Sita's Story: Intertextuality and Folkloric Allusions in the Creation of a Desi Feminist Discourse in Nandini Sahu's *Sita*

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ABSTRACT

The story of Sita in the Indian epic *Ramayana* has over time been subject to several transformations, reinterpretations, and recontextualization. Sita the fiercely dedicated wife of Lord Rama has evolved to become a woman protagonist and, in some cases, even a feminist idol. Although there have been several modern interpretations of the *Ramayana*, Nandini Sahu's Sita composed as a poetic memoir running into 25 cantos, in its form, content, and context is situated in a liminal space between the real world and the mythical world. This liminality is otherwise referred to as the "permeable membrane" in the words of A. K Ramanujan provides scope for many voices to emerge; from orality, from marga and desi mediums all of which oscillate between the temporal zones of the past, present, and future, constantly engaging with one another. Furthermore, the figure of Sita and her narratives extend to what Sahu refers to as the "Sitaness" in every woman whose agency has been snatched. For instance, she yokes together women protagonists from the Literary domain such as Desdemona, mythical namely, Trijada, and historical such as Meerabai, Mother Teresa, Kalpna Chawla, and even Nirbhaya respectively to create a uniquely Indian feminist discourse highlighting various instances of injustice meted towards women. Moreover, the poem is crafted using self-reflexive storytelling inspired by oral tradition and folklore. It also implements multilayered intertextual allusions to reimagine Sita as a woman protagonist transcending time and space. Therefore, this paper will investigate the intertextual and folkloric allusions in Nandini Sahu's Sita consequently exploring the relevance of this composition as a contribution towards the creation of a desi-feminist discourse.

Keywords: Ramayana, Sita, Intertextuality, Feminist Discourse, folklore, Desi.

Introduction

The story of Sita in the Indian epic *Ramayana* has over time been subject to several transformations, reinterpretations, and recontextualizations. Mythology with respect to the Indian context is not a distant realm isolated from reality but rather the mythological tales and narratives permeate and interact with our everyday reality. The heroes and the heroines who feature in these mythological narratives become a part of our collective memory and continue to thrive in our consciousness as living breathing entities. Sita who is the epitome of duty, dedication, and loyalty is portrayed as a victim of patriarchal injustice but her contemporary interpretations in film and television:

> "Sita dwells in
>
> the Sitapurs, Rampurs, Udaipurs of India;

she is on the Internet, in T.V. soaps,

in households, streets, call centers, universities, in temples

and churches, in Ceylon, in the back waters of Kerala, in

your concealed perception, and in the Indian Constitution." (Sita 1)

Moreover, she has also projected her indignation and her silent strength when she disappears onto the earth's surface when asked to prove her fidelity through the trial by fire for the second time. Sita's hardships and obstacles are empathized over by all the women. Throughout *Sita,* the fiercely dedicated wife of Lord Rama has evolved to become a woman protagonist and, in some cases, even a feminist idol. The figure of Sita is that which has become a part of the collective imagination of the people, sprouting countless narratives in folklore, folk songs, Television, and literary works featuring both the grand traditions as well as the little traditions. Kalidasa's Raghuvamsha, Bhavabhuti's Uttara Ramacharita to name a few but the retelling of this narrative is also found in various folk mediums such as songs, tales, theatre as well as material crafts such as paintings as in the case of the or in various folk retellings that are not only told and retold as stories but also feature in paintings art and material culture of the Gond tribe, Chau in Odisha among countless others. If we were to catalogue the different interpretations or the variations in the Ramayana one might not find an end to it. However, there are noteworthy anthologies of various creative pieces such as "Ramayana Stories from modern India" edited by Paula Richman featuring modern retellings of Ramayana from the last 100 years from regional literature of south India. Yet another anthology is "In Search of Sita" which features a collection of essays detailing commentaries, and creative pieces with Sita in focus tracing her evolution through the various retellings and her relevance in contemporary times. Furthermore, there have been several soap series and films featuring the Ramayana not only in the Indian context but also in the West. For instance, Nina Paley's Sita sings the Blues (2008) is an animated musical which by interspersing Blues into the musical film presents the injustice meted out to Sita in relation to a modern-day woman, whose fears of estrangement and loneliness in a turbulent marriage is relatable to the mythical narrative of Sita and therefore becomes relatable to women worldwide. Although there are several retellings and versions of the Ramayana, the most well-known version is that of Valmiki's.

As for the creative works particularly with an emphasis on Sita's narrative, we may consider Sashi Deshpande's exploration of Sita's isolation and abandonment in the short story "the day of the golden deer", other writers like Vijay, Lakshmi Chauhan explore theme of jealousy,

Volga explores a tender relationship between Sita and Shurpanaka in the short story Reunion and writer Kumidini posits the human vulnerabilities to the epic through her imagined letters to Sita's mother. ("Sita: a personal Journey", Gokhale np). The deification of Sita has distanced Sita as an individual from her realities, thus creative works and fiction bring the figure of Sita to the realm of reality, as a living breathing entity subject to foibles and fate. Thus, Sahu's personal memoir would be considered as one such attempt to comprehend her assimilation as what would be discussed in this paper as desi-feminist consciousness.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore how Nandini Sahu's poetic memoir integrates allusions to retellings of the Ramayana from both the Marga and the desi trajectories. It also explores how Sahu uses intertextuality both literary and folkloristic to create a uniquely desi feminist discourse while examining Sita as a protagonist traversing the temporal realms of the past, present, and future vis a vie to examine the "Sitaness" as she puts it herself in strong women figures through time who dared to defy patriarchal norms. Thus, this study seeks to investigate Sahu's Sita as a contribution to contribution towards the creation of a desi-feminist intellectual tradition. Before we delve into Nandini Sahu's Sita, in the next section we shall explore the historical narrative of the *Ramayana* story in the most known version.

The Valmiki's *Ramayana* is one of the most popularly known versions of the *Ramayana.* Although the origin of this epic poem and its authorship has been contested, the role of storytelling and the dispersion of the story of Rama cannot be neglected. The Valmiki Ramayana comprises seven *kandas* or books namely Bala, Ayodhya, Aranya, Kishkindha, Sundara, Yuddha, and finally the Uttara Kanda or the book of answers. Scholarship on the Valmiki Ramayana points out that although this epic composition is attributed to Valmiki the story of the exiled prince Rama, the abduction of his wife Sita in the forest traversed among people as oral stories before it was documented in Sanskrit and attributed to Valmiki as it is done today ("Uttara" Sattar np.). Moreover, Valmiki could have been a construct rather than a flesh and blood individual. In the light of this, the influences of storytelling and the folkloric channels have played a huge role in the popularization of this epic poem.

Story of Sita in the *Ramayana,* an Epic poem of Love Loss and Liberation

> …I am glorified in classical literature,
>
> epitomized in folklore. (Sita 119)

Before we delve further into Sahu's interpretation of Sita's story in her poetic memoir and her deviation from the Valmiki Ramayana it might be noteworthy to trace the basic plotline of the Ramayana as related by Valmiki. King Dasharatha needs an heir to continue his legacy and so he conducts a special sacrificial ritual the result of which is his three wives conceiving; Rama being the first-born son of his first Wife Kousalya followed by Bharatha son of Queen Kaikeyee and Lakshman and Satrughna the twin sons of Queen Sumithra. Rama marries the daughter of King Janaka who is Sita and eventually, when the time comes Dasharatha decides to make Rama the heir to the throne but Kaikeyee fearing that Bharatha would be left with no wealth evokes two boons that King Dasharatha had granted her when years ago she had saved his life. She asks for Rama to be sent into an exile for fourteen years and Bharata to be made the King; Rama is accompanied by his beautiful wife Sita and loyal brother Lakshmana. Bharata refuses to ascend the throne that doesn't belong to him and rules the kingdom in place of Rama until he completes his exile. While in the forest Ravana's sister Shurpanaka desires Rama and Lakshmana mutilates her by chopping her nose which sends her fleeing to her brother Ravana who initially avenges the injustice meted out to his loving sister and becomes deeply infatuated by Sita's beauty, abducts her and takes her to Lanka keeping her captive. Rama builds his allies and charges with an army of Vanars or monkey kings, meets Hanuman who consequently becomes his staunch devotee and sets off with his Vanar army towards Lanka to defeat Ravana and rescue to rescue Sita. Rama builds a bridge with the help of the monkey army, kills Ravana in combat, and rescues Sita. However, before he accepts his wife, he questions her chastity; enraged Sita successfully proves her chastity through a trial by fire and is accepted by Rama. However, talks about Sita continue to circulate and Rama banishes a pregnant Sita who takes refuge in Valmiki's ashram, and raises the twin sons of Rama, Lava and Kusa. Eventually, when Rama recognizes his sons as they are found singing the story of Rama, he once again asks Sita to prove her chastity. Sita evokes a chasm on the surface of the earth and returns to the earth where she had come from (Richman 5-7).

Therefore, the tragic story of Rama, the exiled prince functions at several levels as an example to show human vulnerability, as a bedtime stories for children but beyond that it is also an intimate tale of husbands and wives, fathers and sons, brothers, friends and allies. Furthermore, the story deals with "kingly duties", "nobility of character", "fidelity" that shape individual's personal and public personae ("Valmiki's Ramayana" Sattar 24-25). Especially in relation to women in the *Ramayana*, we find that there is a clear juxtaposition of women who are sensuous and ascetic women scattered throughout the narrative. For instance, to oppose Kaikeyee and

Shurpanaka there are the ascetic like women in the likes of Tara the wife of Sugreeva, Ahalya, Anusuya and Trijata, Sarama who are the rakshashi women, in addition to Sita who is represented to be the epitome of steadfast duty and devotion (ibid 39-40.).

The *Ramayana* story interestingly even embodies some of the tropes of the fairy tale or the folk tales with the damsel in distress, the abduction of the princess, featuring magical objects (pushpaka vimana); the quest of the hero in reinstating his honour through the trope of the princess rescue to name a few (ibid 67). Furthermore, there are more than one version of the Ramayana, and it exists almost as a language and its various versions could be examined as dialects. Ramanujan in the three hundred Ramayana states that the Ramayana could be understood to be a gene pool that includes plots, characters, names, phrases, proverbs and even slurs. Each of the versions of the Ramayana relates to the other versions wherein they relate to the other ones, borrow or even contest. He elaborates that each of the authors dip into the pool and brings out a "unique crystallization, a new text with a new unique texture and fresh context" (Ramanujan, 158). In light of this when we consider Nandini Sahu's poetic memoir Sita, she breaks through the "tight normative" roles assigned to their women and through an alternative voice explores the possibilities of Sita as the "elemental woman" to put it in her own words (Sahu 84). The poetic composition is comprised of three-line stanzas that appear to follow the free verse majorly, but it also niftily integrates the "invocation" in the beginning of the poem, a common pattern seen in epic compositions in folk literature:

> "…Can you do justice to the anguish of a
>
> mother, loyal, elemental, integral to
>
> her children's lives without approving the
>
> fate of Sita ? The story of many a dedicated parents, the tales of
>
> single mothers, re-telling the tale of Sita—can you comprehend?
>
> Hence this poem.
>
> 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." (4-5)

Thus, in this manner, we can find that Sahu makes references to the different retellings of the Ramayana both the marga and desi narratives. Her understanding of the use of folkloristic material as a part of her poetic style fosters a uniquely organic Indian storytelling in her creative work.

Intertextuality, Folkloric Mediations and the Poetics of Marga and Desi in Sahu's *Sita*

Scholars have explored various dimensions of the notion of marga and the desi, their meaning contested since these categories are fluid entities whose meaning cannot be set in stone. Originally the notion of the marga and desi referred to medieval poetry. Therefore, although the term originates from medieval poetry its meaning can be expanded to relate to literary phenomenon. To simply say that the marga equates to the metropolitan and the desi to the vernacular is polarizing; their relationship is complex. Several scholars have attempted to understand this notion but perhaps we may consider G. N Devy's postulations in the context of this study. According to him the Western equivalent of the notion "tradition" is Parampara. This comprises of two entities the marga or the metropolitan or the mainstream and desi to be the regional and subcultural traditions (18). Devy in his discussion highlighted the power politics between the marga and the desi trajectories (78).

Sahu weaves within her poetic memoir a constellation of both marga and desi versions of the Ramayana stories taken from the *parampara* of the *Ramayana* tradition ranging for stories dispersed through orality, creative compositions in the regional languages as well as dominant texts such as the Valmiki's *Ramayana*. However, Sahu's poet persona Sita incisively critiques the perpetuation of patriarchy from both marga and desi favouring neither. For example, Sita rejects the so-called institutionalized versions of the Ramayana such as the one authored by Kalidasa: "The story of many a dedicated parent, the tales of single mothers, re-telling the tale of Sita—can you comprehend? Hence this poem. Today, Kalidasa's Raghuvansha and Bhavabhuti's Uttara Ramayana on Sita's life aren't prolific for me" (Sita 4). Furthermore, Sahu integrates within her poetic cosmos references of retellings from the Sanskritic works. In light of this, we find that Sahu through her poetic craft creates a universe of Ramayana stories from Sanskritic works as well as from folk retellings and compositions. Let us consider some examples:

> "Kalidasa's rumour -monger is a spy in
>
> his Raghuvamsa. Bhavabhuti's Uttararamacharita

and some texts like Kundamala, Dashavatarcharita

talk of Sita's critic as someone called

Durmukh (the foul mouthed); in the

Ananda Ramayana and the Adhyatma Ramayana,

the rumour -mongor is Vijaya. In the

Jain Ramayana, Paumachariya by Vimalasuri," (112)

And

"and then the Kathasaritsagar, Bhagavad Purana,

Jaiminia Asvamedh, Padama Purana, the

Ananda Ramayana, the Ramacharitamanas

wrote the tale of the washer man and my

abandonment. Whatever has been written by whosoever,

mine is the tale of exile and ultimate abandon." (113)

In the above excerpts, we find that she refers to the unilateral dimension in which her story has been narrated in the Sanskritic retellings. She also brings in references from the vernacular otherwise referred to as the basha retellings in Odia: consider the following excerpts:

"Hymns and songs confer a romantic image

on me; Balarama Dasa in Odia Jagamohan

Ramayana writes an Ode, Kanta Koili, that Sita

laments her separation before a cuckoo

and sends messages to Rama through her." (126)

and in this excerpt, she makes references to the creative works in the vernacular language:

"Odia writers Upendra Bhanja in Vaidehishavilasa

and Gangadhar Mehen in Tapaswini, both

classics, write erudite poetry about Sita.

All these avant-garde works of fine art authorize

women of noble households and honours.

Women! You grow up in the Indian households

listening oral tales and poetry of Sita. Filter those and grasp." (127)

Thus, Sahu incisively critiques the portrayal of women and their conceptions in both the Sanskritic marga as well as in the bhasha languages, in this case in the Odia composition. It is here that she breaks the wall of the mythical realms and addresses women to be mindful and aware and she urges them to be critical of the knowledge and stories that are passed on to them. Moreover, Sahu also brings in folkloric allusions through intertextuality to the Ramayana stories focusing on spin-offs, secondary characters, or quite simply digressions from the most visible versions of the *Ramayana.*

According to Julia Kristeva Intertextuality is a notion that refers to the inter-relatedness of all the texts. She says that not only are they related but they also inform and influence the other texts. Each of the texts does not exist in isolation but rather they belong to a larger ecosystem of texts and meaning. Moreover, intertextuality also influences meaning in culture and society and it also provides the scope for newer interpretations (Kristeva 36). Kristeva comments that this notion of intertextuality is not restricted to merely texts and their relationality but rather it also extends to cultural and social practices. Moreover, Kristeva uses the notion of "inter-text" to also integrate previous literary and cultural texts which influences the foundational core of any language and discourse. Therefore, in this process, intertext evolves as not merely a network of texts but a dynamic and continuous process of meaning-making, resulting in ways in which meanings are reinterpreted through the production of new texts (Graham 56). In this regard, we may find that Sahu's Sita is scattered throughout with folk retellings and the folk stories that sprouted and grew from the Valmiki Ramayana. For instance, she comments on how different regions and folklores construed her story and identifies the continuities and the lack of it (Sita 114):

"I heard one folktale about my relinquishment.

that Sita was asked by a crooked step-sister….

Hemachandra's Jain Ramayana, the Jain tale

of Haribhadra Suri and the Ananda Ramayana

wrote, Sita had seen only the feet of Ravana….

The Bengali Ramayana by Krittivasa stated,

Sita drew the toe of Ravana, then slept

near it, exhausted, thus she was doubted and deserted.

Kashmiri Ramayana assumed the same tale." (Sita 114)

And

"In the Thai Ramayan, Ramakien, the

daughter of Surpanakha painted Ravana's picture

and kept on my breast. And in Pommachakka,…

Many Ramayanas, many tales. Story of a

woman, loved and lost, accepted and questioned.

In my story, eternal time has been synchronized

by a mysterious command. Since ages, I

unfurl my questions, which are never elucidated." (Sita 116)

Irrespective of the language, the region or the writer Sahu comments that "mine is the tale of exile and ultimate abandon" (Sita 113). Thus, Sita more often that is not victimized, empathized and glorified for her sense of morality but Sahu's persona says that's she continues to remain invisible; her questions remain unanswered.

Bhram Prakash discusses the implicit hierarchy in the *Ramanyana* from the perspective of the creation of the nation-state. He highlights the hegemonic implications wherein both culture and hegemony come together to represent" live dominance and subordination" of classes (Cited in Prakash 63). He comments that the "social universe of the Ramayana narrative is based on hierarchy". Women glorify the suffering and in the process are venerated but Sahu's Sita do not succumb to the suffering, she is constantly questioning, interrogating, moreover, her voice of resistance emerges from the realms of both classical and oral traditions, both the domains of marga and desi. For instance, women identify with Sita's suffering and celebrate her suffering to receive the moral high ground. Although the retelling of Ramayana by women highlights the injustice, suffering, loneliness and sorrow, the image of Rama is intact with the women accepting their suffering as fate. Moreover, such an alternative narrative- "Reproduce the meek character of Sita who eulogizes motherhood and the larger patriarchal structure" (Prakash 65).

However, as we have seen in the above excerpts, we find that such tendencies may not be observed in Sahu's interpretation of Sita and the way she chooses to tell Sita's story.

Traversing Realms: Towards the Creation of a Desi Feminist Intellectual Discourse

Over time, the figure of Sita, the woman, the wife of the Goddess has been explored, scrutinized in some cases, and celebrated too. While Draupadi is considered to have visibly opposed patriarchy the same is not extended to Sita. According to Meghna Desai, the glaring absence of Sita from the various Kandas in the Valmiki Ramayana leads her to construe Sita as an absent heroine whose mentions in the epic are passing at best and the description represented from Rama's perspective through his lament. Therefore, in the Valmiki Ramayana, she features in 76 stanzas (sargs) out of a total of 645 which equates to about 10 percent of the entire composition. However, Arshiya Sattar on the other hand does not look at Sita as a victim but rather a strong-willed woman. Over time and through reinterpretations of the figure of Sita, she is plagued with internal conflicts and towards the end attains complete autonomy over her decision when she chooses to disappear into the earth without a second glance at her husband towards whom until then she had harbored steadfast loyalty and devotion and dedication (Sattar np).

Other works that are creative retellings or commentaries focusing on Sita's version of the story highlight the vulnerabilities of Sita as an ordinary woman (Basu). Sahu's poem too brings out this ordinariness of Sita which she refers to as "sitaness" however by doing so the objective is not towards creating a victim narrative, venerated through the suffering but rather Sita can be read as a powerful woman, in the likes of Kali or a marginalized tribal goddess, a rural woman who is likely to see a bit of herself in the self-willed, stubborn confident, mortal woman that Sita is (Basu np). Furthermore, in addition to bringing out the humane dimensions to her personality, her poet persona also traverses the mythical realms, she identifies "Sitaness" in contemporary women figures who dared to defy literature, history politics, and folklore. For instance, consider the following excerpt:

> "I have been taking births and rebirths, my
>
> thirst unquenched, my heart passion-drenched.
>
> I distribute myself into atoms in my rebirths; in the
>
> 'sitaness' of every woman Sita eternally breaths.
>
> I am re-born as Mother Teresa, Florence

> Nightingale, Lucy Grey, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra,
>
> Atlanta, Cordelia, Desdemona, Penelope, Sylvia Plath,
>
> Athena, Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Shakuntala,
>
>
> Radha, Meerabai, Kalpana Chawla, Kiran Bedi,
>
> Indira, Nirbhaya, Damini, Lata, Nandini, Rebati or Anandi.
>
> I live numerous lives, in women, bold and beautiful." (117)

This, Sahu refers to as the "Sitaness" in every woman. Moreover, Sahu also brings in addition to this the relatability of Sita drawn by alluding to other women who dared to challenge the norm such as Draupadi, Ahalya, Trijada as well as the figures such as Mother Teresa, Nirbhaya, Kalpana Chawla. Sahu's poetic style and the tapestry of intertextual references resonate with Adrienne Rich's snapshots of a daughter-in-law resonates with that of Adrianne's Rich's snapshots of daughter-in-law. While Rich subverts the patriarchal order of the intellectual world, Sahu through her unique poetic style and folkloric allusions creates the space for a desi feminist discourse through Sita's story. Furthermore, the fluidity that provides the scope for the mythological figure Sita on the modern and contemporary injustice meted out towards woman creates a community of solidarity for all those strong-willed women in the annals of history. Therefore, in Nandini's Sahu's Sita we see the absentee heroine speaking up, calling out the women folk to unite:

> "Oh women! Take Sita, the bold defender, Sita
>
> the ecofeminist, Sita, the mother, as your role model.
>
> I never felt the necessity to explicate my life
>
>
> to anyone, and was in harmony with myself
>
> in the Valmiki ashram, which is my
>
> utmost forte as a complete woman" (Sita 120)

Thus, traversing the mythical realm, shifting between the real and the mythological, spatial and temporal spaces thereby reimagining her as much as a contemporary feminist icon she implores the readers and the women folk to act:

> "Women! When the society asks you to be
>
> 'like Sita', and decides your future by

virtue of public morality, forces you be chaste

and submissive, please redefine your lives.

Let me hark back, there is yet another

veiled, unseen Sita in the Ramayana, the one

who questioned the standards and rulebooks

of public morality, purity, chastity set for her.

Live life like Sita, communicate a new relevance of her." (Sita 121)

To put it simply, in the light of the above excerpts we can see that through her poetic craft Sahu reimagines vis a vie and deconstructs the image of Sita as a distant figure of the mythological realms but rather through a combination of poetic styles including the interspersion of the folk epic poetic style, she creates a unique desi feminist discourse. Sita is made the protagonist whose voice transcends through time and space and integrates them through the quality of "sitaness" which is seen in Helen of Troy, in the fierce woman scientist Kalpana Chawla, in Trijada the rakshashi woman who kept her company, in Nirbhaya who fought bravely for life and so on:

"Many Ramayanas have conveyed my

loyalty, my docile character, I am illustrated.

as a one-dimensional character.

Stop it. It's time to terminate that image

and resurrect me, alter the Sita-myth,

talk of the progressive woman Sita, redefine Sita." (Sita 120)

Although there have been several modern interpretations to the Ramayana, Nandini Sahu's Sita composed as a poetic memoir is situated in a liminal space between the real world and the mythical world. This liminality or otherwise referred to as the "permeable membrane" in the words of A. K Ramanujan provides scope for many voices to emerge; from orality, from marga and desi mediums all of which oscillate between the temporal zones of the past, present and future, constantly in dialogue with one another.

Sita's story as related by Nandini Sahu is elusive, evading the limits of spatiality and temporality thereby etching Sita as a revitalized figure in our consciousness with a sense of

agency. Sita is not merely celebrated for her steadfast loyalty, dedication to duty, and venerated for her sacrifice but she is rather examined as a spirit that emblematizes resistance to injustice meted out by the patriarchal order. Sahu's Sita incisively questions patriarchy and instigates women to move toward social change. On a creative note, Sahu implements methods of storytelling form oral tradition and folklore in the process of fostering a desi-feminist discourse by reimaging Sita in a realm that is neither completely mythological nor real, thriving in the interstices.

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