Valmiki Ramayana*. Through this book a reader gets an insight into the current happenings which are comparable to happenings of Ramayana. The ancient society and beliefs in current settings are crisply presented.

*...Can you harbinger of a time
When Nirbhaya would be adept to stand firm
Despite a thousand scars on her body and soul? ... (Canto VI, Pg 24)*

Shocking events of the current times like Nithari serial murder case, baby Falak's treatment in AIIMS, etc. are also discussed with due importance.

...The sages advised

*me, Rama and Lakshmana, the comely humans
to elude Dandaka Aranya. What has altered in the society
since then, Oh Almighty? Even today there are men*

*eating flesh of loving kids and draining their tender bones
in a drain in Noida; there are parents killing and
somersaulting dead bodies in the trauma centre of AIIMS. (Canto VI, Pg 24)*

A surefooted, majestic tone pervades through the whole book where Dr. Nandini has described the modern day Sitas (Mother Teresa, Hellen Keller, Florence Nightingale, Malala, Kalpana Chawla, etc.) who gave-up their securities at home, came out in the world with feminine- persistence, embraced losses and sorrows, tried tirelessly to serve nature and man.

*We talk of feminine- frailty in accepted
hypothesis. Do we remember the courage
and conviction of Savitri, Sita, Gargi,*

*Maitreyi, Apala, Ghosha, Visvavara,
Mother Teresa, Helen Keller, Florence Nightingale
and Malala? It was no discounted adolescent*

*passion, nor female stubbornness. True, I was
used to placates of life in a generous manor.
Woman knows when to spare securities*

*of home and take up weathered severity.
Her sole religion is to render service to
nature and man and give solace and comfort. (Canto V; Pg- 20)*

Term 'Sitaness'

This haiku poetry has coined a new term 'Sitaness' which connotatively means the quality essentially found in woman like Sita namely dedication, self-respect, self-sacrifice, indignation, courage and purity. Those who share the same quality like the ancient Earth goddess, who serves everybody tirelessly and selflessly by blessing good crops, forgives mistakes and carries on with malice, she only reacts when she has had enough just like 'Sita'

Over three hundred written accounts of Ramayana and the popular beliefs see Sita as a model female (daughter, wife and mother) who is always protected by patriarchy because she is a helpless woman. She is portrayed as a weak person, as someone who constantly needs support and assistance of the male folk. Because she is virtuous, beautiful, soft and humble, who lacks physical strength to physically fight out any male offender like the *Asura* (Demon).

However, in this in-depth study and discernment of Ramayana the real strength of Sati Sita (with her steadfast demonstration of honour and dignity in fire) and daughter Sita (with her

absorption by Mother Earth at her request to take her inside away from the world filled with pain, disbeliefs and misunderstanding) are revealed.

In this light, '**Sitaness**' is a modern term for all Ecofeminist Sitas who embody feminine power, who can lift Shiva's colossal bow (great responsibilities), who can audaciously decide to convoy with Rama into exile, who can dare to encounter Ravana boldly, quietly undergo first fire-test (difficult situations) and who disproved to undertake a subsequent trial, a second fire-test (unnecessary trial by ordeal to prove her true self).

The enraging words of the fight between *dharma* (धर्म) and *adharma* (अधर्म) are described vigorously which expedites the gush of blood in the reader's body. Sita's commodification after Ravana's defeat, her abandonment during pregnancy, her redemption by mother Earth, etc. are equally heart wrenching.

Bold and most impressive lines of the free verses 'Sita'

... Tell me, oh

Lord, why do we subject a woman,

at 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 Hastinapur? To make a society

of successful men, who are the so-called future supports

to aging parents, it is needed to conceive

a female fetus, and kill her unborn?

To boost someone's male-ego, violating a woman is a must? (Canto VIII, Pg 32)

Conclusion

'Sita' the book, serves its duty conscientiously, as torchlight to Sita's quiet choices in her lifetime. Her silent protests, self-reliance, confidence are fetchingly worded. It upholds Sita's thoughts, deeds, decisions and values which were ignored by many other versions of Ramayana in order to highlight and prove *Maryada Purushottam* Rama's greatness.

Sita's self-sufficiency, her unbowing attitude, her *satyagrah*, her voice against identity politics, her death-by-choice (*Ichha mrityu*), her stubbornness of not giving in to the whims and fancies of the patriarchal society, etc. make this book delicious food for thought.

What's most remarkable in this poem is that, while it never stops speaking through gritted teeth, never quite vilifies anyone but still upraises itself. Throughout the poem the narration is smooth and without a loss in its spirit. This poem offers an unlikely kind of hope, Dr. Nandini's ambivalence is the evidence of a fragile belief in the possibility of passion and change, of the logical reasoning and the will to challenge the patriarchal view to understand the real Sita (as she was always strong-willed, persistent and firm).

Similar to Rabindranath Tagore's characters Chitra, and Aurobindo's Savitri in their Upnishadic works¹, in this book Dr. Nandini's also focuses on evolution of our society. The main stylistic device in this book is the conversation between Sita (divine character) and human beings. This book also speaks for the understanding of Sita's viewpoints which works for truth of life and uplifts conscious subjectivity of the modern feminine mind.

¹ Tagores Chitra And Aurobindos Savitri- A Comparative Study By Ketki N. Pandya
Upnishadic work in a sense that their principal theme is search for *vidya* or knowledge and liberation from *avidya* or ignorance