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The Vantage Point of the Vanquished: Retelling of *The Ramayana* in Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*

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Sarah Joseph's novel *Oorukaval* translated as *The Vigil* (2014) by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan is a retelling of *The Ramayana* through the eyes of Angadan, the son of Vali. The novel questions the justice of Raman for whom his own reputation as a king is far more important than the lives and dignity of others. The novel problematizes the rationale on which war is fought and stresses on the havoc it wreaks on the lives of people, especially women and children. It also questions the indiscriminate destruction of nature's resources. A feminist activist-writer known for her strong female characters, Joseph connects Nature and women in their woes and thus brings in an ecofeminist reading into her tale. *The Vigil* urges the readers to look at stories of victory from the point of view of the victims, thus bringing in a new perspective to the story of Raman.

Epics in India and elsewhere have always been a rich reservoir of tales. Time and again, different perspectives emerge from the re-readings of these ancient tales, inspired by the challenges thrown up by the vicissitude of contemporary life. As Workman has observed "...the literary attractiveness of mythology is due to its enduring depiction of significant and sometime very uncomfortable relationships, some admittedly between man and his environment, but others of at least equal importance between man and his fellow men, and between man and his deities" (Workman 1981: 36). Sarah Joseph's *Oorukaval* (2008) translated as *The Vigil* (2014) by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan relooks into the story of *the Ramayana* through the eyes of Angadan, the son of Vali. Joseph narrates the story of a once prosperous land ruined by the political ambition of a powerful few thereby problematizing the justice and valour of Raman, who is hailed as *maryada purushottam*.

In the Kishkindakand in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Ram kills Vali, the ruler of Kishkinda to give the kingdom to Sugriv, his younger brother who was banished from the land for scheming against Vali. Sugriv claims it is a misunderstanding but Vali throws him out and takes his wife, Ruma as one of his women. Sugriv, with the help of Hanuman, enters into a contract with Ram. According to this contract, Ram kills Vali and makes Sugriv the king of Kishkinda while Sugriv with the help of his army helps Ram search for Sita. Valmiki's *Ramayana* narrates how enthusiastically the armies of monkeys set out in search of Sita. The troop that goes to the south finds out from Sampathi that Ravan has taken Sita across the ocean to Lanka. While the other monkeys hesitate in fear Hanuman jumps across the ocean, meets Sita and wreak havoc in Lanka. This is narrated in 67 *sargas*. Sarah Joseph's novel is divided into three parts. Part one is set in Kishkindam, immediately after Vali's death. Part two is the description of the journey in search of Sita and part three focuses on the journey of Raman, Lakshmanan and their army to Lanka, the release of Sita and after.

The Vigil starts with a crest-fallen Angadan confounded by the injustice of life reflecting on his carefree days. A cheerful adolescent till then, he is unexpectedly thrown into the crux of

political turmoil with no way to know who his friend is and who his foe when Vali is killed. Sugrivan seizes power, makes Tara his queen and announces Angadan as the heir apparent. This was insisted on by Raman who grew uncomfortable by Tara's accusation that he had killed Vali by treachery. Sugrivan forgets his promise to Raman and whiles away time in his new-found life of luxury and power till an angry Lakshmanan appears at his door. Tara is made to pacify Lakshmanan, and Sugrivan swings into action ordering his armies to go in search of Sita. Angadan is made the leader of the group that goes South against Tara's and her father's entreaties. Angadan, brooding over his father's last words that he should remain submissive to Sugrivan, but embittered by his betrayal agrees to take on the mission. Thus he finds himself in a complex situation where he is forced to help the murderers of his father. Unlike the spirited monkeys in Valmiki's Ramayana, the people of Kishkindam are forced to join Sugrivan's army by threat and force.

Throughout the journey, Angadan's mind is in turmoil. He seeks answers for the wrongs done to him and his clan from Maruthi, Sugrivan's trusted soldier and Raman's loyal devotee. The answers of Maruthi do not bring solace to Angadan, rather they only highlight the privilege of the powerful, the ones with iron weapons in hand, and the helplessness of the vanquished. To the people of Kishkindam and Angadan, Raman's ideology is strange and distorted for it challenges their own traditional beliefs by which they lived and survived as a community. In a major departure from the epic, Sarah Joseph portrays Kishkindam not as a land of the monkeys, but as a tribal land with its own customs and rules of conduct (Still, the cover surprisingly depicts Angadan with a tail!). But their codes are not acceptable to Raman, who belongs to the distant land of Ayodhya. According to Raman, Vali is punished for being lustful towards his brother's wife, Ruma who should have been like a daughter to him. Moreover, Raman's words were: "You monkey! As a human being, I have the right to kill you!" (118). Maruthi explains to Angadan and the young soldiers that what Raman meant was they were "unsophisticated". He explains: "We do not have knowledge. Nor any rules. Nor do we have the justice and law to regulate life. We are superstitious people who believe in antiquated customs. All Raman meant was that such people are not very different from animals." (118). Angadan promptly points out that they do have all that but in their own way. Moreover, he declares that he is proud of his physical appearance however much it does not suit Raman's aesthetics which prompted him to call Vali a monkey. Maruthi becomes the advocate of a new change in the belief systems which heralds in knowledge and thereby truth. He insists: "Raman is one who has understood the essence of life and the universe. Following him is equal to pursuing the essence of life" (116). Maruthi elaborates on the union and disintegration of particles that make up human body, and the inevitability of death. Taran and the other members of the tribe find it difficult to believe as to them "death signifies hope too. It is a return to the mother's womb" (117).

Angadan also questions Raman's sense of justice which made him kill Vali by treachery, and not in a direct fight. Taran explains to him that there is a more intricate political motive behind it. Raman would not want Vali to bring back Sita, all by himself. That would have undermined his position. Later Angadan is also surprised by Raman pining for Sita. He curses himself for not being able to protect her, and burns in sorrow. He conjures up her vivid details:

"Eyes that seduce me

Lips that make me feel helpless

Breasts that fill me with thirst

Thighs that make me weary” (212)

In his country, a man may have many women, while Raman believed in having only one woman all his life. Even when the half-wit from Muchili ominously commented that “I don’t believe she is within him”, Raman seems to move heaven and earth in search of Sita. Raman’s lament for Sita brings memories of Iya, washerman Toppan’s daughter. But unlike Raman, Angadan is not able to recall her face or body. He laments: “I remember only you, just you!” (214) Angadan later is shocked by the way Raman treats his rescued wife. Raman’s nonchalance makes him suspect the very validity of his earlier pining. The logic of having one wife so that he can do justice to her unlike his father Dasarathan, fails miserably here.

Sarah Joseph’s work is undeniably an anti-war novel. Throughout the novel she questions the premise on which war is fought. Raman tells Sita “What I won through war is my own good name” (255). But the war fought for Raman’s reputation wreaked havoc in the lives of many. Kishkindam was famous for its cotton trees and threads. Sarah Joseph enunciates how a traditional stable economy is destroyed by war and violence. The people of Kishkindam for whom the cotton seed was precious than the “throne of Ayodhya, diamonds of Lanka and horses of Kekayam”, are forced to stop weaving and make weapons for the war on Lanka. The bamboo forests are decimated to make bows and arrows for the warriors. Kishkindam which was once a prosperous land of the bounty, suffers an unprecedented famine after it has to feed Raman’s army. The war with Lanka not only affects normal life in Kishkindam, but it also displaces other communities. The asuras are portrayed as a subaltern community who are pestered by sanyasis and kings alike. When Kishkindam decides to fight Raman’s war the *danavas*, another *asura* clan, are caught in between even when they had enjoyed a good trade relation with Kishkindam during Vali’s times. They are driven out of their abodes in forests in fear of their lives because “Ayodhya is the land of weaponry. Each man from that place is a travelling armoury” (102). As always it is the women and children who are victimized by violence. The danava women accuses Pravarana, who asks them not to run away fearing the army of Sugrivan: “People like you can stand tall and confront them. Who will save the children hanging onto our breasts?” (102)

Joseph also comments on the devastation of the environment at the hands of the war-mongers. Mighty mountains and tall trees are brought down to build the Nalasetu creating panic in other living creatures. Angadan who grew in the lap of nature cannot bring himself to fell trees and flee. While the bridge across the sea is celebrated as a splendid feat, Angadan is sceptical about whether it is indispensable: “Constructing a bridge over the ocean was indeed a great feat. But it was an assault on nature, more brutal because of the purpose it served --- to feed the needs of a war” (239). Mirroring Sarah Joseph’s ideology, the great war between Raman and Ravana is dismissed in less than 20 sentences with the ominous warning: “Ravana suffered the consequences of his karma. The results of Raman’s karma awaited him” (250).

Sarah Joseph’s feminist standpoint makes the women in the novel stand out. Joseph’s Sita is a bold woman who dares to question Raman: “You have taken into consideration only my body and passed your judgement. You didn’t for a moment think that I am not just my body” (256). She further accuses him: “You didn’t know my mind as keenly as you knew my body (257). Tara, the wife of Vali and mother of Angadan is portrayed as a strong, sensuous and sensible woman. Her political acumen is unmistakable. She understands the need to appease

Sugrivan for the sake of Angadan's life, but will not give into him on his terms. She insults him making it clear again and again that he has no power over her, and that she will remain Vali's woman forever. Still, she understands her duty to her land and therefore, pacifies Lakshmanan when he becomes furious at Sugrivan for forgetting his promise to Raman. Ruma, Sugrivan's wife, is a soft-spoken shy woman who "loved Vali more than Sugrivan." In her mind, she questions Raman's justification of killing Vali because Sugrivan too desired Tara, his brother's woman. There is a rich contrast between man-woman relationship that exists in Kishkindam and in Ayodhya. Even when polygamy is not a desirous trend, one is made to wonder if monogamy would ensure true love and freedom.

The women's attitude to life and nature is very different from the men in the novel. In addition to Tara and Ruma, Angadan is taken care of by many other mothers. Tara fears that Sugrivan may find a way to remove Angadan too from his path, and ensures that Angadan is safe by taking him back to her womb because "Mothers know that there is no place in the world as secure as the womb. No one can enter that space and subject their children to sorrow" (60). All mothers of Angadan take part in the ritual and his life is invoked into a clay pot which is then immersed into the waters of river Pushkaram. The mothers stand vigil on the banks of the river when Angadan goes south leading Sugrivan's men in search of Sita. The women are the protectors of life and nature, as epitomized by Swayamprabha who stands guard to the magic forest of plenty where time stands still. Swayamprabha is moved by tenderness at Angadan's entreaties to show him the way out of the forest. Angadan who hides a raging hatred against Raman in his mind, is in turn comforted by her cool touch. After the war, Angadan enters Raman's chamber with a sword with the intention of killing him. There, surprisingly, he finds Sita keeping vigil. She prevents Angadan from killing a sleeping Raman, offering her own life for "I am awake" (261). This is a strong commentary on Joseph's view on women as the guardians of sanity and peace in the world. Sarah Joseph also celebrates the camaraderie of women who are innately compassionate to the suffering of other women. Ruma weeps with Tara thinking about Angadan. There is no feeling of jealousy between the two women shared by the brothers, Vali and later Sugrivan. Ruma is quick to come to the help of the servant girl who is sexually assaulted by Sugrivan to spite Vali's women. The *rakshasa* women cry out in shock and pain when they hear Raman asking Lakshmanan to light a pyre for Sita while Maruthi, Vibheeshanan and even Lakshmanan keep silent (258). As Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan in her Translator's Note observes about the women in the novel:

All of them are strong women, their strength derived from their love for their loves or their children, their, their sense of eternity even in times of crisis, and their ability to live by themselves and establish solidarity and companionship with other women..... They love men, but they are neither dependent on them, nor lonely without them. They manage their lives with or without the men. It is actually their bond with other women that keeps them going even when the men are not present.

Sarah Joseph is at her lyrical best when she describes the sights and sounds of nature. Her imagery is overwhelmingly feminine: "They went to the river bank. Like the black sari discarded dawn, darkness shrouded the river" (114)/ "Pale light, like the anaemic lips of a pregnant woman" (81). The lake pushkaram, whose waterbody men cannot enter, is imagined as a beautiful, sensuous woman:

“Lake Pushkaram had the mysterious aura of a seductive woman. In solitude, she lay facing the sky, fully revealing the sensuous beauty of her body to the planets. The lotus leaves, as wide and soft as the lower parts of a woman’s abdomen, lent a greenish hue to the lake. The lotus buds that opened up when she sighed softly resembled her breasts; the half open red lotuses reminded one of her sweet-smelling vagina.” (59)

Tara baring her breasts to Sugrivan says to him: “Look at my beauty! Look! The marks made by Vali’s nails. The bites that he presented. The holes made by Angadan’s milk teeth. This earth is marked by the imprints of a father’s and son’s kisses. If you can find any untouched space on my body, you are welcome to it” (57).

Joseph underlines her ecofeminist perspective by the vivid description of the suffering of women and earth at the hands of the patriarchal forces. As Noël Sturgeon defines “Ecofeminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment” (Sturgeon 1997: 4). Critics have warned against ecofeminists perpetuating absolute dualisms by celebrating “an uncomplicated opposition between women’s perceived unity with nature and male-associated culture’s alienation from it.” (Armbuster 1998:104) Joseph, however, steers clear of this essentialism. In her novel, Vali is a visionary who loves and cherishes nature. His ardent admirer and son Angadan, raised by many mothers is sensitive to the core to the trauma of living beings and all other physical entities that constitute nature. Tara’s body compared to earth bore the marks of Vali and Angadan. Still these are not marks of violation but love and belonging. To quote Salleh:

...to turn the subliminal Man/Woman=Nature equation around the other way, it is the inevitable effect of a culture constructed on the domination of women, and domination of Nature ‘as feminine.’ . . . Women are not ‘closer to nature’ than men in any ontological sense. Both women and men are ‘in/with/of nature,’ but attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on men distancing themselves from that fact. Ecofeminists explore the political consequences of this culturally elaborated gender difference. (Salleh 1997:13)

It is no wonder then that Raman who is driven by his own idea of an ideal world order does not concern himself about destroying nature to rescue Sita and later abandoning Sita to rescue his reputation. But Joseph does believe that women have a more lasting bond with nature than men. Sarah Joseph in an interview with the translator, elaborates: “The protection of nature and saving it for production of food should be entrusted to women. In other words, the natural guardians of home and food-making ventures are women and not men.... As an author who is telling a story which has traditional moorings, I have a duty to examine the premises on which it is built and relate it to a contemporary reckoning of the world, nature and human beings.”

Sarah Joseph’s *The Vigil* is thus the story of the victimized and the vanquished. Her retelling gives voice to the agony and anger of all those who get crushed under the weight of

hegemonic powers that dominate history and distort it to suit their perspective. Through her work she interrogates rationalization of violence which uproots lives and violates nature. Her novel is a strong commentary on the way fundamentalist forces further their agenda through might in the name of progress, truth and justice. It evokes images of conflict of civilizations, religions and races that ravish the world time and again, and therefore, is very contemporary in its scope. The novel thus becomes the vigil of a conscientious writer against the ills of the society.

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