

REVISITING *RAMAYANA*: AN ECOFEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SARAH JOSEPH'S *THE VIGIL*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is identified as a movement that speaks for the environment, women and the marginalised, including queers. It studies how the oppression of women is linked to the oppression of nature. Sarah Joseph is a renowned writer and social activist born in Kerala. She is considered as one of the most prominent women writers in Kerala. She is the founder of Manushi, an organization of thinking women. Her writings focus on women, marginalised as well as the environment. *The Vigil* is a retelling of *Ramayana* from the perspective of Angadan. The novel is about the huge ecological destruction caused by Raman's army, due to the construction of Sethu (bridge), in their mission to rescue Sita. *The Vigil* is written against the destruction caused by war. The main aim and objective of this study is to analyse and interpret the essence of ecofeminism in *The Vigil*.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Marginalisation, War, Ecological destruction, Feminism

The evolution of feminism and environmentalism in Kerala owes much to the writer-activist, Sarah Joseph. "Environmentalism is a set of cultural and political responses to a crisis in humans' relationships with their surroundings" (Morton 9). Joseph experiments with multiple philosophies of feminism. Her works represent the voices of multiple marginalised categories, including the nature. *The Vigil* is a retelling of *Ramayana* from the perspective of Angadan, the son of Vali. The novel questions the justice of Raman, who is regarded as the 'Maryada purushottam,' for whom his reputation as a king is far more important than anything else. The novel shows how the prosperous land of Kishkindam is subjected to destruction due to the selfishness of Raman. The novel is divided into three parts. Part one is set in the land of Kishkindam, which is subjected to a political turmoil, immediately after the death of Vali. Part two focuses on the journey of the people of Kishkindam in search of Sita. Part three is the

description of the journey of the army along with Raman and Lakshmanan to Lanka for rescuing Sita.

In *The Vigil*, Kishkindam is not the land of monkeys. Instead, it is portrayed as a tribal land with its own traditions and beliefs. People live in harmony with nature. Ecological aspects are given prime importance by people. Even their professions are ecofriendly. They do jobs like weaving, agriculture and clay pottery. The kingdom under the rule of Vali never used to get into conflicts with any other communities or groups. Vali has played a great role in creating a mutual bond between the kingdoms of Kishkindam, Danavas and Rakshasas. Vali is portrayed as a strong ruler, well loved by his people. He loves both his people and land equally. Nothing is important to him more than the well being of his people. He is a visionary with great ecological foresight. He very well knew the importance of nature as well as its preservation. Vali's love for nature can be understood from the words of Sama, one of the female characters:

Have you noticed the flower gardens of Kishkindam? Is there any region without a forest? All these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali. He brought back seeds, saplings or cutting from every place he visited and planted them in Kishkindam. Flowering trees, shrubs, creepers and medicinal plants. Is there any city like ours in the world? A place where a hungry child can stretch his hands and pluck a fruit. (Joseph 25)

The land of Kishkindam which was once most revered by Vali and his people is subjected to mass destruction. The rich forest resources are shamelessly plundered to serve Raman's needs. Man's selfishness is very evident when the forest resources are mercilessly slaughtered. *The Vigil* is written against war which causes huge destruction. The whole ecology will get affected due to this. Raman is presented as a selfish king, who doesn't hesitate to destroy anything just to preserve his ego. When an invasion occurs, all organisms are forced to leave their natural habitat. When the troop returns after finding about Sita, they are terrified at the sight of Kishkindam. They simply could not believe their eyes:

Wherever they looked, they could only see destroyed bamboo groves. The entrances to the groves had been blocked by mounds, heaped with uprooted plants, leaves and thorns. The smell and colour of the land had changed. All signs of life had faded. People ran around helter-skelter. With all their strength, they kicked aside the thorns and

trampled on the bushes and leapt over the hurdles to reach the gates of the city. (188)

The huge environmental destruction caused due to the building of Sethu towards Lanka to defeat Ravana is explicitly explained in the novel. The whole ecological system is affected in the process of making the bridge. In Valmiki's *Ramayana*, while building the bridge the trees, hills and rocks were waiting to be uprooted. But Joseph explains how a whole habitat is destroyed due to the construction of this bridge. The extent of destruction caused to the land of Kishkindam by Ravana's army breaks Angada's heart. Being the son of Vali, a great nature lover, Angada couldn't bare the sight of his beloved land being tortured:

Getting out of the river, walking with Maruthi, he reached the top of the mountain. The sight that greeted him was frightening. He saw below him a graveyard of trees and stones. The place where huge mountains had stood, their heads held high, was now level ground. The forests which had given shelter to the army had disappeared. Not a leaf, nor a blade of grass was to be seen. The ocean had swallowed it all. Cracked and split, the earth had turned red. On it, Kishkindam's army crawled like worms. (237)

Sarah Joseph presents the people of Kishkindam as human beings with monkeys as their ancestors. Ravana considers the Vanara community as mere animals. They are treated as subordinate beings. Humans hunt and kill animals for fun. Being a Kshatriya, he believes that there is nothing wrong in killing animals. He uses this very sense of superiority to justify his heinous act of killing Vali. He says:

Human beings kill animals as they run away in fear. They remain firm, showing courage, advance in mad fury or just stay quiet. The kings who observe Dharma hunt and capture animals for fun. I do not see any harm in any of these actions. Now you shouldn't get angry hearing what I have to say. As far as I am concerned, you are only a "monkey". Whether you oppose me in a battle or not, the fact that you are an animal gives me the right to kill you. I don't regret it. (118)

Sarah Joseph's stand on feminism is evident from the way in which women are portrayed in the novel. Apart from Angada, female characters like Tara and Ruma, wives of Vali and Sugriva respectively are also dealt with great importance. Most of the female

characters also have their own stories to tell. They find strength and support from each other. They are subjected to the brutality of men. Sugrivan considers them as mere objects to satisfy his lust. They obey the orders of Sugrivan silently even when their children were asked to participate in the war. Just like the nature, they are also marginalised by men. “Women are devalued first, because their work cooperates with nature’s processes, and second, because work which satisfies needs and ensures sustenance is devalued in general” (Shiva 7). There are many instances in the novel where Sarah Joseph compares nature to a female body.

Lake pushkaran 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. (Joseph 59)

Being an adaptation of Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Sarah makes her first departure from the original by presenting Angadan, a peripheral character in the traditional *Ramayana*, the hero of *The Vigil*. Angadan becomes the voice of the marginalised women and nature. He questions the denial of Sita by Raman and the idea of war which leads to death and destruction. Raman and Sugrivan are representations of modern man who destroys nature in the name of development and civilization. Sarah’s deep awareness of the environment can be seen in her detailed descriptions of the events surrounding the building of bridge across the ocean. Through this novel, the author makes the readers realize that the mass destruction of the ecology that happened in the days of *Ramayana* is still continuing and shamelessly justified in our world.

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