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POSTFEMINIST MYTHOPOEIA: OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AT WORK IN
SARAH JOSEPH'S *OORUKAVAL*

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses Sarah Joseph's *Oorukaval* (translated *The Vigil* by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan) as a mythopoeic discourse the writer constructs to voice protest in the postfeminist context of increased ecological and human rights consciousness. The US Third World post colonial feminist critic, Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness provides the theoretical framework for the analysis. Sandoval in her landmark essay, "US Third-World Feminism; The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," categorically analyses the theoretical structure of US Third – world feminism that functions outside the operation of white hegemonic feminist theory. This trajectory of an evolving non-hegemonic feminist consciousness is evident in the works of Sarah Joseph that seek to achieve a new paradigm of renaissance. The article argues that her novel *Oorukaval* is a theoreticonarrative that uses oppositional consciousness to anchor Sarah Joseph's feminist politics in the post feminist phase .The methodology of a coalition politics at work in the novel, blurs the boundaries between theory and praxis empowering feminism to rise above the gender variable and fight against all forms of oppression.

Key words: Oppositional Consciousness, Third World feminism, Chela Sandoval, Postfeminism

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The trajectory of postfeminist representations and resistance in Sarah Joseph's *Oorukaval* in the background of Chela Sandoval's theory of oppositional consciousness, forms the purview of this paper. The evolution of Sarah Joseph's feminist politics closely parallels the history of modern feminism in Kerala. The concept of feminism has been much debated over and misunderstood in Kerala as it is elsewhere. Fighting against odds, it has come a long way shifting paradigms from the site of gender inequality to that of a political mobilization, organizing debates around differences. That is to say, feminism today is influenced not only by struggles against gender discrimination, but by struggles against class, race, and cultural hierarchies. It has become an effective locus of resistance to power voiced by all those sidelined classes victimized under the social stratum of domination and subordination. Or in other words ,we speak of postfeminism – a social movement that coalesces all the organized and unorganized movements seeking justice and social change. It acts in association with the varied communities – human and nonhuman – all of which have been preys to a grave oppressive hegemony.

As Ann Brooks puts it, 'Postfeminism represents, as Yeatman claims, feminism's 'coming of age', its maturity into a confident body of theory and politics representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding change.'"(Brooks 1). Postfeminism provides a theoretical space to conceptualize Sarah Joseph's social activism footed on the feminist platform. In her novels feminism finds a broad based multiple application in order to address the demands of all marginalized and colonized cultures. Regional, ethnic, environmental and postcolonial feminisms get represented in *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, (*The Daughters of Aalaha*), *Mattathi (The Other)*, *Othappu (The Scent of the Other Side)*, *Oorukaval (The Vigil)*, *Aathi (Gift in Green)* and *Aalohari Aanandam (Each One's Share of Happiness)*.

This relates her works, in a way, to the theory of oppositional consciousness put forward by the Third World, postcolonial feminist Chela Sandoval. Sandoval in her landmark essay, "US Third-World Feminism; The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," categorically analyses the theoretical structure of US Third – world feminism that functions outside the operation of white hegemonic feminist theory. White hegemonic feminist theory has identified a four-phase feminist history of consciousness. Feminist critics and historians like Elaine Showalter, Gayle Greene, Coppelia Kahn, Hester Eisenstein, Allison Jagger, and Alice Jardine have theoretically worked out these phases complementing and challenging one another's feminist intellectual spaces. These four phases can be broadly segmented as liberal ('women are equal to men'), Marxist ('women are different'), radical/cultural ('women are superior'), and socialist ('women are a racially divided class') feminisms.

In contrast to this hegemonic feminist movement, US third-world feminism projects another kind of typology which, far from being feminist, is a history of oppositional consciousness. This mode of consciousness is a differential method that has a mobile retroactive and transformative effect on all four hegemonic feminist political strategies. The illusion of one mode being the single most correct one is shattered by the US third – world feminism that launches the fifth mode of differential consciousness which demands a new subjectivity. Sandoval concludes: "The differential mode of oppositional consciousness depends upon the ability to read the current situation of power and of self-consciously choosing and adopting the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations, a survival skill, well known to oppressed peoples." (Sandoval 90). Within the realm of differential consciousness the varied conflicting ideological positions do not cancel out each other, but remain tactical positions which may be adopted for the time being according to the situational demands of resistance against power.

This trajectory of an evolving non-hegemonic feminist consciousness is evident in the works of Sarah Joseph that seek to achieve a new paradigm of renaissance, to use the word in the sense of a social metamorphosis. Feminism, here aims at an egalitarian society that eradicates power hierarchy entrenched in the name of class, caste, gender and culture. The aforesaid novels are all political statements of the subalterns who have been denied their voices so far. They seek to establish how women, dalits, minorities and nature need to accomplish unconditionally their right to survive in dignity and honour without any threats from a demonizing agency above – men, upper caste, the majority, the so-called civilization and culture. The novels are obvious theoretico- narratives that deconstruct the binaries ingrained in the current social structure that denies authority and agency to the subordinated citizenry forced to exist within the realms of marginality. This awareness to rise above the purport of eliminating gender disparities has anchored Sarah Joseph's feminism in the postfeminist phase wherein it incorporates the elements of social, political and environmental mass movements and the outcries of the oppressed.

In the backdrop of this all encompassing postfeminist ideology, the paper analyses Sarah Joseph's *Oorukaval* (translated *The Vigil* by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan) as a mythopoeic discourse the writer constructs to voice protest in the postfeminist context of increased ecological and human rights consciousness. In *Oorukaval* Sarah Joseph sets upon herself the task of recreating mythology from the perspective of the defeated, the silenced and the victimized. The task here is, as Gyan Prakash, puts it, "to fully recognize another history of agency and knowledge alive in the dead weight of the colonial past." (Prakash 5). The alliance that Raman effects with Sugrivan in Vali's Kishkindam unravels in a new light through Angadan, the tyrannized son

of Vali. The imperial power of Ayodya dismisses the aboriginal community's practices and customs as savage and superstitious. The contemporary chronicle of imperialism and globalization structures the subconscious of the text, that surfaces in its theoretical contestations of the victims' identity. The text offers immense possibilities for an ecofeminist reading too thus bringing into its framework the varying oppositional activities of internally colonized communities.

Contemporary times have witnessed a political urge to possess the variegated tradition and multicultural past of India in an attempt to enforce uniformity under the façade of unity. Efforts to sanctify the epic status of *Ramayana* and glorify the colonial escapades of Rama have met challenges in Sarah Joseph's earlier works like *Puthuramayana* (New Ramayana). The stories unveil the unequal power strategy at play in *Ramayana* that struggled to marginalize the indigenous communities as uncivilized titans/asuras/vanaras. The subalterns speak for themselves as the Ramayana myth gets reconstructed by the silenced and the justice denied.

Differential consciousness operates in *Oorukaval* by a process that Sandoval elaborates,

"As the clutch of a car provides the driver the ability to shift gears, differential consciousness permits the practitioner to choose tactical positions, that is, to self-consciously break and reform ties to ideology, activities which are imperative for the psychological and political practices that permit the achievement of coalition across differences." (Sandoval 90).

Chapter – 3 of the novel, entitled "Two Types of Justice" begins with an account of Vali's murder. Raman punishes Vali with death for the sin of coveting his brother's wife and making her his own. The people of Kishkindam could not understand the logic of such a punishment for observing a custom so common in their clan. This decolonial ideology that the enslaved community uses for resistance goes hand in hand with an oppositional feminist ideology that the women resort to in order to challenge the patriarchal logic of one woman shared by two brothers. Ruma, the wife of Sugrivan, asks, "Raman says that he killed Vali because he lusted after me. Who will then kill Sugrivan who lusted after Thara?" (Joseph 28).

Again, the concept of liberal, Marxist and radical feminisms find their way in the characterization of Thara and Ruma who also question the imperialist imposition of dominant cultural rules on an indigenous tradition that survived on its own terms under a different and unique system of justice. Both relentlessly challenge Aryan colonial inequities by counterpointing Kishkindam's history.

The concept of 'womanism' propounded by Alice Walker, takes serious dimensions in the novel where, through Angadan's upbringing the text explores the idea of a larger motherhood. Angadan's mothers – Thara, Ruma, Kushi, Sama – vividly enliven the concept of joint motherhood through which the deserted and the forsaken are empowered. The other women – Iya, Inba, Swayamprabha and Sita herself -- establish solidarity and companionship with the rest of their kind. A feminist utopia unfolds itself wherein these women draw strength from each other and sustain smoothly in nature's comradeship without men and their support. Another instance of cultural feminism at work in the novel is the enactment of Kishkindam's ethnic ritual of recalling one's son back to his mother's womb performed in all sanctity for Angadan's safety.

Each of the women in the novel, is sufficiently individualized especially Thara, Ruma and Sita, whose characters are chiseled to perfection as personifications of individual integrity. Thara, the wounded widow of Vali defeats Sugrivan every time he approaches her with his fire of passion: "What Vali and I did together, you will never be able to do." (128). Sugrivan flinched each time 'like a water snake hit in the middle of his body'. Thara spares not even her father demanding justice for Angadan from Raman who used deceit to kill his father. The same Thara pacifies the infuriated Lakshmanan who stands 'like a serpent spitting poison', reminding Sugrivan of his promise. Sugrivan kneels in front of her to appease Lakshmanan,

"Thara laughed.

Her lips curled in a sneering smile, like a sweetmeat made of mockery. Sugrivan shrank into himself. He became smaller and smaller and finally began to crawl like a worm in front of her, begging for his life." (133).

Ruma, a calmer and more modest incarnation of female strength, also puts the colonized slave in Sugrivan to shame recognizing Thara and herself as inheritors of the same psychic terrain. She holds up her honour that denies Sugrivan, the King of Kishkindam, any royal agency over her self to force her into coaxing Thara yield to him. She tells him unflinchingly, "Vali is not so weak as to die at the hands of Mayavi. Nor is he a coward." Letting out a huge roar and slapping his thighs, Sugrivan stepped down and loped away. His exhibition of anger did not faze Ruma." (22).

The characterization of Sita deserves special mention. The traditional epic hero, Raman, is demystified as he subjects Sita to the greatest of humiliations by disowning her and proclaiming that the war was fought to preserve his kshatriya dignity and not to win her back. Sita questions him quietly, but firmly. She reminds him how he has denied her the status of a humanbeing, taking her for a sexualized body. She, the daughter of a kshatriya king was never treated with equal respect by Rama, a self-styled, high born kshatriya.

The feminist ideology pervading the narrative of the text weaves into its fabric, the oppositional consciousness of liberal, Marxist and cultural feminist concepts. The gear shift to the tactical vantage point of ecofeminism is also effortlessly and aesthetically accomplished. The vivid portrayal of Vali's town planning featured by orchards, rivers, gardens, greenery, cotton fields, bamboo and banana groves; the devastating preparations for a war that defiles wombs and lays lands fallow; the dragging down of great mountains to raise the sturdy bridge across the ocean – all project a deep concern for the environment threatened by the so-called developmental projects in the contemporary world. *Oorukaval* specifically leaves threadbare the exploitation of women and nature thoughtlessly carried out by a patriarchal, colonial, capitalist rule. Sara Joseph tells Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan in an interview:

Bearing life in one's womb, delivering it, and nurturing it to grow – these experiences have endowed women with life-preserving abilities, skills and responsibilities which result in an instinctive watchfulness. A woman's vision of life would involve the spreading of this vigilance to nature too. Developmental projects that pollute soil, water, air and degrade the things that are required to satisfy basic human needs do not take into account the essence of women's experiences. Women can easily identify with nature, which is ignored, exploited and destroyed because she also has been limited, marginalized, exploited and destroyed by the patriarchal system.(Appendix to *The Vigil*).

Presenting Rama as an autocratic imperialist who shamelessly displays the hegemonic consciousness of royalty that renders the tribals, barbaric and contemptuous, *Oorukaval* emerges as a critique of colonization. Raman tells Valiand his race: "The Kings who observe Dharma hunt and capture animals for fun. I do not see any harm in any of these actions....As far as I am concerned, you are only a "monkey". Whether you oppose me in a battle or not, the fact that you are an animal gives me the right to kill you. I don't regret it."(118). His colonial pride suffers insults in the dying words of Vali:"If you think I am an animal, was this killing for food or pleasure? Raman, would you ever eat my flesh?...so on this occasion when you have been separated from your wife, killing me... would it be for fun, recreation, entertainment?" (118-119). While Raman is demeaned as a capitalist figurehead who thrives on war, treachery and destruction, Vali looms large as the supreme commander of an indigenous civilization that subsists beautifully on growth, communal harmony and environmental justice.

The novel bears historical witness to the trajectories of imperialistic domination branching out into a detrimental globalization and a racist capitalism. Invading the ethnic culture and land, Raman recruits the physical and intellectual prowess of Maruti, to drive home to his clan that they are savage, their rituals are superstitious and their customs outworn. Maruti lives up to Macaulay's prophecy,

"One taste
Of Western wisdom surpasses
All the books of the East,"(Seth 65)

Maruti tells them: "Calling us animals only means that we are unsophisticated. We do not have knowledge. Nor any rules. Nor do we have justice and law to regulate life. All Raman meant was that such people are not different from animals."(Joseph 119). And the subaltern speaks in response: "Angadan questions, " We have got all the things you mention, but in our own way.... Look at it through your eyes, not

Raman's. Are we human beings or animals?" (119). Angadan sparks off what Benitta Parry calls, "the construction of a politically conscious, unified revolutionary self, standing in unmitigated opposition to the oppressor." (Parry 30)

The Aryan invasion of the Dravidian race becomes the archetypal forerunner of the modern colonial political strategies that erode the third-world civilizations. The youth of the Vanara race, beguiled by Maruti's logic, abandons their customs, language, costumes and ethnic way of life to embrace Raman's cultural status quo. Maruti succeeds in making them ashamed of their cultural practices and finally the flabbergasted young men come to recognize the veracity of the Vedas as science and the new knowledge thus gained, as civilization. The farsighted visionary, the author turns out to be here, enlightens the narrative with contemporary innuendoes.

A civilization built on the very foundations of a life lived in close communion with nature, informed by indigenous intuition of nature's rhythms, altered by visionary consciousness not to disturb her poise turns topsy-turvy as the war monger culture of Ayodhya seeps into the Kishkinda soil. Vali's race believed in the religion of nature. They worshipped her with insurmountable faith. They followed her seasonal changes closely and adapted themselves to work on the soil uncomplaining and complacent about her yields. This covetable and politically correct way of life – as we look back from the modern context of large scale ecocide that warns us of a final doom – is ruined by a war for which the race was in no way responsible and had no moral obligation to support. The very opening of the narrative sets the keynote to this tragedy. The Vanara race divided their loyalties between Vali and Sugrivan as Vali gets treacherously struck by iron on his chest and shatters 'like a mountain split by a landslide.' (Joseph, 8). The imperial policy of divide and rule and the rule of iron over stone commence the collapse of an epic race that culminates in colossal ruins. Angadan remembers Vali's words:

"Meet fist with fist, stone with stone.... This is how we fight. The arrow can be ... a tool for trickery. As people grow old and feeble, their hair falls, their strength diminishes and they have to resort to trickery and traps to escape. Only the sharpness of the arrow and the cunning of betrayal will protect them. They will never be able to fight face to face.... In a fist fight, only one of the combatants dies.

With the arrow, hundreds and thousands die, including those who should not." (9).

The colonial thirst for empire is rendered non-sensical as Vali establishes poignantly the hollowness of the whole conquest, resourced by nothing but colonial hunger, especially in the absence of any enmity between Lanka and Kishkindam. Vali who had been a close ally of Ravana could have initiated peace talks failing which he alone would have sufficed to bring Sita back to the comforts of Ayodhya. But Raman's culture found war inevitable and manipulated the support of a peace loving community much against their will.

As the text thus brings into its fold varied forms of resistance contextualizing an epic past in times contemporary, the narrative theorizes a post feminist ideology that refocuses the priorities and politics of the dominant feminist theory. The writer activist consciously blurs the boundaries between theory and praxis as she integrates feminist critical thinking into postcolonial, post structural and post modern theoretical concepts. Worldwide ethnic, race, gender liberation movements and environmental, anti colonial, anti globalization strategies that display oppositional ideologies meet in and around the feminist movements in the postfeminist phase of evolution. The ongoing phase expands to new horizons of social renaissance as the author takes up burning environmental and minority issues for a cultural critique in her later and more recent novels – *Aathi* and *Aaloharianandam*. The evolution foresees what Fanon conjectured, "Total liberation is that which concerns all sectors of the personality." (Fanon 250).

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