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BOOK REVIEW

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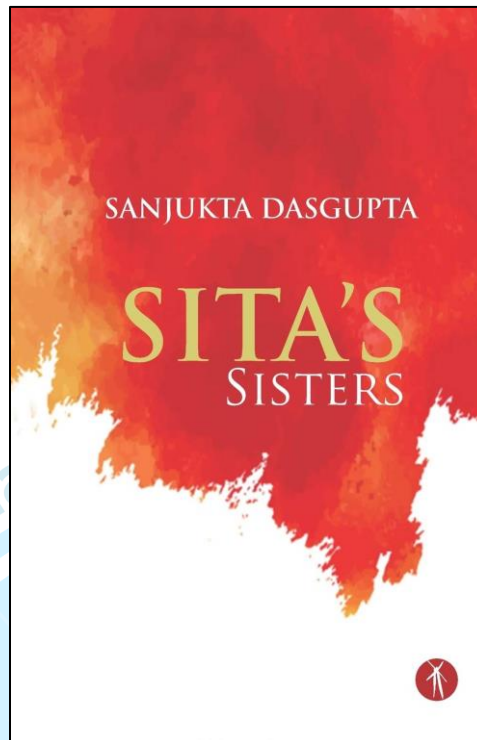
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***Sita's Sisters* by Sanjukta Dasgupta**Reviewed by Jaydeep Sarangi



Title: *Sita's Sisters*
 Author: Sanjukta Dasgupta
 ISBN: 978-9387883895
 Edition: 2019
 Published by Hawakal Publishers, Calcutta, India.
 INR 300

Key words: Sita, love, loss, desire, epic, protest

Sanjukta Dasgupta's poems in her latest collection, *Sita's Sisters* glitter with a rare sweet touch of clarity and modesty that mark her poetic idioms subtle where the corpus is an engaging discourse. Sita, the central female character in the *Ramayana*, broke frontiers and social stereotypes at several levels in the epic. She became an icon for individual parenting taking complete care of Lava and Kusha when she was in refuge in the hermitage of Valmiki. Her role as the single mother is exemplary, relevant in today's society. She maintained a dignified countenance when Ravana kept her in Ashoka forest. Sita stands for integrity of character:

“Sita's sister was a good woman
 She belonged to just one man.” (‘Sita's Sisters’, p 13)

Probably, Sita had no sister in the great epic. In this collection Sita's sisters are all women in different cultures and places in the globe,

“Sita’s countless sisters-what were their names?
Rita, Mita, Arpita, Sumkita, Rinita
Lalita, Bontia, Anita, Sumita, Sucheta...” (‘Sita’s Sisters’, p 13)

She hopes, through her poems, to unsettle received meanings, to bring new experiential truths to the table, and to build bridges across time, allegiances, and empathies. Sanjukta Dasgupta’s poems explore inner strength and humility of Sita(s) in today’s world. The poetess makes her inside out through a whirlpool of epic myths and references. **Girl Power** is a fresh way to look at the competence of women—a gaze of respect. Now feminism is inherently intersectional feminism – we are in a place of multiple feminisms. Interpretation is a whirlwind of views, experiences, acceptance and grievances. Sita, in the *Ramayana* is an embodiment of patience and mental strength even in the midst of extremely adverse situations,

“Sita’s sisters watched in silence
Sita’s sisters were deaf and dumb.” (‘Sita’s Sisters’, p 13)

Sanjukta’s poems are armed with love, grit, fortitude, nostalgia and hopes. Clay, wax, wood, bronze, stone, harmonium- materials the artist laid her hands on with her consummate artistry in brilliance cadence,

“Tonight however
I’ll play the farewell song
On my mother’s harmonium.” (‘My Mother’s Harmonium’, p.38)

Ecological crisis, gender stereotyping, patriarchal hegemony and age-old socio-political situation are some of the other prominent issues that find voice in this anthology. Sanjukta retorts,

“Patriarchy encouraged misogynists
Remember Sita, Draupadi
Hirimba and Shakuntala at home.” (‘Why I am a Feminist’, p.29)

Hirimba in the *Mahabharata* is the figure of strength and vitality from the marginal space. She is the unacknowledged heroine in the great Hindu epic. The Pandavas made Hirimba and her son Ghatotkacha fit nicely in to their scheme of thing, and moved on leaving behind those wretched yet obliged souls. Sanjukta speaks for her empathy for the voiceless, tribal girls in India. She has a poem for them, ‘Who Killed the Little Tribal Girl?’ ‘She raises her voice against brutal rapes involving ‘pinning ripping and killing her’. She describes the precarious situation of an eight year old tribal girl and her uncertain future with fitting and hard hitting words,

“She groaned, and moaned
She bled, screamed and cried.” (‘Who Killed the Little Tribal Girl?’, p. 73)

Reading Sanjukta Dasgupta’s poems is like whiff of cool breeze blows in or aroma wafts from a neighbour’s kitchen. She is a poet of the senses. Sanjukta portrays the man as ‘older than the father’ of that tribal girl. She rejects the label of ‘humanist’. She wants poetic justice. The glow of the sun is its own, nor a gift of a deity or power from someone else! A feminist by temper, Sanjukta Dasgupta, seeks gender equality where no one will invade others’ bodies without consent. Body is always a personal wealth. Invaders are criminals.

Mentor to many thinking heads in Kolkata and beyond, Prof. Dasgupta sensitises both the men and women, the victims and the perpetrators with the special literary literary armaments. Socially committed poetess, Sanjukta Dasgupta intends to articulate the age old social, cultural, political and religious oppression perpetrated in India and beyond. For her, writing poems is participating in a cultural movement, and she does it skilfully.

Protest is a strong holocaust for the poetess. Sanjukta in her poem 'Protest' says,

“Voices cannot be raised
Strangled and gagged
Voices just whimper.” ('Protest', p.76)

No wall of age old stereotype of inequality can be broken in mute mode. Here Sanjukta Dasgupta's language is militant in texture and aggressively blunt in meaning.

Sanjukta Dasgupta is an extremely earthy poet. Most of her imageries are tied to elements of earth, be it water, trees, fire, forests, or the soil. But what is unique is the way she weaves these elements to create a sense of the primordial state of being, where emotions run raw. Her poems deal with rich mosaic of thoughts and concerns related to Indian ethos, nuances and linguistic mileage that reflect various facets of life and its routine course. Image of Sita is related to earth. Sita means “furrow” in Sanskrit. Sita is the name of the Hindu goddess of the harvest in the *Rigveda*. She is considered as the daughter of the earth.

Empires fall not because people oppose them, but because they find their support eroded. Anger is an effective mobiliser, but anger without hope is a destructive force. The poetess is a soul maker who knows the value of soft feelings for others. Sanjukta has poems on Night, Kolkata and Moon where tender and soft feelings are evoked passionately:

“Moon and I
Buddies forever
In dense darkness.” ('Moon and I', p. 54)

Many of the well-crafted poems in this collection are though not didactic in tone and tenor, talk about the value of plurality and acceptance of divergent ways on the life on surface for the survival of humanity. No doubt, many poems in this collection would establish the foundations of a proactive politics. *Sita's Sisters* is a timely prescription for a positive feel and outcome for women of today from a seasoned academician turned into a committed artist.

BIO-NOTE

Jaydeep Sarangi is a widely anthologized bilingual poet with eight collections in English latest being *Heart Raining the Light* (2020) released in Rome. Sarangi has read his poems in different shores of the globe. His later readings and talks on poetry were at Flinders University, University of Western Australia, University of South Australia, University of Wollongong, Perth Poetry Club (Australia), University of Udine (Italy) and University of Rezeszow (Poland). Sarangi is on the editorial boards of different journals featuring poetry and articles on poetry like *Mascara Literary Review*, *Transnational Literature* (Australia), *Setu* (USA), *Geetanjali and Beyond* (Scotland) *Teesta*, *WEC* (India). He has seven critical books on poetry and edited special issues on poetry for reputed journals in India and abroad. With Dr Amelia Walker he is guest editing a special volume for *TEXT* (Australia). Among his recent awards, the Setu Award of Excellence for 2019(USA) and SUFI AWARD for Indian English Literature (2020).He is a professor of English and principal at New Alipore College, Kolkata.

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