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Re-interpreting the Myth with a Vision for a New World: A Probe into Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*

Vincy J Dasan

Research Scholar,
Auxilium Centre, Angamaly,
Ernakulam

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Abstract:

This paper explores through Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*, originally *Oorukaaval* in Malayalam, translated by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, for subaltern elements and events of discrimination. The author subverts the original characters in the Ramayana, topples down boldly their roles and speaks from a subaltern perspective. She has a clear cut purpose when she alters the traditional Ramayana. She intends to demolish the hero of the original epic story and makes Angadan a seemingly unimportant character, the hero. The paper highlights the areas in which the conventional, established faith traditions are altered; and the author speaks through Vali, the ruler of Kishkindam and the rival of Rama that the so called dharma of Rama is not dharma. When the traditional Ramayana glorify and extol war poetically like many other classical epic stories, Sarah Joseph's text intentionally speaks of war in just about twelve lines to show the irrelevance of war today. Her vision for a new world enables her to promote a culture of peace, equity and integrity without discriminations through her bold retelling of the traditional story.

Keywords: hero, environmental protection, gender equality, war.

All writers want to say something to the world through their writing and want to be immortal through their literary works. Words are their tool to convey the ideologies or beliefs they hold and want to share to the world. Some of them choose an already told story as their base and background. This retelling is not a new storytelling technique; instead it has been part of the storytelling tradition. Even the eternal and legendary writer Shakespeare told his Classical stories of Plutarch and Ovid based on history and many other literary and biblical sources for reference.

The online edition of "The Hindu" News Paper in its review, discussing about the various types of the treatment of the Ramayana in a co-authored book by Sreekantan Nair and Sarah Joseph namely, *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, states that it is a "questioning of Rama's dharma from diverse, yet converging, points of view"; it is a story of people who are living in harmony with nature and others who strive to conquer it by force and that it is a depiction of "women humiliated and torn apart by ambitious men" (Venkiteswaran). Sarah Joseph, the environmental activist and renowned writer hailing from Kerala, basically a

Malayalam writer, adapts a rather bold step in subverting the original epic characters of Ramayana and their roles in her renowned novel, *The Vigil*. The author wears a contemporary lens to skim and scan through the Indian classical epic and brings out issues like environmental protection, gender equality, colonialism, terrorism, war and violence. Thus she uses the story of Ramayana in an effort to explore questions of human existence and purpose and proposes higher life values.

There is overly exaggerated narration in classical epic stories with a sole aim to be figurative and sublime; instead contemporary writings are more realistic and human oriented. The author uses Ramayana, the highly ornamented literary piece; erases its adornment and presents concepts and events, exploring the true feelings of human mind. In the age of chivalry, war and conquest was considered as a sign of valour, bravery and heroism; but today's anthropological approaches consider it as an uncultured practice. When the classical epics like the Mahabharata, the Iliad, the Odyssey and many more glorified, extolled and described the horrors of war elaborately; Sarah Joseph remains mortified and considers such descriptions of war as a nasty thing. Her single chapter on war occupies only one page of the book and covers its narration in about just twelve lines. The chapter titled "War" appears as:

Therefore, because of all that had happened, there was war.

Night and day, without a break of even a moment or a second, the war continued.

For seven days.

'Even if the ocean confronts the ocean,

Or the sky battles with the sky,

Nothing can match

The battle between Raghavan and Ravanaan.'

Thus was the war praised.

The brave men of Kishkindam were killed.

So were the brave among the rakshasas.

Even before that, within seconds, ten thousand of the ones who were not brave, dropped dead like winged moths.

All those who did not die fought the war till they died or won the war.

In the end, Raman killed Ravanaan.

Ravanaan suffered the consequences of his karma.

The results of Raman's karma awaited him. (Joseph 250)

She declares about her intention in describing war in the post-script provided in the novel that she purposefully used laconic prose, to highlight the futility of war in the contemporary world and the consequences that women, children and the generations there after suffer. To say in the author's own words:

. . . my stand is that wars are avoidable and therefore I do not wish to celebrate them through my poetry. Women and children would not want to describe war at length, nor do women take pleasure in the recital, which would otherwise make their children war-crazy. A world where my son does not become either the murderer or the murdered alone will give me peace. (Joseph - interview)

Thus she intends to give least importance to war in her story telling purposely not to promote a culture of war and violence.

Bijay Kumar Das' essay "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism: A Note", gives the meaning of 'subaltern' as "colonized/oppressed subject whose voice has been silenced" (Das 145). The idea of 'subaltern' as a literary theory which originated in the thought of Antonio Gramsci is a relevant lens to study *The Vigil* in order to examine the subordinate position of the characters of the story. This novel highlights the emergence of the prominent characters at the right opportune moments to open the eyes of the oppressor and "to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed" (146).

The people of Kishkindam make a happy, loving family and community. The family life of the Head of the Kishkindam clan which consists of the trio Vali – Tara – Angadan, reveal to be an ideal one. Vali proposes gender equality and calls for a celebration when Ruma weaves her colourful tapestry. He declares it as a hilarious day for the women of Kishkindam. There is a lot of joy, sharing and living together as a welfare community. He promotes traditional agricultural practices which are nature friendly and sustainable for the prosperous life of the people. He brings saplings of various kinds of plants and trees from the different nearby countries that he visits. The novel states that "All these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali" (Joseph 25).

The neighbouring countries feel safe and comfortable to trade with Kishkindam as long as Vali was ruling the country. The people of Muchily testify to a fair trade between them and Vali as: "He fixed how much paddy, oil, cotton, clay pots and fruits had to be given in exchange for a certain quantity of salt" (Joseph 33). In their opinion "Kishkindam without Vali is a mere termite hill", that can be knocked down with anyone's heels (101). The Danavas who live nearby are the of the opinion that with the death of Vali the sun has set there and furthermore they are afraid to engage in any kind of trade and friendship with them as the Kishkindans have new ties with Raman and Ayodhya, which is a "land of weaponry" (102). They speak about the precautionary measures they have to take with regard to their relationships with Kishkindam now as they have made a new pact with Raman that,

. . . Each man from that place is a travelling armoury. Dawn breaks, urging them to take up the bow and arrow. No one has measured the real power of their weapons. We should be careful when we indulge in games with them. . . . The kings enter, strike the ground with arrows and mark the boundary, then tell us to escape if we want to live. Whenever our people have opposed them, we have been defeated – felled like fruit from the trees. (Joseph 102)

These lines express clearly the fear of the neighbouring regions with regard to the new affairs between Raman and Sugrivan. They also begin to experience a lot of atrocities from the Search Party. They know that this new enmity is a sign of change in leadership in Kishkindam.

Angadan develops into a real hero. Though an heir to the kingdom he does not have the least ambition to possess it. He is completely detached. He likes to play around the “seven Sala trees” with his girl-friend, Iya (Joseph 244). But still Sugrivan finds him as a threat to his throne. So as part of his secret plan he commissions him to take charge of the Search Party for Sita which is rather a dangerous one. He was unwilling to rethink about his decision even though Angadan's grandfather, Taran pleaded with him because he was still a child.

In the case of the affairs in Ayodhya, the relationship between the young couples, Rama and Sita instead becomes stained, as Rama asks his wife to prove her chastity by jumping into the pyre after redeeming her from Lanka. He labels his actions as dharma, but it is merely an exhibition of muscular pride and arrogance and to sustain his political stability and popularity among the people. He wishes to put on a mask and be carried away by public opinion. The war that he invokes kills thousands of soldiers, innocent women and children. He destroys the animals, plants and the sea life without the least remorse. The felling of many mountains, trees and dredging of the sea disturbs the balance of the ecosystem. It is clear as day light that all these heartless atrocities of Rama are as part of conquering the other regions of the South. He pretends that he is undertaking all these in order to redeem his soul-mate Sita. If his intentions were true he would have been by her side even if he had to lose all the kingdoms, power and authority. At the end of the victorious evening he reveals his true colour while addressing Sita before a large crowd, “. . . I, a person of dharma had to suffer a bad name. My illustrious clan also acquired a bad reputation. . . .”; “How can I believe that having subjugated you, a beautiful woman, Ravana didn't touch you? Even after all that had happened, did you think that I would feel attracted to you?”; “Nothing exists between you and me. You can go wherever you want and live with anyone. . . .” (Joseph 254 – 255).

The women characters in the novel challenge Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who establishes her view in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, that “it is difficult for the subaltern to articulate her point of view” because of the patriarchy which oppressed women (Das 148). Joseph's Sita retorts Raman fairly and justly saying, “You have taken into consideration only my body and passed your judgment” (256). She blames Raman for not considering her mind which cannot be touched by another person with a look, word or action and says, “You didn't

know my mind as keenly as you knew my body” (257). Sita courageously reminds him that the war which destroyed many thousands to prove one man’s valour, could have been avoided. Thus the author intentionally but with solid reasons presents the epic hero as a villain and a seemingly minor, unnoticed character as a hero for his integrity of thought and actions.

There is a great synergy from the part of the women in the story for social justice and environmental protection. The women of Kishkindam very courageously gather themselves to raise their voice against the atrocities done to them. Tara gives a sharp tongue to her harasser, Sugrivan, and Raman, the murderer of her husband. Addressing Sugrivan she says: “. . . From now on, you don’t have to be afraid of anyone. Your elder brother whom you considered your enemy has been killed. You wanted to be the next ruler of the country and you have won” (Joseph 52). Turning towards Raman she says boldly, “. . . Aren’t you one who understands the pain of separation? If I am not with Vali, he will have no peace of mind or happiness. Use the same arrow that you aimed at my beloved’s chest and kill me too. I can never be happy or feel secure without him” (52). Tara seems to be always surrounded by the neighbourhood women including Ruma after the assassination of her husband, in order to avoid the erotic advances of Sugrivan. He acknowledges his failure in subduing her stating that she is a “cruel, arrogant woman” (129). He understands that it is not the “fire of passion” instead it is the “fire of anger”, and each time he advances towards her she inflicts insults upon him (129).

Most of the women of the country engage themselves in making clay pots, weaving colourful clothes, cultivating vegetables and cereals and looking after the livestock. During the reign of Vali the women enjoyed great freedom to choose sustainable methods of cultivation and weaving. Once the power-shift happened due to the conspiracy of Sugrivan, to kill his brother with the help of Raman, the women and their arena of work changed. Raman curtailed their freedom. The same hands which weaved clothes, moulded utensils, cooked and served delicious food were chained and used for carrying bamboo stems for making war equipments for Raman. After the successful return of the Search Party Angadan who looks for the women alarmed at the turn of events and turmoil in his kingdom finds that, “The wind bore the smell of bamboo soaked in water instead of the all too familiar one of wet cloth. The weaving centres were closed. . . .”and that “The women who spun and wove were missing as well. The tinkling of anklets and laughter could not be heard. . . .” (Joseph 190 – 191). Worse still, Sugrivan, the king appointed by Raman in the place of his murdered brother Vali, as a shameless mouthpiece of Raman, orders that the women and children of Kishkindam must eat less in order to provide plenty for the soldiers of Raman. Is this Raman’s justice!!! Is this Raman’s dharma!!! Is this his vision and promise for a prosperous common wealth for the land of Kishkindam!!! Thus Raman becomes an imperial, sadist king who implements his egoistic supremacy over the weaker, innocent nations who enjoy their daily simplicities of life. The novel pictures him as a “cheating, weapon crazy, sinful man” (Joseph 52). According to the original Ramayana, the mountains and trees gladly gave their consent to be destroyed in a spirit of sacrifice for a greater cause. But in today’s understanding it is considered as a mere plundering of the earth for human selfishness.

So the contemporary world would place Raman only as a heartless, greedy imperialist who subdues the weaker sections of society for his selfish motives.

The novel elsewhere portrays the condition of Kishkindam where the children are given toy pistols to play with. Raman turned the weaving shelters into places where they store quivers. The plough fields become grounds for practicing archery.

The text testifies that,

“With bow and arrow in hand, the youth of Kishkindam were immersed in single-minded training. They aimed at the little bird hidden beneath the leaves, the rabbit crouching between the rocks, the fruit that dangled from low boughs, the snake that crawled into its hole, the fish that swam and played the huge trees which they had always imagined as enemies. . .” (Joseph 191).

They are muted, the people of Kishkindam and even Sarah Joseph's hero Angadan, carrying in his heart and body his enemy but unable to express his feelings of hatred and resentment; agreeing with the suggestion of Spivak that “there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak” (Das 148). From the beginning of the novel he wants to take revenge on Raman for killing his father Vali, but delays with a turbulent question “to be or not to be”, as Hamlet of Shakespeare. Worse still, young as he was he had to take up the task as the head of the Search Party; described by its promoters as “sacred mission” in their expedition to rescue Sita (Joseph 70). Furthermore, after Sita was spotted he had to carry Raman on his shoulders throughout the journey but with the worst abomination in his heart. The war preparations at Kishkindam disturb Angadan very gravely. He knows that “It will sully the soil, defile wombs, lay the plough lands fallow. War will steal from me my own words. My hands will be tied behind my back and my feet bound by restraining chains. It will destroy and pulverize my consciousness. Slavery, debt, imprisonment, famine, fine. . .” (189). The question still remains unanswered, why did Angadan with his integrity of mind and heart, with his physical prowess not subdue his enemy and get back the kingdom and become the hope and promise of his people; and prove himself to be a real hero.

He is a hero in another sense. He gives a new definition to heroism. He shows his bravery when critical and crucial situations in which people are in need. He manifests his audacity by spending time with his mother and other women in the story. When his mother Tara engages herself in making clay pots Angadan collects for her the clay needed from the spot marked by his father – “a spot surrounded by seven sala trees”, which makes her eyes open wide and her face red brimming with happiness (Joseph 3). He makes Ruma, the star among the weaver women by drawing with the juice of colourful fruits and leaves, “long and short red lines”, “red stars on top and red suns below” her ordinarily weaved fabric (13). Iya, his beloved still relishes his love for her which is revealed in his inquiry, “Shall I pluck and give you a star?” (13). He reveals his humaneness by freeing Aatiyan, who was awaiting his new born, without

the knowledge of anyone in the Search Party. Aatiyan was forced to join the Search Party with many others from the fishing village, Muchili. Angadan knows the intensity of Aatiyan's love for his wife. In the course of the dangerous journey undertaken by the Search Party Aatiyan once expresses his inability to understand as to why Raman needs the assistance of others "to search for the one who resides in his heart" (66). He speaks of his experience with his beloved when they have to be parted for some reason or other as, "The woman residing in my heart often shows me the path that will take me to her. I only have to shut my eyes and focus on her and the path becomes clearer and clearer. If I follow it, I will be able to reach her" (66-67). Aatiyan who feels that "I can tell the direction only when I reach Muchili" proceeds with the belief that the woman residing in his heart would show him the path, still bewildered at the bold step of Angadan in freeing him (229). Thus Angadan's heroism lies in being more people oriented contrasting with other conventionally venerated characters that are power crazy.

In the course of the story his feelings of revenge and resentment are healed by Tara, Ruma, Swayamprabha, Sita and other women portrayed in the story. The novel testifies that Angadan who had "seventy different moods" was advised by Sama to plant an irippa sapling and to water it, which would help him to "subdue the anger", that sits at the tip of his nose, becoming for his lonely soul "a peaceful haven" (Joseph 25-26). Angadan himself testifies how Swayamprabha whom the Search Party meets at the mysterious cave calmed down his turbulent mind that, "Swayamprabha looked at me intently. She approached me and kept her palms on my head. The coolness from those hands, acquired over a hundred years, seeped into me. Slowly, my mind calmed down. I sighed." (154). In the final scene the spirit of Sita intervenes with her gentle, yet admonishing tone that "killing a sleeping man is a sin"; when Angadan raises his sword to kill Raman who was taking a deep sleep after his historical victory over Ravana and after "Sita was burnt and turned into ashes" in the pyre (261, 259). He attains the heights of heroism by distinguishing between right and wrong and thus being led into higher realms of spirituality. He attains the heights of sublimity of life by learning to be tolerant towards his enemy which reveals his real strength of mind and quality of heart. He learns in the school of women portrayed in the novel that forgiveness is the righteous way towards peaceful coexistence.

Thus in designing her vision for a New World through retelling the story of Ramayana the author proposes a set of new values and principles which include and give voice to the marginalized, the women and the environment.

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