

Voice of Protest against ‘Universal Male Sexual Sadism’: an Interview with Sarojini Sahoo.

By Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal.

*Sarojini Sahoo (b.1956) is a reputed Indian feminist and bilingual writer who has won the Orissa Sahitya Academy Award (1993), the Jhankar Award (1992), the Bhubaneswar Book Fair Award, and the Prajatantra Award. She writes in both Oriya and English and besides her eight novels and eight anthologies of short stories in Oriya, she has published one novel and two collections of short stories in English. Her novel *The Dark Abode* has gained critics’ appreciation abroad and has been translated into many languages like French, Bengali and Malayalam. Two of her novels have been published from Bangladesh. Besides writing, she has been also an Associate Editor of a city based monthly magazine, *Indian AGE*, published from Vadodara and Chennai. She is a known blogger for her ideas in feminism and has gained worldwide fame. *Thanalonline* has commented thus about her literary genius: “Her novels have gained a reputation for their frankness about sexuality and of feminist outlook.” She is also an advisory board member of the *Indian Journal of Post Colonial Literature*, published by the English Department of Newman College, Thodupuzaha, Kerala.*

In a detailed conversation, Dr. Nilanshu Kumar Agarwal (another Advisory Editor of IJPCL) engages Sarojini on several issues related to, feminism and her creative art.

NKA: Your website ‘sarojinisahoo.com’ introduces you thus: “She writes with a greater consciousness of women’s bodies, which would create a more honest and appropriate style of openness, fragmentation and non-linearity.” Is not this candid and frank portrayal of female body anti-woman? The titillating material provided by the feminists may arouse the opposite-sex and may further make the women playthings in the hands of men. In the poem ‘An Introduction’ by Kamala Das, we have the candid expression: “I became tall, my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.” I think this type of excessively candid expression may titillate the baser instincts of the men to make them

sex-maniacs and thus creating a long army of parochial men, considering a woman just a toy for the gratification of their desires. What are your views on this?

SS: It is very important to understand that this social movement centers on the notion that sexual freedom is an essential ingredient of women's freedom. I believe in sexual self-determination of women where each woman has the right to determine who she will be intimate with. I am strongly against the system where without being judged for her choices, a woman is forced to be involved with her partner. According to my survey, between 60 to 70 percent of married women of India don't know what an orgasm is in their whole life. Only they are used by their husbands and become a mother of children. Our Shastras also support this milieu as "Putrathe Kriyate Bharya" (means: wife is meant for a son).

I stand just as strongly for a woman's right not to have sex (of any kind) if she doesn't want to and I believe that women who make that decision deserve support and protection as well. I refuse to be a victim of some imaginary universal male sexual sadism. As a human being, I always argue about equal status for women and I refuse to believe that by denying our sexual selves, women can be equal with men.

But what I oppose is patriarchal society's unfortunate decision to grant more liberation for a man than a woman. Our current society uses woman as an object and not as a human being. If a painter paints a nude of a woman, we can appreciate it as a masterpiece. We can enjoy the erotic sculpture showing women's nude bodies on the temple wall.

We can digest all these from the pen and brush of a male artist, but if Kamala Das writes, we feel disturbed thinking that society is now in danger. When Sunil Ganguly writes about his affairs with other ladies, it is cited as a literary boldness, but when Kamala Das expresses her passion, it is considered as 'perverted thought.'

How many people became sex maniacs after reading *Ulysses*? We consider *Kamasutra* as classic. I never think sex is not dirty play. Our Shringar literature in Sanskrit, literature of Sangam Period in Tamil, and the erotic sculptures on temple wall prove that it is as truth as hunger, thirst, slumber, birth, death wish, and dreams. How could you blame a woman that society is spoiled for HER only?

NKA: In the wake of Nithari killings of innocent children by the pedophiles, what is the significance of this type of frank literature? We must come forward to attack a literature which excites the sex instincts of the people. If forbidden impulses are aroused by literature to gratify (let us hope it does not happen in the future) profane desires and men turn into pedophiles, as was reportedly done in Nithari, then what is the utility of literature? Is literature not merely becoming a plaything in the hands of the nasty people? What do you say?

SS: In 2006, a greater number of sex crimes are registered in spring and summer, according to figures provided by the Municipal Department of Internal Affairs in Moscow. In February of that year, nine rapes were committed in the capital, whereas in March this figure reached 15, and in May, it rose to 22, and in June, it rose even higher to 23. The fact is that only 20 percent of rapists are so-called sex maniacs. Another 30 percent are drunken teenagers or released criminals. In half of these cases, the rapist is a person with whom the victim is already familiar, even if they have only just met at the house of a mutual acquaintance or at a bus stop. In the case of teenage girls, who are not always able to say “no” to an adult, the statistics are even higher: four out of five victims of sexual crimes suffered at the hands of a neighbour, class-mate, or family friend. So how can you say woman’s right over her body is responsible for the increase in rape cases? Why not the sun, the hormones, and alcohol?

It’s a vague and absurd idea that woman’s right over her own body (rather we shouldn’t name it as sexual liberation) is responsible to enhance sex crime. Look at Denmark. There were six registered sex offenders living in Denmark in early 2007, according to State List. All names presented here were gathered at a past date. No representation is made that the persons listed there are currently on the state’s sex offender’s registry. The ratio of number of residents in Denmark to the number of sex offenders is 357:1. But the country is very much liberal, having a less control over sexual restrictions.

NKA: Your webpage further talks about you: “She accepts feminism as a total entity of femalehood which is completely separate from the man’s world.” If there is complete separation between the two sexes, there might be continuous confrontations, arguments

and debates and thus generating ill-will between man and woman. The divorce rate is rapidly increasing, which in turn, makes people of both the sexes hysterical. Is there a way out of this confrontation to make life sweet?

SS: Scientists have come to accept that a few fundamental differences between men and women are biological. It turns out that men's and women's brains, for example, are not only different, but the way we use them differs too. Women have larger connections and more frequent interaction between their brain's left and right hemispheres. This accounts for a woman's ability to have better verbal skills and intuition. Men, on the other hand, have greater brain hemisphere separation, which explains their skills for abstract reasoning and visual-spatial intelligence. The biological differences subject a woman to some experiences like menstrual periods, menopause, and pregnancy which a man never experiences. I differ from Simone De Beauvoire in this context that women have their own identity and that they are different from men. They are 'others' in real definition but this is not in context with the Hegelian definition of "others."

In various articles I have written, though I protest the patriarchal system, I am never for replacing it with a matriarchal system. I believe in a like status of females with the males. In thinking, taking action, working, and creating, women should be on the same terms as men rather than seeking to disparage them.

I am not against motherhood, but I don't think 'motherhood' is the only important job in the world, nor is it the only "choice" available to women. It should be confined to the ability of woman to say "yes," as well as "no," to having children.

I am not against 'divorce' and I think it should be treated as the right of both sexes, not only the male's. What I stress upon is on love and emotional bonding between two hearts, not the social and patriarchal guidelines for females to teach them 'how to be an ideal woman.'

NKA : What differences do you find between 'the writings of men about women' and 'the writings of women about women?'

SS: I think a writer should be gender-neutral. If he is a writer in true sense, a man can write from a woman's viewpoint, though there are some feelings like pregnancy, the post-menopausal psychological conditions, or the feeling of joys in feeding her breasts to her

child, which a male writer couldn't express correctly as a woman. But it doesn't show the inability of male writer. I consider Balaram Das, a fifteenth century Oriya poet, as the prime figure to establish feminism in literature. In his *Laksmi Puran*, we find the agony, melancholy, and pathos of a woman. And this is the first 'Purana' perhaps in Indian literature to claim for women's rights.

NKA: How are your works, marked by feminist iconoclasm, received by men?

SS: In India, a female writer is always considered as an inferior writer in comparison to a male. I have presented a paper on "Women Writing of India" at Calicut Book fair 2008, where I have elaborately discussed this topic. Traditional readers have a tendency to find out the hidden love affairs that have been hiding beyond a fiction of a woman writer. Until now, their minds have not been prepared to accept a woman as a thinker or as a philosopher, whereas in the Vedic period, there were female philosophers like Madalsa, Gargi, and Maitryi. There were some interesting happenings with my story writings. *Gambhiri Ghara* ('The Dark Abode' in English and 'Mithya Gerosthali' in Bengali), the most controversial novel of mine was first written in story form and it was written for a special issue of an Oriya periodical. Before its publication as a short story, it was rejected and I was asked to submit another story in place of *Gambhiri Ghara*. While inquiring the reason of the rejection of my story, I was told that the editor would talk to my husband. This comment of the chief editor made me irritated and I asked the chief editor whether my husband has an authority over my writings? The patriarchal attitude of the chief editor made me to transform the short story into a novel.

Once I was also insulted and forced to beg apology for writing the story *Jalhad* (The Butcher) by the staff council of my college. It was a story about rape where the victim was an infant. The story was claimed as an obscene one and the matter was referred to the Governing Body of the college to remove me from my service of lectureship from the college.

For my story *Rape*, (published in *Waiting for Manna*) I was criticized for using the word 'fuck' in my story for several years. It was a story about a woman admitting sexual desire and it was intolerable for a patriarchal society to find a woman speaking

about her sexual desires. The story has a central idea whether a woman has no right for sexual desire even if only in her dreams.

In *Agneyagiri* (The Vulcano), I have painted two types of woman. One is a traditional one, submitting herself to husband, family, and society by losing her identity and the other one is searching for her identity. It is the story of two sisters, both having the same family background but the ultimate way of their flying was different. My elder sister, about whom I have told you earlier, felt herself very hurt thinking that the story was meant for her. No one of my family took it easily. As a feminist writer, from time to time, many people, both male and female, certainly get hurt by my frankness. I think a feminist writer is herself a challenge for the patriarchy form of society and also always has challenges from society in general.

NKA: What was the reaction of the parochial and patriarchal intelligentsia about your works here in India and abroad? Do you think that the west is more open to these types of revolutionary ideals or is it also following the stereotypes set by the men?

SS: There are mixed types of readership both in the East and in the West. You see conservatives and fundamentalists everywhere. In Orissa, where we think the people are more rational, my short story *Rape* and the novel *The Dark Abode* raised a controversy while in Bangladesh, where we think fundamentalists are that still remain under the roof of some recognized political parties, the same novel and short story got the response and appreciation of many readers there.

When these two works have been exposed to the Western market, I have found that they are well accepted. The West is more open to the idea of feminism, but still, there remains a timidity in the Western mind to accept sex, much like Eastern conservatives here.

NKA: What are major literary influences on you?

SS: In writing, I have been influenced by many Western writers. How could I mentioned just one name? He may be Dostovosky; he may be Kafka; he may be Joyce; and he may be Proust. But are they my hero? I don't think of anyone as an idol. If I consider anyone

an idol, it would be Jagadish Mohanty, my husband, who is a veteran Indian writer of Oriya Literature and whom I consider to be my friend and philosopher and guide.

NKA: Why do you write? Do you have a mission to reform society or is it merely for self-pleasure?

SS: It's an old debate and still a complicated question to which to reply. In the seventies, when I was just a budding writer and was a college student in undergraduate classes, in the literary debates, I was always standing to speak against the social commitments. Today, I also feel and believe nothing can be changed with your writings. Still, we write with the people and for the people. We, as fiction writers, have to write with society in mind but for me, commitment to art and commitment to self-answerability is more important. You know, as a feminist, I think I am more a writer and as a writer I think I am more a feminist.

NKA: What are the major themes of your novels? Are there certain other issues too besides this discussion of feminism?

SS: Though I like to portray a woman's life, her destiny, her experiences, and the pathos -- the agony she has to bear for being a woman, I don't want to be confined to the feelings of women only. I have written on gender-neutral topics as well.

In one of my novels, *Swapna Khojali Mane* (The Dream Fetchers), the story revolves round an acting troop who have come to a village to shoot the poverty in celluloid forms. The protagonist, Medha, at last realizes that the poverty lies with them, the intellectuals who want to earn money by selling the have-not's helpless conditions.

In *Mahajatra*, the protagonist Barun, an editor of a newspaper and an atheist, has realized how fragile his beliefs are.

In *Pakhibasa*, I have portrayed a family saga of a downtrodden cattle bone collector family. This is a multi-dimensional plot where the landscape spreads from symbolic representation of mythical Bhagwat to the current Naxal problem. It is a very complicated yet strongly weaved novel.

In *Gambhiri Ghara* (The Dark Abode), I have tried to raise my voice against terrorism from a micro level to a macro level. You can say *Gambhiri Ghara* is a

feministic novel. It can be represented as a novel whose base is sexuality. And you can also say it is a novel based on the current South Asian political environment.

As my novels are multi-dimensional in character, you can't say any of them have a single-line concept. But in some of my novels like *Pratibandi* and *Upanibesh*, I categorically confined the plot to feminist issues while in *Asamajika*, I have tried to focus on the social aspect of the gender problem issue. The later novel is the first novel in the Oriya language that deals with a lesbian relationship. *Upanibesh* has also been accepted by the critics as the first Oriya novel to claim the sexual rights of a woman.

In my short stories, I portray the feelings of a pregnant lady ('*Waiting for Manna: Amrutara Pratikshare*'); hysteria (*Burkha, Deshantari*); fear of miscarriage (*Sakal: The Morning*); false pregnancy (*Tarali Jauthiba Durga: The Melting Castle*); agony of and annoyance of menopause (*Dampatya: The Couple*); and lesbianism (*Behind the Scene*). I have also portrayed the shaking situation of a sixty years old lady, who is still waiting for her menopause and in every month her embarrassing situation when she find herself in bleeding (*Aparanha: The Afternoon*). Even in my story *Jahllad* (The Butcher), I have told the story of an infant who finds herself being raped by a caretaker servant.

But, like in my novels, I have also written many stories on gender-neutral topics. Some examples are: *Smoke, Flies, End of the Fascination, Burden of Proof* and *Beyond the Reach*. All are anthologized in *Waiting for Manna*, my second collection of short stories published in English.

NKA: Some of your short stories are translated into English. Are you satisfied with the translation of those stories into a foreign language? Are the translations faithful to the original and do they capture the native spirit of the Oriya cultural background?

SS: Sometimes, the problem is not that many translators have the wrong concept but that the variance in culture cannot be directly or effectively translated. When Western readers open a book by an Eastern author, the reader will have to accept that he/she is going to be reading material with which is not familiar. In such cases, footnotes or other unnecessary elaboration of text may disturb the reader's mood and focus. A translator always tries to capture the original feelings of the author but the success always varies with his intelligence and skills.

NKA: Do you prefer writing in your mother tongue or in English?

SS: No doubt, I prefer writing in my mother tongue because I think if Shakespeare would have written in French, he might not have ever been a Shakespeare. A writer can express his/her feelings well and skillfully only in his/her own language. I write critical appraisals, my blogs, my regular columns in *Indian Age*, and other articles in English, but I always prefer to write my creative writings in Oriya for the reasons stated above.

NKA: You are also an editor. What are the major problems of the creative writers of today?

SS: Today, young writers are more crazy for publishing. I have noticed that many of them that I have edited want to submit the article in one writing. One of our eminent writers, Gopinath Mohanty, once advised the young writers of his time to keep the article in a drawer after completing it and to read it again after few months. If it would still seem to be worthy for publishing, then the writer should send it to an editor. But nowadays, nobody wants to keep his/her writings in a drawer for even a day after completing it.

NKA: Who are the other contemporary female voices from Orissa writing in the native language?

SS: There are countless female writers writing in Oriya. If any one would make a survey, they would find that the number of female writers would outnumber the number of male writers. In this case, to utter only one or two names, I think, would be an injustice to the many talented writers out there.

NKA: Have you written some poetry too? If yes, are you planning to publish them?

SS: Yes I also write poems but there are not a sufficient number to make them into a book. But you can find poems and poetic essences in the majority of my creations.

NKA: What are your future writing plans?

SS: I am now working on a novel and don't want to plan anything more before completing it.