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Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract:

Ecofeminism is a movement that brings together environmental and feminist concerns. Critics hailed it as the third wave of feminism. Ecofeminism examines women and nature in culture, economy, religion, politics, and literature. It also analyses the similarities between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. The novel chosen for the paper is Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil* (2014). It is translated from Malayalam *Oorukaval* (2008) by Vasanthi Sankarnarayan. The researcher of this paper focuses on the ecofeminist elements in *The Vigil*. The aim and objective of this present study is to explore contemporary concerns through an ecofeminist lens. This study concludes by examining the ecofeminist theoretical perspective. In *The Vigil*, the researcher employs the traditional epic of the Ramayana to examine an assortment of modern issues, including environmental conservation, gender equality, colonialism, war, and violence.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, *The Vigil*, Kishkindam, Ayodya, Exploitation.

Introduction:

Ecofeminism is a newly coined concept that emerged from the feminist peace and environmental movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Though the term was first coined by French feminist Françoise D' Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la mort*, 1974 (Feminism or death). Ecofeminism is a movement that associates feminism with nature.

“Ecofeminism is not a single master theory, and its practitioners articulate multiple perspectives on their social practice” (Gaard, Murphy, 2).

Ynestra King defines: “In ecofeminism, nature is the central category of analysis. An analysis of the interrelated dominations of nature – psyche and sexuality, human oppression, and non-human nature – and the historic position of women about those forms of domination is the starting point of economic theory.”

Murphy's famous 1986 statement, “Where I live as a woman is to men a wilderness. But to me, it is home.” and “The Women are Speaking: Contemporary Literature as Theoretical Critique” explores literary examples of women speaking about the relationships of wilderness, nature, home, and identity.

Vandana Shiva is a prominent advocate of the Indian Ecofeminist movement. She is a polymath, engaging in the discipline of physics and philosophy and feminist activism. She is a world-renowned environmental thinker. Her immense, prosperous literary work is titled “*Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*.” This book elucidates the connection between ecological issues, colonialism, and the subjugation of women.

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva are the ecofeminists who discuss ecofeminist theories, the illusion of catching up with progress, and contemporary science & technology's intellectual roots. Reject any form of exploitation, the relentless commodification of needs, and violence. Plumwood highlights the need for revamping several interconnected fields such as ‘nature,’ ‘culture,’ man,’ ‘woman,’ and ‘human,’ to recognize that humans are “continuous with, not alien form, nature.”

In the context of intersectionality, ecofeminism and third-wave feminism are brought together. The study of the interrelationships between the subjection of women and the environment is part of a wide range of research that examines these connections. The interconnection of different social strata, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, caste, species, religion, nationality, and marginalized society, as well as concerns such as colonialism, is reinforced by this statement. Specifically, it investigates the global scope of environmental and gender concerns, to foster global solidarity and collaboration in the fight against these interconnected challenges.

Colonization marks the initiation of women's subjugation, according to Allen's argument. He asserts that the subjugation of Indian women was crucial for the colonizers' overall objective of subjugating Indian societies. Allen states that this assault on the system of women's power necessitates replacing a peaceful, non-punitive, and non-authoritarian social system in which women hold power by facilitating a harmonious and gentle social life. Instead,

the new system is based on instilling terror in children, asserting male dominance, and enforcing women's submission to male authority.

Theoretical Background

As the concept of ecofeminism evolved, it diversified and inevitably gave rise to two distinct ideologies by the late 1980s Radical and Cultural Ecofeminism. (Madan, Vandana, 99)

- Radical ecofeminists argue that patriarchal societies and principles of supremacy create a link between nature and women, leading to the oppression and exploitation of both. This is achieved by treating women and nature as "commodities," which allows for their exploitation and degradation. (Madan, Vandana, 99)

- Cultural ecofeminists emphasize the association between women and the environment, highlighting a fundamental relationship of nurturing that women and nature share. Women's collective experience fosters heightened awareness and vigilance towards the devastation and deterioration of the environment. (Madan, Vandana, 100)

The primary goal of ecofeminist literary critics is to explore the cultural construction of nature, including the examination of language, desire, knowledge, and poverty.

Ecofeminists argue that human language is both influenced by and has an impact on the natural environment, including rocks, woods, and rivers. This influence doesn't just affect sentence structure and comparisons, but also conceptual frameworks. In her work, Donna Haraway emphasizes the need to reconsider behaviors and language by reconceptualizing nature as an active subject rather than a passive object of study. The process of "embodying nature" entails shifting nature from being a passive reflection of society to becoming an active participant or influencer.

Ecofeminists contend that the depiction of nature as feminine (as mother/virgin) plays a vital role in perpetuating a detrimental environmental ideology. This portrayal also reinforces hierarchical modes of thinking that rationalize the subjugation of numerous marginalized groups in patriarchal societies by sorting them as being "closer to nature" or by labeling their behavior as "natural" or "unnatural".

Sarah Joseph's Biography:

Sarah Joseph is widely regarded as one of the prominent contemporary female writers in Kerala, India. She was born in 1946 in Thrissur, India, into a conservative Christian family. Her contribution to the "écriture feminine" movement—which emphasizes the writing of women—is acknowledged. She is considered the godmother of the feminist movement in Kerala, having founded Manushi, an organization of thoughtful women. She engages the whole field of gender theories through creative writing. Joseph is influenced by the Chipko movement, which leads to protests against women, subjugation, and environmental deterioration. Her writings are responses to nature's rhythm.

Sarah Joseph's first novel, *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, was published in 1999 and received the Central Sahitya Academy Award, the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, and the Vayalar Award. In 2003 and 2005, she authored *Maattathi* and *Othappu*, respectively. Intending to compose a trilogy, Valson Thampu has translated *Othappu* into English. The author created and published her fifth novel, *Aathi*, and its English translation, *Gift in Green*, in 2011. The novel "*Oorukaaval*" by Vasanthi Sankaranarayan was translated into *The Vigil* in 2004.

The Vigil (Oorukaval) 2014

In the novel *The Vigil*, the author uses the classical epic of the Ramayana as a means of addressing an array of modern concerns, such as "environmental protection, gender equality, colonialism, war, and violence" (Dasan, 2). The plot of *The Vigil* is about a utopia that has been transformed into a dystopia, a peaceful and flourishing environment that has been destroyed by political ambition.

The novel is divided into three sections.

Part I focuses on the demise of Vali and the subsequent suffering of Kishkindam. This section emphasizes the seamless blending and unity between the natural environment and the oceanic setting.

Part II portrays the political strife, the expedition of the search party to locate the Sita, and the preparations for war.

Part III chronicles the army's progress towards the ocean of Lanka and the partial liberation of Sita. (Hussein, 9)

The three components correspond to integrative, hierarchical, and anarchic oikoi. The narrative's framework relies on parallelism and contrast as it emphasizes the juxtaposition between peace and violence, as well as the preservation and the devastation of nature (Hussein, 9).

Plot Overview

The narrative opens with Sugrivan establishing a bond with Raman and orchestrating the demise of Vali. Vali's wife and son endure terrible agony as a result. Meanwhile, Angadan was raised by Tara, Ruma, and other female caretakers known as Ammas. Sugrivan exerted dominion over the whole of Kishkindam, including Vali's female companions, and obstructed the ascension of Vali's son to the throne. Sugrivan assembled a military force to locate Sita and after that advanced towards the island of Lanka. Raman's action caused Angadan and Tara to express their grievances separately, which deeply saddened Mother Nature.

The search crew traversed several towns, rivers, mountains, deserts, and huge forests. The setting has transformed, resembling the transition between seasons characterized by misty conditions and a bountiful harvest of ripe fruits. An army searching would have experienced severe thirst in certain places. Following Vali's defeat, Muchili experienced arid wind gusts and constant hunger. Nirvana, a member of the search group, perished as a result of poisoning. Sugriva's army found themselves trapped inside a mystical cavern belonging to a female magician named Swayam Prabha. Through Maruthi's astuteness, they were freed, and ultimately, they heard about Sita's location from Jatayu. Maruthi sets off to follow Sita's trail.

Sugrivan warmly welcomed the search party upon hearing the news regarding Sita. Tara greeted her kid with excessive tenderness. Raman assigned the surgrivan to form a military force, which included Angadan, Vividhan, Manidan, Jambava, Panasan, and Nalan. Meanwhile, Vibhishan, the younger brother of Ravana, assumes the role of a leader for a group of refugee soldiers and follows Rama's commands. The army used multiple warfares such as stones, soil, bamboo, grass, creepers, and trees to create a bridge spanning fourteen yojanas using the Nalan method. Following several espionage efforts, a relentless fight has erupted between Raghavan and Ravana, persisting day and night without respite, culminating in Raman's successful elimination of Ravana. The war has ended. Sita attained liberation. Raman's words were disengaged from Sita. He instructed his brother to arrange the funeral pyre as a means of demonstrating her purity. Angadhan became enraged and brandished his sword at Raman, but a voice as heavy as pain. A woman who could turn into the wind and blow. Sita pleaded with Angadhan that it would be healed to take her life instead of Rama.

Ecofeminist perspective

The inhabitants of Kishkindam constitute a harmonious and affectionate familial and communal unit. The idyllic family life of the Kishkindam clan chief seems to be constituted of Vali, Tara, and Angadan. However colonial power made them fall in the form of Ayodya. The people who owned iron strode as if they owned the world. They conquered regions and clans. They made the wells, ponds, and fields their own. Women, fruits, and the earth were also treated as their possessions (Joseph, 8). Angadan had several Ammas, including Tara, who gave him birth, and others who had similar experiences, When Tara's tummy expanded with Angadan, the other Ammas experienced pregnancy.

Holding rituals to celebrate their pregnancy, they filled decorated clay pots with seeds and grains and placed them in pits dug in the ground. Then they watered the seeds till they began to sprout, and made figures of girls with swollen stomachs and full breasts and placed them under the trees. Such images, decked with garlands, also lined the paths. Clay lamps were lit before them. They made the figure of the primordial goddess – who sprouts a tree between her legs – and placed it on the river banks and ridges between fields, too (Joseph, 17).

Vali promoted sustainable farming throughout his lifetime to enhance the well-being of the people. He collected seeds of different plants and trees from neighboring countries that he traveled to. The neighboring countries were confident in engaging in trade with Kishkindam under Vali's reign. After Vali has fallen to the ground, his limbs are covered in blood, like an Asoka tree in full uprooted by a tempest. Even Sugrivan's women looked like banks of the river. (Joseph, 20) Valis's death news spread like a forest fire. All of Kishkindam and the neighboring kingdoms such as Muchilipatnam and Dhanavas were exploited by the Sugriva's army, which also dominated Vali's realm.

Tara contemplated recalling her son Angadan back to her womb. However, Tara's decision was firm. "Before they kill him, I shall take him back. He will be well protected in my womb." Because the mother could not find a far better place than her womb.

Sugriva's lusty towards Vali's woman. She was like a blossoming fire in Sugrivan's veins. It leads to Vali's assassination. Now, she was so close, like a fruit that can be plucked by merely extending the hand. He didn't need to be afraid of anyone (Joseph, 56).

“Tara struck him and pushed aside his hands, then lowered the cloth that covered her breasts. ‘Look at my beauty! Look! The marks made by Vali’s nails. The bites that he presented. The holes were 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” (Joseph, 57).

Even though Tara should remain with him as his mother, minister, and adviser, she needs to protect her kingdom and wants to regain freedom for Vali’s followers and neighboring supporters.

The novel features several female characters, including Vali and Sugriva's wives Tara and Ruma; Angada's mothers Mavala, Kushi, and Sama; Angada's companion Iya; Atiyan's friend Inba; Swayamprabha, whom the vanaras meet in a cave while searching for Sita; and Sita herself. All of them are strong women because of their love for their partners or children, their feeling of eternity even in times of crisis, and their capacity to live alone and form solidarity and friendship with other women. They all have tales, which comprise this novel's subtext. They adore guys yet are neither dependent nor lonely without them. With or without men, they survive. Even without males, their friendship with other women keeps them going. Sarah shows how women may survive without males and their assistance by using their own and their partners' abilities.

Even neighboring nation Dhanvas are not scared of the people of Kishkindam, but the thrashing by Ayodhya using the hands of Kishkindam.

‘Nonsense!’ Pravaran murmured.

‘Young rascal! Out of the way. Move.’

The danava women crept through the space between Pravaran’s legs.

‘People like you can afford to stand tall and confront them. Who will save the children hanging on to our breasts?’ they asked, infuriated.

During each attack, many children had been sacred – tossed up or flung to the ground, dashed against trees, necks squeezed – and pregnant bellies split open. They had to watch helplessly the screaming and scattering of children who got trapped and thrown into the fire. Still, children continued to sprout in the wombs of the Danvas women in tens or more of the ten children born to each woman, they managed to keep only one dry and above the ground, out of danger, not floating in the water. How could they bear this constant torture? These women didn’t like leaving their homes in the Danavas village. They felt a keener sense of loss than Pravaran.

They had abandoned many such places dear to them. Many loves. They had had no choice. The women instructed everyone to take whatever they could carry. Even children had to carry on their backs, loads that weighed more than what they could carry. And yet they had to leave behind many of the things dear to them (Joseph, 102,103).

When Sarah writes her perspective, she does not restrict herself to only narrating events in the life of her protagonist, Angadan. Employing her political understanding and her awareness of ecological and environmental concerns, she broadens her narrative to include a comparative analysis of three significant kingdoms portrayed in the Ramayanam. These kingdoms are Raman's Ayodhya, Angadan's Kishkindam, and Ravana's Lanka. Every individual has unique characteristics, principles, and established behaviour standards.

Rama's Ayodhya indicates hierarchical colonized dominance. Rulers have strong power, dominating authority, higher-order thinking, and gaining marital skills. Vali's Kishkindam constitutes a trinity of human, nature, and spirit. It is a prosperous land of people living in harmony with nature. Lanka is ruled by Rakshasa King Ravana, who is a lover of beauty and art. Attention is given to developing the arts, such as music and dance. They are also a warrior-like nation and not very pacific like the Kishkindam (Joseph, translator note). Tyranny and anarchy, personified by figures like Rama and Sugriva, wiped out whole communities, ecosystems, and economies.

Another intriguing element is Sarah's contribution to the search for Sita by the Vanaras. They traverse hills, valleys, woods, and plains on their voyage. The locations they traverse are depicted with such vividness that the tale often resembles a detailed travel report. One may identify contemporary regions and cities in South India by observing the reported plant and animal life and the people encountered. At last, the southern sea's coasts, referred to as the culmination of the voyage or the ultimate destination, showcase the majestic expanse of the sea that surpasses all human endeavours.

Sarah's profound environmental consciousness and commitment to preservation are evident in her vivid depictions of the construction of the ocean bridge, which aided Rama's army's access to Lanka. Indeed, we can audibly perceive the lament of the natural world when mountains are uprooted and woods are chopped down to assist Sugriva and Rama in constructing the bridge. A war has finished. Sita was partially freed. Rama's words left Sita. He directed his brother to set up the pyre to prove her chastity. Raged, Angadan swung his sword at Rama,

“Guardians of the Region! Mothers!

Gathering the whole strength of Kishkindam into his hands Angadan drew his sword and held it high. ‘child!’

A voice as heavy as pain.

A hand as cool as snow.

Angadan turned and looked with a shudder.

A woman who could turn into rain and give showers.

A woman who could turn into the wind and blow.

Angadan lost consciousness and looked at her.

‘Who are you, child?’ Sita asked.

All the seeds sown in the plains sprouted together, at the same time. The tender, moist leaf bloomed. A young breeze blew. Like strands of silver, water channels flowed.

She lifted the clay lamp and held it to his face.

An adolescent with tear-stained eyes and quivering lips!

‘Vali’s son?’ Sita asked in trepidation.

The lamp went out.

Still, she could see the harsh glow of the sword that he held.

‘child...’ Pleading, she extended her hands.

He saw them, those blackened fingers, even in the dark.

Sita said:

‘Angadan,

‘Raman is sleeping.

‘Killing a sleeping man is a sin.

‘I know there is no remedy for the sin done to you.

‘If you think taking my life would help, I am awake” (Joseph, 261).

Sarah Joseph has examined contemporary issues in the novel. Tara and Angadan depict women and children as both colonizers and victims of patriarchal exploitation, a practice that persists to the present day. The Surgivan army built the ramsethu, and the destruction of countless plant and animal species signifies the exploitation of the environment. Sugriva’s strong desire for Tara shows sexual dominance. Sugrivan’s political ambition to ascend to the throne results in the assassination of Vali. The Sugrivan army made preparations to conquer the women of neighbouring nations. A woman who is shared between two brothers symbolizes the oppression of women. The conflict between Raghava and Ravana, driven solely by the

desire for renown rather than the liberation of Sita's spirit, symbolizes the nature of warfare and violence. Sita is revered as the divine mother deity Janaki, the farmer, retrieves her from the plough furrow. That is the reason she assumed the name Sita. The symbols of her clan are soil, water, seed, and sweat. She is a woman who possesses knowledge of and holds high regard for the Raman clan and their bravery. However, he declined to acknowledge gender equality.

Joseph reread the novel from an in-depth pursuit of an ecofeminist perspective. Consequently, Sarah Joseph explored modern challenges that are connected to the ancient epic known as *the Ramayana*, the classical epic of India. The conflict between Rama and Ravana is for the sake of strife, scandal, exploitation, tyranny, subjugation, and grievance. So Joseph has diminished the importance of war and highlighted her belief in peace and tolerance. The title "*Vigil*" signifies the recurring restless nights experienced throughout the quest depicted in the novel, Tara's passivity, the search party exploration, the awakening of Sita's spirit, and Raman's state of consciousness. "Hence, the title of the novel, *The Vigil*, refers to Sita's soul, protector of life and nature" (Hussein, 10). The novel emphasizes the healing power of nature and critiques the patriarchal structures that exploit both women and the environment, aligning with core ecofeminist principles.

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