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‘The Concert of Womanhood’: Reading Nandini Sahu’s *Sita* (A Poem)

Srideep Mukherjee

Assistant Professor of English
Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata

“Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.” Helene Cixous: *The Laugh of the Medusa*¹

The urge to revisit these lines written in 1975 originally in French (and made available in English through the translation of Keith and Paula Cohen in 1976) which laid the basic roadmap for what came to be known as ‘Ecriture Feminine’ came from the very first glance at the ‘Preface’ to *Sita* (A Poem) by Nandini Sahu. At the very outset, Nandini categorically states that her long poem is not a re-telling of *The Ramayana* in any of its varied extant forms; it is, as she puts it, “*penned as a poetic memoir of the heroine of the epic Sita, told in the first person narrative*”. (Sahu: v) (Italics mine) Conventional literary theory has it that the epic is a predominantly masculine form of poetic utterance; history of literature would augment that presumption as well. However, the realistic dynamics of eking out living in a postcolonial globalised society will uphold beyond any doubt, the absurdity of gendering representations of life in literature from the view point of the writer. The authorial preface too augments this, as she quotes on the one hand Matthew Arnold (*Absence*) in a Foucauldian understanding of the invisible societal pressures that make forgetting a forced upon act; and on the other, reiterates after Ian Hacking that such perforce forgetting resistantly forms the modernist sensibility of our character, personality and soul. It is between the interstices of this ‘being made to forget’ and instinctive dogged remembrance/understanding through sensibility that she traces the contours of her protagonist, Sita. Hence the text stands as a subversive deconstruction of the epic from the subject position of one subalterned by gender.

The interest behind this Paper primarily stems from the fact of the poet herself calling it a first person narrative; wherein she attempts not just a radical displacement of the focus of the long poem from patriarchal/chauvinistic social ethos, but catapults the text on a universal eco-feminist plane by proclaiming through it the ‘Sitaness’ of every woman. The modus operandi in this is both rhetorical and sociological – she simultaneously ‘divines’ and ‘humanis(es)’ Sita with what is called ‘a quixotic presentiment’; and also assimilates the various receptions of the character ranging from the marginalised, the sacred, the self-effacing to the profaned, the self-willed as also the beautiful woman armed with knowledge and power. At once, Sita transcends all space-time bounds; as one recognizes the all too relevant efforts at gender sensitisation and valid probe of the patriarchal politics of deification, which in turn bring up the purity-pollution debate, all of which remain ever relevant in the Indian context. In this sense, the text is untarnished by any super-imposed feminist agenda which in fact the poet categorically eschews. In the long span of 25 Cantos, *Sita* (A Poem) rather problematises issues of identity and personal-public peripheries within the framework of feudal polity on a temporal frame, and thereby within the larger social

canvas on a universal plane. In fact, all of it is cumulatively universalised by an almost neo-historicist perspective wherein the poet binds history (as myth) and textuality in perfect reciprocity, syncing the voiced concerns with all times. By thus harking back and forth in time, Sahu transcends any temporal barriers to the metaphor of Rama *rajya* and questions subalternity inherent in stereotyping of gender, in a way that has always been a nagging thorn at the heart of the evolution of the nation and its 'civil' society. In course of this, she not only assays the character of Sita as inhering the collective unconscious of all progressive, independent women (wherein these often narrowly construed terms are pragmatically re-defined), Sahu also ventures to explore female bonding with her own Sita as the pivotal force. In the same Preface she also mentions that the subject has been seminal to thoughts across her literary oeuvre, so this means the long poem in a way marks the culmination of Nandini's poetic flair while transcending the ever fleeting boundaries of the personal and the artistic.

There is a clear structural design behind the arrangement of the 25 cantos. Canto 1 reiterates in greater detail in poetry what the Preface has in prose. The sense of contiguity in passing from one to the other evokes Nadine Gordimer's choice of the phrase "inward testimony" of witness literature as a genre to describe *Sita* (A Poem). In Gordimer's words, "Witness literature finds its place in the depths of revealed meaning, in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness and the antennae of receptivity to the lives among which writers experience their own as a source of their art".² As this paper will argue, the text at hand does exactly this as the author builds a new bridge between epic and modernity whereby she lives and recreates the Sita of yore for us. In the manner of composing witness literature, Nandini involves the reader into the participatory act of reading, as in approximating the broad contours of Sita; albeit herself circumscribing a very wide periphery within which to estimate the protagonist who is culled out of Sage Valmiki's 'adikavya':

Call her what you may – Sita, Janaki,
Vaidehi, Ramaa – she is Woman
She is every woman, the propagated, interpolated role model. (Sahu: 1)

Noticeably free from either the Bloomean 'anxiety of influence' or the hallowed epic device of invoking a muse, she shows subaltern agency through a radically subversive reading of accepted facts from the female point of view, armed with the neo-historicist tool that at once destroys periodicity through assimilation from what is called 'a timeless history'. We thus have a Sita who dwells alike in the corridors of power, in households, streets and call centres, in the victimhood of a Nirbhaya, in the helpless tears and hidden fears of the poor or even in the innumerable single mothers who battle for legal rights and social acceptance of their children! The 21st century Sita, as Nandini writes, is 'truly animated to this living, present living'. That this is no romantic demagoguery but the poet's exhortation of womanhood to reassess in the light of Sita their infinite potential is made clear with the allusion to Pegasus's resilience. Her belief in

the power of the eco-feminist creed seeps through as she writes of Sita, whom she has called ‘the original ecofeminist’:

Come back she has
From the segments of Mother Earth, to live in me, in you,
in the mass consciousness of the universe. (Sahu: 1)

One of the most widely accepted myths of Sita’s birth and death being from and to the earth respectively, folk imagination has often associated her with the cult of fertility. Nandini’s belief in the ‘sitaness’ of every woman strikes new ground through these lines where the female as the bearer of fertility is very importantly equated with the bestower of the desirable human faculty of ‘consciousness’ as a derivative of conscience, the genuine form of which humanity so dearly lacks and pays for equally dear. Thus fertility is perceived as beyond the physical or the politics of the body, just as the metaphor of woman as Lakshmi (hence provider) characterizes Sita even before she actually becomes a mother. Hence Nandini finds her Sita as much in Florence Nightingale and Mother Teresa, just as perhaps she found her in real life in Sukamaa, of whom she wrote earlier in *Sukamaa and Other Poems*:

She passed away. Suka-maa

Suka’s mother. Suka’s – Sakunta’s –
Shakuntala’s mother
She was the mother earth,
the virtual mother of we six sisters.
In our love, perhaps she loved less her

Suka, Shaili and Koili, her own daughters. (Sahu, 2013: 1)³

She concludes the poem with a tone of regret at being ‘an unwitting bystander’ whose conscientiousness pricks her to pen the untold tales of subalterns like Sukamaa for ‘an unmindful posterity’. Since the poet considers *Sita (A Poem)* as ‘seminal to (her) thoughts on life that find expression in the creative impulse of literature’, there is reason to believe that with this text she comes to a rounded understanding of her vocation as a poet. This in a way also reinforces the sub-text of witness literature broached upon earlier.

Canto II brings a second layer of introduction from the dramatis personae of Sita herself, beginning with the story of her birth that simultaneously venerates and others her; an othering that however also foregrounds her eco-feminist creed. With courage she eludes the patriarchy fostered topos of ‘*Sitayah charitam mahat*’ and declares:

I am *utterly and unquestioningly in love*.

I am the *resolute, acquiescent*,

enthraling wife of Lord Rama... (Sahu:5) [Italics mine]

These lines vindicate the claim earlier made in this paper of the terms ‘progressive’ and ‘independent’ being pragmatically re-defined in the context of Sita. Instead of being a passive adherent to the deification that runs at the sub-textual level as a patriarchal ploy (and is the staple

of most parent texts) to hem her consciousness of ‘incandescent strength’ (Canto XXV), the refrain of Sita as the woman (above and beyond a rarefied soul) being in love with her husband and expecting love in return is very eloquent. Ordinarily, for a woman in the public domain, such a professing of the personal would be unexpected, but as a *careful* perusal of the text will show, this is not the same as reverence for ‘*Maryada Purusottam*’ that pervades the epic. Rather it is the mark of Sita’s innate womanliness that Nandini designates as her ‘Sita-ness’. She is, by her own acclaim, resolute and acquiescent, while being intensely aware of her enthralling nature. Without doubt, the poet envisages this self-awareness of the coexistence of apparently (*sic.*) multiple and mutually challenging qualities in the woman of today; for these alone can give her both the completeness of womanhood and the strength to combat patriarchal oppression. Thus being pativrata; defining womanhood through the full cycle of duties like daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood; creating a chain of female bondings with Aryan and non-aryan women alike whether in Ayodhya or Lanka; or her communion with forms of nature go hand in hand with Sita’s recurrent critique of patriarchal social codes like the ‘text and context of a complete connubial’ in the case of her Swayamvar, or the very chauvinistic connotations of raj dharma whereby Rama blissfully forgets that the wife too is a subject of Ayodhya and has rights to justice. Thus Rama-*rajya* becomes a chauvinist’s utopia even as Sita’s narrative is pervasive with her knowledge of these failings on the part of her ‘protector’, and thereby the state. In this sense she emits subaltern agency in her unique forms of resolute protest/suave acceptance and it is necessary to perform a deconstructive reading to arrive at the fullest possible implications of the text at hand. It is also important to identify the vantage point that gives the hitherto subalterned character the voice of the protagonist, as the persona is contemporised:

I am speaking my words now, lying bereaved
on the lap of my mother, Vasundhara, the

Mother Earth, your memories are sinking
Deep within the mind’s courier. There a
Bride burning, here a girl child is

Doomed. Anon! a female foeticide there!
When I cannot see myself as different
From the concert of the entire womanhood... (Sahu: 12-13)

It is indeed a concert out of polyphony, coming from a mature and assimilative poetic voice, transcended to a more cosmic plane than in Nandini’s earlier poetry:

The Opposite Sex⁴

The pleasure of being a woman
the opposite sex, is immense.
Opposite
by Nature, in dreams, ambitions,

obsessions, recreation,
 purgating the creation, performing roles.
 Opposite, perfect and different
 having beauty
 of face and the soul as well,
 the better part of man and
 the mirror of God,
 teaching affectability to
 the opposite artless,
 heartless one.
 Woman smiles
 sucking the venom of life
 opposite to the sweetness
 set in two sides of the coin.

The 'differance' between Sita's/Nandini's ability to see through the fault lines of Rama, much of which may be the domain of masculinity studies, and her conscious choice of defining 'dharma' as the dutiful wife gives a whole new range of significations to the character. Thus while on the one hand she mentors herself to comprehend the 'meaning of wifeness' which primarily entails the fourteen years of exile and readies herself as the home-maker in dire straits, she simultaneously soliloquies on the injustice being meted out to Urmila, the docile wife of Lakshman who must now endure more than a *yug* of solitude that is killing, to say the least. The question Sita poses to Rama merits an answer, though there is none:

Where did your
 unending compassion to values and duty
 vanish in this agenda of pain for her? (Sahu: 15)

There is neither an answer to the politics of male gaze and touch that Sita raises in the context of a long line of women from myth (Ahalya, Anasuya and Savitri) through epic (Sita herself and Draupadi) to the modern day Nirbhaya. Her spirited riposte to women of substance is to realize that deification is but a patriarchal ploy at comprehending, nay taming woman's enigmatic blend of beauty that is kept beyond bounds with the armour of knowledge and power. An instance of the abortive anger and the insurmountable challenge to manhood this produces, could be found in the statement made to Leslee Udwin of BBC by a lawyer fighting for the accused in the Nirbhaya case:

"In our society, we never allow our girls to come out from the house after 6:30 or 7:30 or 8:30 in the evening with any unknown person... You are talking about man and woman as friends. Sorry, that doesn't have any place in our society. We have the best culture. In our culture, there is no place for a woman."⁵

The ban on Udwin's film *India's Daughter*, the furore on both sides of the divide in social media, Barkha Dutt's statistics to show how sexual violence is a rampant global phenomena and such things should not diffuse the focus or spirit with which the above lines have been quoted. What

matters is how patriarchy, which is an embedded social structure, tries to legitimize gender violence and how the ancestry of such legitimizing may undeniably be found in the ancient epic forms that Nandini here tries to interrogate.

The ahistorical nature of the text once again becomes clear when Sita questions not just the specifics but the entire philosophy and archaeology of touch, purity-pollution and chastity in words that are redolent with dramatic irony of the fate that is to befall her as well:

Can the grace of a woman redeem
only with the touch of a man? And can

the grace of a woman wane only with
the fraudulent touch of a man? (Sahu: 17)

Mass protests of the Nirbhaya incident that have been compared to the likes of Cairo's Tahrir Square, definitely suggest that affirmative action on gender equality in India has moved beyond the pages of Article 14 of the Constitution. *Sita (A Poem)* as this paper strives to show, is of that catalogue; it conjoins upon women the concerted task of summoning courage in the face of the subversive social tag of blasphemy, to stand up for their own rights and protest its violation. For her part, Sita alias Nandini scripts ecriture feminine by baring her own voice which comes through abject nullification of over three hundred different versions of Ramayana, all of which wily nilly are narratives of the woman as subaltern. This explains the demystification of the epic language and the creation of a discourse that easily criss-crosses time and space.

In the same vein the poet must be credited for being free of any undue feminist slant. Sita the champion of women's rights is also her own critic when it comes to her obsession for the golden deer which is beyond what is ordained by Mother Nature. Further, she is the quintessential philosopher who ponders over the logic of the perennial subjection of woman as a means to an end – Helen, Sita, Draupadi or the unborn female foetus – the list is long. And yet again, at an intensely private level she is the same person whose buoyant expression of conjugal love is the mettle of all life sustaining man-woman relationship:

(That woman loves) the fortification of her man, feels secure with him
This is her cipher of chastity, the glory
of her feminine prosperity. (Sahu: 41-42)

The multi-dimensional vision of Sita with which she creates a female bonding that encompasses 'tales of incredible exoneration and extraction' is indeed praiseworthy. Just as the exiled queen of Ayodhya can look beyond her imminent doom and care for Urmila, so also a Sita liberated from the imprisonment of Ravana after victory to the vanara sena led by Rama cannot but feel for the widowhoods of Mandodari and Sulochana. At one level they are today what she would be in the days to come – victims of boundless male ego. So she calls the battle a game 'fetid and fair'; advises them to take a panoramic view of life while offering her sisterhood, even as she

realizes how poignantly this ambivalence of fair and foul has woven its way into the rubric of her own life. Post the fall of Lanka, her status too changes from a doting wife expectant of her husband's embrace to a political prisoner whom the next king must hand over to the victorious general who is only incidentally her husband.

Both the irony and the embedded politics at play here are interesting. Though he has rendered strategic support to Rama which has been fostered by the sub-text of ethics based alliance, yet Vibhisana is technically the king now, while Rama, territory-less, stands venerated only by virtue of his larger than life image as *maryada purusottam*, all the more bolstered by the fact of his being the vanquisher of evil incarnate. In political terms of course, Rama stands tall as the king-maker and the restorer of order in the land of demons; even though it be a subtle strategy of territorial aggression! And Sita, her eager awaiting of a glimpse of the husband she so doted on notwithstanding, is thoroughly commodified at Rama's insistence and the king's acceptance that the stage be set for her to be formally handed over to him. It is not even just statecraft that is in question here, rather it is all about how the epic mode of glorification makes out of Rama an overlord who commands authority not by persuasion or force, but by converting the discourse of power into absolute authority and thereby defining (il)legitimacy anew. The ablutions she is made to go through strongly indicate not just a negation of the basic identity of this earth born woman; the entire ordeal of her days spent in the Asoka vana are thus sought to be erased beyond visibility so that she may be made to conform to the expectations of 'civil' society and her husband may retain his social prestige unquestioned. Hence Sita's intervention here becomes pivotal in charting the course of her life and of the text henceforth:

Was Sita

unacceptable to you in her exilic raiment, a fount of raw energy that
she was? The purity-pollution debate – had it already started
in your mind? (Sahu: 68)

In stark contrast to her welcome in happier times as the imminent queen of Ayodhya got off the palanquin, Sita, under express orders from Rama, is allowed to be jeered by the mob as the now 'unchaste' woman comes to meet her husband in full public view. Thus the female body becomes the site for contestation between private-public spheres, as the husband who is royalty designate, ensures that denunciation of the woman who lived alone in another man's house without any of her clan to protect her, must happen in the public domain, just as her acceptance and raising into the iconic cult of '*Jai Siya-Ram*' earlier happened. Within the span of a mere 12 lines, we have Rama saying:

"She was solely responsible for this war, this disaster." (Sahu: 69)

and yet again,

"... but the war was surely not for your sake, it was to redeem my forefathers' honour." (Sahu: 68)

The restoration of order in Lanka is thus not all pervasive the way the metaphor of ‘the time (being) free’ is said by Macduff, also a king maker of sorts in *Macbeth*, to Malcolm as the former enters with the slit head of Macbeth in the last scene of Shakespeare’s play.

Far from being any poetic oversight, this comes across as a discursive reading of myth making strategies that have always hoisted Rama as the ideal man and just ruler of Indian philosophical traditions – the possessor of all *guna* and yet the ascetic. Had he become king of Ayodhya by the laws of primogeniture, Rama would be at par with all kings of all times; hence his exilic predicament and his writ in absentia are epic ploys at glorification. Similarly, his turning king maker in Lanka not only has a semblance of latent subjugation, it is a de facto transformation of innate power into explicit authority by the legitimising credo of displacing a coward Ravana who committed the theft of a ‘lonely, hapless woman’. For all his learning, Ravana comes across as the proverbial bad guy who transgressed and therefore met his nemesis as all evil must at the hands of good. But if the death of the demon should expectedly restore peace and order in Lanka, shouldn’t the theory of *corruptio optima pessima* apply to Rama who schematically arranges to meet Sita in public not only to tarnish her character by implicating her of losing her chastity, but also entirely decimating her identity:

You were born of unknown parenthood
Thus your purity was already half challenged

Now you have lost it all; you must not be chaste anymore. (Sahu: 70)

Yet to come to terms with this reversal from her lord, who by Hanuman’s account was deeply pained by the separation due to abduction, Sita in Canto XV is a silent presence who feels ‘nude, defenseless, with a grim cordon of fear’. If the reader can look upon the text as a plea for gender sensitisation, then Rama’s protracted castigation of Sita would appear, not as the stripping of this woman who is virtue incarnate, but as a dramatic monologue that only strips the accuser of all vestiges of glory ever attributed to him. On Lankan soil, after being reminded that a woman can never have an autonomous existence, she is rendered *persona non grata* by the one for whom she staked her all; her offence being that she had crossed the ‘Lakshmana rekha’!

By its nature the classical epic is a masculine form of creation, regardless of the culture to which it belongs. So it has always defined social relationships from a patriarchal point of view. This is true of Milton’s conception of divinity as a mediated enterprise for woman if we talk of the secondary epic, or of the disrobing of Draupadi under her husband – great Yudhisthira’s express sanction on the ground of her valid commodification after the Pandavas have lost their all in the game of dice, in talking of our own primary epic. It is indeed high time that ‘écriture feminine’ begins to question these ruptures that by way of epic narratives that are perceived as founding blocks of social ethos, find way in legitimising convoluted public morality in our times. Draupadi’s disrobing by foe is to me equivalent to Rama’s intellectual and emotional disrobing of Sita who has considered him her destiny and destination – both husbands being men

designated as virtue incarnate and hence, first among equals. Treating the dependent wife as chattel slave, stripping the dalit woman and parading her naked, wife beating et al are stale fodder as news items, they hardly move humanity beyond a passing mention. That way, this text stands the test of what Gordimer has privileged as 'inward testimony'. The sociological implications of being nouveau Sita in the Indian context that Madhu Kishwar brings out in her survey based paper 'Yes to Sita, No to Ram: The Continuing Popularity of Sita in India'⁶ bears out the truth of such inward testimony.

The long Canto XVI where Sita in speaking out, assimilates the history of femininity from the first wave feminism's seminal rueing a woman's lack of a 'room of her own' to the explication of the forces of *shakti* and *bhakti* in her own psyche forms the nerve centre of the text. Her initiating the test by fire while Rama stands blasé and nonchalant has been the subject of much feminist debate; emerging unscathed from her self-imposed trial she clarifies once and for all that it was an act of 'insolence' and not 'weak capitulation'. Having shunned both humiliation and sympathy while being the nurturer of magnanimity that can 'counterbalance the chaos of civilization', she is empowered to say that Sita stands tall for autonomy and feminine free will. Once again, terms like 'progressive' and 'independent' are deeply re-oriented as she says in the same breath:

Compassionate mother, self-assertive wife
dutiful daughter, woman on a special pedestal
Sans all intellectual slavery, this is my feminine moral. (Sahu: 77)

Almost anticipating conflict with stereotyped Western feminist politics that believes in binaries, Sita asserts the possibility of being simultaneously flexible and dignified; none of it implicating a woman as either 'frail' or 'feeble'. Designed for a larger purpose in life, the icon of non-violence who has often been invoked to explain the mainstream of Indian nationalist thought and movement posits herself within the larger all-embracing frame of eco-feminist thought:

"I am no object of pity, remember me as Nature humanitarian". (Sahu: 77)

Humanly, this is easier said than done. The collective pronoun 'Our' that she uses back in Ayodhya amidst paeans to Lord Rama and Mata Sita raise subtle questions over whether it is a public pose Sita is obligated to strike for the greater weal. Her forgiveness of Kaikeyi, being moved to tears at Urmila's Madhubani paints depicting their arduous life in exile, and above all her philosophising with Sugreeva's widowed wives on the absence of an indisputable reason to everything in life where purity of the intellect, spirit and heart alone can be talismanic show Sita as a woman with an oracular vision. What abides and binds this polyphony of woman voices is the Sitaesque ideal of sympathy as an answer to supreme ego. That way, 'Sitaness' becomes a way of solidarity – the key to the concert of womanhood.

There seems to be a directly proportionate equation between the incremental patterns of Rama's casting aspersions on Sita and his own downscaling in the moral-ethical order. Conversely, every

trial of grit that befalls Sita as a result of convoluted private-public peripheries makes her emerge stronger. For one, events of the epic are not being fabricated by the poet; it is amazing how perspective and point of view can give radically new dimensions to a character! The first attempt at desertion of the pious wife having failed, Rama tries anew and engineers it to success when Lakshman is instructed to leave a pregnant Sita by the Ganges near Valmiki's ashram. The *Uttara Kanda*, blissfully left out by certain Ramayanas, is said to have happened as a result of hearsay from a washer man who supposedly questioned Rama's re-acceptance of a wife, despite the fact that she had already undergone the voluntary fire test. As the narrative clearly shows, Sita turned hysterical in accepting this banishment, presumably because the paragon of virtue was here undoing his own earlier acceptance. As king, Rama's casting away of Sita who is now a pregnant woman is a double violation – both as wife and as subject. Torn between her individuality and her 'self', she turns to ecology for a home, and thus begins the retreat to her origins, even as she fulfills the one remaining vital aspect of her womanhood – biological motherhood. There is irony in her regret to Sitaputra Lava and Kusha that their noble father did not care to complete the picture of a happy family. Like any other single mother, she takes upon herself the challenging and happy task of being parent to them, even as Sita expects her children to understand 'the ecstasy and ache' of the solitary mother and castaway wife. There is that unmistakable hope of vicarious fulfillment as she says:

You must shine as the resplendent sun importunately. (Sahu: 93)

It is important to recognise that Sita's single motherhood is not that of the narrowly individualist woman whose personal ambitions lead her on an overdrive for liberation and autonomy, away from what she feels are the confining/imposing structures of family. In fact every single phase of her life is a product of circumstances wherein she is acted upon; it is another matter that 'unmatched mystic powers' and the force of destiny see her through it all. But since it shall not be that way for all women, she offers them her reciprocated universal sisterhood as they 'comprehend and accomplish the kinetic dichotomies of life'. Citing the example of a derelict Dhritarashtra-Gandhari on the one hand and of the widowed Uttara on the other, she enthuses perforce single mothers like her that what matters in the upbringing of children is to imbue them with character and proper education – the touchstones of a worthy life. The stallion of Rama's Asvamedha rite, in itself associated with the course of the sun and symbolic of his unquestionable supremacy being halted by Lava and Kusha at Valmiki's ashram is testimony not just to their physical prowess but also of such rightful upbringing. Viewed initially as an act of insurgence and a direct challenge to authority, it actually lays the ground for the final conflict between Sita and Rama, metaphorically between the wronged subject and the absolutist state.

The outright transition from the personal to the public is deliberate, for, having performed all her womanly duties, Sita now confronts Rama as a citizen abandoned by the throne. One must acknowledge the stages she passes through before coming to this – overcoming 'old lacerations', fighting tears, the gestural wishing to 'family' and clan, and a look at her love that still does

pierce her own heart. Had she cowered at this juncture, the charges of weakness often leveled at her would hold ground. It is now that the Sita of the first fire test, the castaway re-wronged wife at the altar of her husband/king's greatness, nonetheless the same resolute individual whose latent fire has been stroked again by the demand of a second fire test, who speaks:

“I, Janaki, the mother of Lava-Kusha, demand justice today from
the noblest king on earth, for the wrong

done to a pregnant woman and her unborn children.

And justice for the fatherless teens. If justice cannot be given, what
right has the king got to adorn Ayodhya's venerated throne?

Aren't his queen and sons a part of his subjects?

Deserting three guiltless people, is it called honourable ethics?

Oh Lakshmana! As a citizen, do I, too, have some fundamental rights?” (Sahu: 105)

Sita's unmatched mystical powers, which in postmodern terms can be read as her agency, might not qualify her as a subaltern in a strictly personal sense, but within the discourse of statism⁷, she has definitely been consistently othered and is in this sense a subaltern without a doubt. So when Sita-putra Lava and Kusha halt the Asvamedha stallion and bring about this subversive meeting of Ayodhyans of all ranks with Janaki, the stage is definitely set for a cataclysm. Virtually, the justifiability of the Asvamedha is questioned in the king's own backyard. Interestingly, all of Sita's denunciations have been in full public view, while the pining has been private. It is time now for a direct confrontation and the final one between thwarted royal ego and the ability of the subaltern to speak. Speak she does, and as is her wont, Sita collectively questions the commodification of the female body through the paradigms of sin and purity as mind-games. She rightfully lays the onus of all future violations of womanhood on Rama as his dissolute desertion of her vindicates and sets the trend for the abject insensitivity of absolutist state power when the issue at stake is gender divide. This way, Nandini's Sita overturns the string of allegations made by patriarchy from the oppressed to the oppressor.

Sita's refusal of the second fire test and her willful assimilation with Mother Earth, that which I call her agency, marks the refusal to submit to the dictates of what Althusser called the repressive state apparatus.⁸ It also establishes her as the 'original ecofeminist', as the poet proposes in the Preface. While in Rama's denunciations of Sita, the shifting focus was from the private self to the claims of public morality, Sita's invocation of the earthly mother (of course after her equally public pay-back to the king/husband) is all on terms of the private individual – her unstained nature, her dedicated wifeness in thought and action, the redemption of the burdened eternal orphan. As a character in a story of conjugality, Sita has been eternally absent in the story of her husband, though the two are often valorised jointly in public acclaim. What then causes the anguished cry to emanate from Rama at the moment when Sita is subsumed into the lap of Mother Earth? Is it a reckoning of his nemesis as the voice of 'justice' or the

realisation that he stands to lose that forfeit(able) part of his life that has in a big way been the launching pad of his greatness? Or is it a fact that Sita's 'Iccha-mrityu' (like Vheeshma in the *Mahabharata*) which comes after discharging all her worldly responsibilities and is a result of the denial to live on with a disrespectful husband, destroys future possibilities of the veneration of the cult of Siya-Rama and hence spells a crisis for royalty as in the image of *maryada-purusottam*? For one thing, he did need a gold effigy of his wife to be made for the Asvamedha ritual, something that testifies to the institutional need of a queen to adorn the seat beside the king! These are vital questions that the text leaves us to ponder about.

The incantatory nature of the verse monologue of Sita after attaining her calm of mind when all passion is spent, gives the text a serenity and poise. The concert of womanhood she initiates is timeless, as Sita herself asserts:

I distribute myself into atoms in my rebirths; in the
'sitaness' of every woman Sita eternally breathes. (Sahu: 117)

This metaphysical idea makes *Sita* (A Poem) a contemporary and continuing text that can serve as a reservoir of incandescent strength to all women who want to be 'free spirited, contemporary (and) enlightened'. To take a leaf out of her life is to re-define freedom as *swa adhin* – her rejection of Rama that is upheld as an illustration of the highest dignity of a just woman, it must be remembered, has come about only after she has lived out the entire purpose of her life amidst all odds. Such organic criteria of completeness has been her own making, in keeping with Nature's purpose of womanhood; she has neither ever paid any heed to scrupulous voices, nor does she now need to be perturbed by continuing debates over Sita's purity and pollution. In the truest sense thus, Sita amplifies the dictum 'Character is Destiny'. The note of empathy thus comes with a rider that is unstated. Being Sita-like also conjoins upon womanhood the self-disciplining task of not succumbing to virile temptations one too many that lure one on the by-lanes of life in all ages. She is aware that not all ordinary women are born with the 'unmatched mystic powers' that she wields, nor are all equally privileged by destiny; hence the promise of her 'reciprocated' sisterhood to empower the less fortunate. Such shared concern makes her the true leader who can say to her successors:

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

and submissive, please redefine your lives. (Sahu: 121)

Sita here virtually overturns the Aristotelian definition of catharsis as pity and fear inspired by the odious fate of 'one like ourselves'; rather she posits herself as indelible and through her ideal, fosters a bond of solidarity for all women across the spectrum of space and time. This is indeed positive energy at its best.

It seems befitting to conclude this Paper by reverting to the poet herself who reasons why she dared to undertake what would be considered a radically subversive take on one of the founding texts of Hindu life, philosophy and culture.

Through poetry, I celebrate womanhood;

the living and the loving spirit of Sita in
me asserts herself in my heroic verse, through my
story of kinship, affection, loyalty, sacrifice and the social codes. (Sahu: 4)

Nandini's portrayal of Sita thus comes to us through a gendered postcolonial adaptation of myth in a way that interrogates shared concerns over the ever-evolving relationship between a woman and her milieu, simultaneously narrativising her many selves through ever renewing discourses. In contemporising the text and thereby the central character, she avowedly puts a part of her own mind into it and as stated at the outset, this places the text in a way in the domain of literature of witness too. The character of Sita mediates a host of concerns that bind the 21st century author to her reader, and herein lies the contemporaneity of *Sita* (A Poem).

Notes and References:

All references to the text are from *Sita* (A Poem) by Dr Nandini Sahu, published by The Poetry Society of India, Gurgaon.

1. Helene Cixous, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Signs*, 1.4 (1976): 875-893. Web. Accessed on 22nd Sept. 2015. The citing of Cixous is not to imply that *Sita* (A Poem) is a conscious work of 'Ecriture Feminine'; the text as it stands, may be seen as making a primary appeal to such cause. As this Paper has tried to show, the range of issues go well beyond any kind of feminist stereotype. But the point of departure in taking on the epic is essentially from the point of view of othered feminine sensibility.
2. In a personal testimony titled "Testament of the Word" in The Guardian dated Saturday, 15 June 2002, Gordimer writes 'Poetry and fiction are processes of what the OED defines as the "inward testimony" of witness'. She further writes of Witness literature that it 'finds its place in the depths of revealed meaning, in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness and the antennae of receptivity to the lives among which writers experience their own as a source of their art'. My contention behind attributing qualities of Witness literature to the present text is that the spirit of Gordimer's words in a big way is seen to drive Nandini's thoughts. www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jun/15/fiction.nadinegordimer accessed on 22nd Sept. 2015.

3. “Sukamaa” is the title poem of Nandini Sahu’s collection *Sukamaa and Other Poems* published by The Poetry Society of India, in 2013.
4. “The Opposite Sex”, from Nandini Sahu’s early poetry, was first published in *The Last Goodbye*, from Maryland, USA. The topical reference here is to indicate the development of the poet’s mind and thought processes insofar as the breadth of vision to an inclusive view of womanhood is concerned.
5. www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31698154 accessed on 25th Sept. 2015. There could be and have been multiple viewpoints on the interview and the resultant film made by Udwin. The politics of repression and representation apart, it is shocking how educated intelligentsia can take such a stand. The legitimizing voice this confers on the perpetrators, as revealed in the said interview, is proof of the ‘trickle-down’ effect of gender insensitivity.
6. [www.manushi-india.org/pdfs_issues/articles/Yes to Sita, No to Ram.pdf](http://www.manushi-india.org/pdfs_issues/articles/Yes%20to%20Sita,%20No%20to%20Ram.pdf) accessed on 25th Sept. 2015. Kishwar’s paper details how and why the cult of Sita as ideal woman vis-à-vis Ram as ideal man is what the medieval Ramayana interprets as. She also takes up the formation of the cult of Sita and provides a catalogue of poems on Sita.
7. Ranajit Guha. “The Small Voice of History” in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty. OUP: New Delhi. 1996. Guha uses the term ‘statism’ broadly to imply the voice of the dominant, as an ideology that authorises the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic. This ‘criteria of the historic’ is here extended to include the epic-mythical. The inadequacy of statism which Guha states is inadequate for a truly Indian historiography as it forbids any interlocution between us and our past is exactly the issue at stake in this Paper.
8. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>. Accessed on 25th Sept. 2015. In order to explain his theory of the State, Althusser accounts for the distinction between *state power* and *state apparatus*, while also assigning a separate category for the repressive state apparatus which he calls *the Ideological State Apparatuses*. In Sita’s case, my contention is that it is this Althusserian category that Rama invokes, may be against his individual will, to justify the othering of the woman.