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ECOFEMINISM IN NANDINI SAHU'S

SITA (A Poem)

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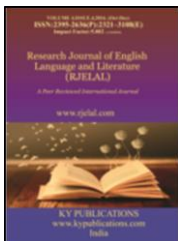
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ABSTRACT

This article, titled "Ecofeminism in Sita (A Poem)" focuses on how woman and Nature are in close communion with each other. In this poem, Nandini Sahu wants to give a new identity to woman and Sita, given a new identity, is no more the traditional submissive, enduring woman but is the one who reacts to adverse situations in life. She is pictured as an eco-feminist.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Sitaness, New Woman



'Ecofeminism', the term coined by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne, was developed as a theory in the 1970s. It is a branch of feminism that examines the connection between woman and nature. Ecofeminism links ecology with feminism. This closeness of woman with Nature is due to her reproductive role which brings her closer to it. Ecofeminists see the domination of a woman as stemming from the same ideologies that bring about the domination of environment. It argues that there is a connection between woman and Nature and it comes from their shared history of oppression by the patriarchal society. It brings together elements of the feminist and green movement, at the same time offering challenges to both. It takes from the green movement the concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism, the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women.

Ecofeminism as a theory deals with political and resistance movements and is also concerned with race and class. It believes that Nature and people are inseparable and this closeness has an

intrinsic value which needs to be preserved, even if it necessitates the curtailment of human use of Nature. Maria Meis, a socialist and ecofeminist, points out that since women are more involved in daily life than men, they are more engaged with elements of Nature. Vandana Shiva and Maria Meis give instances of the resistance offered by women protesting against ecological devastation that endangers their existence. Shiva refers to the Chipko movement of 1974 in which several women of the Indian Himalayan region started an unusual protest against the felling of indigenous trees. The movement was a female oriented one to save trees as well as the socio-political movement against the western model of development.

Towards the end of 1980s, ecofeminism developed widely and thus became a popular movement. Many scholars believe that Ynestra King, a feminist theorist, is instrumental in bringing about its popularity. In 1987 King wrote an article "What Is Ecofeminism?" in *The Nation*, which challenged all Americans who exploited Nature and oppressed women. The late 1980s witnessed the branching of ecofeminism into Radical ecofeminism and Cultural

ecofeminism. Radical ecofeminists believe that the dominant patriarchal society equates Nature and women in order to degrade both. On the other hand, Cultural ecofeminists bring about a co-ordination between woman and Nature. She is more sensitive to the deterioration or degradation of Nature.

An acclaimed poet and critic, Nandini Sahu has carved a niche in the literary scenario. Sahu's works reflect her deep interest in folklore, gender studies and environmental criticism. *Sita*, her long haiku poem, a monologue of 25 cantos, delineates Sita, the heroine of Valmiki's epic *The Ramayana*, from the post-structuralist and eco-feminist perspectives. While Valmiki's Sita is a paragon of traditional femininity, mostly self sacrificing and submissive to the desire of her "truth loving" husband Rama, Sahu's Sita is a revolutionary "modern" woman challenging the old norms and beliefs about woman. Her Sita represents women of various forms, "she is every woman, the propagated, interpolated role-model" in whom resides "the mass consciousness of the universe" (Sahu, Sita 6). Sahu makes use of the heroine of *The Ramayana* as her mouth-piece and she gives Sita the identity of an ecofeminist. In her monologue Sita says "Oh women! Take Sita, the bold defender, Sita/ the ecofeminist, Sita, the Mother as your role model" (120). Through her sufferings and oppression, Sita has transformed herself into a new woman. Some episodes of *The Ramayana* depict Sita as a bold woman, facing the challenges of life hoping that Rama, the *maryatha purushotham*, would elevate her. But Rama's sentence of exile imposed on her, after listening to the doubts of his subject, creates a pathetic situation which will be unbearable to any woman.

Crucial social issues of the modern day including female foeticide, bride burning and the Nirbhaya rape case, have been carefully interwoven in the poem which gives an insight into the current social issues. The ancient society and beliefs are presented in contemporary situations:

Can you be harbinger of time
when Nirbhaya would be adept to stand firm
despite a thousand scars on her body and
soul? (p18).

Sita by no means is a retelling of *The Ramayana* but it is, as Sahu opines penned as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic *Sita*, told in the first person narrative. Sahu's Sita is independent and optimistic, full of love, care, forgiveness and patience. She is the ultimate woman or the "original eco-feminist". She faces adverse situations in life with undaunted courage. The poet emphasizes woman empowerment in *Sita*. Dr. Sanjeev Kumar Uprety, a Nepali novelist, in the introduction to the Sahu's *Sita* says, "Nandini Sahu presents the story of *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective to show how Sita questions the norms and values of a pre-historic Hindu society from a woman's position. The long poem deconstructs the traditional understanding of Sita as a self-sacrificing woman, while re-interpreting her character from a modern, eco-feministic perspective" (iv).

Sita in *The Ramayana* is dynamic. She is Mother Earth's daughter. "I am born in a furrow from/ mother earth in the sanctified sacrificial grounds" (p5). She has the power to lift the miraculous *Shiva-Dhanush* which designs her destiny. On seeing Sita lifting the *dhanush*, Janaka decides to give his daughter in marriage only to the one who is capable of lifting it and thus Rama becomes her husband. Here the physical power becomes the criterion to choose a husband for Sita rather than her own desires and willingness: "The colossal bow was/ the backdrop, the condition to my *Swayamvar*" (p10).

The Sita of *The Ramayana* is always an obedient daughter and loving wife who chooses to be with her husband in all his happiness and sorrow, even in his exile she goes with him and this leads to her abduction. During their stay in the forest she is lured by a golden deer, Mareecha, the *maya* of Ravan. The deer holds a fascination for her and she longs to get it and compels Rama to catch it. Ravan, the demon king, now begins to play his pranks and thus she hears the fake cry of Rama calling out for help "O Lakshmana, oh my Sita dear!" (p 27). Sita urges Lakshmana to rescue Rama. Lakshmana who knows Mareecha's 'necromancies' disobeys her for which she accuses him and her perpetual insistence compels him to leave her. He draws the *Lakshmana-*

Rekha and asks her not to cross it; unfortunately she crosses it and is abducted by Ravan.

Ravan wants Sita to be his wife but she strongly refutes and even veils her face not to see him. During her stay in Lanka, she chants the name of Rama, her only refuge. After a great war Rama retrieves Sita. But after taking Sita back from Lanka, Rama becomes doubtful about Sita's chastity. He says: "Ravana could not have left you unpolluted/ after all you are a fine-looking, desirable woman!/All glory and grace have left you now, you are besmirched" (p 69).

Sita has to enter into an *agnipareeksha* (a trial-by-fire) to prove her chastity and the fire god protects her and saves her from the blaze. "To testify my transcendental sacredness, in person,/the Fire-God appeared from the pyre emblazon,/ carrying me in his fatherly arms, cosmic and benign" (p73). She wins. She once again begins a new life with Rama and they return to Ayodhya after fourteen years of the exile. The happiness of Ayodhya has returned, Rama is crowned as the king and people enjoy bliss under his rule. Everything is in perfect harmony and to add to the happiness, Sita conceives, her womanhood attains consummation, but her happiness does not last long. The problem starts when Rama happens to hear the doubts expressed by the washer-man about Sita's chastity. According to him "an insipid, decadent wife must not find a place at home" (p 86). Rama, bewildered at this comment, finds himself in a dilemma, whether to abandon Sita or to leave the kingdom back to Bharatha and go to some hermitage along with Sita, decides to desert his wife, though he had strong faith in his wife's chastity. He consoles himself: "The Mother Earth will take care of her, she stands for purity" (p 86).

Thus in the most crucial moment of her life, Sita is abandoned by her husband and she wonders how Rama could desert her in such a condition when even a tiger takes care of the tigress in her pregnancy. While she stands alone traumatized by sobs in the midst of the forest, sage Valmiki and his disciples come to her rescue and take her to the ashram. There in the ashram, she regains her strength and lives in peace. "Mother Nature was the phenomenal palliative to my

suffering soul/She healed my pain and in turn I became a healer (p91). There she is always engrossed in humanity's service leaving no time to brood over her destiny. She heals "the pain of many a wounded deer, peacocks;" (91). "My healing touch gave life to the dry grasses/ my tears gave the rivers full-bodied waters/ my music and songs added symphony and ambience" (p91).

In the ashram, she gives birth to her twins who grow under the tutelage of Muni Valmiki, and they grow up as brave and intelligent warriors. Valmiki pens the story of Rama and Sita and this becomes the chosen symphony of Lava and Kusha. The two adorable twins are so strong and powerful that they could even defeat Lakshmana and Hanuman in the massive war that occurred as a result of the *Asvamedha Yajna*. Rama is surprised to hear that the twelve year old twins defeated Lakshmana and Hanuman and wishes to see the two peerless twins. Muni Valmiki asks them to recite the song of Rama and the obedient disciples flawlessly recite. On hearing the song, Rama, captivated by the magical charm of the twin minstrels, orders numerous gold coins to be given to them. The children deny the gift: "No my Lord we are children of the forest who live in the hermitage" (100). Rama wants to know their lineage. On knowing their identity, he is surprised and asks to summon Sita, thus Sita is brought to Ayodhya. Even though Sita is summoned, Rama is not ready to look at her, he wants his subjects to be satisfied before accepting her for which he asks her to perform another fire test before his people. Sita cannot accept this harshness anymore and for the first time. She questions Rama of the injustice done to her. She demands justice from the King of Ayodhya and never wants to endure any more torture, decides to return to Mother Nature and prays: "Oh Mother Earth! If I am unstained in my thought and / action, then my dignity is yours; receive me back on your lap" (p107).

The Earth divides into two and she is taken in by Mother Nature. Thus Sita, the daughter of Nature, is reunited with her mother, the Earth. Sita has always been in the company of Nature and finally she returns to Nature itself. Sahu opines that Sita is not only a symbol of sacrifice and endurance

but also a soul of power and courage. Sahu's Sita has the face of a bold woman who is strong and courageous. She is a model or idol to the present world and is the 'new woman' by all means.

Sita, the daughter of Mother Earth, right from her birth is closely associated with Nature. In her childhood she was brought up mainly in the company of Nature. After her marriage she again went into the lap of Nature along with Rama and Lakshmana when they were in exile. Nature is her teacher, confidant and companion. When Rama is asked to go on exile, Sita insists on going with him. She, being a faithful wife, wants to accompany him. "I have been the audacious, adamant, self-willed, self – motivated/ woman forever. I joined you, because / that was my dharma, my duties to my husband" (20). The beauty of Nature delights her and she sacrifices all her luxuries and pleasures and enjoys her new place of stay. She is quiet happy with the fruits and greenery upon which she feeds on to satisfy her hunger. Her forest life reflects that she has some special relation with Nature. She "in the sacred presence of fire, skies and compliant passions" (23) is in perfect harmony with Nature. During their journey to the forest, while crossing river Ganges, Sita prays to Mother Ganga, to protect her husband. When Ravana abducts her, she calls out to the trees, animals and the entire Nature for help. The elements of Nature play an important role in helping Rama to detect Sita when she is abducted by Ravana. Nature, including trees and animals, weep when Sita is captured by King Ravana. Thus it is evident that Sita is valuable and important for Nature and how close she is with Nature. Later in Lanka, due to her resistance, Ravana gives her a period of time – twelve months -to surrender to him, during which she is accommodated in the Ashokavani-groove of Ashoka trees.

Once again when Rama abandons Sita to satisfy his subjects, doubting her chastity she is deserted in the forest near Muni Valmiki's ashram. There she gives birth to her twins and raises them up playing the role of a single mother. She lives there for almost twelve years until Rama recognizes his sons and wants the three to be summoned before him. Her life in the ashram again proves her association with Nature how harmoniously she has

lived there in the company and protection of Nature. "Ecology was my home now, free from the/ wistful four walls of the stately mansions and palaces/ The daughter of Mother Earth, I was ultimately in her lap" (93). Thus one can easily identify that most of Sita's life is spent in the abode of Nature. It is this life with Nature that gives her the strength to face the difficulties of life. Finally, Sita returns to Mother Earth when she is once again asked to undergo a test of chastity. It is unbearable for Sita to face any more trials and thus she decides to go back to her mother:

I was born of you, I wish to go back to you (p 108).

The miracle happened, the redemption emanated.

When I was in the trance of unconditional renunciation, the

earth got divided at my feet, and a golden throne arouse.

Mother Earth, the Ultimate Woman, arouse and took me in her lap... (p108)

Thus Nature is always a phenomenal palliative to the sufferings of Sita.

The poem poses questions related to morality, truth and character by evoking powerful images in lucid verse. While questioning it reconstructs the reality "essential" or universal femininity to reveal that femininity which can be emotional and rational at the same time she can play the role of a lover and a revolutionary at various points of her life. The powerful character of Sita is revealed in the following lines which also show her loving, caring, forgiving, protective and destructive nature: "I am *Prakriti*; born of and fading into Mother Nature./I am *Sakti*; phenomenal destroyer of Ravana./I am grace; I stand for mercy, bounty and redemption" (p111).

Apart from the feminist perspective, the poem also focuses on ecology, or Nature. The present world is greatly aware of the destruction posed by the patriarchal society. As how some men try to assert power on the female body, some men show their strength by exploiting and devastating the environment. In this way Nandini's Sita gives a chance to rethink the relationship between gender and environment, especially because Sita is the

daughter of Earth and she returns to Nature when her husband wants her to prove her chastity for protecting his masculine social prestige.

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