CHAPTER – III

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SITA – WOMAN AS WIFE

Utpatti-sthiti-samhaarakaarinee sarvadehinaam!
Saa Seetaa bhavati gyeeyaa moolaprakriti-sangyita!!

“There may have been several Ramas, perhaps, but never more than one Sita.”

Prof. Iyengar unmistakably keeping in mind Sri Aurobindo’s Savitri, describes Sita and Rama as ‘powers that advance human evolution towards far horizons.’ We all know that Savitri strives towards a new dawn and Sita according to the poet seems to do no less. It is not for nothing that Iyengar concludes his introduction to Sitayana with words borrowed from Savitri of Sri Aurobindo:

She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire;
the luminous heart of the unknown is she,
A Power of silence in the depths of God.2

In his prologue to the Sitayana the poet declares in the epic style that he intends to write of womanhood and the glory of motherhood with its travails, - also of the primordial Shakti’s myriad manifestations on earth. If Savitri is one Avatar, Sita is another. They are only two points
in the long line of evolution. The poet concludes the prologue with a prayer that the grace of the mother 'mighty, fair, immaculate' may redeem us still.

As Aswapathy, the father of Savitri, the philosopher-king of Mithila, Janaka is a representative of the mortal trying to fulfill the inmost ambition of the human being by bringing down to the earth a kind of perfection in life. His earnest desire for salvation and perfection makes him a representative of the whole humanity.

Like Aswapathy, Janaka is the forerunner, the spokesman of the world's aspiration for a divine life. Man needs to be transformed into something higher and nobler than the creature he is at present. To quote Savitri of Sri Aurobindo:

A world's desire compelled her mortal birth.
One in the front of the immemorial quest,
Protagonist of the mysterious play
In which the Unknown pursues himself through forms
And limits his eternity by the hours
And the blind Void struggles to live and see.
A thinker and toiler in the ideal's air,
Brought down to earth's dumb need her radiant power.³

Narada, the divine sage, calling upon Janaka, understands his anxiety and remarks that some souls dwell apart and shine like stars in isolation. But others, simpler in their life style and understanding, must have their own privilege to salvation. Love, according to Narada, is one of the parameters, which holds the humblest human beings together, but the perennial source of divine love emanates from the Magna Mater. The descent of the Divine alone ushers in a new dawn and Narada says that a new incarnation with the Mother in a human form may help in the redemption of humanity at large. Hence the poet rightly marks Narada's remark:

A manifestation and ministry,
recogisably human
yet intrinsically divine, may charge
all the earth with life anew.

(Sitayana. P.12)

A total spiritualisation or divinisation of life is the only answer to the ills of the world. As the Divine Mother promises Aswapathy that an
*Avatar* would descend to the earth to effect the desired transformation, so is Janaka, destined to have the incarnation of the goddess as his daughter.

A seed shall be sown in Death's tremendous hour.

A branch of heaven transplant to human soil;

Nature shall overleap her mortal step;

Fate shall be changed by an unchanging will.¹

The poet falls into an elaborate description of the qualities of this other worldly creature. Her beauty is ineffable, her smile serene. She is like a flash of revelation. Physically she might have been the figure of a woman but in reality she is the all-inclusive Mother. Janaka seems to have realised in a flash, under the grace of the goddess, life with its bundle of contradictions and achievements of a high order. In a moment he feels as though the 'gateways to the future burst open.'

The poet describes all this to set a tone for Janaka to be the father of the Mother Divine in the shape of Sita. The poet remarks very meaningfully that the question is larger than Mithila and that humanity's destiny is at stake. The birth of Sita is not a question that would concern
Janaka alone as a father but the entire human race as her avatar is bound up with human destiny.

The smile of Sita seems to reveal to Janaka all the cosmic mysteries. The barrenness and doubt in his mind, which trouble him seem to be miraculously dispel in a moment. No wonder, she appears like a charter from heaven. Yajnavalkya, the sage remarks that this babe is not cut out for conventional destiny. She is an incarnation of Mahashakti, with a difference:

This latest of Shakti’s emanations may play the sheer melting role of sublime sufferance and alchemic action and transformation.

(Sitayana. P.32)

Sita’s beauty is a blaze of radiance and her veiled abilities seem to defy even Yajnavalkya’s comprehension. The poet rightly describes Sita’s coming as a tantalising mystery. To the commoners and on lookers she would appear to have shared the bounties of nature along with other royal women. But her growth is ‘god’s garden of growing consciousness.’
Sita tries to make her birth appear natural like the birth of any other. She likes to live as any other girl in the company of others, so that she might appear to share the girlhood as it occurs on earth. Nevertheless her talk savours of the philosophic. She pretends to be a silent learner. But as the author rightly remarks she is the ‘light among the lights’ and ‘the grace of all graces’. (P.43) What is more, to give her girlhood an authenticity, the poet represents her as having played chess, snakes and ladders, and the like. Like Sri Aurobindo, however, Iyengar never loses sight of the symbolic value of Sita’s sojourn on earth, as she seems to be interested in the odyssey of the soul-

...the soul’s journey
through the tunnels to the light.”

(Sitayana. P.44)

The poet represents Sita as tossing on psychic motions like every other human, although he is well aware that to humanise the divine is no easy task. She is represented as contemplating the connection between good and evil. In her discussions with the yogi Maitreyi, Sita speaks about the essential oneness of the universe and the contradictions, which figure merely on the surface. For Sita, as for her sisters, the years of
their girlhood are indeed a seedtime of unceasing unfoldment and growth within and without.

The poet narrates the story of women other than Sita mentioned in Indian mythologies, thus widening the scope of his discussion on womanhood as presented in Indian mythology.

In Book- II, in lines reminiscent of The Ramayana, Sita speaks indignantly to Rama who speaks of his exile from Ayodhya and talks of separation from Sita and others. She tells him that she can be no more separated from Rama than the sun from his rays, the shadow from the object. She reminds Rama of Janaka’s words that she would follow him like a shadow through thick and thin.

I’m sinless. and my father Janaka,
my mother too, have taught me
how, shadow-like, I should always partake
of your life’s vicissitudes.

(Sitayana, P.139)

Thus Sita proves herself a brave lady.
My father, Janaka of Mithila.
surely chose a man as my

husband, not a woman in man’s image

what fear governs you, my lord?

(Sitayana, P.140)

So Sita convinces Rama and shares his exile with their first journey to Chitrakuta.

Sita is no mere shadow of Rama. She exhibits a personality of her own in demanding an equal share with her husband in the obligations of life. In Book – III, on a suitable moment, she speaks freely to Rama reminding him of dharna’s imperatives. She says that there are three important temptations namely – falsehood, adultery and the third, violence without cause. She feels concerned that Rama may yield to the temptation of indulgence in unwarranted violence by pledging protection to the rishis. She feels that launching a crusade against those that do not harm us is a causeless violence.

The poet rightly puts the following words in the mouth of Lopamudra. - ‘Glitter is not gold, and gold is not life, and seeming is not being’. (P.215) as if she predicts Sita’s fascination for the false golden deer. The abduction of Sita is described as Ravana’s ‘Tryst with Doom’. Sita reveals to Ravana that she is not isolable from Rama for
she herself is he. Sita curses herself for doubting blameless Soumitri and for welcoming the deceitful anchorite, Ravana. She compares him to a 'goat tied to the sacrificial altar post awaiting its tryst with death', who comes to her with an indecent proposal of marrying her.

Life becomes for Sita a soulless routine under the Simsupa tree in the Ashoka grove. Conversation with Trijata and Anala, who are introduced by the poet as the daughters of Vibhishana, a votary of Dharma by choice and discipline, is a rare break from her silence of isolation and is truly refreshing. She feels nostalgic, remembering the bygone days happily spent in Mithila and Ayodhya. She thinks of ending her life for a while but after a pause, determines to dare the devilish Ravana till he is finally destroyed. She places a blade of grass—a potent barrier between Ravana and herself when she speaks to him. She warns him 'just as a gaunt tree is felled by the thunderbolt when the time comes such will be the defeat of Ravana.' (P.320)

When Sita hears the sweet recital of Rama's story from Hanuman, at first she fears that it is a mere hallucination, but Hanuman gives her some examples to win her trust. Overwhelmed by Hanuman's infallible integrity, Sita gives him her crest-jewel after receiving the signet ring sent by Raghava.
The long-awaited war begins and for sometime one observes the ‘fortunes alternating’ between the two groups. Though he fights in a Do or Die manner, at last Ravana dies. The noise of battle rumbles no longer. Sita, now thinks of this peace, which is lately won. She feels sorry for the fate of Mandodari, Sulochana and all other women in Lanka. The following stanza is worth quoting:

Her heart went out to the tens of thousands
of mothers, sisters, daughters,
and most of all, the wretched wives now left,
to stew in their misery.

(Sitayana, P.475)

The delay in her reunion with her lord, pains Maithili. Moments seem to crawl for her. The crowning piece of Sita’s demeanour as a woman of spirit and dignity comes when, Rama sends for Sita, only to tell her that he has vindicated the honour of the Ikshvakus by killing Ravana and releasing Sita from captivity, and that he has no use for her as her chastity is suspect, in as much as she has lived for a year under the roof of a volatile profligate. She is even suggested to find a protector in Bharata, Lakshmana or any other. The words pierce Sita like poisoned darts. Her eyes flash fire as one who has known her
intimately for long, indulges in this unwarranted charge, she can vindicate her chastity only by passing through the ordeal of fire. Agni, the witness to the wedding vows, then bears testimony to Sita's absolute fidelity to Rama in thought, word and deed. Sita takes the fire-baptism and comes out from the effulgent flames, unscathed. She is the perfect yogini with her mind fixed on her lord as the Supreme; and the elements serve only to heighten her glory and brilliance.

Before their journey through air to Ayodhya, Sita speaks to Mandodari, Sulochana and the daughters of Vibhishana- Trijata and Anala. A nightmare has at last come to an end, and the coronation takes place. It is verily Life, a new life for Sita. She shares all her experiences in the forest and in Lanka, with the queens Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. She makes a round of visits to Ruma, Tara, Sarama and others who express their concern for Maithili and discuss the plight of woman, with her.

After listening to sage Agastya, Sita feels sorry for woman being treated as a piece of property, a commodity, a trophy both in the hands of bad and good men. In the Canto entitled, 'Sita's Stream of Consciousness', Sita finds herself lost in the nightmare net of the doing
of the gods, demons and humans and she is at a loss to locate the norms of life.

Sita, presently an expectant mother, expresses her desire to revisit the *ashramas* and is granted her request readily by her lord. Exiled again by her lord, on hearing a malicious scandal, Sita finds herself in the forest. Seized by mere spasm of despair, Janaki trembles like a basil leaf. She finds solace in the *ashram* of Valmiki, the poet-anchorite, who consoles her by saying that human beings fall only to rise and ‘flux, not stasis is the law of life.’

Sita withdraws into her thought and glances at the panoramic progress of her life. -- childhood, girlhood and all that. She feels the fulfillment when she gives birth to Kusa and Lava. Feeling nostalgic now and then, she thinks that ‘be it *lila* or *yoga maya*, the divine play must go on.’

In the Soul’s Mystic Cave Sita sits musing on the meaning of her life, and a clear perception of the human condition dawns upon her: While the fight against evil and the sons of darkness must always go on, ‘We learn the wisdom of sufferance and the certainty of Grace.’ She follows Valmiki along with her two sons to Naimisa, where Raghava
performs the *Aswamedha* sacrifice. The two boys recite the epic, Sita’s saga sublime evening after evening. There in the woods of Naimisa, Sita falls back into introspection and debates whether her life is a waste or a fulfillment. For everyone on this earth there is a hell within and a hell without. From the day of her wedded felicity in Ayodhya, she picturises herself in the theatre of her mind as though a reel is moving on the celluloid. To her surprise, the fever and fret of the world do not seem to touch the ascetics and the *yogis*. Sita is also impressed by the galaxy of the *pativrata*, samples of pure femininity, sheer gold. Their equipoise, equanimity and quiet grace appear single and singular to her mind. The women in the forest, like the wives of the *rishis*, seem to be far from the madding crowd and ignoble strife of the city life. They do not seem to suffer or reel under the temptations and tensions of the city women. The silent strength of the sages is exemplary and this even to a woman like Sita eludes explanation.

Sita is surprised that a man like Rama allows himself to be misguided by rumours. She wonders why Rama does not leave Ayodhya permanently if only to discover a meaning for their conjugal felicity. He could have simply installed one of his brothers on the throne. She cheers herself and realises that the mind rests on a razor’s edge. There is no point in crying over spilt milk. A strong mind should
not be fettered by the vagaries of time. The world is misguided by *Mahamaya*, whom the poet calls, 'the mother of illusion.' The life of one man or one woman is like a bubble while the history of the human race is like the eternal flow of the mighty ocean. She bemoans the cruelty of fate to which no one seems to be an exception. The word, 'woman' is spoken by the poet as being synonymous with suffering.

Presently a conference of great *rishis* and their wives as well as the people of Kosala is arranged. Sita is accompanied by Valmiki, and the twin-brothers: Lava and Kusa. Valmiki addresses Rama and the audience and certifies Sita as the soul of purity. But the belated forgiveness of Rama does not seem to produce the desired effect on Sita. She returns to her mother Earth, Madhavi. Rama is struck dumb. Valmiki consoles Rama by saying, ‘all of us are merely thorns in the hands of destiny.’ But life continues. The compassion of people like Sita fosters life on this earth.

The earth never tires or stales or despair,

for the pulses of Sita’s

heart of compassion sustain and foster

Our evolving Life Divine.

(Sitayana, P.657)
Sita shows certain human foibles, which she corrects soon after; as wife and woman she exhibits virtues of a very high order of unblemished chastity, irresistible courage, remarkable fortitude and fidelity: she displays divine qualities of unswerving devotion and total surrender on certain occasions. She is a non-pereil in beauty and virtue and a model for women to accept and adopt; and she has retained that exalted position of a _pativrata_ all these thousands of years.

"Sita is real; she is a symbol. Sita is a princess; she is a significance. Sita is a queen; she is a presence. Sita is a renunciate; she is an inspiration. Such has been father's (Prof. Iyengar's) absorption in Sita's tale that he has seen the Mother in Sita's story and Sita in the Mother's image", so says Dr. (Mrs.) Prema Nandakumar.

In the Epilogue Prof. Iyengar compares the saga of Sita to the myth of Demeter, Persephone. The cycle of life, death and rebirth with its mysteries hinted at in the Greek myth seem to be demonstrated equally well or for that matter more magnificently in the character of Sita. She is the incarnation of the Mother Goddess who is the refuge of all and sundry, being the Primeval Mother.
Like Sri Aurobindo, whom he admires and follows, Prof. Iyengar deals with the symbolic significance of Sita’s character rather than her mere physical presence. The travails of Sita in the human form are merely representative of the struggle of womanhood to direct humanity to fresh woods and pastures new.
NOTES


