

RETELLING THE EPIC: CHRONICLING GENDER NARRATIVES FROM MALAYALAM

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Abstract

The Ramayana known as the *adi kavya*, consists of seven *kandas*, five thousand *sargas*, and twenty four thousand *slokas*. It is the name of a tradition, culture and the multiplicity of oral, written, and performed retellings, each equally authentic, are also part of this great tradition, a result of popular imagination. The Ramayana Stories of the Malayalam writer Sarah Joseph chronicle the mindscapes of a set of characters from the Ramayana and carries out a gender perspective or re-reading of the Ramayana focusing on some of the female characters who are subjected to physical as well as mental subjugation, like Sita, Manthara, Surpanakha. Sarah Joseph's stories like 'Asoka' 'Mother clan' and 'Black Holes' present before us the perception of Sita, Surpanakha, Manthara respectively. It is a new telling, at the same time it is part of the great Ramayana tradition. This paper tries to analyse three short stories of Sarah Joseph, a woman writer from Malayalam and studies how she interprets a few episodes from the Ramayana chronicling a gender retelling.

Key words: The Ramayana, Epic, Retelling, Gender, Malayalam

Introduction

We should see the Ramayana not only as an epic poem written by Valmiki, but also as a text that shows how people lived in ancient times, their relationships, customs, and traditions. In this most valuable sense, it is an *adikavya* or *granta* that defines culture itself. In itself, the Ramayana is a complex text and though it occupies a religious place, it goes beyond religion to enter into a discourse regarding hierarchy, relationships, good, evil, and civil behaviour. When we look into a text like The Ramayana it is definitely the multiplicity and the ability to accommodate questioning within its boundaries that make Ramayana a fine epic as well as a modern text. It is an example of a text with narrative reflexivity, narrative fragmentation, and open-endedness.

Statement of the Problem

Questioning any text which delivers views about the workings of society or culture is a very difficult task. The multiple forms of questioning within the tradition of Ramayana range across norms of demons and deities of rulership, of social obligations and relationships, of gender constructions, of the ethics of behaviour. This study based on the gender readings of the Malayalam writer Sarah Joseph marks a novel perspective of the Ramayana which undoubtedly contributes to its permanence.

Objectives of the study

- To showcase the open-endedness of the epic tradition of Ramayana
- To analyze the politics and aesthetics of gender retellings
- To analyze the impact of these retellings in the cultural opulence and diversity of India

Romila Thapar in a paper titled "The Ramayana Syndrome" calls attention to the plurality of Ramayana in Indian History:

The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places....The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of group

meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning. (353)

In his book *The Raw and The Cooked*, Claude Levi Strauss explains how the structures of myths provide the basic structures of understanding cultural relations. These relations appear as binary pairs or opposites, as the title of his book implies: what is "raw" is opposed to what is "cooked" and the "raw" is associated with nature while the "cooked" is associated with culture. These oppositions form the basic structure for all ideas and concepts in a culture. This basic mythical and binary patterning is present in The Ramayana in the form of pairs like man/woman, arya/dravida, nature/culture, dalit/upper class, human beings/animals etc. questioning of this mythical binary pattern is possible only through a rereading or retelling of existing authoritative version and relations within The Ramayana. As a female writer, Sarah Joseph safely places herself within the basic mythical structure and then subverts it with her women characters drawn from the Ramayana. She rewrites the Ramayana within the help of this mythical structure for certain female characters to tell their own version of the epic story. Helene Cixous argues: "A feminine text cannot be more than subversive: if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old 'real' property crust" (89). While a text like Ramayana continues to live through big variety of interpretations such as Sarah Joseph's, the retellings survive through their respective translations. The relationship between the Ramayana and Sarah Joseph's short stories is based on a degree of subversion, differences, changes, slips and omissions.

A change in the 'perspective' of the female narrator is a prominent feature of Sarah Joseph's short stories. The style adopted by Sarah Joseph is that of autobiographical monologues by the female protagonists. Each character tells her own story, by explaining the way she was suppressed both physically and mentally by the patriarchal system. Each story speaks of age old suffering. But behind these autobiographical reflections there is an invisible force at work, the thoughts and emotions of the women and writer -Sarah Joseph. She literally empowers these women characters to speak for themselves of what happened to them and how these facts have been downgraded to the backdrop in the making of the original narrative.

Sarah Joseph has borrowed three different incidents from the Ramayana and by putting woman characters at the center, restructures these episodes into three short stories. These stories are 'Asoka', 'Mother clan' and 'Black Holes'. These short stories are almost of equal length and are independent, in the sense that it questions the way in which female characters are represented in the epic and re-writes existing vision to another version. Each story is unique and at the same time is part of a great tradition too. As subversion is a kind of re-creation, it is only natural to include new descriptions, events or information in the retelling. Paula Richman in her book *Questioning Ramayanas, A South Asian Tradition* uses the collective term 'the Ramayana tradition' for a set of tellings that present the story of Rama in different styles, languages and media. Joseph's activism as well as her stories is located very specifically in a particular region in India, the Third World.

Analysis of the Narratives

The story 'Asoka' portrays the complex working of the mind of Sita, her long waiting for Rama and the aftereffects of that meeting. After a year in pain and suffering, Sita examines her body which is totally destroyed and Sarah Joseph compares it to clay that is battered by continuous onslaughts of rain and sunlight. The point view of the story shifts between third person first person and for example "which diet had she been ordered to cleanse by bathing, immersed?" is the agony of a person, an outsider, most

probably the voice of the author herself. But 'I wish to see my husband now- before taking a bath' (109) is the powerful sound of protest from Sita towards the authority. Interestingly, in 'Asoka', we listen to voices of other characters too, that of Vibhishana and Rama. Rama says "I did not win this war to reclaim you. The insult inflicted on me and my clan..." (113). What Sarah Joseph has done is a total reworking of the point of view of Sita, who finally, after the battle realizes her plight and criticizes Rama not as her husband but as a man. Sarah Joseph views Sita's fire ordeal as an attempt to restore her identity, the author's voice declares:

The daughter of earth stepped into the fire, her right foot first. I am Sita! The soil quenches fire! From the beginning of time, I bear in my belly the rains showered on the soil. My mind is focused on the memory of unchanging rains to come in the future. The one who accepts rain and seeds. Mixing them with fire to spread the cool, green spark of life. (116)

K.Satchitanandan in his preface to Sarah Joseph's book, *Papathara*, compares the laugh of Soorpanakha to the laugh of the Medusa that Helene Cixous talks in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa". Medusa in Greek mythology is the most famous of the monsters known as Gorgons and anyone who looked directly at Medusa would be turned to a stone. This comparison is apt not because both belong to the monster or Rakshasa group but because the way in which Cixous and Sarah Joseph use their mythical identity to dismantle patriarchal structures of the present day. Such a comparison will lead us to another level that in the Ramayana Soorpanakha is punished for her openness toward sexuality whereas Cixous's Medusa upholds a new attitude towards sexuality which is free and fluid.

The story, 'Mother clan' also shifts between first person and third person, between Soorpanakha and the author's voice. Stream of consciousness technique is adopted as Soorpanakha is remembering an earlier incident, of her mutilation and criticizes it from her present situation. These interior monologues clearly expose the disturbed psyche of Soorpanakha mixed with love, passion and anger. Soorpanakha is punished for her display of unrepressed sexuality, which is harmful to both domesticity and asceticism. But a writer like Sarah Joseph sees the condition of Sita and Soorpanakha as one and the same because in spite of their position as wife of the victor and the sister of the vanquished, both are the victims of one male dominated law. That's why when Soorpanakha asks about 'Cheeta' to Ayomukhi, she replies: They did not cut off her nose and breasts but, for the sin of having spent her days fearful, weeping, king Ravana's garden. They prepared a blazing coal-fire and asked her to jump into it! (125)

From an ethical point of view, Soorpanakha episode raises complex questions regarding Rama's exemplary character and it also raises a cultural perspective about the text's general attitude towards female sexuality. What is the justification for cutting of the nose and breasts of a woman? These stories, 'Mother clan' regarding Soorpanakha and 'Asoka' about Sita, should be read in connection with the final judgment that these women receive from whom they believed, loved and worshiped. 'Asoka' and 'Mother clan' are deeply psychological in the presentation of the inner thoughts of Sita and Soorpanakha. Sarah Joseph has boldly linked these stories. For example, the exhausted Sita in 'Asoka' sympathizes with Soorpanakha as 'whose was the sin? Was it that of Aryan virility that had slashed the nose and breasts of a lower caste woman who dared to make the mistake of begging her love?' Soorpanakha after hearing the news about Sita's fire ordeal from Soorpanakha roared with laughter! The forest woke up with a shiver. The birds and beasts began to whimper. The forest trembled as though someone had squeezed and structured its boundaries. Hands pressed behind her, head thrown back, and shoulders shaking, Soorpanakha laughed with abandon, louder and louder. (125)

In 'Mother Clan' breasts grow into a metaphor that it stands for womanhood and motherhood. The source of her breast milk forms the roots of Soorpanaka's clan and her blood. As breasts are seen as a symbol of female power, the act of mutilation is definitely a humiliating...punishment which deprives a woman of her power. In the story Soorpanankha nostalgically remembers her breasts 'round and black like the graceful breasts of Karimkali' that "suckled three or four generations. Sarah Joseph deliberately puts the title of her Soorpanakha story as 'mother clan' to indicate the injustice done to Soorpanakha and her clan and to celebrate the need for a strong maternal root. That's why Helene Cixous creates the metaphor of "White ink" of writing in breast milk and she wants to convey the idea of a reunion with the maternal body, an unalienated relation to female bodies in general. The nose is a symbol of honor and removal of Soorpanakha's nose signifies the loss of honor and again the loss of sexual purity of women. In the story Soorpanakha begins to gather the distilled scent of flowers through her mutilated nostrils. She remembers a time when she played with Champaka flowers. Soorpanakha expresses her grief as "this is my love forest.... Every single tree in this forest is mine! my lover. He bursts into bloom only when I ask him to. On a thousand nights I have mated with the forest" (122).

If 'Asoka' and 'Mother Clan' are about Sita and Soorpanakha respectively, 'Black Holes' is told from the perspective of the 'evil' doer Manthara. In the story 'Black Holes', there is a meeting between Kaikeyi and Manthara which is absent in the epic Ramayana. Manthara explains to Kaikeyi the circumstances that lead her to spy about the coronation of Rama, being a victim of power. We, readers learn with Manthara the fact that Kaikeyi too is a victim of the ugly inner power games of Ayodhya. Manthara in Ramayana is the catalyst, one who instigates a series of unfortunate incidents in the epic. Both Manthara and Kaikeyi are presented as winners in Ramayana but in Sarah Joseph's short story, they are losers. Both are victims of the corrupted power in Ayodhya. Both are victims of the corrupted power in Ayodhya. In the Valmiki Ramayana Manthara was portrayed as an ugly hunchback, spy woman who pours poison into the ears of Kaikeyi that leads to the banishment of Rama from Ayodhya. By giving these incidents as the background to her Manthara story', Sarah Joseph speaks at length about the authoritarian power politics. Manthara appears as a rebel one who depicts and criticizes the system.

The story titled, 'Black Holes', through Manthara enacts the confrontation between the powerful and powerless Manthara is the victim of the power game and her situation is treated very sympathetically. We learn the psychology of Manthara, the conditions that lead her to spy about the coronation, obeying Aswapathi, Kaikeyi's father, Sarah Joseph by the means of rereading questions the system of power in Ayodhya and attempts to change it by projecting a new perspective as well as vision through Manthara. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* has pointed out: "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely a need to speak itself aloud. When its working is exposed and questioned it becomes not only subjected to discussion, but even to change."(160) Manthara's agenda is that of opening up before the people of Ayodhya the hypocritical veils of its rulers and let them understand what kings do when seized by lust and anger. Manthara understands the 'politics of Ayodhya better than any other woman because she is within and part of it. Ayodhya, for her is a stage set for the game of power. Manthara feels pity for the world of fathers ordering their sons to raise their axes and swords against their mother's necks to preserve power.

So female torture and subjugation is not confined to any one woman but it is practiced throughout ages by the patriarchal male authority. The adage "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is applicable to any system or arrangements where power is involved. Power, like poison or alcohol spreads fast into every part of the body and can intoxicate anybody so as to turn a friend into foe and a god into devil. The story ends with a meeting between Manthara, Kaikeyi where, Manthara gives her the final authentic statement about the condition of subjugated people under power systems: "Thrones have

been installed in the blood of innocent persons". Only the cries for murder will emerge from them. Who knows it better than me? On this frightening night, in this dangerous forest, in the shadows where predators lurk, let the ghost, of Dasarathan save you". 'Black Holes' presents a theme which is old but timeless: power unchecked feeds on itself, becomes intoxicated with itself and seeks relentlessly to aggrandize itself. Sarah Joseph's Manthara is truly a victim of the corrupted power politics in Ayodhya. Sarah Joseph says "My reading is that all killings of rakshasas need not end in a 'victory' of human/divine beings" (xiv). Each reading or interpretation is definitely a questioning of certain set of values, of social practices prevailed in another ages. The author continues, "When the laws and justice that prevailed centuries ago do not coalesce with modern practices of justice, we feel confused...truly, it is from the doubts arising from a deeply pained self that my 'Ramayana stories' were born...." (xv).

Conclusion

The Ramayana stories of Sarah Joseph are the result of a 'violation' on her part, an attempt to introduce her own ideological stand into the reading of human characters. Sarah Joseph has interrogated the concept of the masculine, challenged the power nexus that sustains the patriarchal discourse, unveiled the belief systems that determine the role of the male and the female, revealed the cruelty that underlines unequal marital relationship, upheld female bonding, re-examined the celebration of motherhood, expressed the intimate relationship between (wo)man and nature, and the power of the dialect and of woman's private language to fight linguistic standardization. Her stories based on the Ramayana try to look at mythology from the point of view of the gendered subjects. Sarah Joseph's stories offer a feminist reading of the Indian epic Ramayana that criticize the images and stereotypes of women and the conscious omissions and misconceptions in the text. These stories prove the fact that the Ramayana continues to inspire writers, artists across cultures, languages and identities. Such retellings reinstate the cultural diversity of our nation by accommodating hybridity and plurality within its cultural heritage.

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