

The ‘Other’ side of the Narrative: A Postcolonial Reading of Anand Neelakantan’s “Valmiki’s Women”

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Abstract:

It is said that Valmiki’s poetic skills are induced from the pathetic death of a male krouncha bird which is killed by a hunter. The agony of its female mate evokes a strong sense of Karuna Rasa in him and he utters a poem out of it. Then he meets Maharshi Narada and hears the story of Ram eventually, he writes ‘the Ramayana’. The desire to write about an exemplary man, Ram, who defeats the epitome of all the evil, Ravan is also a kind of hidden pathos which hits the cruel nature of the hunter. But, if he had given a chance to see the tragedy from an-‘other’ perspective, from the hunters perspective, he would have written the story differently. Especially, the disliked and defamed women characters of the narrative might have been portrayed definitely in a different way. Anand Neelakantan, one of the leading modern mythological fictionist, tries to recreate the untold tales of such women using the narrative gap left by Valmiki in the Ramayana through his “Valmiki’s Women”. This paper aims to study the concept of ‘other’ in the narrative from the perspectives of post-colonial theory and how the key concepts of the post-colonial theory like counter-discourse and orientalism can be observed in this work of Anand Neelakantan.

Key Words: Other, counter discourse, postcolonial, savage, civilized, orient-occident, colonizer-colonized, grand narrative, deconstruct, perspective.

Introduction:

Valmiki’s Ramayana, the most celebrated grand narrative of Indian sub-continent, has been narrated innumerable times across the cultures. Usually, from whose perspective we are viewing the things and course of action, would change the entire narrative. Yet, only a few retellings of the Ramayana have depicted the epic from the other perspective. The twenty-first century Indian mythological fictional writers have uniquely presented their works based on the grand narrative written by Valmiki. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s “The Palace of Illusions” has depicted the entire epic from Sita’s perspective; and Anand Neelakantan’s “Asura” represented the same epic from the Antagonist (Ravana)’s perspective. In the same way, his recent work “Valmiki’s Women” has projected some of the events same grand narrative from different female characters’ points of view. These works are examined the scholars by using different literary theories such as feminism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism.

Postcolonial literary studies taught us to see the world from the ‘other’ perspective. Colonizers used the concept of the ‘other’ to colonize the natives, to subjugate and control them. Most of the stereotypes and discourses spread by the colonizers are deconstructed by projecting the viewpoints and the cultures of the colonized people. This deconstruction in the postcolonial terminology is called as ‘counter discourse or counter narrative’. Likewise, the well celebrated postcolonial author Edward Said explored a concept named ‘Orientalism’, in which Said describes the West’s disdainful depiction of the East.

The purpose of this paper is to contemplate and discuss how these postcolonial concepts of other, counter discourse, and orientalism are merged in the work of Anand Neelakantan’s “Valmiki’s Women”. The book is woven with five chapters each has an individual story that revolves around some of the overshadowed and misunderstood women characters from the Ramayana. The chapters are named as: 1. Bhoomija, 2. Shanta, 3. Manthara, 4. Tataka, and 5. Meenakshi. Apart from the stories of the titled characters, the book mainly unfolds the fate of the other related characters, their sensibilities, and valour which are entwined with the titled characters. All the stories are written in the third person omniscient narrative, but tell only up to the experience and knowledge of the central characters. The rest of the events in the narration are heard from the other characters.

The first story ‘Bhoomija’ and fourth story ‘Tataka’ are presented differently by the author. The first story, Bhoomija should tell the story of Sita as per the reference of the title. But, it tells the story of Valmiki. Also the fourth story titled as Tataka and narrates more about Maricha, the elder son of Tataka. This paper tries to show how the different postcolonial concepts are intermingled in these two tales. A close observation of these stories unwraps the postcolonial ideology like counter discursive elements in the first story ‘Bhoomija’, and orientalist attitude in the fourth story, Tataka.

‘Bhoomija’ as a Counter Discourse:

What if Valmiki doesn’t want to write the story of Rama and his life journey– the Ramayana? Instead, if he intends to write the story of a woman who is the epitome of love in the entire universe, he would have named it as ‘Bhoomija’, just like the title of this first chapter of Anand Neelakantan’s “Valmiki’s Women”.

‘Bhoomija’ tells the story of Maharshi Valmiki, how he started realising the power of words and the circumstances which motivated him to write a story. This tale is based on the emotions of a mother krauncha bird, which lost its children to the forest, when the male krouncha bird is not around. Later, the male krouncha is killed by a nishada (hunter) while the birds are in the act of love. The female krauncha bird shatters by looking at the death of its mate. This angers the sage Valmiki and he curses the nishada for his savage act of killing a mating bird. But, the curse does not impact the nishada, Valmiki wonders why! Later, he analyses his words again and understands that his words sound more like a blessing rather than a curse. As the post-structuralist deconstruction points out the ambiguity which underlies in the language, words doesn’t always mean the same, the meaning changes according to the perception. Valmiki epiphanically realises the power of words and wants to write a story.

“He wanted to write a poem, he wanted to tell a story that would lead the heartless men like that hunter onto the righteous path.....there was a need to civilise such people, people who

did horrible things for the sake of material gains.... such men had to be reformed, and for that he needed to create an exemplary man, a hero. A perfect man, a man of great virtue. Such an ideal man may not exist, but the sage would create him. His hero would also need an antagonist. A man who was selfish, jealous, passionate, materialistic, who was led by passion and anger. A man who lurked inside every man. A man like the heartless hunter. And he would need to create a heroine too, who would choose the righteous man over the real man who lusted after her.” – “Valmiki’s Women” (Page-15)

This is one side of the narrative, which tells how Valmiki has conceived the story of the Ramayana. Here, Valmiki has seen the situation from the krauncha birds perspective, so the hunter appeared more as a boor, a barbarian, and a brute. Hence, the story he wants to write would aim to reform and ‘civilise such people’. Thus, the antagonist of his story who would be epitome of all the evil is more like this ‘heartless hunter’ who would be defeated by his hero, a man of great virtue and he just wants to create a heroine who chooses the righteous man over a lustful man. This description resembles as the colonial discourses which have always shown the native, colonized people as barbarians who are needed to be civilised by following the colonisers’ way of life and their ideology.

Here where exactly the postcolonial counter-discourse comes into picture. The counter-narratives give preference to the marginalized section of people and show a kind of resistance against traditional domination. These narrations create a space to represent the voices of those who are kept muted for so long. As we find this point of view in this first chapter.

Now, Anand Neelakantan flips the story by creating an incident where Valmiki meets the nishada again and happens to see the other side, the nishada’s side, of the events. He finds out that the same heartless man is also a helpless father who has to feed his hungry daughter. Then, he notices the self-sacrifice of the female krauncha bird by jumping into the fire pit. He is also moved by the nature of the nishada woman, who remains hungry and feeds her daughter, her husband, and even the dog. This situation creates a turmoil in the mind of Valmiki. Many questions arise out of it.

“The poem he wanted to write appeared meaningless. What was right and what was wrong? What was dharma? Who was he trying to reform? Who would he civilise? The man he had tried to curse, who had come back to offer him food, ignoring his own hunger? Or the nishada woman who had sacrificed her share for her family, not once but twice? What could he write against passion when he had seen the dedication of the male krauncha towards its mate? Or the female’s instinct to put her life at risk to save her young.”— “Valmiki’s Women” (Page-20)

Valmiki completely changes his opinion because what he believes as truth is just an illusion. In the story, Valmiki at first wants to create a heroine just to choose his exemplary hero over the villain. But, when he understands more about the motherliness, all he wants to write about an exemplary woman. Now, he is determined to capture all the love in the world and create a woman to whom no earthly mother can give birth except the mother earth herself. Hence, he names her as ‘Bhoomija’, the epitome of all the love in the universe. Though the epic he would write might call her with many other names like Janaki, Maithili, Vaidehi, Sunayani or Sita, she is Bhoomija for him, his favourite mind child.

The key feature of counter discourse, according to the popular definitions is:

“Post-colonial counter discursive strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions, and the dis/mantling of these assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of the imperially subjectified 'local'.” – from ‘Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse.’

In ‘Bhoomija’, this type of counter discourse is vivid. One can observe how Anand Neelakantan dismantles the popular version of Valmiki’s conception of the story of the Ramayana with the projection of the Nishada’s story. Valmiki considers the Nishada at the beginning as a savage and an ignorant man who worries only for physical needs. When the story tosses, he is in fact a responsible father determined to feed his daughter who is hungry. A sensible man who cares about the hunger of others too. He assumes that Valmiki might be starving hence he looks so thin. Thence, he offers his portion of meat to Valmiki though he is hungry. He is an optimist too, while his wife feels that god is unfair to them he assures her by saying ‘Mother always provides. Mother knows’. The only god he knows is mother nature.

No animal hunts in the forest without hunger. The ‘civilised’ men may hunt animals for sport. But not the ‘barbarians’ who feed on forest. This counter-discourse is also shown in the story when the Nishada spots another krauncha crane he takes his bow out to hit. But his wife stops him by saying ‘we have enough for now’.

The postcolonial ‘otherness’ can also be noticed in the story. The unfamiliar other is always fearful as the Nishada is afraid of saints not the ghosts or the dacoits because ‘a saint can curse him and send not only him, but also the next seven generations of his family to eternal hell’. The other is strange where he treats the cursing words of Valmiki as a ‘blabbering’ in his strange tongue.

Otherness and the Orientalist Counter Discursive Elements in ‘Tataka’:

What kind of stories fascinate people? The one with beautiful melodies or the ones which are drenched in blood? Mostly, people love to listen to the stories of blood and vengeance and like to hear about the wars— who win against whom. The story of Tataka from the Ramayana has all those ingredients to make it as a fascinating one. But all are told almost monotonously. However, some are exempted like this fourth story from “Valmiki’s Women”, ‘Tataka’. It tells the story of Tataka from her son, Maricha’s point of view. This story triggers the stereotypes concealed in the grand narrative about the rakshasas and the native people of Sothern forests. A close of reading and critical analysis of this chapter from the postcolonial lens would bring forth the concepts like otherness in orientalism and counter discourse.

The well-known versions of the Ramayana describes Tataka as a mighty Rakshasa woman who disturbs the Yagnas conducted by the rishis and taunts them to the core. Hence, killing her in the name of the protection of dharma is justified as she is mainly considered as a Rakshasa not as a woman. On the contrary to those popular versions, this version of the story is told from the perspective of a so called “rakshasa” and tries to deconstruct that the label ‘rakshasa’ itself is a discourse of the North intruders wrongly accusing the natives of the southern forests who try to interrupt their invasion and question their sovereignty.

Edward Said's Orientalism discusses the things like European colonial domination and how the colonized nations are being conceptualised, studied, talked about, and understood in the West. According to Edward Said, the West used the concept of Orientalism to capture the East. The East is viewed as an undefined and wild mass that needed to be regulated. The colonisers have justified their colonization and colonial encounter in this way and this is precisely called as "the white men's burden". Said uses the terms like orient and occident, the East and the West as binary opposites to refer to the colonized and the colonizers. How one sees the other is also analysed. To the West, the East is the exotic other, wild and violent; hence, it is needed to be tamed and 'civilized'.

This sort of orientalist framework can be observed in this chapter. Here, the West and occident can be considered as the North, and the East and orient can be taken as the Southern forest people of India. In this chapter, it can be noticed that the rishis who come from the north call the natives who try to stop their animal sacrifices and question them as 'rakshasas'.

'He was a rakshasa. He tried to stop the sacrifice. We curse him to death. No one tries to meddle with the divine sacrifices.' Maricha heard the voice and turned towards it. He was speaking fluently in the yaksha language. 'Stay away from us. We are taking the holy scriptures till the end of the earth, where the three seas meet. We are bringing enlightenment and civilisation to you savages..... All those who don't respect our scriptures are rakshasas. Yakshas, gandharvas, kinnaras, vanaras or asuras, they are all the same as far as we are concerned. Whoever stands in the way of our divine sacrifices deserves to die.'— "Valmiki's Women" (Page-186)

Further, in "Orientalism", Said discusses the attitude of the occident towards the orient. For the colonisers, anything not related to them is the other; hence, it is 'inferior'. As they are whites, black is ugly and evil. This kind of projection is also highlighted in this chapter. The north's intervention into the lives of the south changes many things even the very definitions of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, like:

"The songs had changed and the new bards, the ones who knew what everyone wanted to hear, sang confidently about who was evil and who was divine. It was simple — evil looked ugly and ugly was evil. And ugly meant black skin, curly hair and thick lips. Yes, that was how evil looked. The bards often added some pointless laughter that went 'Ha! Ha! Ha!' to make things more interesting. Throw in a helmet of horns and a spiked mace, and lo and behold! Evil was ready! It made the job of the avatars easy. Good looked beautiful. Good meant straight hair, light skin and light eyes. And thin cruel lips. The gods worked for their good. Their gods." — "Valmiki's Women" (Page-192)

This kind of generalised and judgemental attitude towards the natives make them feel inferior to their counterparts. Hence, they start imitating the way of life of the north; for instance, Tataka's father builds a palace like the devas or asuras because, "He was desperate to be like others. He believed no one would respect him if he lived like any other yaksha". ("Valmiki's Women" Page-180)

For the first generation of colonized people it is quite challenging to accept the sudden change in their culture, their way of life, their religion, believes and everything. Some people have accepted all

those out of fear, some have made a futile attempt to retaliate by fighting. All those are resulted in a great psychological trauma. Anyhow, the second generation has somewhat adjusted towards this “civilisation mission”. This aspect of colonisation has been presented in this chapter. Sunda, the father of Maricha, as the first generation to see the clear changes in their culture and destruction of the his beloved forest couldn’t digest it. He fought back, but was killed and labelled as rakshasa. Even Tataka, the mother of Maricha, after many years of the death of her husband, also does the same mistake; she tries to stop the animal sacrifice creates an interruption to the yagna hence, becomes a rakshasa. She is killed by Rama, who follows the instruction of his guru. But, Maricha as a second generation victim of the new “civilization”, who witnesses the death of his father and mother, changes his attitude.

“He has ceased thinking of anyone as his kin. He had stopped being a fool like his father, who thought he could dissolve the chains of darkness that lay curled up in the hearts of people with some songs and stories.” (“Valmiki’s Women” Page-189)

Maricha responds to the death of his mother in a different way than that of his father’s. He along with his family leaves his father’s body at a river bank so that it would become a food to many forest creatures. But, when it comes to the death of his mother he doesn’t want to leave her to the forest and wants to bury her. Because, “He had grown civilised enough to not worry about the hunger of the others. He didn’t want his mother to be eaten by the jungle”. (“Valmiki’s Women” Page-198)

If we closely observe this chapter from the view point of the postcolonial theory, the entire narration appears as a counter discourse. The psychological impact colonisation had been presented through the transition in the character of Maricha. The narrative voice projects the story in a non-linear way. The story opens with the death of Maricha, who risks his life to take revenge for his parents deaths. His journey as an innocent child of a forest to a crooked man who deceives Rama is shown in the narration. What he has become ultimately is the result of the injustices he has suffered in the name of the so called ‘civilization’. When Rama identifies him as a rakshasa in his last moments, he doesn’t even bother to correct his killer and tell him that he is not a rakshasa but a yaksha. Because, all his life he has carried that label along with his family.

The story counter narrates the origin of the word ‘rakshasa’. Maricha hears the word ‘rakshasa’ for the first time as a child through eavesdropping to a midnight conversation of his parents. After a few days, he is recognised as a rakshasa by a strange bearded man who is performing a blood sacrifice.

“...‘rakshasas are attacking us!’

Maricha looked around. He was scared. He had never seen a rakshasa before. There had been no rakshasas in the jungle until these men had come with their fire and their stories. There were yakshas, kinnaras, gandharvas, vana naras and asuras, but never any rakshasas. Maybe these people had brought them along from wherever they had come? One of the bearded men shouted something in their language and those who were fleeing stopped in their tracks and approached him.” (“Valmiki’s Women” Page-184)

Anand Neelakantan cleverly chooses a space between the word ‘vana nara’(a forest man) whenever it is uttered by the natives of the forest. But the word becomes ‘vanara’ (a monkey) if it is

mentioned by the people who come from the north. Everything and everyone not related to the forest is the exotic other to them. So, whatever be their original names, it is unimportant to them.

Likewise, when the perspective flips the culture and traditions of the north is also exotic to the natives. Hence, they see each other as the savages. As the sages have the responsibility to perform and protect the yagna, the people of the forest do also have their respective responsibilities to perform like, a yaksha's duty is to protect the jungles and its children and keep the rhythm of nature intact. So, the sages who are killing the animals for the sake of their yagna are seen as savages by the yakshas. Contrarily, yakshas who are stopping their yagnas are rakshasas for the sages.

The counter discursive technique of this story tries to pose an important question to the reader like who are savages? The people who are living in an eco-friendly way without disturbing the peace in the forest or the people who clear the forest to build the huts and kill the life to please their gods? The sages who are supposed to behave in a kind manner behave violently and become savages in the eyes of the native people. For Sunda, Maricha's father, the ferocious animals appear more harmless than of those 'civilised' men.

'Tigers hunt to satisfy their hunger, not to please some god in the skies. Hunger I can understand, not greed or stupidity. The slaughtered animals go to their bloody heaven, these savages say. Why don't they slaughter their fathers then, and send to heaven too?' ("Valmiki's Women" Page-182)

In this story, the character of Sunda is presented in a more sensible and civilised way than the rishis who ironically address him 'rakshasa'. He is a gandharva, who sings melodies spreads the morality in the forest. His love towards the forest is shown in his every deed and word. In his opinion the people who kill the life and spirit of the jungle are savages.

'These savages are conducting strange rituals to please their gods. Unlike us, who believe gods reside everywhere – in the leaves, in the grass, in the grains of sand and even in the worms that wriggle under the soil – they think their gods live in heaven. Their gods thirst for the blood of innocent creatures. Can you believe that? They have names for each of their bizarre ritual sacrifices, like the one where they slaughter a hundred and eight animals and birds.'—"Valmiki's Women" (Page-178)

He lives in a very eco-friendly way like eating berries and mangoes, and watching every step while walking so that no little creature would get hurt. Even his dead body is left to the creature in the forest and to get mingled with the trees and soil he loves most.

The key aspects of otherness are strangeness and fearfulness. They can also be observed in this chapter. For the native of the southern forests, the attire and action everything related to the men from the North is strange and wild. When Maricha happens to them for the first time he pants in fear. The deerskin clothes and the rudraksha beads they wear, their matted hair, long beards, and the ash tribes on their bodies everything appear strange. He feels that they are crazy because no man in right mind would sit under the blazing sun and pour things into a fire pit. Thus, the dichotomy of 'other' and 'us' has manifested well in this story.

Conclusion:

Analysing Valmiki's Ramayana by applying the modern theories may make injustice to the story as it has been written ages back for a different society. But, Anand Neelakantan has written his "Valmiki's Women" for the twenty-first century readers. The modern readers must understand that there is no existence of the ultimate truth in the world. The perspectives change everything. In the opinion of Anand Neelakantan history is full of lies. In his words, "The official history is the lie agreed on, as dictated by the winner. A counter-history, often concocted by the vanquished, also exists. While the prominent history would demonise the vanquished, the counter-history would talk about the unjust means the victor used that caused their defeat. Both sides harbour a delusion of grandeur. Both are lies. The truth would be somewhere in between". Thus, this paper proves that "Valmiki's Women" by Anand Neelakantan is a counter-narrative attempt to show the other side of the grand narrative, the vanquished side of the story. The otherness can be best understood with the help of postcolonial literary theory; hence, it is applied in this paper.

The supernatural and magic elements of the epic are also counter narrated and reconstructed by applying a reason and new logic. For example, the ten heads of Ravana is explained as just the reflection of the nine diamonds around his neck. Maricha's magical powers to disguise himself as a golden deer is also reconstructed. The reason provided in this book is that Maricha can cry like a doe in heat which would attract the deer in search of its mate.

The rest of the chapters of this book are also counter narrated by bringing out the untold stories of three women characters from the Ramayana. The second chapter, 'Santa' is a story of the first born child of Dasharatha and the elder sister to the four Princes. Her unnoticed sacrifices and love towards her father are told in the second chapter. The third chapter, 'Manthara' and the fifth chapter, 'Meenakshi' tell the story from the most disliked and hated characters of the epic. The subaltern perspectives of these two chapters try to evoke some empathy in the readers for these two characters. Therefore, the entire book of Anand Neelakantan is an attempt to see the popular events of the epic with a fresh insight.

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