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Problematizing Science: *Ramayana 3392 A. D* as an Eco-critical Text

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Abstract:

The praxis of science fiction encompasses a wide variety of writings from hard-core scientific prognosis to speculative fantasy. *Ramayana 3392 AD*, "India's Answer to The Lord of the Rings", reformulates epic mythology as science fiction, with its post-apocalyptic setting, scientific rationalization of monsters and mutants, and its stylistic coherence to the configurations of the genre. The graphic novel is an ahistoric mythic prefiguration of a dystopic world, where archetypes are re-enacted to present science and its working as the 'monster' or the "Asura Prime" that must be destroyed. Like the earliest science fiction canonical texts, *Ramayana 3392 AD* epitomises science gone wrong. Science is a threat to the physical and social world, invading human bodies, creating monsters, transmogrifying nature and endangering existence. The graphic text places science in a socio- environmental matrix and enunciates adherence to a pantheistic ideology. The eco- feminist inflections of the text is reified in the apotheosis of Mother Earth as the 'Earth Goddess', a verdant, regenerative force. The centrifugal forces of masculine violence resulting from scientific hubris is controlled only by the centripetal sacralized female 'network of energy'. This paper attempts to interrogate the repertoire of images that locates the text within the genre of science- fiction and the semantic, metonymic and formal strategies used by the graphic novel to communicate the philosophy of eco- feminism and biocultural conservation.

Keywords: science, fiction, Ramayana, eco-critical, fantasy.

Science fiction has been a literary method to illustrate political and social problems, particularly to critique the technological process and to censure the hubris of science. The

praxis of science fiction encompasses a wide variety of writings from hard-core scientific prognosis to speculative fantasy and recounted myths. Myths have been reconfigured as science fiction and archetypes reenacted in modern contexts to coalesce the ancient cultural ideals in present day actualities. "Behind the retelling of myth ... lies the feeling that, although, particular myths grew out of a specific cultural background, the truths they express relate to our humanness and remain relevant to all our societies..." (sf Encyclopedia,np).

Ramayana 3392 A.D, a graphic novel published in 2013, narrates, reconstructs and (re)presents the story of Rama and the conquest of Lanka - in an uncanny futuristic setting. Though classified as epic fantasy and labelled "India's answer to *The Lord of the Rings*", it can be categorized as science fiction as it effulgent with the icons and iconography of classic science fiction texts. The setting is in the distant future, the protagonists use elements of advanced technology (laser swords, machine guns, ariel scooters), the aliens that populate the texts are cognizable by scientific logic - not supernatural creatures from magical places, and the story uses science as a crucial element of the diagesis. The icons of science fiction - space ships, wastelands, cities, robots - are integral components of the plot. The argument that this paper makes is that *Ramayana 3392 A. D* is an ahistoric, mythic prefiguration of a dystopic world which presents science as problematic when it appropriates the prerogatives of the Gods. It is an eco-feminist novel - recognizing the ecological carnage caused by man and the regenerative powers of woman who is close to the landscape, which is itself picturized as feminine. The graphic novel is a harsh indictment of the toxic effect of industry and technology on human beings and society.

Ecocriticism as a method of literary analysis first arose in the 1970s and refers to the reading of a text from an environmentalist standpoint and texts evaluated in terms of their environmental preoccupations. The absolute right of man over nature has been challenged by eco-critics, and according to the philosophy of Deep Ecology, the "non-human world has value independent of its usefulness to human beings" (Kerridge, 536). This calls for a change in the attitude of human habits of consumption and exploitation of the natural world, "not only to avoid catastrophe, but as a spiritual and moral awakening" (ibid). The logic of human domination over nature leads to the ascendancy over women

as well, because of the postulate that women were closer to nature. Thus, belief systems that legitimise environmental degradation also legitimises the subordination and oppression of women. *Ramayana 3392 A.D* presents the political agenda of ecological consciousness and the power of the sacred feminine refracted through the prism of science fiction.

The novel opens on the classical sci - fi note of time travel - "As we sail upstream on the river of time, we will come to the shores of distant lands" (*Ramayana 3392 A.D,np*). The setting is a post - apocalyptic world "surviving holocaust, an apocalyptic war that once destroyed the atmosphere and ecology." The "last remains of the human race" amongst various anthropomorphic creatures, is a highly evolved people in their last bastion, the land of Armagarh, situated in the North east of the great continent, Aryavarta. The brave new world of Armagarh possesses its "superior technology and lifestyle since it is the only land blessed by the light of the sun" (*ibid*). Harnessing solar energy with the 'marvel...reactor' 'Shakti Kundali' is adumbrated as a paradigm towards holistic advancement. The semiotics of the name points to the feministic overtones - 'shakti' is the term for the Mother Goddess in Hinduism and 'Kundali' also refers to spiral galaxies. The discrete and yet mutually involved terms suggests the feminine power of energy creation, that has the capacity to "cut through the noxious cloud cover that enwraps the planet" (*ibid*). Climate changes that occur because of increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere leads to "flooding, desertification, famine..." (Kerridge, 533) which results in the distinction between Armagarh and the rest of Aryavarta. As an environmentally oriented text, *Ramayana 3392 A. D* presents the natural non- human environment as an active agent that shapes human history and impacts the life of the people.

The eco- feministic orientation of the novel is brought out both by creating a binary opposition between the physical, social and moral standards of Aryavarta and the rest of the world, and by presenting Seeta as the Sacred Feminine, the apotheosis of Mother Nature into Earth Goddess. Seetha as Earth Goddess is introduced after Rama lies dying after the war in the "godforsaken junkyard with the asura- haunted Chitrakut mountains at ...[the] back, and the wasted deserts of Thar in front..." (*Ramayana 3392 A. D, np*). The threat of war is the fear of space age genocide that culminates in the death of Gods, while

desertification is the conceptual representation of natural and social destruction - land and people which are barren, arid and untenable. Chitrakut is characterized by 'entropy' – it is a system that has no symbiotic biosphere and is decayed both physically and spiritually. However, Seetha, the woman, has "the capacity to change the very face of the earth with her will and make it a place we all dream of"(ibid) - the power, affinity and compatibility of the woman with the earth and Seeta's identification with the Earth makes her the 'genius loci' of monistic beliefs. She is presented standing in a dilapidated building in the midst of the desert as a princess who has "lost everything", but whose capacity to work miracles still exists. Her "tears [can] bring a dead plant back to life" and one tear drop revives the dying Rama (ibid). She is thus, the power of the earth with the human and nature seen as an organic body and a strengthened sense of human embeddedness in nature. Like the earth, she can work miracles but destruction of nature has led to her incapacity to have control over her magic.

Creativity and productivity come from her, "You're the one who can bring life" and her powers rejuvenate the wasted deserts of the Pampa to make it "earth...as it should be" (ibid). The greening of the Pampa is depicted through a series of panels, which grow larger as the earth splits to sprout full grown trees, inserted into a full page spread of Shaab, her monstrous rats and the three travellers dwarfed before the magnificent immensity of nature in full fruition. The power of woman to provide solace reinforces her biological attributes and promotes her agency.

Similarly, when war and destruction, "madness and Chaos" reign in Panchavati, it is the Sacred Feminine that "gives...salvation" and averts the urban peril. The placement a biome at the centre of the narrative and the primacy attributed to the feminine reverses the traditional hierarchy that privileged the human and the male.

Ravana, the spawn of man's precipitous hyper technology, which created hybrids and ravaged the earth and its creatures, desires Seeta, not for sexual gratification, but to gain control over the natural processes inherent in living organisms which bionic forces are denied. He was created in a nuclear "fallout shelter" in the pre- apocalyptic age. Ravana epitomises the forces that govern the destruction of nature and he is "blasphemously brought into this world by the evil of man" (*Ramayana 3392 A.D*). Ravana's desire for Seeta is the hubris of the scientist who desires to "control the energy"

the Earth Goddess wields so that "I shall become God" (ibid). He is incomplete because, though his bionic body makes him "more powerful than any other creature on earth", he is not alive. The text privileges natural biology over synthetic technology by making Ravana crave "the power of the earth, the secret of life" (ibid). He transforms himself alchemically to capture Seeta, representing the both the machinations of patriarchy and the forces that seek to desacrilize nature making it 'natural resources' whose "true potential" can be exploited through "proper guidance" (ibid).

Rama is the binary dyad of Ravana who believes, loves and protects the Earth Goddess and seeks her as a presence, not a possession. His rejects Soornaka who offers him "a huge treasure of wealth" (ibid) is a rejection of material gains that attract the asura hoards.

Physical, Social and Moral Degradation

The novel builds up a binary opposition between Amargarh, where the environment is protected and women accorded respect and the rest of Aryavarta, intent on the exploitation of nature and subjugation of women.

The entry point of the novel is a double page spread of the princes of Amargarh on the right and the the embattled trio of Rama, Lakshman and Seeta on the left. Significantly, the full-page spreads appear periodically throughout the novel, imposed by the narrative structure - which Groesteen called 'gridding'. The story is divided into sequences of the same length and it is within and through this matrix that the narrative is effectuated. Except for the first double page spread, the others occupy three pages, signifying the present, the past and the immediate future. The first spread is the equivalent of low angled shots with Rama foregrounded and therefore of greater salience; but, notably, the weapons - the sword and battle- axe - are wielded by Bharat and Shatru, not by Rama or Lakshman. Rama's aversion to unnecessary violence, his reverence for the sanctity of life "values life more than anything", the reason for which he was exiled, is introduced in the following pages - but Amargarh is presented at the outset as "the land reflecting the splendour of human excellence" - where two of the "finest soldiers" are not shown wielding weapons (*Ramayana 3392 A.D.*) "The ultimate warrior" fights only to avoid a greater catastrophe not to acquire land or wealth, as do the rulers of Panchavati. Even when facing death and ordered to slay his opponent, Rama's "honour" disallows

him from killing "an unarmed man". Again, as opposed to the machine guns and tanks that are the artillery of the Vanara and Asura armies, the armaments borne by the Amargarh heroes can only kill the immediate opponent, not annihilate an army. Even the potent "Haradhanu" (bow of Shiva) gifted by Seeta's father only serves to temporarily check the progress of the Vanara hordes, it does not exterminate the threat: "I think all you did was make him mad, brother" (ibid).

The network of full-page spreads relates to each other, through the process of 'braiding' - where "every new term of a series [is] a recollection or an echo of an anterior term" (Groesteen, 147). Here the text of the comic produces a tension between the brightly coloured introductory spread, in tones of warm gold; to the deep expressionistic red and high key lighting of the spread that shows us the Asuras; to the grey and macabre monstrous image that brings in the fake Vishwamitra, the somber grey war pictures of Viv-shan, and the floral cornucopia that presents Seeta. The visual contrasts privilege the value-systems of Amargarh and Rama as productive and desirable.

Moral degradation as a natural concomitant of environmental damage and consequent rapacity is the theme of the Pamba sequence where the heroes and Seeta meet Shaab, an ironic parody of the meeting of Rama with Shabari on the verdant banks of the river. By 3392 A.D, Pamba has become a 'junkyard', the devout old Shabari, a cannibalistic vampirish fiend, surrounded by ravenous "oversized rats". She does not await Rama with half- eaten gooseberries, as the epitome of hospitality - she is intent on devouring the brothers and Seeta herself because in the junkyard of Pampa, "Food is even scarcer than love" (*Ramayana 3392 A.D*). The human and divine values do not operate in the wasteland: "there is no good or evil" (ibid); there are only eco- wars over limited resources and animal instincts of survival - "there's just predator and prey" (ibid). Shaab, who provides the Prince of Ayodhya with the choicest fruits, the finest he had eaten, is an environmental refugee wonder-struck at the fruit trees that sprout under the magic wrought by the Earth Goddess.

The arboretum that is created is a network of sustenance - "bounty from heaven and from this more bounty shall sprout. Shaab and her children will never, ever be hungry again" (ibid). Trees not only provide food that is nutritionally essential, they sustain life and protect human and ecological existence. As the junkyard becomes an oasis, there is a

transformation in the behaviour of Shaab and her fiends - she transmogrifies into the Shabari of the Ramayana attitudinally - submits herself to the Earth Goddess, the threatening aspects lost and warmth towards her guests restored " Stay with Shaab and her children, we shall be your servants forever. How else could be repay you?" (ibid).

The environmental values of Armagarh are set against the industrial, technological societies of Nark and Panchavati. Lanka, the capital of Nark, and Vigadh, the castle of the Asura Prime is technologically advanced, but void of emotional and organic fecundity. Ravan is portrayed as a bionic creature - a mechanized robot, which can feel no emotion, cannot be physically hurt and has the capacity to easily heal. The Asura hordes are malignant and deformed, suffering from "loss of fuel", and consequently, selfish and hyper aggressive, a state characteristic of what is known as "ecological antagonism".

Panchavati is, similarly, in a state of post- apocalyptic decay, ecologically barren, morally corrupt and predicated on the notion of individualism not organicity. The graphics present an arid desert, reinforced by images of turbaned travellers with camel-like prehistoric mounts. The city teems with buildings and migrants and tourists come seeking profits "seldom a day passes in Panchavati without a meeting of creatures, each of whom believing the other's land a fable", in a land where "anything can be had for a price" (*Ramayana 3392 A.D*). Panchavati, "a city of smugglers, brigands, thieves of all nations" (ibid) is also a critique of globalization, a natural concomitant to scientific advance and adventurous forays. The physical threat of an invasive species is narratively characterised by the influx of foreigners, the last of who are the travellers from Armagarh, who destroy the city. Men are regarded as "property" in the city that "reeks of corruption and dementia". Soornaka is the woman abused - "It was his hunger" - in the city where nature is exploited (ibid). The only legitimate interest in Panchavati is that of the human and the male. Woman and nature are shackled, regimented and deployed for putative uses of man.

Included in this scientific society are "degenerate hybrids" (ibid), the result of biological experiments, which like the "oversized rats"(ibid) that attacked Seeta in the Pampa episode, are monstrous beings that ultimately assail the life force of the world. In the "arena of despair" where combatants fight to death for the paid entertainment of the

public, the brothers battle a "formless abomination". The gigantic, murderous beast is the result of "an experiment gone wrong in the Asura strongholds" where scientists were involved in selective breeding of a super warrior by fusing together the finest attributes of "a platoon of superheroes" (ibid). What was "once a unified force of heroic men" is reduced to being malignant abominations because of the hubris of man playing God (ibid). Monsters in science fiction novels - Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stevenson's *Mr. Hyde* - have all dealt with the disasters wrought on the world through the hubris of scientific knowledge, and "shows the 'true' face of science" which is potentially dangerous and trespasses the boundaries of nature (Shelde, 42). A city that fails to conform to Seeta's "own image" is destined to be ruled over by monsters, lust, corruption, avarice and hatred. In the sub-text of Seetha's overwhelming Panchavati with jungle, a movement from 'culture' to 'nature', lies the ideology of the Deep Ecologists who took the radical stance that technology was problematic and 'saving' the planet is only through a return to wild nature.

Scrutinized through the eco-critical lens *Ramayana 3392 A. D* postulates the sacrilization of nature and prepotency of women. By reconfiguring a mythical text to enunciate a contemporary social issue, the novel becomes a descriptive - meditative narrative, uberous with eco- feminist messages.

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