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Ooru Kaval: A Political Rereading

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Myths can always be considered as the nurturer of Literature. Being a symbolic narrative that is usually of an unknown origin and traditional to an extent, that seemingly relates actual events and is especially associated with religious beliefs, myths had always given enormous contributions to literature. Myth is usually culture specific or regional. Every region and culture has its own myth. At times same myths are shared between adjacent geographical areas. Myths often act as a tool for social reformation. Most of the myths are believed to be true from within the associated faith system. Within any given culture there may be sacred and secular myths coexisting. Myths are reflective of social order or values within a culture. Characters are often non-human but heroic who mediate inherent, troubling dualities, reconcile us to our realities, or establish the patterns for

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life as we know it. Myths are usually set in a proto-world. Myths are always functional as it directs the society to live with assumptions, values, core meanings of individuals, families, communities. To conceptualize the emergent effect of rereading we should consider it with a wider perspective, looking beyond literary theory. Writers always prefer to interpret books that have content in it, to be analyzed. The main sources of reread texts are epics and other classical works including myths.

There are well founded myths in the Western Literature as well as in the Eastern Literature. In literature, epics like *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are retold in various versions in various genres of literature. Of which, the Indian epic *Ramayana* which is one of the largest ancient epics in world literature is the one with most number of rereading within Indian literature. It portrays the duties of relationships, portraying ideal characters like the ideal father, the ideal husband, the ideal brother, the ideal servant and the ideal king. Like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* is not just a story rather it presents the teachings of ancient Hindu sages in narrative allegory, interspersing philosophical and ethical elements.

In this paper, the novel *Ooru Kaval* by Sarah Joseph is analyzed with reference to the popular version of the epic. Sarah Joseph's uniqueness lies in the way she chooses subjects and stories that are not seen in mainstream, and has employed a quaint narrative style and tone of language that are strange to the readers. In the case of *Ooru Kaval*, unlike all other re-readings which has interpreted *Ramayana* from the viewpoint of Sita, Ravana

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and Hanuman, Sarah Joseph has portrayed the epic form from the view point of Angadan, son of the slain king Vali. *Ooru Kaval* is a plethora of deviant interpretations rather than being simple rereading of a popular myth. Sarah Joseph had given political tinges to the story by bringing in the contrast between the victor and the vanquished, the dominant and the dominated, the man and the woman, the tribal and the urban.

Ooru Kaval , certainly not the first *Ramayana* rereading, can be considered as a break through to the ever made rereading of the epic on the fact that Sarah Joseph would not do a retelling without adding her scholarship and literary skill to it. Translated by well-established translator Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, the English version is entitled *The Vigil. Ramayana*, being a long story with exciting events and idealistic characters, has plenty of matters to relay upon for rereading. There are major characters like Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana, who can be examined deeply. Thinking out of the box, Sarah Joseph has chosen 'Angadan' as the central protagonist, who is only a minor character in the *Ramayana*. He is from the monkey clan of Kishkintha, a prince, and the son of a slain king, as well as the nephew of the ruling one. Not only Angadan but also others characters who served very little roles in the epic are portrayed in the novel. There are characters whose names are not even heard before in the epic of *Ramayana*. And those characters are given considerable importance in the plot of the novel. Angadan is depicted in the epic as the symbol of diplomacy, especially in the crucial days of battle, but his story is not dwelled on at length. Sarah

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Joseph has emphasized on this part of the epic to manipulate her novel, *Ooru Kaval*. Most of the rereading of the epic was focused on the religious threads. Apart from that stereotypical imitation, Sarah Joseph has tried to figure out the politics in the work. Portrayal of the characters is as tribal and thus the author is analyzing the tribal issues on the context of the epic. The novel mainly dwells upon the internal matters of the Kishkintha kingdom and how King Vali's death affected the life of the people and the relation it has with the epic. Characters that were depicted as good ones in the epic are subjected to analysis in this novel. The image of Rama as an ideal man is questioned in this work. His concept of righteousness is questioned. In the novel, the narrative technique is that there is a violation of chronological order, the past and present events are narrated in a mixed way. The shift from present to past happens suddenly. Unlike other re-readings of *Ramayana*, *Ooru Kaval* is of a different structure. The novel is divided into three different parts and these parts have chapters and sub chapters to it. The story line is a mixture of past and present events despite of chapter division. The language seems to have an ethnic touch and at times is difficult to interpret.

In *Ooru Kaval*, in the first part, 'Ooru Kaval', author has detailed a different version of the story of Vali and Sugriva. Here Vali, Sugriva and the entire characters are depicted as members of a community. The novel starts with the soliloquy of Angadan on his memories of his childhood, his father and his death and the unknown force who rescued him. Angadan is the son of Vali and Thara.

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Sugriva was his father's brother and Ruma, his aunt. It was Vali who chose Ruma for Sugriva. But it was said that Vali tried to possess Ruma by banishing Sugriva. And it was for that charge Sugriva conspired against Vali. But Sugriva always had an eye on the throne and Thara. On the fight with Mayavi, Sugriva locked Vali in the cave, Mahabilam and made the people believe Vali is dead and thus he possessed both Thara and the throne. When Vali returned he banished Sugriva for cheating him. And not ready to leave Ruma with such an untruthful husband Vali accepted her responsibility. And after confusing Rama with his version, Sugriva made him kill Vali. But in the popular version of *Ramayana* Rama kills Vali to free Kishkintha from his demonic rule as per the information of Sugriva in return for promising to help for searching Sita. After killing Vali Sugriva ordered compulsory participation of every man in the search for Sita. Even the kid Angadan was not spared. Rejecting the pleas of his mother and grandfather Sugriva put him in the mission. Sarah Joseph had here introduced a new community of people, Muchli, who are generally salt makers. They live in the coastal region of Kishkintha. They were very weak in nature. When Sugriva proclaimed the compulsory participation of men in search for Sita, the guards had come here to take men to Kishkintha. They had only access to the outer world through the traders who came there for salt trade. The author has introduced another strange practice to show the tribal nature of the characters. It was a ritual that Thara practiced to ensure the safety of her son from the conspiracies. The concept behind the ritual was to take the son back to the womb. There was a pond named

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Pushkaram. Only women were allowed there. To practice the ritual Tara and the other mothers of Angadan went there at night. They dipped themselves in the pond and filled pots with the water of Pushkaram. They went to some distance away from Pushkaram. They made a large monkey figure with potbelly and made its interior smooth with lotus leaves. A lotus stem protruded out signifying the umbilical cord. They wore a mask so they could not be identified and it was night. They striped Angadan off his clothes and poured the water from each pot on him. Then they made him enter into the monkey figure through its mouth and exit through the tail end. After doing so they told him to run away. The ritual is not literally taking back the son to the womb. But the concept that the author tries to convey is that there is no safer place than mother's womb. Author by implementing this concept has added to the tribal elements in the characters. The second part of the novel is titled as "Vishudha Douthyam" which means sacred duty. This part details about the uncertainty that the people feel, when they left to search Sita. The people who were on the search mission were unaware of what they really were searching. Neither they had seen Sita before nor did they know how she looked like. They were not sure whether she existed or not. Yet they searched for her in every single place disregarding the dangers that they would face. Sugriva had ordered to kill all those who showed reluctance in carrying the order. Nonetheless they consider it as a sacred mission.

A ritual, Kandankett, is a tool employed by the author to strengthen the fact that the people of this clan are people who are having their own customs and

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traditions. Their life style is similar to the humans. But these rituals and practices in fact attributes to the tribal traditions. Throughout the novel we can find elements that reveal the tribal nature of the characters and this usage makes us distanced from the actual epic and its story. In popular version of *Ramayana* there is only minimal detail of the character of Vali and Sugriva and Angadan is of less relevance. As *Ooru Kaval* deals with the plot detailing the search for Sita and portrays Angadan as the central character so the more relevance is given to him and thus more characters that are related to him and who were not discussed in the epic can be seen in the novel. There are many small characters that are related to Angadan in the novel, characters like Athiyan, Iya, Maindhan, and Sharabhan. Through the idea of giving Rama less importance, Rama actually appears considerably a few times in the novel, author has broken the stereotypical rereading behavior that has been followed so far. The characters are depicted having a paradoxical double role. One side they are people belonging to a tribe and are a clan of monkeys. On the other side they are civilized and having a definite lifestyle, ritual practices and a system of administration. They worshiped "Vanaras". They share the traits of humans in the affairs of politics, family relations, cheating and in ruling.

But in the epic this clan is depicted as just faith full servants who admire Rama and help him to find his wife. They only carry out the orders. Maruthi is shown as a faithful follower of lord Rama but here Maruthi is a minister of Sugriva who fulfills the orders of the king,

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who never let the king down. Author has never followed a stereotype rather has redefined something to be a new standard to be held for analyzing.

Author has made Angadan express his views. He told about the pithy tricks Rama played by giving a flower necklace to Sugriva to distinguish from Vali. He questioned the righteousness of Rama. He expressed his interest was to wander among the woods, cotton fields and salt fields rather than governing the kingdom with Sugriva. He had enough of the conflicts happened so far. He remembered how Vali treated his brother. Even though there was information from the spies that Sugriva is getting ready for an attack with the support some exterior forces Vali didn't have the intention to kill him. The question author raises through Angadan is that Vali could easily find Sita for Rama but why did he selected Sugriva for the mission. Vali was powerful than Sugriva. He could do it for himself. Ravana had to be killed by Rama. A war should happen. Vali would not let his people start unwanted war. More than that Vali was an invincible king whereas Sugriva was banished by Vali. So he would stay dependent. Also Sugriva had the most powerful ministers of Kishkintha with him. They would do anything for him.

Another influential character mentioned in the novel is Imba, a woman from Muchli. Imba is lustful than anyone in Muchli. She remarked that she would seduce Angada. Once she had seduced him he would ask her who she was for that she would reply that she was a famine stricken village. Here, author has depicted Imba as a character who is immoral in nature but at the same time

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she is used as a tool to express that they are all human in nature. The mood of the story gets into a sudden change from Athiyan's description. Apart from a rereading, this novel serves to be a single whole which frames the story of another group of people, other than the royalty, who are neglected by Valmiki in the epic. Morality concept is problematized by the character of Imba. She has no way left other than being with Angadan to convey the pity plight of her community. At the same time the morality of the people of Muchli is questioned here. There is an indirect notion that the community is uncivilized through the description of Athiyan about the women of Muchli.

As the novel progresses the author introduces more and more communities of monkey clan and characters from those communities. Even though the clan is of monkeys they are referred to as "Vanaras". They are not portrayed different from humans. Dhanava is another community that is been introduced by the author. They were migrating from their place to another place leaving all their things fearing the attack of Kishkintha. Here Sarah Joseph has introduced another ritual that is human sacrifice. This is done by Dhanavas to please Amiya. If Amiya became hungry it would target pregnant ladies and eat the fetus. And that would lead the lineage to extinction. So every year they would find somebody to be sacrificed. But they hadn't sacrificed anybody from Kishkintha. It was because of the relation Vali had kept with them and they believed that the reason for this enmity is the aftermath of the change in rule.

Another contradictory factor author arises is elementary. As Sarah Joseph had depicted Maruthi as

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very much obligated and dedicated to Rama, in the popular versions of *Ramayana* Maruthi's is a diehard devotee of Rama. There are stories that Maruthi had ripped his chest open to show only Rama and Sita are there in his heart. Author in a more logical way founded the cause for Maruthi's devotion toward Rama in this work. Rama is highly criticized in the novel and Vali is praised. This is because the story is said from the viewpoint of Angadan and Rama was on Sugriva's side.

In the epic of *Ramayana* there are supernatural events and people. In *Ooru Kaval* too such incidents are depicted. The incident can be related to the phenomenon of time travel. On their way they went a long distance without food and water. All the men were tired and many of them had died. It was then they saw birds flying with wet wings and they realized there was a water source nearby. They followed the direction from which birds came. It led them to a cave. Going deeper into the cave they came to the other end. There they saw a woman figure. Many of them assumed that it was Sita. But she was a witch. She introduced herself as Swayamprabha. She showed them an illusionary luxurious place. Supernatural elements are considered to be an inevitable factor in the epics. It enriches the heroic portrayal of the hero. In the novel Sarah Joseph had used supernatural or magical incidents to enrich the plot. It gave the then desperate mood a level up to a more interesting level. The cave of Swayamprabha is represented as a symbol of hope. And the inclusion of sub stories to each incident can be considered as a feature of epic. An epic generally has sub stories so has this novel too; the story of Hema, the

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story behind the cursed land are some of those. This gives a detail about the scene and proves its logicity. The presence of Gods is also seen here. Mayan, a character, was killed by lord Indra. As the novel progresses, nature of the situation changes into a more serious one. The disillusionment of the characters is replaced by hope and confidence.

Sarah Joseph had portrayed Rama a bit superior in defining his morality. But at the same time Angadan is also portrayed morally correct. Though Thara had found the most beautiful girls for him, Angadan went in search of Iya. In the popular version of *Ramayana* we can see the morality of Rama being highly glorified. He is portrayed as a gentleman in the epic. He has eyes only to one woman. He never lies. He never does anything breaking the law. He is very righteous. He never breaks promises. But here Rama is not depicted as the calm prince who can adjust to every situation. When Angadan played in the waterfall Rama lost his temper. Here also Rama had justification for killing Vali. For everyone Rama had done wrong against he had his own justification.

Another contradictory part in the novel is when the bridge is built to Lanka. When they were working on a solution for this, Vibhishana told them about the closer point from which Lanka is very near and there the depth will be low. One can only reach there when the sea is clam. That way is used by Rakshasas. One can walk through the seaway but is highly risky. They decided to construct bund under the leadership of Nalan. They went in search of that particular point under the leadership of Vibhishana. They came to that point walked through the

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slippery rocks until they came to a higher point from there they could only see the sea and hemisphere. Nalan proposed building the bund from there but wasn't sure to where they will build it. Rama was frustrated. Nalan meanwhile started putting large rocks into the sea and everyone followed it. The foundation was the part of Trikuda Mountains so building bund was not a tough thing to do. Depth was low one can see the base. Nalan ordered for more stones, soil, creepers, leaves and rocks.

In the popular version of *Ramayana* the bridge is built in a magical way. Hanuman writes Rama's name on the rocks and they floats in the water. That illogical depiction is broken by Sarah Joseph in this part. Nalan is an expert craftsman. Through him Sarah Joseph made way to build the bridge. His efficiency is detailed in the description of the machine he made. Through this she also portrayed the mindset of Angada. She once again strengthens the fact that people of Kishkintha are more advanced scientifically. And it is also revealed that there is reformation going to happen from Maruthi's explanation of new style of kingdom. Maruthi can be considered as a challenge to a civilization built on the very foundations of a life lived in close communion with nature, informed by indigenous intuition of nature's rhythms. Angadan is portrayed as one who have humanitarian instincts and one who is so close to nature.

The war started. Many people were killed including innocent souls. At last Ravana was killed by Rama. Angadan took iron for the first time. He thought of the new justice Maruthi had referred earlier. He felt ashamed to be a part of this massacre. He questioned the

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justice of Rama. It was better to leave her with Ravana than to insult her like this. People had gathered to see Sita. Many of them insulted her, teased her. Sugriva, Vibhishana and Maruthi were not at ease. She seemed very weak. That was a trial. Rama talked unemotionally. He clarified that it caused him insult that Ravana abducted Sita. It is to get rid of this insult that he rescued her. He expressed his disinterest in having her further. She can go anywhere she need, live with anyone. He doubted her chastity. Angadan haven't seen Maruthi this much nervous. Lakshmana stood ashamed. He clarified that he regained his reputation through the war. Sita told Rama that it's the word of a common man that he had just spoke. She clarified her purity of her mind. The body may go weak but mind was still strong. He criticized Rama for not being loyal to his reputation and for not giving respect to her clan. If Rama has informed this to her earlier through Maruthi she would have made her mind for that, demanded Sita. She suggested that this war which had caused the lives was now wasted. She expressed her desire to sacrifice herself in the fire. Lakshmana without mind carried out the order of Rama in making arrangements for the wish. They set fire to the crematorium. That night Angadan wandered through the palace. Vibhishana was happy; the same happiness that Sugriva felt on the day Vali was killed. Both were done by Rama. Both were done through fratricide. His anger toward Rama increased. No one in Lanka is really awake. He searched for a room guarded by Lakshmana but couldn't find one. But he could find a room guarded by Maruthi. As Maruthi was sleeping he gets into the room. There were no luxurious cots; Rama was lying on the

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floor. He prayed to his mothers and Ooru Kaval and gaining energy from them raised his sword. Someone called him. It was Sita. She said to him that it's bad to kill someone who is sleeping and requested to take her life to avenge his father's death. Angadan threw his sword away and walked away. Here once more the author had proved that Angadan has humanitarian feeling within him. Also it produces another dimension to the character of Sita. Here the plot is twisted further in end give a new chance of ending to the epic.

In the popular epic there is reference to such a message. Actually Ravana had sent some spies to Rama which was captured by Vibhishana. Sarah Joseph had twisted the plot a little in favor of Angadan to make let him avenge for his father's during the war many things happened. And they were not discussed in the novel. And in the case of Sita, Rama doesn't rejected Sita or it is not for securing his reputation he rescued Sita. Rama had intense love towards Sita. Being a noble ruler Rama had to give ear to the people. It's on their complaint he makes Sita take the fire test which Sita passes successfully. Then Sita is banished from the palace by Rama. And later own Rama realizes her importance and call her back but she rejects it and goes into the earth, to her mother. Sarah Joseph by altering the end of the novel had given another possibility that could happen. In the novel, the Rama we see is not the Rama we see in the epic. The character in the novel is rude and selfish. So from such a person this type of behavior can be expected. In the end author had left an uncertainty about Sita's death. Here what we can see is a swap in the character of Rama and Angadan.

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Angadan is portrayed as kindhearted brave and humane even though he is from a tribal community. But Rama is depicted as just ruler who doesn't have any obligations to relationships and morality. Usually Rama is often associated to morality but by depicting Rama in a very strange form author had redefined that concept. Angadan even getting chance to revenge his father's death doesn't do it. Here Angadan is becoming the hero and Rama is the antihero. We can clearly feel the decline of the sanctity of the characters in the epic while reading from the shoes of Angadan. Another archetype that the author has tried to break is the depiction tribal as uncivilized and savages. Here Kishkintha is far much advanced in every matter. The politics of the Ayodhyan kingdom and the greed for power is also present there.

Ooru Kaval cannot be considered just as a rereading but can also be as a work depicting the colonization process. While taking the work as a single piece of literature apart from the fact that it is a rereading we can get it into a new realm of interpretation. Ayodhya is considered as a most advanced and civilized kingdom. And the tribe of Angadan lives in the forest. What we see here is that. Through helping Sugriva to get the throne they are getting a way to fulfill their selfish needs. They make use of the people of Kishkintha to search Sita whom they have never seen before. Rama had influenced Maruthi a lot and the attempt to change the beliefs of the society is done by Maruthi in different parts of the novel. The Ayodhyans conquer lands and destroys the innate culture of that place. This fact is evident from the migration of Dhanavas when they came to know that

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Kishkintha is baked by Ayodhya. The Ayodhyan princes treated the people of Kishkintha as slaves. Made them built bridges and to fight for them. But what they get in return is nothing. It is simply the power asserted upon the weak by the powerful

Another reading is that of an eco-critical reading. Kishkintha is being a community which live close to the nature is being corrupted by an exterior force. Kishkintha upholds the eco centric philosophy of deep ecology that recognizes the inherent value of all living beings. In the beginning chapter of book Angadan is getting bathed in mud, this serves as a reference to the same. They worshiped Vanaras. They fed on fruits and grains their commercial items were cotton and salt. At the same time they were far advanced technologically. But they were made to interpret natural resources for the short term goals of power centers. For making the bridge they are destroying large amount of hills and trees. The bamboos in Kishkintha are all taken to make weapons. The fields are transformed to grounds for practicing warfare. The novel is replete with romantic descriptions of the pastoral woodlands of Kishkintha, planted, cultivated and nurtured by the conscious ecological foresight of her visionary King Vali.

Interpretation done through this paper has helped in gaining a wider perspective to look upon the repeated fantasies of the stories. Deconstructing the epic into a normal fiction and there by adding new meanings to the epic is what the author has done. It is worth mentioning that, out of the plethora of deviants present in the novel very few are presented in this paper. *Ooru Kaval* revealed

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the hidden agendas and the stories of betrayal and colonization hidden in the epic. Sarah Joseph has shown how Rama would be if he is in the modern world. This paper has tried to demythologize the Myth of *Ramayana* and to analyze the redefined myth in the stories. Though myths are narrations in themselves, here these myths serve the function of a structural element to enable the production of a redefined myth. Use of nature and myth through the techniques of dualism, equalization of women and nature, oral language, dominance of men over women and nature, etc. forms a completely new narrative structure in total.

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