



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

An UGC Approved Open Access Journal

Vol. 2 No.4/ December, 2017

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017

Subverted Mimicry Of Myths As A Postcolonial Tool Of Narration In Sarah Joseph's *The Vigil*

Dr. N. Kavidha
Assistant Professor
&

M.Marimuthu
Research Scholar
PG Dept and Research Centre in English
Alagappa Govt. Arts College
Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu
Email: kavisakthivel@gmail.com
marimuthubst@gmail.com

Abstract: In postcolonial theory, native mythological narration is also a tool for conveying the unique experiences of a subaltern self and for recording its sociological and psychological opinions. Myths are often preferred by great Indian writers to prove their affinity for their cultural roots. The literary myth based texts subvert the existent stereotypes of women as presented by the male writers. There is a sort of 'demythification' or removal of the already existing myth and in lieu of it, there is a 'remythification' that recurs there. Writers like Sarah Joseph consider myths to possess the space that they require to voice their resistance and she makes a study of the life of Tara and Angadan from *The Ramayana* in her work, *The Vigil*. Joseph mimics the myth of Raman and Sugrivan also from the epic, but she subverts the traditional myth, thereby espousing the novel postcolonial conception of subverted mimicry. Raman and Sugrivan who have been portrayed so far in the myths as ideal kings, are presented by Sarah Joseph as unjust leaders, who commit unethical deeds and heinous crimes against women and nature. There is a subversion lurking in this process, which is cited as subversive mimicry. Sarah Joseph employs this as a tool to represent her sense of repulsion and vengeance towards patriarchal brutality on women like Tara. Bringing to light the misinterpreted myths and by breaking the prevalent monocentric perceptions, Joseph reconstructs these myths with subversion, highlighting the accomplishments of the oppressed characters like Tara, Vali and Angadan.

Key words: Subversive mimicry, historical specificity, stereotypes, demythification,



remythification, monocentric perception.

Postcolonial theory originated in the mid-twentieth century and since then, the scope of postcolonial studies extended beyond the boundaries of colonial histories, third world cultures, immigration issues and minority constraints. Cultural assertion done by clinging to one's roots or yearning for one's roots, anti-colonial resistance to new, invasive cultures and preservation of one's national identity are all major themes of postcolonial development. Native mythological narration is also a tool for conveying the unique experiences of a subaltern self and for recording its sociological and psychological opinions. Myths are often preferred by great Indian writers like R.K.Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Raja Rao whose socio-realist works proved their affinity for their cultural roots and mythological discussions also signify the historical specificity of their nation.

Giving a re-reading of the extant mythology is a part of postcolonial impact in India. As Nayar relates:

Postcolonial cultures' reliance on myth and local legend is an effort at decontamination, a process of freeing their cultures from colonialism's pervasive influence. The return to roots – while running the very real danger of fundamentalism, reactionary nativism, and chauvinism – is an attempt to gain a measure of self-affirmation that is not tainted by colonialism. (Nayar 234-235)

Patriarchy considers myths to be their personal domain and uses it as an instrument to confine women and show their restrictions on women. In Indian literature, the characters from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* follow this and serve as moral lessons on how women ought to live in a patriarchal society. Biblical characters are also pointed out in many contexts to restrict the roles of women. Mythical men characters are set apart to prove their masculine strength and diplomatic skills. Men are always portrayed as the leaders in the power structure and in all levels of power – political, familial, social and cultural – and in all domains, woman is the ruled.

Mimicry refers to the imitation of the mythical and cultural background, of mythical heroes and heroines who are quoted objectively, not only to highlight their virtues or accomplishments, but also to set them as a unique model to display their follies and weaknesses. Hence, the postcolonial readers discern the significance of the events in the myths and learn from them, so that they do not end up in the same predicament as them. Women writers give special attention to mythical women



characters and many writers mimic the original mythological prototypes and concoct stories from them, with or without a few changes, and recreate them as their protagonists. Chitra Banerjee's novel *The Place of Illusions* is based on the story of Draupati and Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Light* is based on the story of Gandhari. These literary myth based texts subvert the existent stereotypes of women as presented by the male epic writers. There is a sort of 'demythification' or removal of the already existing myth and in lieu of it, there is a 'remythification' that recurs there. There is a subversion lurking in this process, which is cited as subversive mimicry. Sarah Joseph employs this as a tool to represent her sense of repulsion and vengeance towards patriarchal brutality on women like Tara.

Julia Kristeva comments on the subversion of mythical texts to literature through the following words:

Authors do not create their texts from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts . . . and the texts become a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text, where . . . several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. (Kristeva 64)

The text may be from history which is an inevitable part of myths and literature, and history forms a bridge between abstractions and experience. These literary texts attempt to form stereotypes and at the same time, also challenge and subvert the stereotypes and reconstruct a new image. Sometimes the original forms of myths are questioned and sometimes, the myths are deconstructed and left bare to the understanding of readers.

Myths are closely related to history, but they are not historical events at all times. Culture is a fluid component in them and it is always on the move. Myth is also a generative component of culture and myth is a recorded part of culture. It is plural and co-textual. Myth is accompanied by the text which states whatever it narrates. The contexts of a myth are multiple and tradition bound. Nathanael O'Reilly sums up the nature and scope of myths as given below:

They include resistance, appropriation, race/ caste / class relations, language usage, indigeneity, immigration/ invasion, land rights and ownership, national identity, marginalization, mapping, naming, mimicry, the role of historical narratives, settler



guilt-feeling and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging. (Reilly 1)

Myth is a way of negotiating the present with the past and the activities of the present are related to those of the past and new dimensions are arrived at.

Mythological study in the present century is a single oft-repeated motif in many countries alike – to expose the suffering of women, the submerged voices of the weak and the victimized, the fables of valour and bravery of men and the teaching of values to posterity. They redefine human identity and create new interpretations. Deepika Bahri calls myths to be ‘cultural commodities’ and they seek to “re-conjugate aesthetics, restoring its capacity to emancipate the human senses” (Bahri 15).

The collective conscience of critics and postcolonial sensibility fixes mythical women characters like Sita and Draupati as prototypes. But they are more realized as victims of patriarchal domination. They are considered to be treated with dignity in the epic, but after a meticulous study they can be identified as abused and exploited women, and this is evident from a mythical study. Alan Swingewood asserts that myths seek “to eliminate the historical basis of institutions and processes and create within popular consciousness an acceptance of the inevitable facts of class inequality and power” (Swingewood 119).

Writers like Sarah Joseph consider myths to possess the space that they require to voice their resistance. The life of Tara is even more complicated than the other women in *Ramayana* and Sara Joseph makes a study of her in her work, *The Vigil*, which is dealt in detail in the forthcoming part of this paper. Women and nature form an archetypal binding with each other and Tara symbolises the veritable empathy of a woman for nature. Myths like the myth of Angadan in *The Vigil* reflect the orientation of man to his environment. The cultural inheritance of man from his physical and natural environment is the first influence on man, and the world of Vali, Sugrivan and their clan proves it. Their emotions, their loyalty and patriotism are all depicted through the myths in the novel and it shows how they shape the life of human beings as being a part of the society.

The title *The Vigil* symbolically pleads vigilance from the readers and appeals them to skip the bigoted perceptions of the *Ramayana*. Joseph directs her readers to read the novel from the perceptions of the subaltern people, the weak and the oppressed, whom she lionizes and ennoble to the acme. She, in this novel projects the characters of Vali, Tara and Angadan as subalterns because



their intrinsic character is mythologically misinterpreted and distorted and they have been subjugated and pulverized as victims by the oppressive power of Raman and Sugrivan. Therefore, Joseph mimics the myth of Raman and Sugrivan from *The Ramayana*, but she subverts the traditional myth, thereby espousing the novel postcolonial conception of subverted mimicry. Raman and Sugrivan who have been portrayed so far in the myths as ideal kings, are presented by Sarah Joseph as unjust leaders who commit unethical deeds and atrocious crimes against women and nature.

To illustrate, Joseph deconstructs the myth of Vali, who has been projected as a philanderer and a perfidious ruler throughout the epic, and she deliberately and emphatically sublimates him as a martyr of his clan. She introduces Vali as a valiant and invincible king of Kishkindam and his love for his people is benign and limitless. Likewise, his concern for nature and his native land is unconditional. He wraps the land with greeneries by cultivating enormous trees and plants which are brought from various places. As depicted by Joseph,

... A man who loved Kishkindam more than anything else... All these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali. He brought back seeds, saplings or cuttings from every place he visited and planted them in Kishkindam. Flowering trees, shrubs, creepers and medicinal plants. (TV 25)

His deep love for nature evinces his kindness for the flora, fauna and trees that he brought from different regions to Kishkindam, revealing his genuine nature and the congenial relationship that Vali maintained with other kings and rulers proves his efficient kingship. As the ruler of the country, he is said to strictly follow the traditions and customs of the land.

A ruler's virtue is assessed in two ways. The first one is based on his goodwill that he earns and accumulates from the common people while living and the second one is on the people's testimony about him after his death. When Vali is heinously killed by Raman and when the news of Vali's death spreads in Kishkindam, "...the people fell prey to a terrible sense of insecurity. Trees were burnt. The streets were filled with smoke. People ran helter-skelter, crying out loudly and picking up stones and sticks – whatever they could lay their hands on" (19). It seems that he has not only gained his people's support, but he has also won their heart, and it unambiguously exemplifies



Vali, as drawn by Sarah Joseph as a more morally and spiritually righteous man than Raman and Sugrivan.

In the *Ramayana*, the character Sita has been highly exalted and centralized as the most virtuous woman because of the sacrifices that she has done for her husband. This aggrandized myth has diminished the character of Tara, the wife of Vali, whose sacrifice for her husband and son, is even more virtuous and profound than Sita. As focused by Joseph, she has tolerated the gruesome deeds of Sugrivan, her oppressor, than Sita who suffered imprisonment and subjugation in the hands of Ravana.

Even after the death of Vali, Sugrivan, the sibling of Vali, tries to sexually exploit Tara, but she bravely accosts him as:

Tara struck him and pushed aside his hands, then lowered the cloth that covered her breast. 'Look at my beauty! Look! The marks made by Vali's nails. The bites that he presented. The holes made by Angadan's milk teeth. This earth is marked by the imprints of a father's and son's kisses. If you find any untouched space on my body, you are welcome to it.' (TV 57)

Though Tara is disarmed in front of Sugrivan, she daringly retaliates to him. It undoubtedly exposes her bravery and indomitable will, especially in taking decisions, rather than Sita who merely protects her virtues in a docile manner from Ravana, only with the help of Raman. Tara succumbs, but only for the sake of her son's life. She becomes a prey to Sugrivan's sexual perversion. It explicitly shows her true sense of self effacement and sacrifice, which stems from her boundless love for her son. Therefore, while comparing these two women's sacrifices, Tara who has come across a sea of difficulties overshadows Sita, who is safely caged in Ravana's fort. Though the widespread myth has trivialized the character of Tara, Joseph in her novel accentuates her to the maximum.

The mythology of *Ramayana* celebrates the fruitless deeds of the people in the forefront, who have been believed to be great and it callously ignores the astounding and noble endeavours of the subalterns. Therefore, challenging this aspect, Joseph furnishes more importance to the character of Angadan who is the innocent son of Vali, when compared to other characters in this novel. Angadan who is in the springtime of life is commanded to search for the wife of Raman, who



has killed his father Vali against all principles of dharma. Hence, being mentally tormented with an unquenchable thirst for revenge on Raman, and being compelled to lead his journey to rescue Sita, Angadan suffers a traumatic dilemma. But, even then he succeeds to perform some great adventures during the mission. At the end of the novel, when Angadan proceeds to kill Raman, Sita prevents him by telling that:

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. Even the sob that comes out of the earth may at time lack compassion. Even the mother's womb may turn out to be bitter. The iron that he held in his hands proved useless. Angadan swung the sword and threw it away. He walked out and disappeared into the darkness. (TV 261-62)

By exemplifying and prioritizing the character of Angadan, Joseph mocks at the deeds of Raman by indicating that even "a beardless lad is better than him in observing the ethics of war". She also ridicules the 'valour' of Maruthi Ammavan and Lakshmanan for being an accomplice to Raman in his immoral deeds.

Joseph utterly distorts the mythologically constructed image of Raman and Vali. Raman justifies his killing of Vali as "You, Monkey! You coveted your brother's wife and made her your own. You have to die. That is the only punishment for you" (19). Joseph vehemently berates Raman for denoting Vali as an animal and when he himself has flouted the warfare ethics in making a hidden attack on Vali. Likewise, she charges Raman for helping Sugrivan, who proves to be a lecher by coveting his brother Vali's wife. Bringing to light the misinterpreted myths and by breaking the prevalent monocentric perceptions, Joseph reconstructs these myths with subversion, highlighting the accomplishments of the oppressed characters like Tara, Vali and Angadan.

The ethos of Indian sensibilities appears in all Indian texts and literary articulations of varied areas with the Indic origin. Since literature is a vital record and creative writing is often a social act, the well known myths of all places play a conspicuous role in the moulding of literature and a collective consciousness in the range of human understanding and intellect. The mythification and romanticization of literature is possible only with the help of a sound knowledge of myths in



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017

one's culture, and this is ventured by Sarah Joseph. Subverted mimicry successfully upholds the hitherto forgotten aspects of the mythical narration of the renowned epics and tales, and projects out as a typical postcolonial experience.

Works cited

- Bahri, Deepika. *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Joseph, Sarah. *The Vigil*. Trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan. Harper Collins, 2014.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel". *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi, Columbia University Press, 1986. pp 62-74.
- Nayar, Pramod.K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson Longman, 2008.
- O'Reilly, Nathanael. "Australian Literature as Postcolonial Literature". Accessed on Oct 20, 2017. p-1. www.academia.edu/637945/Introduction/Australianliteratureaspostcolonial_literature
- Swingewood, Alan. *The Myth of Mass Culture*. Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977.