

# Demystifying Anthropocentrism: Othering and Identity in *The Vigil* by Sarah Joseph

---

**Gayathri Varma U**

*Research Scholar, Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) (Kerala)*  
(rgv13.94@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

*The paper is an attempt to read the novel Oorukaaval (2008) by the Malayalam writer Sarah Joseph, translated as The Vigil (2014), a reworking of select episodes of the Ramayana through the perspective of Angadan, Bali's son, in the light of present-day ecological, animal-centric awareness. By revisiting and re-reading a well-known episode from the age-old epic, the writer gives voice to the previously muted and marginalized sects and redefines their identity. The paper takes the concepts of 'creaturely hybrid' and 'othering' as relevant tools in reading the representation of Angadan and his Vanara clan. It looks at how Angadan and his clan deflate and challenge the notion of anthropocentrism/speciesism and establish their identity beyond the binary human-animal divide.*

*Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Othering, Creaturely, Hybrid, Consciousness, Identity*

Ecological consciousness, awareness regarding Animal rights and protection, and a posthumanist ideological strain dominate the twentieth and twenty-first century academic, socio-cultural, political arenas across the world. The interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies marked the prominence of literary and cultural representations of the non-human animal world, and the absence/presence of non-human animals in them began to attain high critical attention. Representations of such invisible, unheard, and marginalized sects by

revisiting the established and concretized ideologies, perspectives, and thought-systems in the light of newly gained consciousness is, in fact, a revolutionary act.

*Oorukaaval* (2008) by Sara Joseph, translated as *The Vigil* (2014) by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, is a modern-day adaptation of the epic *Ramayana*, where the author re-reads the episodes of the Bali-Raman encounter, Sugrivan's ascension, and the quest for Sita, from the perspective of Angadan, Bali's son, and his community. The text could be seen as the product of a vivid ecological, animal-centric, posthumanist consciousness the writer possesses. A close analysis of the text would help us understand how it obliterates the concretized myths of anthropocentrism and speciesism through the representation of a "creaturely hybrid" to establish an altered consciousness. Angadan, Bali, and their clan constantly engage in a process of "othering", which contributes to the assertion of their identity in a certain way, that becomes the stamping of a solid counter-consciousness to the established anthropocentrism. Before analysing the text, the methodological tools and terminologies employed are to be explicated.

Anthropocentrism, according to Adam Weitzenfield and Melanie Joy, is "a belief system, an ideology of human supremacy that advocates privileging humans" (4) and is also "an ideology" that "functions to maintain the centrality and priority of human existence, through marginalizing and subordinating nonhuman

perspectives, interests, and beings” (4). The foregrounding of the man Raman and the legitimization of his actions and thoughts is central to the *Ramayana*, and in the process, minor and marginalized voices fail to enter the limelight. In the epic, Angadan and the entire Vanara clan, including Tara (Bali’s wife) and Ruma (Sugriva’s wife), are muted and only appear before us as the obedient servants of the dominant Raman-led human clan and its ideology. “A conception of the human as opposed to the nonhuman, and thus the very definition of the *animal*, is at or near the center of conceptions of power”, says Oerlemans (5). The encounter between Bali and Raman is justified on the ground that instituting ‘dharma’ (the product of anthropocentric power) is the noblest and the most significant motive, and rarely is the whole episode of the Bali-Raman encounter seen from the vantage point of the wounded, the victim Bali or Angadan. In the novel, the writer aims to sabotage man-power over the other by questioning Raman’s murder of Bali through the eyes of Angadan, through the light of renewed animal-centric consciousness, and makes the unsung hero’s voice echo through varying shades of revenge, indignation, and fiery sense of right and justice.

The concept of “creaturely” as discussed by Pieter Vermeulen and Virginia Richter is central to this paper as it “defies the rigid classifying operations and bounded identities integral to the knowledge projects of Western modernity” such as the human-animal binary (Ohrem 6). As Dominik Ohrem further puts it:

...creaturely does not necessarily refer to an actual creature or some kind of fixed ontological status (of “creatureliness”), it can also, and perhaps more productively, be understood in terms of a plane of relational, embodied becoming-in-the-world that interweaves human and nonhuman lives across the bewildering differentiability of specific modes of existence or as a “zone of exchange between man and animal in which something

of one passes into the other,” as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it in *What Is Philosophy?*(6)

In such a representation - being creaturely and possessing fluid, floating subjectivities and identities – it is important to focus on the notion of ‘hybridity’ also. The amalgamation of two or more entities, the ‘doubleness’ with distinctive heterogenous elements, oppose the exclusive, exceptionalist, and essentialist claims of the dominant humanist discourses. Animating and narrativizing the vanara clan in the above sense – a “creaturely hybrid” – is a postanthropocentric vision the writer carries ahead and it can be validated by analyzing the nuances of their characterization in the text. The paper would analyse various instances of anthropocentrism and the corresponding reactions to them through the conceptual lenses of othering and creaturely hybrid.

Vali (the writer’s stylization of the name Bali) and his subjects are the successors of the Vanara clan – monkeys are “the guardians” as Tara states (7) – and they form a distinct community with their customs and traditions. The writer portrays them as a community of “spinners and weavers”(13) which is a clear case of anthropomorphism, but a closer look at the text would help one perceive the idea that the community thrives somewhere between the dichotomy of ‘humans vs animals’ and deflates the same binary by finding their identity and subjectivity in a state of ‘in-betweenness’. Shifting between the first-person and the third-person omniscient narration, the text offers us a journey through the mind of Angadan, for whom Raman and Sugrivan are absolute traitors, his father’s assassins, who went against the rules of Kishindam. One can discern his profound reverence for Bali, his love for Tara and Ruma, and the burning hatred and revenge he breeds inside towards Raman for the latter’s ‘manly’, dominant, and deceptive move against his father, denigration of his clan, and also, most importantly, the obliteration of his identity.

The question of identity and existence, which the writer problematizes for the Vanara clan and specifically for Angadan, is presented through the dialogue between Maruthi, Lord Hanuman, who justifies Raman's words and action and is compliant with his sense of justice and dharma, and Angadan, who staunchly disagrees to it. The encounter begins with Maruthi's words as follows:

We worship the monkey. We believe that the monkey is the origin of our species. But we are not monkeys, are we? Aren't you sure? In what way are we likemonkeys? Do the monkeys have a language? Do they build cities? Do they plough fields? Do they construct roads and decorate their houses? We sing, paint pictures.... We have a king who rules the country, and the ministers. (41)

Here, Maruthi establishes the identity of the Vanara community as 'humans' by completely erasing all animalistic traits. Angadan reacts by castigating Maruthi's language as "the language of Raman" (39) and not of Kishkindam, and accuses Raman as the one who "challenged all the traditions and customs of the clan..." (39). The fundamental belief in separatism that Angadan holds is conspicuous here. A powerful defiance of Maruthi's words and an affirmative acknowledgment of his and his clan's distinctive identity severed from the tag of 'humans' could be discerned from the responses of Angadan and his fellow beings that take on from the above reaction. It is here that 'othering' gains significance.

Othering is a term often used by the postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, structuralist discourses and in various disciplines like sociology and anthropology, and is significant when it comes to identity politics. Othering is the process of assigning another entity a status different from oneself, treating it as alien, opposing, and dissimilar to oneself, which creates two distinctive categories as 'them' and 'us'. In an article titled "Hegel on Others and the Self", Frances Berenson discusses

Hegel's idea of 'self-consciousness' and 'the other', where he states that the Other Self becomes a mirror of the Self Conscious Self (77). As Berenson puts it, "the subject can only see itself when what it sees is another self-consciousness" (77). Angadan constructs and asserts his identity through othering, that is, by marking himself and the Vanara clan as different and distinct from the exclusive categories of 'human' and 'animal'. It is the existence of the 'human' sect as that of Raman and the 'animal' sect as that of monkeys of the natural world that gives Angadan a vivid idea about his existence and identity. Angadan's major demarcation is from that of humans, but one can see that he is not willing to be tagged under the sect of 'animal' as well, which leads to the construction of their identity as creaturely hybrid.

One can note that throughout the text, Angadan demarcates between 'us' and 'them' and the disparity becomes a strong cause for the increasing enmity he feels for the 'menfolk'. The third-person voice through Angadan's mind speaks thus: "The people who owned iron strode as if they owned the world. They conquered regions and clans. They made wells, ponds and fields of their own. Women, fruits and earth were also treated as their possessions" (10). Being forest-dwellers and closer to the earth and nature, this sense of sole possession and ownership of land is in opposition to the Vanara clan's ideology of egalitarianism. Vali's advice on mastering battling skills constantly reminds Angadan of their own practice of fighting solely with one's physical strength. "The arrow can be a source of knowledge or a tool for trickery" (10), states Vali in Angadan's remembrances. Thus, the sense of justice that rules the Vanara clan is marked entirely different from that which is followed in the human-world of Raman. It is because of this that his father's death by arrow, the iron, through deception, leads Angadan to a life-long enmity towards Raman. For Angadan, Raman is just a 'non-person', while his father is the real warrior. The anthropocentric othering is also showcased in the text by the writer so as to vindicate the stance of the

Vanara clan. Raman's words of detestation to the dying Vali flow as, "You, Monkey! You coveted your brother's wife and made her your own. You have to die. That is the only punishment for you" (19). The counter-argument emerges from Ruma who asserts that their tribal tradition of sharing wives by brothers is quite acceptable and right, and she vehemently criticizes Raman's autocratic, narrow-minded, and authoritarian stance (20). In a similar way, to Raman's humiliating words to Vali, "Whether you oppose me in battle or not, the fact that you are an animal gives me the right to kill you" (99), the writer poses a counter-consciousness of separatism and non-exclusiveness through Vali's reply, where he states, "I am one with five nails, but I am not included among the five-nailed animals you non-vegetarians consider fit for eating. My fine skin is not used by anyone to wear as a garment. You will never touch with your hands my hair or bones" (100). One can note that othering characterises Vali's words. On the other hand, they also point at the writer's representation of the clan as a creaturely hybrid as stated in the first part of the paper. This is evidently a deflation of the anthropocentric notion and also an affirmation of the clan's hybrid identity.

The manifestation of the Vanara clan as a creaturely hybrid one is showcased through Angadan's crisis, his inability to locate himself either among 'humans' or among 'non-human animals'. When he takes his conviction from his father and defies Maruthi's dominant ideology of speciesism/anthropocentrism by asking, "Look at it through your eyes, not Raman's. Are we human beings or animals?" (101), this crisis is evident. Though Maruthi fails to answer his question, Jambavan justifies Raman's inferiorization of the members of the Vanara clan based on their physical attributes. Angadan's response to Jambavan's stance of anthropocentrism marks the assertion of a creaturely hybrid identity: "I am very proud of my build. I don't consider the absence of an aquiline nose a flaw.... Just because we are stocky, or our teeth protrude, does anyone have the right to kill us?... Maruthi Ammavan,

since when have the people of your clan become animals?... We are not people who kill animals for food. We do not kill for pleasure either (100-101)." Angadan's statement is revolutionary for its questioning of not just anthropocentrism, but also of the binary construction of humans and animals, and throws light on the wider spectrum that carries shades of shifting, fluid, dynamic identities.

Angadan's revenge for Raman springs from his sense of justice that he imbibed from his father and his clan through constant othering. It is Nature and its laws that the Vanara clan follow and abide by; it is physical strength and not the strength of a weapon like iron that they rely on; it is egalitarianism and not the other autocratic, authoritarian ideology that they uphold. At the same time, he consciously demarcates himself from the monkeys of the natural world, as shown above. This hybrid identity or in-betweenness he forges for himself is centered around Mother Nature, pure and pristine. The depiction of Angadan as a child of Nature and its elements underscores the idea that he finds bliss "not in occupying thrones but in the bamboo groves, on the banks of the river and clear water springs" (231). This makes him compassionate towards Sita, the daughter of Mother Earth and it is only for her that he withdraws from killing Raman, as the final episode of the novel shows.

Sara Joseph, through imagining and giving voice to the Vanara clan, in conceiving them as 'creaturely hybrid', here performs a postanthropocentric, anti-human exceptionalist stance and cultivates a strong sensitivity towards the sidelined nonhuman community. Such "discursive-imaginary practices of storying creaturely life" (Ohrem 9) are extremely important to generate a more liberal view of the world by rejecting compartmentalized, narrowed, and constricting human-centric ideologies and constructions. Rewritings and re-readings of myths, epics, and other established thought-systems of this kind always offer us novel viewpoints and perspectives that become counter-hegemonical,

anti-authoritarian, and minority-centered in their stance. *The Vigil* (2014) is utterly revolutionary in this way through its invaluable contribution to the contemporary debates on animal rights, anthropocentrism, speciesism, and animal studies.

**Works Cited :**

Berenson, Frances. "Hegel on Others and the Self." *Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1982, pp. 77-90. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4619540>.  
Joseph, Sara. *The Vigil*. Translated by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, Harper Perennial, 2014.  
Oerlemans, Onno. *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the*

*Boundaries with the Human*. Columbia UP, 2018.

Ohrem, Dominik. "Animating Creaturely Life." *Beyond the Human-Animal Divide: Creaturely Lives in Literature and Culture*, edited by Dominik Ohrem and Roman Bartosch, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 3-20.

Weitzenfield, Adam, and Melanie Joy. "An Overview of Anthropocentrism, Humanism, and Speciesism in Critical Animal Theory". *Counterpoints*, vol. 448, 2014, pp. 3-27. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42982375>.

