

Vol. 6, Issue-1
February 2015

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English



6th Year of Open Access

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The Poet as a Critic: Vishwanath Bite in Conversation with Nandini Sahu

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Dr. Nandini Sahu (1973) is a major voice in contemporary Indian English literature, widely published in India, U.S.A, U.K., Africa and Pakistan. She is a double gold medalist in English literature and also the award winner of All India Poetry Contest, the *Shiksha Ratna Purashkarand Bouddha Creative Writers' Award*. She is the author/editor of eleven books titled *The Other Voice(a poetry collection)*, *Recollection as Redemption, Post-Modernist Delegation to English Language Teaching*, *The Silence(a poetry collection)*, *The Post-Colonial Space: Writing the Self and the Nation*, *Silver Poems on My Lips(a poetry collection)*, *Folklore and the Alternative Modernities* (Vol.I), *Folklore and the Alternative Modernities* (Vol. II), *Sukamaa and Other Poems, (a poetry collection)*, *Suvarnarekhaand Sita (A Poem,)* published from New Delhi. Presently, she is an Associate Professor of English in Indira Gandhi National Open University [IGNOU], New Delhi. Dr. Sahu has designed academic programmes/courses on Folklore and Culture Studies, Children's Literature and American Literature for IGNOU. Her areas of research interest cover Indian Literature, New Literatures, Folklore and Culture Studies, American Literature, Children's Literature and Critical Theory. She is the Chief Editor/Founder Editor of *Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature and Language (IJLL)*, a bi-annual peer-reviewed journal in English.

Dr. Sahu speaks for the marginal in her writings, but importantly, for her subaltern(ity) is neither simply a classy term for the oppressed; nor is it a rhetorical trope for abstract critical theorising. KaviNandini's (that's an identity she cherishes!!!) poetic ethos is a committed act of voicing for the unjustly muted and often un-understood sections under the trajectory of social stratification. The poetic self of Nandini revels in celebrating the elemental that is embedded in a rural, tribal, poverty stricken Odishan landscape that ties the people to their moorings. She brings it out through a series of native images that become in essence pan-Indian. There is in Nandini the deep-rooted bearing of an eco-feminist who draws her female characters in the closest approximation to nature (mother earth). Her elegant lines are tuned in a lucid cadence where the small and marginal occupies the central prominence. There is an indomitable gusto in Nandini's lines which engages a sensitive reader in rediscovering his/her native within. She is therefore an Indian poet who very simply holds up a psychological mirror for her reader. On a greater canvas,

the poetry of Nandini makes us delve both emotionally and intellectually into a veritable image gallery that ranges from the sensuous to the abstract; the tangible to the oblique. Her USP in this is the honesty of articulation. Her subtle, elusive and thought provoking writings transport us to a corridor of the mind between the outer world and the thinking, creative self. There is, on reading her poetry, the feeling that the poet is expressing what we have only often felt. This makes Nandini the chronicler of our unstated minds!

In an exclusive interview with Dr.Sahu, Dr.Viswanath Bite chats with her about her concept of poetry on the occasion of the launch of the fifth anniversary issue of *The Criterion*, which he edits.



Will you tell us something about yourself (place of birth, school and anything in between) .

Dr. Bite, first of all I must congratulate you for your outstanding contribution to Indian literature through *The Criterion*, and in your personal capacity as a poet and critic. And thank you for making me a part of the fifth anniversary issue of *The Criterion*.

About my formative years as a poet/creative writer, as I reminisce, my creative zeal found first expressions when I would have been around 7. This was when I penned my earliest poems on the natural landscape and people surrounding me. During my school and college days, I was a self motivated and dedicated student, as also a social worker in my own tiny ways, speaking for the less fortunate and the deprived. Hailing of parents who were both teachers and sensitive humans, I took to teaching the children of slums and kids of their domestic helps in the evenings after finishing my classes. The study of literature in English was a natural career option for me, so I did my Honours in English from a private college as a non-collegiate candidate, though that never came in the way of my topping all colleges under Berhampur University. I went on to do the Masters in English literature from Berhampur University and was the gold medallist once

again. The same year I registered for Ph.D in English under Late Professor Niranjan Mohanty from VisvaBharati, Santiniketan, on Indian English poetry, completed my PhD at the earliest. In the meantime, I taught for a few years at the local college in my home town, and then at Biju Patnaik University of Technology, Odisha. I fondly remember that even as a teacher of literature at a technical university, I became a favourite of my students, giving hard core engineers to be, a feel of the subtleties of the humanities. My critical publications and poetry volumes went hand in hand with my teaching jobs, along with fond mothering of my only child, Parth. I joined the School of Humanities, Indira Gandhi National Open University, which stands for the democratization of education, and emancipation of the masses through such education, in January 2006.

Which books did you find yourself reading whilst growing up and which are you currently reading?

I grew up reading rather gender-sensitive books. I was born and brought up in a middle class family in rural India which helped to shape both my early insecurities and the feelings of privilege as a woman. Initially, the readers and the critics were reluctant to believe that a woman coming from such rural background with no godfather/mother on her side can build up a niche for herself on her own! But slowly and steadily, it happened. Women's writings have interested me since my early youth. I grew up reading Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Juliana Berners, Mary Sidney Herbert, Isabella Whitney, Aemilia Lanyer, Elizabeth Cary, Mary Wroth, Anne Bradstreet, Jane Lead, Katherine Philips, Mary Rowlandson, Aphra Behn, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Anne Killigrew, Delarivier Manley, Mary Asteel, Eliza Haywood, Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Frances Burney, Phillis Wheatley, Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, Maria Edgeworth, Dorothy Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Mary Shelley, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Berrett Browning, Margaret Fuller, Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*), Harriet Jacobs, Bronte sisters, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, Emily Dickinson, Christiana Rossetti, Louisa May Alcott, Alice James, Kate Chopin, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Bishop, Mary McCarthy, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nadine Gordimer, Densie Levertov, Patricia Beer, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Plath, Margaret Atwood, Linda Hogan, Rita Dove, Cathy Song. Among Indian women writers, I have extensively read Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Ashapurna Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Kamala Das, Bharati Mukherjee, Prativa Ray, Anita Desai, and recently, Arundhati Ray and Jhumpa Lahiri. Theoretically, I have read enough of Sandra M Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Simone de Beauvoir. This helped me in framing a fair idea of women's literature and shaping up my own literature.

Gabrial Garcia Marquez, Herman Hesse, Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, Salman Rushdie, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Amitav Ghosh are among the writers who have influenced me a lot. Currently I am reading mythology and Indian folklore.

What inspires you to write poetry?

Poetry comes to me as a persistent mode of manifestation of the innate self. On restrained reflection, I'd say it springs from the compulsion or even the impulse to express the innermost awareness, and as a self in unity with my environment and my backgrounds. I embrace all things, material and non-material, sentient and inorganic in it. My inspiration comes from the affairs that keep on happening in the world around me, the boundless monographs of Nature, both mortal and cosmic, and the different filaments of thought and sentiments that all these awaken in me.

As for influences, my reading of classical literature has molded me— the admiration that I have for cohorts of eternal literary thought, values, mythoi and their depiction – both in Eastern and Western literatures. In Odisha, my home state, the unwavering inspirations have been of poets/writers like Jayanta Mahapatra, Manoj Das, Bibhu Padhi and my teacher and guide, the late Professor Niranjan Mohanty, from Santiniketan. In addition, there are many contemporary Indian English poets and writers, with whom I have regular rewarding interactions and contemplations on poetry.

What advice do you have for aspiring poets?

My advice would be, be a student of literature forever. Classical literature and literary classics can nurture a writer wonderfully. Nothing substitutes reading. Next, a poet should understand poetic diction before taking up the pen.

Can you describe the time when you first realized that creating was something you absolutely had to do?

Well, I realized that I shall be nothing but a writer as early as I was seven years old! My father was my inspiration since the beginning; in fact I am what I am because of him. He used to say, "You are different!" He always wanted me to be a writer and a professor of English, seeing the kind of stuff I was able to write at a tender age. His sad demise in January this year has left a vacuum in me. Compulsive/ inspirational writing came to me since 1995 when I was recognized by poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, Bibhu Padhi and Late Prof. Niranjan Mohanty. At that point I got critical attention from literary journals and newspapers like KavyaBharati, Indian Literature, Scoria, The Quest, New Quest, Poetcrit, The Asian Age and many more, which was quite motivating for a young poet of twenty! By then I knew that creating was something I absolutely had to do.

Do the Internet and social media contribute to the well-being of poetry?

I don't think that Internet and social media contribute anything much to poetry, because poetry is an intellectual and literary pursuit. Most young poets/writers spend a lot of time on social networking sites to publicize their writings rather than focusing on qualitative reading and writing. Of course there are some e-journals like Muse India, The Criterion, Syndic Literary Journal, Confluence, The Missing Slate, Induswomanwriting.com, Postcolonial Text, learningandcreativity.com, Poets International, Creative Saplings and many such who are providing a good platform for poets to go international through the Internet.

What do most poorly-written poems have in common?

All poorly written poems have just one thing in common—they die a natural death the moment they are born.

What do most well-written poems have in common?

The commonality of all good poems is—they have a universal approach. And they are timeless.

Why is it such a difficult market for poets right now?

Yes, there are lots of difficulties for poets today to publish, but I believe good poetry finds its way. There are publishers who are ready to take up the challenge. In an age of global consumerism, poetry is still written, volumes published and sold is definitely a welcome fact. Poetry has a calming effect on the human heart. The exquisiteness of poetry is the magnificence of veracity, ever restoring itself, being forever pertinent. Because poetry has the capacity to address human thought, passions and social movements.

What aspects of your poetry reader in general and Research scholars in particular must discover and explore?

Gender sensitivity and an ecofeministic approach to poetry/literature thereof—these are the two things that I want my readers to explore in my writings. The two standard stereotypes of women in Indian literature as well as media are the figures of the mother and the adoring lover. In addition to these characters, there are two other typecasts – those of the refined city girl and the less sophisticated rural woman. The two are often compared in a straitjacketed manner to exaggerate the conflict between avant-gardism and orthodoxy. The urban woman is shown or commonly perceived as totally detached from life in the country or from kinsfolks who are not city dwellers. Even in our movies and television programs, two extreme kinds of women—the goddess and the demoness—are represented; the real women, the women like us who have their only too human pains and pleasures are mostly missing! This is a lopsided and simplistic representation of the feminine gender.

If there's something in Derrida that I fully appreciate, it's his violation of polarizations in order to accentuate and accept those metamorphoses that are there in each one of us. In response to this thought, I discover many women rethinking their feminism after a certain age, like I am doing at this stage. People amend, circumstances change. Being a strong woman is to be meaningfully flexible. Perhaps we desired the exciting positions at the beginning until such time as we could find our own solidarity as women.

Motherhood is power. But I have always seen mothers as being more defenseless, at least in our society. Yet, I guess that having a son alters your view of all men as antagonists. In an ideal man-woman relationship, dichotomies perhaps should not actually function. It's only if a power-game is played that consciousness about who's the subject or object comes out. At a certain level of communication, these kinds of dichotomies collapse. I wonder if all clashes should breakdown in order to multiply the opportunities of women! I discover that the poetics of radicalism is pushed to the boundaries of the ivory tower of academia. I don't alarm myself much as a feminist with critics and intellectuals as far as my poetry is concerned, even if I delight in reading them at times. I centre on my personae and leave them up to others to decide what they want to examine. As far as my literature is concerned, my poems speak of a female solidarity, authority, individuality and woman's fight at a distinct level for persistence as well as on the shared level of touching patriarchal coercion. Catastrophe in one phase of women's existence does not reduce them to adversity. It is their capacity to live life organically according to their own terms, without the shelter provided by men, (which sadly often become an ego booster for the male) that defines them as tough units in any intimidating male world. Their courage, resilience and fortitude in the struggle against all odds make them independent women, fighters and survivors against tyranny, patriarchal or social. When I write, the substance goes beyond just about everything else in my life. For the time that I am shaping a character, all other concerns become immaterial. Once I finish, I come back to actuality and deal with other worries. My feminine anxiety is not the kind of extreme like Sylvia Plath's or Emily Dickinson's, the one that puts one's head into an oven or something, leaving bread and milk for children. I am a post-modernist and not a modernist because I don't identify with melancholy. I guess while writing I am redefining knowledge from the past. It's not a restoration of past experience but a novel creation. Critics have viewed that my recent poetry collection, *Sukamaa and Other Poems*, is a personal narrative, which, in fact, it is not. I use certain rudiments from life around and counterfeit my opinions to theorize a work of literature in the contemporary situation. Can you salvage the past? You can recreate it and belong to a tradition, but you can't reclaim it. True, you antagonize the past in order to travel new distances. We all look for our past to understand and judge ourselves, but in creative writing you can't just sit at the roots; you have to perceive the unabridged diagram—the diverse aspects that have come to formulate a character. I think that we women mostly start at nothingness, in all our new roles, be it as daughter, wife or mother. The past

demarcated us as beings that we never were. We become aliens at each juncture. Simone de Beauvoir would say, we became “other” to the society and to ourselves. Anyway, my idea of feminism is not about protecting women, but of empowering them so much so that protection is not required in their lives.

Again I feel gender study is incomplete without Masculinity Study. Talking about men may appear to be a simple and linear task because we assume that man/masculinity/patriarchy is the standard and everything which needs to be said about men has already been said. Such a prejudice rests on the largely discussed feminist structure that men are sufficiently represented in our literary theories. In the 1960s and 70s, since the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), scholars have made feminism, feminist issues, the role of women in literature and society as the point of attention, thus, consigning men to a one-dimensional paradigm. This is prone to view them in a mode as the heads of family and state who exercise power of patriarchy. Thus men have been just subjected to be seen as individuals with power, and we are kind of a priori sure about this vital relationship between gender and power. This is the principle of feminist social inquiry. But this leans towards an oversimplification of the position of men in the social hierarchic order. Masculinity Studies problematizes this reductionist explanation. I guess Masculinity Studies is a kind of re-thinking of feminist criticism as it observes the social production of and changes in ‘masculinities.’

After 1970, feminism evolved into feminisms, it was no narrower but diverse, taking up the questions of race, class and sexuality. Gender Studies emerged as a branch of Women's Studies, propagating the idea that sex and gender are not the same. Rather gender binary (man/woman) is a social concept, while sex (male/female) is a biological concept. Gender is inaccurately demarcated and historically flexible; thus the connection between gender and sexuality is complex. Gender Studies takes up diverse subjects like the study of man /woman/lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/transvestite/intersex. The result was, Masculinity Studies emerged during the 1970s inclined by Men's Liberation movements. Masculinities talked of the positions of men in a gender hierarchical order. During this period, male activists felt that masculinity was facing a ‘crisis’ and a new awareness should be created; they were supported by psychoanalysts and sociologists who motivated them to take up the challenges of middle-class masculinity. They planned personal-growth groups through which men could express their sufferings, challenges as men, without having to be worried about their positions. In the academia, researchers tried to recognise the stresses of young men to encounter the accepted standards of masculinity. The argument was that men, and not only women, are marginalised due to the stereotypical gender conventions. The second wave of Masculinity Studies came into being succeeding Third Wave Feminism during the late 1980s. Now Masculinity Studies focused on marginal and minority men and was interested in class, ethnicity and sexual identity of men. Masculinity Studies viewed masculinity as a social construction defining its ideological functions. By the 1990s, Masculinity Studies talked of the problems of men and their association

with patriarchal authority—a subject that had till now seemed obvious and therefore gone unchallenged. R.W. Connell's revolutionary text, *Masculinities* (1995), claims that there are many masculinities based on common and cultural contexts, each related to the points of power. Contemporary Masculinity Studies concerns issues as the discordance of the "Classic Man" with the tests of modernism, the debate over the "New Man", the issues of masculinity in relation to the issues such as class, race, culture and people. Masculinity Studies seeks to re-think old paradigms of feminist thinking vis-à-vis individuality, victimization and the hierarchies of power. In the process, Masculinity Studies exposes the gaps and conventions in feminist theories with regard to the feminists' ideas of men and masculinity. Masculinity Studies or Men's Studies is neither a rejoinder to, nor negation of feminism. Rather it owes to feminism an intellectual obligation. In fact, Masculinity Studies would not have happened without feminism and its search for patriarchal power and freedom. Men's Studies scholars pool resources with feminists and question the society which considers men and women merely as gendered entities.

I believe writers have a sensible way of addressing a people. The limitations of the society might change from time to time. But good literature goes beyond that subjective cause, a mature writer maintains a healthy writer-community relationship. By tradition, men create and women recreate. But a writer without gender bias is able to do both. Men have been barred from all women's movements; very few male students take up a course on feminism or feminist theory. This is not a healthy practice and it is essential for the feminists to brush up their approaches and ensure the presence of men in humanist missions rather than narrowing down their ideas as feminist or 'mennist'. Feminism is after all a significant feature of humanism and condemnation of one gender is of course not going to make the circle complete and successful.

Gender Equality – that is the spirit of my writings. I try to sensitize the society about solidarity.

How would you describe uniqueness of each of your poetry collections?

I have revealed an independent mind of my own, right from my maiden collection of poems ***The Other Voice*** in 2004. The poems in this volume flash images of alienation and existential absurdity, interfusing classical art with my personal as well as social consciousness. In most of the poems, the personae seems to rejoice at the beauty of creation: sometimes ecstatic about being a woman, at other times disturbing the slumber of society on sensitive issues like mental slavery of the human, subjugation of women. Whenever time is ripe, a brainchild, a poem is born from my pen's tongue, setting a living, breathing world that adds fiery fresh flood of poems to the world of Muse. ***The Silence*** is my second collection of poems where I have taken care to include poems dealing with the secret chambers of the human heart, which is not so silent afterall! These poems reveal a complex and rich treasure of emotions. As a sensitive poet, I have poured out my concerns, fears and ecstasies through these poems, attempting to trace the contours of the social, philosophical and spiritual environment I inhabit.

In my third poetry collection, *Silver Poems on My Lips*, published in 2009, I pour out poetry that oozes from the secret chambers of the heart, though I know well that in an age of material pleasures perhaps it is difficult for the heart to fit in. Thus, an insecurity and reservation moves me greatly in my expedition through life. My moorings however rotate around a belief in human values. Love and poetry are my therapy to live, breathe and sing. Yes I have a mellifluous voice to boot as well, though we are given to understand that it is an extremely private articulation!

In my fourth poetry collection, *Sukamaa and Other Poems (2013)*, Sukamaa is my folklore and the poem is an outcome of my concern for the ‘other’ – the rural, poor tribal woman Sukamaa who is evenly poised between oblivion, nostalgia and an ever hovering presence that impels me to retrace her contours. Thus, my fourth poetry collection *Sukamaa and Other Poems* is a tribute to the marginal. Most poems in this volume are the utterance of a revolutionary zeal to straighten out the record between the less and the more fortunate – thereby to set up an inclusive standpoint within the matrix of a complex identity politics.

Sita (A Poem) is my maiden foray into the long narrative genre, published in 2014; its subject takes off from our epic traditions and takes the discourse much further. The poet-thinker-ecofeminist in me has designed this magnum opus which has always been shaping itself in my subconscious, the writing act of what promises to be a whole new take on the Indian epic has come about when I am convinced that my thoughts have readily found utterance. *Sita* is, in no way, a retelling of *The Ramayana*. It is penned rather as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic, Sita, told in the first person narrative. It carries my convictions and is the result of an organic fusion of my roving mind.

My edited anthology of women poets *Suvarnarekha* (2014) is named after the river flowing from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal in India. The origin of the river is *River Saraswati*, which borrows its name from Goddess Saraswati, the fountain of all wisdom. *Suvarnarekha* is like a woman—life-giving, eternally-flowing, nourishing, a source of ecstasy and beauty, an epitome of mysticism and sustenance. This anthology validates a new dimension to our approach to women’s poetry in English in India.

How do you see the Literary Scene in India? Is it progressing or retrogressing?

Indian literature today is no more at crossroads. It seems to know at the moment which road to take. This is clear from both its tone and tenor. It is bold and tentative at the same time. As a result, it is avant-garde, not that it intends thereby to deny any established literary norms or order. It is revolutionary in the contented belief that no such order exists or ever existed or is ever necessary. Indian literature is liberal, flexible and ever evolving.

How will you judge the body of contemporary Indian English Poetry?

As late as 1937, Yeats reminded Indian writers that “No man can think or write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue” and called “Indo-Anglian” poetry “a blind alley, lived with

curio shops, leading nowhere.” But hundreds of successful, powerful Indian English poets have proved Yeats false. As Daruwalla feels, “for a poet, language has to be used as a sort of acetylene torch with which heat tempts to break barriers. This can only be done if he changes, recreates, transmutes.” And for Kamala Das, “The language one employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by the words.” And there is no doubt that Indian English poetry contains thought, philosophy, tradition and memory more than any other region.

What is the role of the Central Sahitya Akademi in popularizing the Indian English Literature?

Central Sahitya Akademi is organizing some good programmes to encourage writers and give them a platform to showcase their talents. Recently they invited me and a couple of women poets to a programme called *Narichetana*. It was wonderful and interactive. I read and discussed my recent poetry collection *Sita (A Poem)* in the programme, which was very well taken by the erudite audience. Also, their journal *Indian Literature* is a lasting contribution to Indian literature.

Thank you Dr. Nandini for the engaging and very informative conversation.