



ECO-SENSIBILITY IN SARAH JOSEPH'S *THE VIGIL*

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Abstract: Man's anthropocentric attitude of dominating nature has led to eco-disasters and has put the environment as well as the very existence of mankind at stake. Recently in the area of theory and criticism, a young revisionist movement concerning the awareness of environmental issues has emerged. This new theory of nature writing called 'eco-criticism' gives central importance to the natural world. Eco-criticism focuses on how the environmental destruction and disasters are introduced in literary texts, the interaction of human beings with their natural dwellings and how the texts present animals, wilderness and the environment as a whole.

In this research paper, I am looking at *The Vigil* written by Sarah Joseph a Malayalee writer, who has been at the forefront of the feminist movement in Kerala. In *The Vigil*, she contextualizes the relationship between culture and nature using the mythical story taken from Ramayana, the story of Angadan a peripheral figure in the epic. The focus of the paper regards the use of myth to talk about the imperialist and colonial attitude of subjugation by humans towards nature as well as subalterns. Angadan is the character who represents the subalterns as well as the subaltern perspectives towards nature. Observing the binary created in the text by demonstrating natural regions and its life before and after imperial power, how the text creates an eco-consciousness in the reader. Furthermore, how the text is symbolic to the present-day concerns of globalization and capitalization which is underlined in the mythical narrative.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Imperialism, Subalterns, Globalization

The rampant anthropocentric attitude of man towards nature in the present world has brought eco-disasters and put the environment as well as the very existence of mankind at stake. A young revisionist movement called 'Eco-criticism' has emerged recently in the literary theory in which contemporary concerns of environmental crisis comes rudimentary. This new theory of 'nature writing' explores the relationship between humans and the natural world and the way they interact, influence and counter each other.

The term Eco-criticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his critical writing "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco-criticism." However, the official acclamation of eco-criticism was done by the publication of two books written in the 1990s, *The Eco-criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*. Although nature was not new to literature, eco-criticism began to emerge as a new trend in the literary field in the 1980s and 1990s on account of its particular focus on the environmental-related issues. Reuckert observes in his essay that, eco-criticism implied "...application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we live" (The Eco-criticism Reader, 107). In other words,

"Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, eco-criticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies". (Glotfelty)

Normally the literary theory is more concerned about the relations between writer, texts and the world. Despite other literary theories where the "world" is synonymous with society, the notion of "world" has been extended to the entire ecosphere in eco-criticism. Hence in many

ways, it is interdisciplinary as it covers the academic fields pertaining to nature and human culture like natural sciences, humanities, anthropology etc.

It is important to understand the environmental philosophy and its expressions in eco-criticism as it speaks about human-environmental relations and related issues. This will help in the advancement of environmentalism. Being a branch of philosophy, environmental philosophy is related to the natural environment and the place of humans within it. The interests that come under environmental philosophy includes adherence of human beings to various kinds of natural environments, the contrast between the life experiences of those close to the natural environment and the ones in urban industrialized areas. Hence eco-criticism takes the interconnection between nature and culture as its subject. My research paper attempts to find out how mythography as a mode is employed to address the eco-critical concerns placing it into a particular cultural context and how the author introduces colonial or imperial attitudes towards nature and to the indigenous people, thus creating an eco-sensibility among the readers.

Sarah Joseph is not only one of the leading Malayalam writers but also a prominent feminist and a social activist. Her novel *Oorukaval* which is translated by well-established translator Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan titled as *The Vigil* is a mythological retelling in the voice of Angadan a peripheral character in the epic Ramayana. Giving various perspectives to various characters of the Ramayana remains the favourite endeavour of writers. A.K. Ramanujan in his essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas” suggests that there is no single authorized Ramayana but for every Rama, there is a Ramayana. Thus, the power politics and authority as it exists in Ramayana is challenged and undermined across time.

Indian culture and traditions have been eco-oriented since the Vedic period. Through their spiritual philosophy, Indian philosophers differentiated themselves from the western philosophy of materialism. Valmiki’s Ramayana, a work of the second century AD which is

regarded as the authorized Ramayana is one such composition where nature and its inhabitants are well explored. The epic with Raman as the central figure is subverted in Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil* where the novel is told from the perspective of Angadan, the son of Vali and his nation Kishkindam.

Kishkindam the land of vanaras gives primary importance to ecological aspects. People living there are involved in eco-friendly professions like agriculture, weaving, clay pottery and in return nature feeds them. The kingdom never enters into conflicts with any other communities or groups. Vali the father of Angadan loves nature and nurtured it. This serenity is lost when Vali's brother Sugriva deceives him and get him killed by Raman. Sarah Joseph depicts Kishkindam under the rule of both Vali and Sugriva in order to reveal the damages happening to nature as well as to its inhabitants.

Vali and his community belong to the vanara (monkey) clan. They live in harmony with the natural eco-system. They are proud to acknowledge their vanara identity. But for Raman, they are mere 'animals' who are inferior to human beings: "You monkey! As a human being, I have the right to kill you (118). Raman uses this mindset to legitimize his right over animals and also to justify his unethical killing of Vali: "The fact that you are an animal gives me the right to kill you. I do not regret it" (118).

Through Angadan's perspective, Sarah Joseph sternly criticizes Raman's as well the whole Khastriya community's approach towards animals whom they capture and kill for fun. In Sarah Joseph's imagination, vanaras are human beings who have monkeys as their primeval ancestors. In fact, they are the worshippers of monkeys. Another group the author brings in like this is the gridhas (eagles). The novel depicts their way of life as much superior to that of Raman and his community. That is, they are more compassionate towards nature and the fellow beings.

Angadan is the one who speaks for the indigenous people and nature, both which appear to be subalterns in the novel. Building Angadan as her protagonist Sarah provides them a space which was not given in the epic. For Joseph, Angadan is not just a character but a weapon to challenge and question the idealism of Raman. Raman and Sugriva are the representatives of modern imperial man who wants to conquer the powerless and the nature to establish their superiority and exploit them for their selfish concerns. Vali who is condemned in the epic comes as a great figure in the novel and Raman who is the hero of Ramayana is portrayed with all his negative aspects. In fact, she subverts the traditional notion of hero who is brave and known for his valour and courage. Angadan, the protagonist or the hero of the novel is not a warrior but a human being who is gentle and caring in nature. He is a helpless boy who has to suffer the insult heaped on him by his father's killers and has to live in constant fear of danger. Angadan gives a new definition to valour and bravery which is used for the welfare of the community.

The Vigil is not a narrative of events that happen only in Angadan's life. The author expands her feminist ideology, political consciousness and awareness of ecology and environmental issues in various dimensions. In the book, Joseph explores a woman's world - of the female characters such as Tara and Ruma, wives of Vali and Sugriva respectively, Angadan's other mothers such as Mavala, Kushi, Sama, Angadan's friend Iya, Swayamprabha and ultimately Sita have their own stories. Although they are all suppressed, everyone is depicted as strong enough to overcome their grievances and anxieties. Most of them live without their men's presence and support. They find their strength and comfort in a woman companionship. There is a homosocial bond of sisterhood existing in them which enables them to find the sense of eternity even in times of crisis. Their emotions and body are compared with nature's topography.

The lotus leaves, as wide and soft as the lower parts of a women'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's body is equated with the earth itself. She says, "This earth is marked by the imprints of a father's and son's kisses (57)." While the author portrays minor as well as major female characters of strong will power, it is Sita who appears in the last chapter, who comes across as the epitome of womanhood. When her husband rejects and humiliates her, she does not accept it passively but questions him in a strong tone. She showed Raman his failure in understanding her as a whole: "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)."

Sarah Joseph's Sita questions Raman's nobility which failed to look at Sita's clan and its dharma. In the end she becomes more ethical by preventing Angadan from killing Raman against the principles which Raman breaks to kill Vali. Sita emerges as a strong and courageous person in the novel unlike the submissive, faithful and loving wife of popular culture.

Besides eco-feminism the author's eco-sensibility arrives in the description of war and the ecological destruction that comes out of it. In various occasions, Angadan questions the futility of war which leads to nothing but ultimate death and destruction. He indeed tries to dissuade the need for war. His father Vali is well aware of the annihilative nature of war and rejects it. Even Raman could have done that. From Tara's words, Joseph explains that Vali, at the time of his death told Raman that he could have helped Raman to get Sita back without any war. It clearly states that the war was not a necessity but it was Raman's self-centred decision. For him, it was not to get Sita back, but to establish his authority and supremacy over Rakshasas. Thus, the war emerges as a result of the power politics. The incident also suggests

the Aryan invasion into the indigenous territory of Dravidian people- thus brings a historical and political dimension to the novel.

Sarah Joseph's awareness of the environment and her call to preserve it comes up in the description of bridge-building across the ocean for war. Mountains were tumbled and forests felled down on Raman's and Sugriva's orders. Angadan questioned it several times and his questions are valid till now when dams are constructed for larger economic purposes. In the name of development, hectares of environment are destroyed and people are uprooted from their original inhabitants. They are forcibly displaced to some unknown locations to rebuild their lives which create the refugees. All this is done in the name of civilization and progress but the question the author asks here is 'for whom?'. In the text, the whole destruction of the natural environment and the construction of the bridge serves nothing except the purpose of war which causes annihilation. In a similar way the word 'development' is used to fulfil the appetite of capitalists who aim only at profit.

Breaking the stereotype of Raman, Sarah Joseph portrays him as an imperial man who asserts his power over the powerless. The ethics of Raman are questioned in the killing of Vali, in the abandonment of Sita and in the decision for war. In all these incidents, he looks like a hypocrite justifying his actions. In the end, everyone, even Raman's duty-bound brother Lakshmanan, is disillusioned by his deed. Raman is presented as a flawed character rather than as an ideal man in Sarah's novel. The authority Raman shows upon the tribes make him the symbol of imperial as well as colonial power. Raman's every order and action for the larger purpose of Sita's rescue becomes an intrusion into nature as well as into the inhabitants. He is a man who wants to establish his authority over others. Even he is symbolic of a globalized man who justifies the ecological destruction glossed over as development.

The author takes a traditional theme, locates it in a cultural context and gives it a contemporary concern. In this sense, *The Vigil* turns into a treatise which addresses the global issues and not the issue of a specific place. Sarah Joseph links the epic story with present time. She introduces contemporary feminist, ecological, socio-political outlook to the epic, rather than giving a traditional outlook.

In olden days courage shown in war is praised. Even Yuddhakandam in Valmiki Ramayana and several other Ramayanas is very elaborate and descriptive. But in the novel the war description is reduced to ten or twelve lines and the aftermath of war is criticized severely from Angadan's perspective. The author shows that war is not something which the world can behold or celebrate. She exposes the mass destruction that comes out of it. *The Vigil* gives an insight to the similarities in the way Raman dominated vanaras and later the rakshasas of Lanka and what is happening even now between nations. Apparently for Kishkindam, the war is intended to overcome its "primitiveness" and to turn into a "nation with a new justice which can lead the world forward" (238). But the real intention is the craving for power and superiority. Sarah Joseph distinguishes between the war mongers and the victims of war in her narrative. The novel gives the message that wars are not for the betterment of humanity but it leads to destruction and devastation.

In a similar way, how the insensitive developmental projects of the modern world pollute and destruct the environment to a greater extent comes under the concerns of the novel. Construction of dams and hydroelectric power stations for economic benefits is destroying the environmental eco-system and biodiversity. This kind of developmental projects are not only an intrusion into the nature but also into the indigenous people who are displaced from the places they belong to. Human beings in power rarely pay attention to the protection of nature and indigenous people.

Sarah Joseph focusses on the perspectives of women and indigenous people, who continues to be the subaltern even now. Both the groups can easily identify with nature, which is ignored, exploited and destroyed by the patriarchal and also the colonial system of power. Eco-feminism in the novel develops the lessons for the protection of women as well as nature. It consists an ideology which frees women from the patriarchal suppression and exploitation. Along with that it also deals with other marginalized groups who are discriminated and suppressed in the name of race, class and community.

Throughout the novel, the domination by powerful over the powerless is highlighted and criticized. Sarah Joseph makes the story of the glorification of one power-centred man or his clan into a story which provides voice to many people who are powerless and thereby gives many perspectives, especially subaltern perspectives. Giving it a contemporary relevance the author makes the readers realize that the trends which were in the days of Ramayana or in ancient time is continuing even now.

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