

An Exploration of Oikospoetics in Oorkuval
(The Vigil): a Malayalam Novel of Sara Joseph
أنماط المحيط في رواية "اليقظة" للكاتبة الهندية سارة جوزيف

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Abstract

Oorukaval (2008), translated as *The Vigil* (2014), is a contemporary realistic adaptation of the ancient Indian epic of the legendary hero *Ramayana*, written in glorification of his heroic war against a demon prince. Sara Joseph (b. 1946) reintroduced the ancient myth from an oikospoetic approach, dismissing war as irrelevant to contemporary age, as she asserts an utter integration between the human, the nonhuman, the sacred, the natural, and the cultural, within an anti-war, anti-imperialist, ecological frame. The work is not gender oriented. Sara Joseph divided the linearity of the narrative into two axes: the horizontal and the vertical. Each axe encompasses a distinct division of oikoi. The oikospoetic structure corresponds to the temporal line: prewar, war, postwar eras. The paper aims to analyze oikospoetics in Joseph's *The Vigil*, to clear the confusion between oikospoetics, ecofeminism, and ecopoetics, and to bring into universal focus the literature of the third world minorities. The results show that oikospoetics is not identical with either ecofeminism or ecopoetics.

Key Words: oikospoetics, integrative, hierarchal, anarchic, postcolonial

انماط المحيط في رواية "اليقظة" للكاتبة الهندية سارة جوزيف

الملخص:

ترجمت رواية "اوركوفال" الهندية (٢٠٠٨) إلى الإنجليزية عام ٢٠١٤ باسم "اليقظة" وهي إقتباس معاصر للملحمة الهندية القديمة للبطل الأسطوري راما والتي تمجد حربه ضد الشر. في إعادة تناول هذا النص من منظور واقعي يختص بمحيط الإنسان الأسري والاجتماعي والبيئي، أكدت كاتبة الرواية سارة جوزيف على الاندماج الكامل بين الإنسان، الآلهة، الطبيعة، والثقافة، في إطار مناهض للحروب، والإمبريالية، ومحافظ على البيئة ضد مختلف أشكال الدمار التي تخلفها الحروب. ولا يركز العمل على التمييز النوعي حيث تهتم الكاتبة بطبقة المهمشين بصفة عامة، ليس المرأة فقط. وقد ادمجت سارة جوزيف النظرية بالتطبيق في التعبير عن وجهات نظرها الخاصة بالبيئة والإنسان وذلك من خلال تقسيم مسار الرواية إلى مسار رأسي وآخر أفقي، يتناول المحور الأفقي أنواع المحيط الثلاث: التكاملي، التدرجي، والفوضوي. أما المحور الرأسي فيتناول دائرة الإنسان، والأسرة، القبيلة، والبيئة الطبيعية والثقافية والروحانية. ويهدف البحث إلى توضيح الفارق بين بعض الحركات التي تختص بالطبيعة مثل الحركة النسوية البيئية، والدوائر المحيطة بالإنسان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المحيط الأسري- المجتمعي- البيئي- النسوية البيئية- الإقتباس

An Exploration of Oikospoetics in *Oorkuval (The Vigil)*: a Malayalam Novel of Sara Joseph

1. General Introduction

Oorukaval (2008), translated as *The Vigil* (2014), is a contemporary adaptation of the ancient Indian epic, *Ramayana*. In rewriting this text from an oikospoetic realistic approach, Sara Joseph (b. 1946) asserts an utter integration between the human, the sacred, the natural, and the cultural, within an anti-war, anti-imperialist, ecological frame. Being based on a popular myth, the plot of the novel is rather naïve, yet, it tackles a number of intricate issues. The work is not gender oriented in regard to the author's defense of the subaltern in general. Sara Joseph merges theory with practice in articulating her oikospoetic views through dividing the linearity of the narrative into two axes: the horizontal which encompasses the triple phases of Integrative, Hierarchal, and Anarchic oikoi and the vertical axe which contains the oikoi of the protagonist, family, tribe and nature. The oikospoetic approach is not identical with either ecofeminism or eco-poetics as some researchers claim.

2. Methodology:

The primary source of this paper is Sara Joseph's *Oorukaval* (2008) translated into English as *The Vigil* (2014). Secondary data are collected from academic articles, reference books, websites, and existing studies about Malayalam literature, oikospoetics, the author's biography, and any other relevant material. The research method is qualitative and analytic through oikospoetic Malayalam lens, integrated with postcolonial approaches. In regard to oikospoetic analysis, the major theoretical base is Nirmal Selvamony's *Oikospoetics* (2003). Selvamony elaborates that oikospoetic analysis in a literary work consists of three tasks: "the first task is to identify the oikos; the second, to establish relationships between the oikoses; and the third, to compare the oikoses of the text under study with oikoses of other comparable texts"(12). These phases are applied on Sara Joseph's *The Vigil*, preceded by a general introduction, the author's biography, theoretical background of oikos, and followed by the findings and conclusion, then the works cited.

3. The research question(s):

- a- How far are the two axes of oikospoetics applicable to Sara Joseph's *The Vigil*?
- b- what are the differences between oikospoetics and other literary movements in which nature is a primary focus such as ecofeminism and eco-poetics?

4. The research objective: is to analyze Sara Joseph's *The Vigil* from an oikospoetic Malayalam perspective, according to the theoretical layout provided by Selvamony's analysis.

5. The research contribution:

- a- To bring into universal focus the literature of the third world minorities with its distinct features.
- b- To clear the confusion between oikospoetics and other nature-based movements such as eco-poetics, ecofeminism, and romanticism.

6. Theoretical Background

Etymologically, *Oikos* is a Greek term which literally means a house, a dwelling place, a habitation (Garrard 3). According to Selvamony, a typical *oikos* could be regarded as “a nexus in which the sacred, the humans, natural and the cultural phenomena stood in relationship” (340), which is similar to “the limbs of the body” (153). Thus, the Greek term is a blend of human, nature, and spirit. Bate *et al.* point out that *Oikos* in Greek corresponds to the English root *eco-*. Skinner elaborates: “eco’ here signals –no more, no less—the home we share with several million other species, our planet Earth” (“Editor’s Statement” 7). Tarlo states that the home making analogy suggests “the human’s residence on earth as the center of the universe” (3). Thus, the *oikos* investigates the harmonious relationship between the human and the nonhuman, the sacred and earthly, nature and culture.

The meaning of the term *oikos* develops over centuries. In the ancient Greek society, it refers to the basic unit of society—the family (MacDowell 15). It includes the family, the family’s property and the house (Davies 290). It also refers to a line of descent from father to son from generation to generation (MacDowell 15). In modern sociology, the

term refers to social groups. Each individual has distinct circle of relatives, friends, neighbors who relate to someone through various social activities. It also refers to people who share social interaction (Weber 348). In literature, Selvamony maintains that the oikoi of a narrative revolve around the protagonist: himself, his family, his ancestors, his community, his land (153). These elements are arranged on either vertical or horizontal axes according to the type of the oikos.

The three major forms of Oikos are: the Integrative, Hierarchic and Anarchic. Selvamony states that integrative oikos “integrates the sacred, nature, and the humans in complex kinship even as a family of kith and kin” (314), as all are bound by duties, obligations and rights. Power relation in this type is both “horizontal and vertical” (Scariah and Joseph 36). Scariah and Joseph point out that primitive Indian society is extensively affected by Integrative Oikos in which the “spirits, people and nature are all bound together quite intricately by duties, obligations and rights” (35). Integrative Oikos combines its members in a horizontal relationship, in which all members are equally significant and integral to the complete whole. Simultaneously, the members are set within a vertical frame according to their position in the universal frame.

Hierarchical Oikos, on the other hand, works only in vertical manner. In a manner similar to the Medieval chain of being, the Indian hierarchical Oikos maintains that all creatures: “stand in a hierarchical relationship with the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom by attributing supremacy to the sacred, the distance between the humans and the sacred was affected confining to the latter to a special space deemed holy”(Scariah and Joseph 36). Inside the human hierarchy, people are divided into rulers and subjects, as represented in political relations. In natural hierarchy, the land is divided into wet land and dry land, animals are categorized as domestic and wild. All creatures are graded in a hierarchal order.

Anarchic Oikos is anarchic in spirit but economic in practice. According to Scariah and Joseph, with the spread of rational materialistic philosophies and science, the existence of the supreme non-materialistic spirit is doubted. Rational philosophies spread utilitarianism in which

there is a consideration of the possible profit or return of every creature. Modern Indian society adopts the anarchic Oikos as this society views “nature as something to be exploited. Everything has become profit oriented” (35-36). It is noteworthy that this is the philosophical basis for colonialism.

Oikospoetics is not identical with either ecofeminism or ecopoetics as some scholars claim. Ecofeminism, according to Mellor, is a movement that sees:

a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. ... It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (1)

Ecofeminists criticize and address “the inherent inequalities in world structures which permit the North to dominate the South, men to dominate women”(Mies and Shiva ii). Both nature and women are seen as passive and victimized. Wenzel states that there is a “connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature”(12). Central to the theory of ecofeminism was “the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother”, as Merchant maintains(“The Death of Nature” 270). Ecofeminist literature holds that patriarchal structures work through these binary oppositions or dualism: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, and white/non-white (Hobgood-Oster). Tarlo points out that radical ecofeminists “confine women into ‘natural’ roles which are problematic and restrictive and usually involve retaining the male/female nature/culture alignments”(6). Spiritual ecofeminism believes that earth is alive, centered around values of caring, compassion and non-violence. (Eisler 23). Merchant comments that commercialism and industrialization...depended on activities directly altering the earth— mining, drainage, deforestation” (“The Death of Nature” 270). These changes accompanied environmental deterioration. The system of oikoi in literature is different from ecofeminism. Oikos does not have the dichotomy between women/ nature versus men/culture. In Oikos women

are not subordinate. Instead, they are idealized and respected by men. Further, there is harmony, not enmity, between man and nature on the one hand, women and culture on the other hand. Indeed since binary opposition thinking is a Western conception of things, Indian mind set is different.

In a similar manner, oikospoetics is not identical to eco-poetics. Arigo defines eco-poetics as “an ecotone between ... ecology, poetry, and ethnopoetics”(1). Skinner depicts it as “a New Nature Poetry”(127). Arigo elaborates that eco-poetics addresses the “concerns of the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings”(1). Tarlo explains that “eco-poetics is to reduce our sense of alienation from our environment”(10) . The emergence of eco-poetics, Tarlo argues, is associated with Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* (2000), a critical work, which uses the term to refer to a group of neo-romantic male poets (3). Skinner comments that many readers as well as critics relate eco-poetics with themes dealing with the pastoral, wilderness, human’s relation to animals, natural disasters, environmental injustice. Further, eco-poetics manipulate some distinct technical devices as non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling (“Editor’s Statement” 5). Tarlo calls eco-poetry “radical landscape poetry” which combines “engagement with a particular rural or semi-rural area with experimental poetics.”(4). Eco-poetics differs from romanticism as it resists the romantic self “I”. In this sense, eco-poetics “finally abolish the aesthetic use of nature as mirror for human narcissism”(Reilly 18). Oikospoetics is more comprehensive than eco-poetics, which is mainly concerned with nature and literariness. Oikospoetics is concerned with the natural, the cultural, the human, the non-human, and the sacred, as is manifested in Sara Joseph’s works.

7. Sara Joseph’s Biography:

Sara Joseph (b. 1946) is an Indian eminent Malayalam¹ writer of novels, short stories, essays, and plays. Further, she is an activist, a university professor and postcolonial, feminist, poststructuralist and postmodern critic. She wrote her first novel, *Thaikulam*, in 1999. She won numerous awards.

Sara Joseph is considered the god – mother of the Malayalam movement in Kerala, India. This movement allows women writers and critics to meet and form a fraternity bond. Also, Sara Joseph is influenced by Taoism; a metaphysical Chinese philosophy, originated by Lao Tzu. According to this philosophy, “man is a microcosm of the universe and he should live in harmony with the natural universe” (Priya 119). This philosophy maintains a “holistic concept of nature” (Priya 119). Joseph is equally affected by the Chipko movement which is one of the prominent Indian movements formed by Indian women to protest against environmental deterioration as deforestation, lumbering and mining (Rao 47-48). Joseph’s works aim at showing that humans and non- humans are ecologically bound. Her writings are response to nature’s own rhythm. Her writings blur the boundaries between theories and practice as in *Oorukaval* or *The Vigil* (2014).

8. *Oorukaval* (*The Vigil*):

In *Oorukaval* or *The Vigil*, the author exploits and inverts the classical epic of *Ramayana* as a tool to discuss a number of contemporary issues such as “environmental protection, gender equality, colonialism, terrorism, war and violence”(Dasan 2). She presents the epic in a realistic contemporary mould. *Oorukaval* is the story of a utopia turned into dystopia, tranquil prosperous nature ruined by political ambition. It is divided into three parts. Part I is set in Kishkindam during peace time. Thus it highlights the harmony and integration between landscape and seascape. Part II depicts political struggle, the Search party, and war preparation. Part III traces the advance of the army to the ocean of Lanka, and Sita’s release. The three parts correspond to Integrative, Hierarchical, and Anarchic oikoi. The structure of the story is based on parallelism and contrast, as the text highlights the contrast between past (pre-war) and present (post-war), peace and war, nature preservation and nature annihilation. In addition, Joseph utilizes images, irony, and focalization as technical devices to articulate her views of war.

The story is focalized through the perspective of Angadan, the hero of the novel, whose father Vali was murdered by Rama, to force Vali’s wife, Tara, to marry Sugriva, Vali’s brother. Angadan lived his life before as a cheerful adolescent, to find himself after the murder of his

father, thrown into political turmoil. Rama asked Angadan to go in a quest mission in search for Sita, Rama's kidnapped wife. He was chosen to lead the Search Party and cannot reject. He obeys his father's last words, advising him to submit to the will of his uncle Sugriva. He hides bitter hatred towards Sugriva and Rama. *The Vigil* depicts the huge ecological destruction as a result of preparation of war and building *Sethu* (bridge) which necessitate uprooting of trees, hills, and rocks. All the living creatures in those areas will be endangered as their habitat is destroyed. After this destructive war, Rama asked Sita to prove her chastity by throwing herself into a pyre test, and so she died, proving the futility of war. Later, Angadan rushes into Rama's room, raising his sword to kill him. Surprisingly, he finds the soul of Sita keeping vigil, preventing him to kill a sleeping man, and offering her soul instead, saying, "I am awake"(261). Hence, the title of the novel, *The Vigil*, refers to Sita's soul, protector of life and nature. The very title indicates the integration between the human and the spirit. Joseph eliminates Rama from the title to denounce his role as an imperialist who annihilates nature. As a pacifist writer, she foregrounds and glorifies peaceful character. Further, the title refers to the "vigil of a conscientious writer against the ills of the society" (Thomas 266). The oikoi in the novel are arranged in two axes: horizontal and vertical. Vertically, they include oikoi of protagonist, family, tribe, community and nature. Horizontally, they move from Integrative, to Hierarchical and end by Anarchic oikoi.

8.1 Integrative Oikos

The narrative starts by the Integrative oikos in which there is an utter harmony between the oikos of the protagonist, family, tribe, and nature. This part is set in Kishkindan which represents a pleasant and harmonious environment in the pre-war era. Sara Joseph's nature is represented through landscape, biological milieu, and the surrounding world. Nature here is concrete, tangible and alive. Nature in the novel is not just a setting or a background. Instead, it is foregrounded. It is a central character. It is a dynamic nature that comes alive. Man and nature are interdependent. Through her depiction of nature, Sara Joseph articulates her belief that all living creatures have inherent values.

In her description of this forest, she writes “Don’t make a noise...This is a silent forest and one is not supposed to enter it....we are not to destroy a leaf, a flower or even an insect....Those who do that will have to suffer the consequences for a hundred generations”(209). The beauty of nature fills in the silence. Nature is a living sacrament of an all pervading spirit. The writer communicates natural beauty verbally and nonverbally. Nature is depicted through the characters’ physical appearance. The characters are not familiar human beings, as they have tails. They are apes-like. This denotes an interconnectedness between man and nature. It is a sign of the integration between human and nature.

Nature is manipulated both formally and thematically. In depicting nature, the writer depends mainly on nature images as a technical tool to enhance the integration between man and nature. Language expresses the continuity between man and the outside world. For instance, the author depicts the lake Pushkaram as a pretty sensuous woman:

Lake Pushkaram had the mysterious aura of a seductive woman. In solitude, she lay facing the sky, fully revealing the sensuous beauty of her body to the planets. The lotus leaves, as wide and soft as the lower parts of a woman’s abdomen, lent a greenish hue to the lake. The lotus buds that opened up when she sighed softly resembled her breasts; the half open red lotuses reminded one of her sweet-smelling vagina.(59)

Technically, Joseph integrates figurative images- personification and simile- with descriptive images to involve the senses of the readers through the synthesis of visual (e.g. sky), auditory (e.g. sighed), olfactory (e.g. sweet smelling) and tactile (e.g. soft) in order to enable the reader to visualize the harmony. In this manner, Joseph presents the Integrative oikos both thematically and technically.

Underneath the oikos of natural surrounding is the oikos of tribe. Tribal literature, Venkataramana argues, deals with “symbiosis of all the living and non-livings beings in their environment. The oikos of the tribal people not only integrates them with their immediate environment but also with their distant environment”(175). The Vanara race under the rule of Vali lived in a close communion with nature and its rhythms. The inhabitants of Kishkindam live contented in their families and community

under the leadership of Vali. They believe in the religion of nature. All their rituals are dependent on natural processes. Rituals observation is an integral part of the culture of the tribe community. They practice rituals in all sorts of occasions. They overcome psychological damage through practicing rituals. Those people believe that “death signifies hope too. It is a return to the mother’s womb”(117). Death is integrated into natural processes through man’s birth, growth, decay, decomposition and dissolution. They followed seasonal changes and work on the soil uncomplaining about her yields. Characters accept the laws of nature.

Vali’s association of Kishkindan, with its trees, lake constitutes a trinity of human, nature, and spirit. He derives pleasure from the natural world around, from the river, the plants, the sky, the mountains, the birds and animals. He imports from neighboring kingdoms various types of plants and “all these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali”(25). Vali and other clan members experience a physical contact with nature through cultivation and making pottery. He encourages farmers to use traditional methods in agriculture because these methods are not harmful for the environment.

Women in Kishkindam make clay pots, weave colorful clothes, cultivate vegetables and cereals, tend the livestock. Vali believes in gender equality and calls the clan to celebrate when Ruma weaves a colourful tapestry. and calls this day a hilarious one for women in the kingdom of Kishkindam. Vali establishes a welfare society which is built on cooperation and happiness for its members. This peaceful atmosphere encourages other countries to trade with Kishkindam. The inhabitants of Muchily praise Vali’s fair dealings as he “fixed how much paddy, oil, cotton, clay pots, and fruits had to be given in exchange for a certain quantity of salt”(33). They maintain that “Kishkindam without Vali is a mere termite hill”, that can be knocked down with anyone’s heels (101). Nature has a healing effect. Angadan’s bitter desire for revenge for the murder of his father was healed by Tara, Ruma, Sita, and other women. Sama advised him to plant an irippa sapling and water it in order to “subdue the anger” on the tip of his nose to become “a peaceful haven”(25-26). Thus nature affects this tribal community in all sorts of occasions.

Joseph does not only highlight the integration between the human and the natural, but also the human and the spirit. In the final scene, after Raman was asleep after his victory over Ravan and after “Sita was burnt and turned into ashes in the pyre”(261), the spirit of Sita intervenes with a gentle but admonishing tone and warns Angadan from killing Raman: “killing a sleeping man is a sin” (261). Angadan’s rashness and anger is modified by the spirit of peace, whose contribution raises Angadan to heroic status by his tolerance and forgiveness. This illustrates the interconnectedness between all members in the cosmos.

The following oikos is of family which is represented through Vali and Tara, and Angadan. Vali offers an example of the ideal family with his wife Tara and son Angadan. He is an affectionate father and husband. Vali taught his son the chivalric code of honour:

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)

As his father, Angadan manifests a total unification with his surroundings, community and nature. Angadan’s upbringing by Tara, Ruma, Kushi, Sama embodies Alice Walker’s concept of ‘womanism’ which is explored through what is called larger, or joint motherhood. He helps his mother Tara by collecting the clay from the spot “surrounded by seven Sala trees”(3) that he knows from his father. He supports Ruma, his uncle’s wife, in her weaving by drawing “long and short red lines, red stars on top and red suns below” her weaved fabric(13). He expresses his love to Iya, through reference to nature by telling her: “Shall I pluck and give you a star?”(13). A woman is idealized as a romantic lover. Natural elements are tools to integrate human emotions.

Tara is represented as an ideal wife to Vali and an affectionate mother for Angadan. She is faithful to the memory of her husband even after his death. She is always surrounded by neighboring women after the

assassination of her husband Vali as to protect her against the erotic advances of Sugrivan. This raises Sugrivan's "fire of anger", not fire of passion", as each time he advances towards Tara, "she inflicts insults upon him"(129). Tara reprimands Sugriva every time he approaches her after the murder of Vali: "what Vali and I did together, you will never be able to do"(128). Tara tells Sugrivan: "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 can find any untouched space on my body, you are welcome to it"(57). Sugrivan feels frustrated every time "like a water snake hit in the middle of his body"(133). Further, Tara confronts Rama, the murderer of her husband: "Aren't you one who understands the pain of separation.... Use the same arrow that you aimed at my beloved's chest and kill me too. I can never be happy or feel secure without him"(52). The relationship between Vali and Tara is romanticized.

As a mother, Tara asks her father to defend her son, Angadan, from Sugrivan, so Lakshmanan comes like a "serpent spitting poison" attacking Sugrivan who shrank into himself and began "to crawl like a worm in front of her, begging for his life"(133). In her fear lest Sugrivan harms her son, Tara resorts to the rituals of the tribe. She believes that Angadan is safe when she takes him back to her womb as "mothers know that there is no place in the world as secure as the womb. No one can enter that space and subject their children to sorrow"(60). All mothers participate in the ritual and the life of Angadan is invoked into a clay pot and then it is immersed in the river Pushkaram.

The enactment of Kishkindam's ritual of recalling a son back to his mother's womb is performed to secure Angadan's safety. In her interview with the translator, written in the appendix to the novel, Sara Joseph maintains:

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. (Appendix to *The Vigil*)

“The mothers stay vigil on the banks of the river when Angadan goes on the Search Party”(258). All the members of community unite in order to resist Sugrivan's and Rama's evil. Ruma rejects Sugrivan's idea to seduce Vali, to coax Tara to yield to Sugrivan. Her rejection provokes Sugrivan's anger, which made him let out “a huge roar, slapping his thighs, Sugrivan stepped down and loped away. His exhibition of anger did not faze Ruma”(22). Ruma is very compassionate to the suffering of Tara. She shared Tara weeping and worrying on Angadan's destiny. Also, Ruma helps the maid servant who is sexually assaulted by Sugrivan. In her translator's Note, Sankaranarayanan comments on the women of the novel: “They love men, but they are neither dependent on them, nor lonely without them. They manage their lives with or without the men. It is actually their bond with other women that keeps them going even when the men are not present” (“Appendix”). Hence, Integrative oikos introduces the bonds between the natural, the human, the spirit and the cultural. It is the era of peace. It witnesses economic prosperity as a result of home industries, agriculture, and trade. Life is depicted as utopia during peace time.

8.2 Hierarchical oikos

As far as the hierarchal oikos is concerned, Rama is at the top of the hierarchy as he occupies the oikos of protagonist in this phase, maintaining a vertical relationship with other characters. He is the ruler of Ayodhya and conqueror of Vanaras. Rama is depicted as an arrogant autocratic imperialist who looks down upon Vali, the tribe chief of Vanaras:

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).

Vali replies while he is dying: “If you think I am an animal, was this killing for food or pleasure? Rama, would you ever eat my flesh? ...

so on this occasion.... would it be for fun, recreation, entertainment?” (118-119). Vali was struck by iron on his chest and shatters “like a mountain split by a landslide”(8). Vali was very brave but he was betrayed. Angadan asks why Rama kills Vali without having an honest fight with him. People in the kingdom of Danavas express that the sun sets upon Vali’s death.

As an imperialist, Rama imposes the culture of Ayodhya on Kishkindan. Rama claims that he kills Vali for having physical relationship with Ruma, his brother’s wife. However he is ignorant of the customs and traditions of this community. The clansmen in Kishkindam believe in the concept of sharing. According to their tribal culture, sharing one woman by two brothers is not a sin. Rama, the colonizer, wants to erase the culture of the colonized to impose his own. Nevertheless, he is unjust. Ruma wonders “Rama says that he killed Vali because he lusted after me. Who will then kill Sugrivan who lusted after Tara?”(28). Sugrivan is the agent of Rama. Sugrivan betrays his twin brother and arranges his murder with Rama and usurps the throne. Tara confronts Sugrivan “your elder brother whom you considered your enemy has been killed. You wanted to be the next ruler of the country and you have won”(52). The colonizer erases the native culture to impose his own.

As an agent of the colonizer, Sugrivan is at the top of the hierarchy in the Vanaras. Sugrivan issues orders that women and children in Kishkindam must eat less to be able to provide food for the soldiers of Rama:

Is this Rama’s justice!!! Is this Rama’s dharm!!! Is this his vision and promise for a prosperous commonwealth for the land of Kishkindam!!! Thus, Rama becomes an imperial, sadist king who implements his egoistic supremacy over the weaker, innocent nations who enjoy their daily simplicities of life. [He is] cheating, weapon crazy, sinful man. (52)

In order to guarantee an absolute regime, Rama and Sugrivan plan to put an end to Angadan’s life although Angadan has no political ambition. He is completely detached as he spends most of his time playing with his girlfriend Iya around “seven Sala trees”(244). Still, his

uncle Sugrivan wants to get rid of him so he commissions him to take the charge of the Search Party which exposes his life to danger. Ironically, The Search Party is described as “a sacred mission” (70). In fact, it is a double-edged weapon. It serves as a tool to assert Rama’s political pride; and to keep Angadan away from the rule of the tribe.

Within the context of the Search Party, Angadan is at the top of hierarchy. He is a sympathetic figure and takes upon himself the task of supporting the oppressed. He frees Aatiyan who is awaiting his newborn as he was forced to join the Search Party with many others from the village of Muchili. Angadan knows the intensity of Aatiyan’s love for his wife. Aatiyan is a very romantic character as he expresses his astonishment to why Rama needs the assistance of others “to search for the one who resides in his heart”(66), adding “the woman residing in my heart often shows me the path that will take me to her. I only have to shut my eyes and focus on her and the path becomes clearer and clearer. If I follow it, I will be able to reach her”(66-67). Angadan’s heroism lies in being “people oriented” (Dasan 7). Swayamprabha, who guards the magic forest of plenty, shows Angadan the way throughout the forest.

As an indication of hierarchy, Angadan carries Rama on his shoulders throughout the journey of the Search Party, although his internal hatred for Rama, his father’s murderer, but he is restricted by the hierarchical constraints of the tribe. In order to enhance his imperial regime, Rama assigns Maruti, Sugrivan’s trusted soldier, to distort the image of Kishkandan clan that its inhabitants are savages, who practice odd rituals based on superstitions, and their customs are outworn. Maruthi tells his tribe: “we do not have knowledge. Nor any rules. Nor do we have the justice and law to regulate life. We are superstitious people who believe in antiquated customs”(118). Maruthi advocates Rama by asserting that “Rama is one who has understood the essence of life and the universe. Following him is equal to pursuing the essence of life”(116). In order to justify Rama’s depiction of the Vanaras as animals, Maruti tells his clan: “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 Rama meant was that such people are not

different from animals”(119). Language or eloquence is manipulated as a tool of imposition of hegemony by consent.

In resistance of the colonizer’s debate, Angadan argues: ”we have got all the things you mention, but in our own way.... Look at it through your eyes, not Rama’s. Are we human beings or animals?”(119). To assert his right in having a distinguished culture, Angadan explains that they have their own way and their own physical appearance which might not be favourable to Rama. Unfortunately, many young people were influenced by Maruti’s argument and dismiss their customs and tradition, lifestyle and even their language in favour of Rama’s culture and language. Accordingly, “The Aryan invasion of the Dravidian race becomes the archetypal forerunner of the modern colonial political strategies that erode the third world civilizations”(448 Vijayan). It is a cultural imperialism. This invasion paved the way to the anarchic oikos.

8.3 Anarchic oikos

In *The Vigil*, the forest of Kishkindam is not just a surrounding for characters and events. Instead, it is a contributor to the events, a witness to the human invasion over nature. Venkiteswaran points out that this story is of “people who are living in harmony with nature and others who strive to conquer it by force”(1). According to a treaty with Ayodhya empire, all the resources of Kishkindam can be manipulated by Rama in his war. Therefore, all the cottage industries in Kishkindam were destroyed as they are nature-bound:

Bamboo groves are destroyed to provide raw materials for arms and ammunitions, mountains are crushed to make way for the army march, stones mined, trees pulled down, rivers parted and nature plundered to meet human greed and thirst for power. Forest serves the ends of the narrative designed to expose man’s ruthless and thoughtless cruelty towards nature. Kishkindam’s forests become a microcosmic ecosystem that sustains millions of human and non-human species threatened by an apocalyptic doom. (Vijayan 107)

Joseph proclaims her environmental concerns by contrasting the beautiful orchards, rivers, gardens, greenery, cotton fields, bamboo and banana groves before war and the consequent postwar devastation as

“The forest was rent with the loud laments of birds that had lost their nests, eggs and young ones. The sun was hidden. As each tree was dragged down, the number of birds fleeing increased”(235). Also, “Angadan saw below him a graveyard of trees and stones. The place where huge mountains had stood, their heads held high, was now level ground. The forests which had given shelter to the army had disappeared. Not a leaf, nor a blade of grass was to be seen”(237). Even “mighty mountains and tall trees are brought down to build the Nalasetu creating panic in other living creatures”(Thomas 263). The war resulted in the death of thousands of soldiers, women and children, animals, plants and even sea life are destroyed. Mountains fell, trees are cut, the sea is drudged. All the elements of Nature are affected by war.

Reflecting on the destruction left out by war, Angadan expresses his skepticism that “constructing a bridge over the ocean was indeed a great feat but it was an assault on nature, more brutal because of the purpose it served—to feed the needs of a war”(239). Angadan is a peaceful character who dismisses war as he is quite sure that the war “will sully the soil, defile wombs, lay the plough lands fallow. War will steal from me my own words. My hands will be tied behind my back and my feet bound by restraining chains. It will destroy and pulverize my consciousness. Slavery, debt, imprisonment, famine, fine...”(189). Rama destroyed many Southern regions claiming that he wants to redeem his wife, Sita. Sara Joseph illustrates how a traditional stable economy is destroyed by war and violence:

The people of Kishkindam for whom the cotton seed was precious than the throne of Ayodhya, diamonds of Lanka and horses of kekayam are forced to stop weaving and make weapons for the war on Lanka. The bamboo forests are decimated to make bows and arrows for the warriors. Kishkindam which was once a prosperous land of the bounty, suffers an unprecedented famine after it has to feed Raman’s army. (Thomas 263)

The Vanaras mould utensils, carry bamboo stems for making war equipment for Raman, as “the wind bore the smell of bamboo soaked in water instead of the all too familiar one of wet cloth. The weaving centers

were closed...The women who spun and wove were missing as well. The tinkling of anklets and laughter could not be heard”(190-191).

In the neighboring kingdom of Danavas, people express their worry of engaging in trade with Kishkindan under the rule of Raman as it turned to “a land of weaponry”(102). Thus, they express that previous friendly ties have to turn into precaution:

Each man from that place is a traveling armory. Dawn breaks, urging them to take up the bow and arrow. No one has measured the real power of their weapons. We should be careful when we indulge in games with them.... The kings enter, strike the ground with arrows and mark the boundary, then tell us to escape if we want to live. Whenever our people have opposed them, we have been defeated—felled like fruit from the trees. (102)

The previous friendship has turned into enmity as they confront atrocities from the Search Party. This change is the outcome of imperialism.

Other forms of change resulting from imperialism can be psychological as loss of innocence. Children are given toy pistols to play with. Further, weaving shelters are turned into stores of quivers. The plough fields become grounds for practicing archery:

with bow and arrow in hand, the youth of Kishkindam were immersed in single minded training. They aimed at the little bird hidden beneath the leaves, the rabbit crouching between the rocks, the fruit that dangled from low boughs, the snake that crawled into its hole, the fish that swam and played the huge trees which they had always imagined as enemies. (191)

They assault all the elements of nature in order to prepare for war.

Further the war displaces other communities. In the war, the Danavas are caught in between the warring parties, and driven to forests to secure their life as they believe: “Ayodhya is the land of weaponry. Each man from that place is a travelling armoury”(102). The Danava women are terrified and decide to flee to rescue their children: “who will save the children hanging onto our breasts?”(102). Sara Joseph presents

war as a nasty thing. In the chapter entitled, “War”, the author depicts war as going on “night and day, without a break of even a moment or a second, the war continued. For seven days”(250). The effect is monotony and discomfort as opposite to the state of relief and content experienced by people in the pre-war era. The author employs a hyperbolic register in stating “Even if the ocean confronts the ocean, or the sky battles with the sky, nothing can match the battle between Raghavan and Ravanan”(250). Joseph manipulates a set of technical devices to underestimate war.

Joseph employs irony in depicting the influence of war. “Thus was the war praised. The brave men of Kishkindam were killed. So were the brave among the rakshasas. Even before that, within seconds, ten thousand of the ones who were not brave, dropped dead like winged moths. All those who did not die fought the war till they died or won the war”(250). The simile – “dead like winged moth”- indicates the degrading effect of war on man. Joseph employs parallelism and contrast between the winners and the losers. “In the end, Raman killed Ravanan. Ravanan suffered the consequences of his karma. The results of Raman’s karma awaited him” (250). War spells ruin.

On the technical side of the narrative, Sara Joseph dedicates only twelve lines in her story to speak of war in order to “show the irrelevance of war today” and to “promote a culture of peace”(Dasan 1). Sara Joseph declares in the postscript of the novel that she intentionally used laconic prose to highlight the futility of war:

My stand is that wars are avoidable and therefore I do not wish to celebrate them through my poetry. Women and children would not want to describe war at length, nor do women take pleasure in the recital, which would otherwise make their children war-crazy. A world where my son does not become either the murderer or the murdered alone will give me peace. (Interview)

The Anarchic oikos does not influence only nature, tribe, but also families and individuals.

On the family level, Sara Joseph has proved the futility of war by illustrating that after causing all these devastation in order to rescue Sita, Rama confronts her before a large crowd of people:

I, a person of dharma had to suffer a bad name. My illustrious clan also acquired a bad reputation.... How can I believe that having subjugated you, a beautiful woman, Ravana didn't touch you? Even after all that had happened, did you think that I would feel attracted to you? (254)

Rama asks her to plunge into the pyre to prove her chastity. Sita dismisses Rama's claim and refuses to be reduced into a body, asserting her intellectual capacity: "you didn't know my mind as keenly as you knew my body"(257). She courageously criticizes him that the war he wages in order to boast his valour could be avoided as it destroyed the lives of thousands. Sita asserts her identity as the daughter of Kshatriya king who rejects to be ill-treated by Rama who confirms to Sita: "What I won through war is my own good name"(255). Peace of nature is disturbed. Instead of hearing the twittering of birds, water falls, or breeze, the Rakshasa women "cry and feel panic when Rama asks Lakshmanan to light a pyre for Sita" (258). This novel is antiwar and emphasizes the futility of war.

8.4 Comparison with oikos of a comparable text

The Vigil is a recycling of the *Ramayana* epic, written from an oikospoetic perspective. Tarlo maintains that "the recycling of texts is about preservation of the valued resources of previous writing as well as being about acknowledgment of a world beyond the self"(9). *Ramayana* is one of the longest ancient Indian epic poems, 24,000 verses, composed by Valmiki. The epic belongs to the Treta Yuga, second of four eons of Hindu chronology, and it teaches the principles of Hinduism. (Brockington 379). The epic is dominated only by the oikos of protagonist as it focuses on Rama. Rama is the seventh avatar of god Vishnu. He is the eldest son of Dasharatha, King of Ayodhya and Queen Kausalya. The epic starts by an invocation in praise of the poet and Rama, the hero of the epic. "Praise to Valmiki, bird of Charming song, / who mounts on Poesy's sublimest spray,/ And sweetly sings with accent clear and strong/ Rama, aye Rama, in his deathless lay"(1-4). The epic glorifies Rama as a warrior who fights against the forces of evil.

Rama unjustly is banished as a result of the wickedness of his stepmother, Kaikeyi. Further, he is forced him to relinquish his right to the throne. In his exile with his beloved spouse Sita, daughter of mother Earth, the couple lived in a cottage along the banks of river Godavari at Panchavati forest. “They came to Chitrakuta’s hill. And Rama there, with Lakshman’s aid, A pleasant little cottage made,/ and spent his days with Sita, dressed/ in coat of bark and deerskin vest”(140-143). The Integrative oikos is revealed between the human and the natural in the exile.

Anarchic oikos emerges when Sita is kidnapped and imprisoned on the island of Lanka by Ravana, a powerful demon king who received a boon from the creator-god Brahma. Thus, he could not be killed by gods, demons or spirits. Rama addresses Ravana: “King of the giant race, in me/ the friend and slave of Rama see./ Lord of the World, he gives me power/ to smite thee in thy fenced tower”(Canto XL, p. 457). Rama decides to wage war to restore order and peace.

War preparation reveals the Integrative oikos between the human, the sacred, and the natural. In his search and battle to rescue his wife, Rama was supported by a number of Vanaras from the kingdom of Kishkindha: Hanuman, Sugriva, Angada and Jambavan (bear) and Jatayu (ademi god). Vanaras is an apes- kingdom. The apes named Nala and Nila construct a floating bridge across the sea, and cross over it to Lanka. Mountains and trees are glad to sacrifice for a greater cause. A lengthy war ensues. “There on the coast in long array/ the vanars marshaled legions lay,/ where Nila’s care had ordered well/ the watch of guard and sentinel./ and Mainda moved from post to post/ with Dwivid to protect the host”(Canto V, 320). War is praised in the epic world because it enhances victory of good over evil.

The integration between the sacred and the human is manifested after the end of war, as Rama wants to put an end to rumors, so he demands that Sita undergoes a test of fire (Agni Pariksha) when Sita plunges into this sacrificial fire, Agni, Lord of fire raises her unharmed to the throne as an attest to her innocence (Rajarajan 1- 4). The sacred integrates with the human in a fight against evil. They live happily ever after and she gives birth to twin boys Luv and Kusha. Upon his return to

Ayodhya, he forms an ideal state. “When Rama’s glory by the saint is sung!/ The stream Ramayan leaves its sacred fount/ The whole wide World from sin and stain to free”(‘Invocation’ 8-10). The epic structure is built on the hierarchal oikos, with Rama as the central figure in the oikos of protagonist. The oikos of family is presented through Rama’s episode with his father, and his own wife. The oikoi of tribe and nature are not central. The central difference between the epic and the novel is that war in the epic version occurs under the Integrative oikos. War is glorified and is looked upon as honourable. It is a means to restore order, and to raise injustice. Therefore, the sacred, the human and the nonhuman participate in war.

Vijayan points out that “The epic Rama-Ravana war preparations provide the thematic framework for an anti-war, anti-imperialist and anti-maldevelopmental discourse that forms the crux” of Sara Joseph’s approach (106). Sara Joseph wants to end the traditional concept of war as glory and wants to glorify peace instead. Dasan elaborates that “in the age of chivalry, war and conquest was considered as a sign of valour, bravery and heroism; but today’s anthropological approaches consider it as an uncultured practice”(2). Therefore, the author rewrites the story, diminishing the role of Rama, raising Angadan to the hero status. Unlike the original epic, the inhabitants OF Kishkindam are forced to join Sugrive’s army and natural resources are destroyed as a consequent.

Vijayan notes that Sara Joseph, in *Oorukaval*, “sets upon herself the task of recreating mythology from the perspective of the defeated, the silenced and the victimized”(445). According to Thomas, Joseph:

gives voice to the agony and anger of all those who get crushed under the weight of hegemonic powers that dominate history and distort it to suit their perspective. Through her work she interrogates rationalization of violence which uproots lives and violates nature. Her novel is a strong commentary on the way fundamentalist forces further their age and through might in the name of progress, truth and justice. (266)

In Sara Joseph’s *The Vigil*, war is presented under the anarchic oikos, as it causes environmental annihilation, economic depression. War is futile because Sita is killed by Rama’s command to plunge into the fire.

It is a very intricate work. It is an adaptation, across genres and time, of the ancient epic from a contemporary scope. In her version, Joseph introduces a different thematic as well as formal frame. While the ancient myth glorifies war, the novel dismisses war for its devastation of man, nature, and economy. Thus the writer dismisses Rama as an imperialist in contrast to the pacifist Vali and Angadan who are raised to heroic status. In the original epic, Sita is stereotypically presented as virtuous passive innocent and victimized woman. She needs a legendary god to prove her innocence, then she lives happily ever after with her husband. In Sara Joseph's version, Sita is an intellectual woman who is able to debate with her husband, to resist any form of humiliation or injustice, and plunges into fire boldly, and dies heroically. Sara Joseph reduces the myth from its legendary status to a realistic treatment. Gods and demigods are replaced by flesh and blood characters. In the original epic, Kishkindam is a land of monkeys, but in Sara Joseph's novel, it's a tribe with distinct customs and rituals, though its people have tails. Nature is the central oikos in Sara Joseph's version, unlike the original epic in which nature is just a background. In the epic, the oikos of the protagonist is the most prominent as indicated from the title of the epic after its hero. On the other hand, Joseph believes in Merchant's argument:

Just as human partners, regardless of sex, race or class must give each other space, time and care, allowing each other to grow and develop individually within supportive non-dominating relationships, so humans must give nonhuman nature space, time and care, allowing it to reproduce, evolve, and respond to human actions. (*Radical Ecology* 180)

9. Findings and Conclusion

Sara Joseph builds her oikoi on two axes: horizontal and vertical, and these axes encompassed the Integrative, Hierarchal, and Anarchic oikoi. The oikospoetic approach is neither identical with ecofeminism nor eco-poetics as other scholars claim. Sara Joseph believes in the integration not opposition between man/culture and woman/nature. Further, her presentation of male characters is not negative. Vali and Angadan are virtuous, brave men who honour and idealize their lovers and unite with nature and find their pleasures in this company. Rama and Sugriva are the figures of disorder and tyranny who destroyed families, nature and

economy. Thus oppression is not directed towards women in particular. Sara Joseph's approach is not gender oriented. The author transcends the limitation of gender, ethnicity, religious doctrines and classism. In a related context, oikospoetic does not correspond to eco-poetics, because the latter is a form of neoromantic pastoral poetry which glorifies nature and denies the individual self. Oikospoetics assert the integration between the individual and environment, adding the dimensions of culture and spirit. It does not dismiss the human self. In writing back the ancient epic, Sara Joseph affirms her pacifist philosophy in which she dismisses war as being irrelevant to contemporary age. She offers a subaltern realistic oikospoetic scope.

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¹ Malayalam is the language spoken by the Malayali people in the Southern Indian state of Kerala by about 38 million native speakers, Southwest India, closely related to Tamil. It is one of the 22 formally recognized languages of India. (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary*)