Chapter 3
Recasting the Marginalised: Reading Sarah Joseph’s Ramayana Stories in the
Context of the Dravidian Movement

The chapter intends to look at how Sarah Joseph attempts to retell the *Ramayana* in some of her short stories by subverting the dominant versions of the text to offer both feminist and subaltern critiques of it. The chapter also looks at how Sarah Joseph has taken a line similar to Periyar E.V. Ramasamy’s readings of the *Ramayana* and the ideology that constitutes the Dravidian movement in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu. These stories were written during the second phase of Sarah Joseph’s writing career. I organise these stories as a different chapter in order to discuss their thematic relevance as it adds another dimension to her feminist concerns.

Retelling the *Ramayana* has been part of the literary and performative traditions in India and South Asia, although many of those are still left unexplored. However, there have been works that have examined and analyzed some of these diverse narrative traditions in opposition to the conventional view that holds the *Valmiki Ramayana* as the standard and authentic text. These retelling traditions throw light on multiple versions and possible interpretations. A close examination of these retelling traditions, which are part of certain ideological, cultural and political positions, reveals that they also persuade the reader/listener to think along different ideological lines. These retelling traditions can be considered as expressions that try to critique the dominant version, even while thriving under/within the dominant version. Different versions of the *Ramayana* therefore signify the varied attempts on the part of different cultural identities to deconstruct a monolithic
construction. In this context, retelling a particular text becomes part of a movement, foregrounding a certain ideological/political position. The chapter attempts to look at how Sarah Joseph has made use of the mode of deconstruction of the text, available in Periyar’s work, to counter a monolithic text. It pauses to identify how her methods of deconstruction, which extend from Periyar, have created many sub-texts or subversions. The chapter focuses on seven short stories and a recently written novel written by Sarah Joseph. The short stories—“Karutha Thulakal” (“Black Holes”), “Taikulam” (“Mother Clan”), “Kathayilillathathu” (“What is Not in the Story”), and “Asoka” focus on Manthara, Soorpanakha, Sambooka and Sita respectively, exploring different aspects of identity and treating the Ramayana as a text of political domination while also reversing the conventional understanding of villain and hero as suggested by Periyar. “Oru Prayopaveshathinte Katha” (“The Story of a Self-Willed Spiritual Death”) portrays a sad and dejected Angadan, son of Vali, after Rama kills Vali. “Bhoomirakshasam” (“Earthly Demon”) gives a picture of the earlier encroachment on the part of the Aryans on Dravidian land and its women, by narrating the story of Araja and Dandhakaranya. However, “Kantharatharakam” (“The Forest Star”) reveals some thoughts of Rama and Lakshmana. The story “Jathigupthanum Janakigupthanum” (“Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan”) could be considered a political allegory set in the present time, which uses instances and quotations from the Valmiki Ramayana. The novel Ooru Kaval (Guarding the Homeland) gives the version of Angada and the Vanara clan on the Rama/Ravana war.
The writings of Sarah Joseph, a feminist activist and a professor of Malayalam, I would like to reiterate, consistently comprise current debates on identity politics. Therefore, the writer’s subjective position becomes very important. Moreover, if we examine the retelling traditions, the social location from where the narrating ensues, is one of the main deciding factors in defining the text. Sarah Joseph’s subjective position in relation to her attempts in retelling the Ramayana is multi-layered. Apart from being influenced by Periyar’s readings of the Ramayana and the ideology that spread as part of the Dravidian movement which manifest her identity as a South Indian, her position in retelling also stems from her ideological position as a feminist. Therefore, it becomes possible to categorize her attempts as constitutive of feminist myth-making. Nabaneeta Deb Sen expounds on the relation between women and epic:

Epic poets the world over are men singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. In a study I did a couple of years ago, I noticed that out of the thirty-eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there—other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other.¹

Nabaneeta Deb Sen further explains her experiences of reading versions of the Ramayana narrated by women. She describes different versions of the Ramayana written by women.

and approaches they assume. She identifies four different approaches, in a sample of the existing versions of the *Ramayana* by women.

1) You could tell it like it is, by borrowing the traditional eyes of the male epic poet, as Molla does in her 16th century Telugu *Ramayana*. Or 2) you could tell it like it is, looking at it with your own women's eyes, as Chandrabati does in her 16th century Bengali *Ramayana*. Or 3) you could tell it like it is by borrowing an ideological viewpoint as Ranganayakamma does in *Ramayana Vishabriksham*, rewriting the Rama tale from the Marxist point of view. Or 4) you could tell your own story through the story of Sita, as the village women of India have been doing for hundreds of years.\(^2\)

Molla, a woman who belonged to the shudra community, rendered a perfectly classical version of *Ramayana* and challenged the upper caste court poets. More than the theme, it is the identity of the writer as a woman and a shudra that offended the dominant sections of society. Chandrabati’s *Ramayana* took sides with Sita and criticized Rama from a woman’s point of view. Ranganayakamma rewrote the *Ramayana* from the point of view of Marxism, an ideology she believed in. But society was not kind to these women writers. The Brahmins opposed the reading of Molla's work in the royal court, whereas critics rejected Chandrabati's work as weak and incomplete. Ranganayakamma was ostracized socially for attacking the sacred text. We see that Sarah Joseph’s versions of the *Ramayana* follow all the approaches mentioned by Nabaneeta Deb Sen except the first one.

\(^2\) Nabaneeta Dev Sen, “Lady sings the Blues: When Women retell the Ramayana.”
Another aspect is her identity as a Christian. How would one locate Ramayana stories written by a non-Hindu writer, especially if they contain a deeply critical perspective? Barbara Metcalf suggests how in the second half of the nineteenth century, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians criticized the religious beliefs of their opponents through hyper-literal readings of mythical texts. Paula Richman considers Periyar’s readings of the Ramayana and his attack on orthodox Hinduism to be part of the same technique (191). Jain Ramayana and Buddha Ramayana also belong to this category, which criticize the Hindu religion. Sarah Joseph’s retellings are not exactly the result of a hyper-literal reading of the Ramayana. However, her identity as a Christian would have helped her to subject the text to a more radical analysis. Moreover, it is likely that her familiarity with Malayalam Literature, given that she was a teacher, made available to her opportunities to close-read the Ramayana. She offers:

While studying and teaching the Ramayana, I used to imagine so many Ramayana stories… With our own justice, each one will examine the justice system in the Ramayana. That is how many Ramayanas take birth. Different Ramayana stories, that are told differently based on differences in race, region, gender, class, etc., ask the question ‘who is the righteous man?’ When Seeta, Soorpanakha, Sambooka and many other characters ask the question ‘is Rama the righteous person?’ different Ramayana stories take birth.4

I place Sarah Joseph’s retellings within the contexts of existing as well as currently developing retelling traditions in Southeast Asia, India, South India and Kerala. Different versions of the *Ramayana* are available in Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Lavosian, Malaysian, Thai and Tibetan languages. Many versions of the *Ramayana* are available in most of the Indian languages and in languages like Tulu, which do not have a script, as well as in in tribal languages like Bheeli and Santali. In Sanskrit, there are about 25 versions of the *Ramayana*.

There are a number of versions of the *Ramayana* in Malayalam as well. Cheeraman’s *Ramacharitam*, Niranam Ramapanikkar’s *Kannassaramayanam*, Ayyappilla Asan’s *Ramakathappattu*, Punam Namboothiri’s *Ramayana Chambu*, Ezhuthacchan’s *Adhyatma ramayanam*, *Keralavarmaramayanam*, Azhakathu Padmanabha Kurup’s *Ramachandravilasam*, Kottarakkarathampuran’s *Attakkatha*, *Ramanattam*, Oduvil Shankarankutti Menon’s *Ramayanamanjari*, Kadanattu Krishnavariyar’s *Bhasharamayanachambu*, Mannantala Neelakanthan Mosse’s *Ramayanam Attakkatha*, Kumaran Asan’s *Balaramayanam*, Kunchan Nambiar’s *Ramayana*-based *thullal*\(^5\) *kritis*, translations of *Tulsi Ramayana*, *Bhasa Ramayana*, *Kamparamayana* etc. Different genres inspired by the *Ramayana* include lullaby, vanchippattu (song sung during boat race), tiruvatirappattu (sung during a particular dance performance), puppet shows etc.

There are several plays that concern themselves with different instances in the *Ramayana*: *Seetha Swayamvaram* (Kodungallur Kunjikuttan), *Mandhodari* (Sardar K.M. Panikkar), *Adbhuta Ramayanam* (M. Neelakanthan Moos), *Seetaharanam* (N. Sankaran

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\(^5\) Thullal is a traditional dance from South of Kerala, in which a story is enacted through dance and music.
Nair), *Bhasharamayanam* (A. Govindapillachattambi), *Ravanaputran* (Pallathu Raman), *Lankam Ravanapalitam* (Madasserry Madhavavariyar), *Ramarajabhishekam* (E.V. Krishnapillai), *Pushpavrishti* (Tikkotiyan), *Kanchanasita, Lankalakshmi* and *Saketham* (C.N. Sreekantan Nair). There are also a number of poems written by modern poets which interpret incidents from the Ramayana variously. Apart from Kumaran Asan’s “Chintavishtayaya Sita,” there are poems like P. Kunhiraman Nair’s “Sita Devi,” Sugathakumari’s “Innathe Sandhya,” Punalur Balan’s “Samarpanam,” Pala Narayanan Nair’s “Tamasaaakananangalil,” Vishnunarayanan Namboothiri’s “Lakshmanan,” Balamaniamma’s “Vibheeshanan,” Vayalar’s “Ravanaputri,” Ayyappapanikkar’s “Sabari,” K. Satchidanandan’s “Ahalya” and “Janaki Poru” etc. The spirit of challenging the *Ramayana* characterize many of these texts, but can be specifically found in “Chintavishtayaya Sita,” a poem by Kumaran Asan, a twentieth-century poet. In “Chintavishtayaya Sita,” we see Sita, living in Valmiki’s ashram after being abandoned by Rama, questioning Rama’s actions as an individual as well as a ruler. She takes the position of his wife as well as his subject (praja) and judges his actions. C.N. Sreekantan Nair’s play *Kanchana Sita* is another twentieth-century literary work that interrogates Rama’s deeds. In *Kanchana Sita*, not only Sita, but Urmila, Kausalaya, Bharatan, Hanuman and Valmiki challenge Rama and his actions. They stress on the point that a justice system that does not take human emotions into consideration is after

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all no justice. Hanuman chants “Jai Sitaram” and says: “Are Sita and the kingdom opposing forces? A kingdom without Sita! Like a man without a soul…”⁹ Another venture along similar lines is filmmaker G. Aravindan’s movie, Kanchana Sita. The film was not made for commercial audiences and therefore was included in the category of parallel cinema. Aravindan’s film does not present Sita in human form. She is represented as Nature, its movements, changes and so on. She speaks in the film through the changes of Nature and its silences. The film maker also uses tribal men to portray the role of Rama, Lakshmana and Bharata, to denote the indigenous nature of the Ramayana story.

Reportedly there are versions of the Ramayana existing among adivasis in Wayanad, Kerala. They are, however, not published. A different version of the Ramayana is prevalent among the Muslims in Kerala, known as the Mappila Ramayanam. Mappila Ramayanam is said to have been composed in the twentieth century in north Malabar by an anonymous Muslim. T.H. Kunhiraman Nambiar, an exponent of Vadakkan pattu, recollects some of these from his boyhood days, sung by a supposedly insane person Hussankutty.¹⁰ In the Mappila Ramayanam, Rama is a Sultan and he is named Lama. The available text includes episodes such as “Hanumante Poonkavana Pravesam” (“Hanuman’s Entry into the Garden”), “Ravanante Pranayabhyarthana” (“The Proposal of Ravana”), “Soorpanakhayude Chamanjorungal” (“Soorpanakha’s Dressing-Up”), “Soorpanakhayude Pranayabhyarthana” (“Soorpanakha’s Proposal”) and “Hanumante

Poonkavana Naseekaranam” (“Hanuman’s Destruction of the Garden”). The language and imagery employed in the Mappilapattu are resonant of the social fabric of the early Muslim community. Sources suggest that the Mappila Ramayanam cannot claim antiquity, considering the language of the compositions and given the fact that Father Camille Bulcke, author of the Ramakatha, does not mention this version.

There are many versions of the Ramayana available from ancient, medieval and modern India. However, the commendable retelling traditions that need to be acknowledged here are the versions from women and subaltern sections of the country. Velcheru Narayana Rao examines the Ramayana songs sung by upper caste women in Telugu which, even while belonging to the framework of the dominant text, interrogate Rama’s sense of justice with relation to Sita. He terms these songs “Seethayanas.” These songs are predominantly sung in private gatherings of women held in the backyards of Brahmin households or sung during daily chores. Prominence is given to women characters and roles of otherwise obscure women characters like Santha (elder sister of Rama), who is not mentioned in the dominant version. Reference to rituals, women’s daily chores, pregnancy, motherhood, female bonding, etc. can be found in these songs. Rao also talks about the Ramayana songs sung by non-brahmin/lower-caste women, which emphasizes the glories of Ravana, Lanka and so on. Rama, in these songs appears only as a

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devotional refrain whereas the role of a hero is bestowed upon Ravana (132). Nabaneeta Deb Sen explains the selection of themes from the *Ramayana* by women as follows:

It is natural in women's retellings of the *Ramayana* for them to pick and choose their episodes; they are not interested in the heroic epic cycle, which has no relevance to their lives. If what they create is fragmentary, it is because their lives are fragmentary. For them, it is the whole story. It reflects a woman's world in its entirety.15

The multiplicity of these traditions is becoming increasingly neglected or sidelined as a result of the homogenization of culture, resulting in what could be called cultural loss. Romila Thapar argues on a similar note while discussing about the televised *Ramayana*, as an expression of the mainstream, marking a project of homogenisation to create a “national culture.”16 She suggests that such homogenization of culture forces other versions to become irretrievably submerged or marginalized. Since there is little evidence that any one rendering of the *Ramayana* could stand as the original text, as the *Ramayana*, it is difficult to understand the reason behind the State’s choice of Ramayana for nation-wide telecast Thapar suggests that when the State acts as a patron of the arts, it often favours dominant groups in society. Each *Ramayana* then, comes with the signature of the social location and ideology of the respective group that appropriates it. These appropriations and retellings are fashioned by deliberately reinventing the story and

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selectively dismembering/decontextualising particular incidents or by adding incidents that adhere to particular ideological positions.

In the context of the above background of retellings, I will briefly explain the significance and characteristic feature of Periyar E.V. Ramasami’s exegesis of the *Ramayana*. Periyar started the Self-Respect Movement, a radical anti-caste movement in 1925 in Tamil Nadu. It was a movement against caste, Brahmanism, religion, cultural domination of North Indians on South Indians, and the rule of men over women.¹⁷ Periyar interprets the *Ramayana* as a text of political domination on the part of North Indians/Aryans on South Indians/Dravidians. Periyar’s readings of the *Ramayana* are developed in two works: *Iramayanapathirangal* (*Characters in the Ramayana*), *Iramayankurippukal* (*Points about the Ramayana*) (p 180). The gist of his ideas in these two books is translated into *The Ramayana: A True Reading*. This chapter draws from the later English text and not directly from the Tamil versions. He reads the story of the *Ramayana* as a vehicle to spread awareness about the cultural domination of North India. In his comments on the *Ramayana*, he reverses the very story and uses it for spreading his anti-North Indian ideology. He challenges the conventional understanding of villain and hero, by demythologising Rama and presenting Ravana as the real hero. He deconstructs the image of Rama as an exemplary and divine character. In *Iramayanapathirangal*, Periyar criticizes thirteen major characters from the *Ramayana* on the basis of the deeds they perform. He cites fifty incidents of apparent improper

behaviour on the part of Rama, which include coveting the throne of Ayodhya, killing Vali, his treatment of Sita, his attitude towards Sudras which is manifest in the killing of Sambooka and so on. Meanwhile, he portrays Ravana as a monarch of the ancient Dravidians, a responsible political leader. He substantiates this point by providing details from the Ramayana. According to Periyar, Ravana was forced to avenge his sister’s disfigurement. Ravana’s death was possible only because of his brother, Vibheeshna’s betrayal. He subjects the now standard Ramayana, a text with mythical features, to scientific analysis in order to highlight the anachronisms of the text. The manner of Periyar’s criticism is unconventional, and yields dramatic interpretations. His intention was to disseminate Dravidian ideology among the masses, not the scholars. However, one could say that his interpretation has precedent in Chittalai Chattanar’s Manimekalai, a 6th century Buddhist text, Jain Pratipuranas, Vimalasuri’s Paumachariyam and other texts in this vein.¹⁸

Norman Cutler observes a close connection between the Tamil Renaissance movement that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Dravidian movement. The Tamil Renaissance marks the rediscovery of many early Tamil classics, their editing and publishing. This also becomes a moment in the evolution of Tamil cultural and political identity. The Dravidian political agenda emphasised the antiquity of Tamil civilization and its essential independence from Sanskritic culture.¹⁹ K. Nambi Arooran observes that there was an intimate relationship between the Tamil Renaissance

and the ways in which Dravidian sentiments arose. And the Dravidian ideology was formed mainly on the basis of the ancient glory of the Tamilians, revealed through literature (288). What Periyar does is use the Ramayana as a tool to forward his ideology, just as his opponents (the Aryans) had done, but his use of it entirely subverts and deconstructs their use of the same text.

I will now examine the details of the Ramayana stories written by Sarah Joseph and show how she has attempted to retell the Ramayana from the perspectives of different characters in the text. The protagonist of Sarah Joseph’s story “Black Holes” is Manthara–Kaikeyi’s maid who is portrayed in the Valmiki Ramayana as a liar, scandalmonger, and spy. However, in “Black Holes,” Manthara is portrayed as a subaltern woman, a victim of power and intrigue, who is forced to act as a spy for her survival. The writer, by assuming Manthara’s viewpoint, deconstructs Ayodhya’s image as an ideal kingdom. She also makes us look at the traditional sage-like characters Dasaratha and Vasishtha in a completely new light. The story dwells with Manthara’s escape from Ayodhya on the night of Rama’s coronation, after she was blamed by everyone as the cause of all misfortunes. Ayodhya, to her, is not the ideal kingdom, but a stage set for a game of power. She says:

What a supreme stage Ayodhya is! An unusual play was being performed where everyone takes on the role of the sutradharan. Naiveté was written on the faces of all actors and actresses. The white clothes that spoke of extreme satwa. The

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canine and tusk alone kept hidden and invisible from the spectator. ‘I am the sutaradharan,’ the character Dasarathan says, dancing and holding on to the curtain. A face overflowing with compassion. Gentle, sweet words. The great tradition of Raghuvamsam should be preserved. For that, the eldest son Rama alone should be crowned…The Kekaya king, Aswapathi, bursting with anger, waiting to rush from the green room to the stage. ‘I am the suthradharan. Dasaratha on stage is old, lustful, and a cheat. Only after he promised the kingdom as bride price did I give my young daughter in marriage to him. Ayodhya is Bharatan’s. If he does not keep his word, there will be a war.’

Between the stage and the green room stands another character holding the curtain. It is Vasishtan, taking the role of sutaradharan ostensibly to uphold the honour of Ayodhya! Aswapathi should never reach the stage. So he dances blocking the door of entry. (101)

She sympathises with Bharata for not knowing how he is exploited. She says: “The sword that he raised against his mother must be piercing his own throat now. A world of fathers ordering their sons to raise their axes and swords against their mothers’ necks to preserve power.”21 Manthara, in the standard version that circulates, is ugly, old and poor. She has to protect herself. She does not have any help or divine weapons with which to defend herself. She says: “For that, one should have secret assignations with devas. Also, devas preferred very beautiful women. And then there was penance! But could starving people find time for all that?”(99) Here, by locating Manthara as a person from the lower strata

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of society, Sarah Joseph brings out the politics of power experienced by a subaltern woman, whose very position enables such a politics as well as the organization of power. Manthara’s version of the story throws light on the darker and uglier side of the ideal kingdom of Ayodhya and the kings of the renowned Raghuvamsa. Periyar also criticizes Dasaratha and Vasishtha. He describes Dasaratha as a person enslaved by passion, as someone who broke promises and acted irresponsibly. The main charge against Vasishtha is for participating in the plot to crown Rama. The charges made by Periyar against both the characters are developed in the story “Black Holes.”

One can see an interesting connection between the stories “Black Holes” and “Asoka” as the first one speaks about the victor’s (Rama) kingdom and the second one speaks about the loser’s (Ravana) kingdom. While in the story “Black Holes”, Manthara’s version reveals the misdeeds that take place off-stage in Ayodhya, in “Asoka,” the protagonist Sita announces “all glories are rightfully Lanka’s” (113). “Asoka” portrays the incidents that occur in Lanka where Vibheeshana, Ravana’s brother, is made king after Rama kills Ravana. Lanka, destroyed completely after the war, looks sorrowful and frighteningly silent. Vibheeshana informs Sita that Rama wishes to see her after her bath. Sita says to Vibheeshana that she wishes to see her husband without taking a bath. However, Vibheeshana is helpless since it is an order from the victor. In Sarah Joseph’s words:
The odour of the sin of fratricidal betrayal in his breath disturbs Sita. The new master of Lanka was struggling to hold his neck erect, crushed by the crown grown lustreless with the smeared blood of his brothers.\textsuperscript{22}

This is one of the main charges that Periyar makes against Vibheeshana. He argues that Vibheeshana betrayed his brother Ravana and led him to his death in order to gain the throne of Lanka. Periyar also criticizes him for not avenging the mistreatment his sister had to endure from the Aryans. He writes:

To commend a wrong-doer of many horrible blunders as an honest, just and brave man and to despise his own brother (Ravana) who treated Sita while in his custody honourably, as a vicious man— all these were not without ulterior motive of defrauding his brother Ravana and taking possession of Lanka. What can all these be, but selfishness and mean mindedness.\textsuperscript{23}

In a manner distinct from the many texts that describe Sita and her beauty, Sarah Joseph describes Sita as follows:

Clay, battered and destroyed by continuous onslaughts of snow, rain, sunlight, lustful gazes, destructive stares, falling one upon the other on her face, neck, hands, breasts, navel, waist, legs and feet. Scars of severe brutalization, scabs of drying tears, wounds of humiliation. Trailing in mud and dust, hair so matted that


the strands could not be separated. Nails grown long. Skin drying and peeling off.24

Sita, alone in her misery, feels closer towards the women in Lanka. Sita, although an Aryan woman, is also the victim of the justice system of the Aryan male. Here, Sarah Joseph deftly inserts a feeling of sisterhood between Sita and Vibheeshana’s women. They console Sita by holding her in their arms. They say: “This is not our justice, we, a subjugated people. This is the order of the victor” (110). Sita wonders:

Whose was the sin? Was it that of Aryan virility that had slashed the nose and ears of a lower caste woman who dared to make the mistake of begging for love? Or was it that of the justice of the subjugated, which seeking revenge, laid hands on the woman and the land of the dominant? Finally who suffered the result of the sin? (111)

Sita shrinks with humiliation for being led as a culprit into the presence of the victor. He says: “I did not win this war to reclaim you. The insult inflicted on me and my clan…” (113) At this moment Sita identifies herself with Lanka. She thinks: “The soil flung aside contemptuously by the victor is Lanka. Sita and Lanka are one and the same.” (113)

However, in Periyar’s take on the Ramayana, Sita is presented differently from Sarah Joseph’s intervention to the story. While Periyar charges Sita for allegedly feeling attracted to Ravana and for being unchaste, Sarah Joseph uses Sita to voice out the differences in justice systems followed by the Aryans and the Dravidians and to highlight

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a potential of a possible alliance between upper-caste women and the subalterns/subaltern women.

Differences in the justice systems of the Dravidians and the Aryans and the problems that result when one system forcefully replaces another, are voiced in the story “Mother Clan.” In “Mother Clan,” Sarah Joseph goes a step further to show how biased, male-centred and brahminical the Aryan laws are, compared to the Dravidian justice system which follows Nature. It tells the story of Soorpanakha, Ravana’s sister, after her encounters with Rama and Lakshmana. In most of the Ramayanas, Rama orders Lakshmana to mutilate Soorpanakha, after she proclaims her love and makes advances to Rama at Panchavati. In some tellings of the Ramayana, Lakshmana cuts her ears and nose and in some other tellings he cuts her nose and breasts. Sarah Joseph follows the second version. In “Mother Clan,” Soorpanakha’s breasts become a symbol of female sexuality. It throws light on Rama’s attitude to women and female sexuality, which is also normalised in Indian culture. The writer juxtaposes two different kinds of attitudes regarding women in Rama—one about protecting women and the weak and another about the tendency to criminalize and penalize women’s sexuality which is beyond man’s control. Soorpanakha finds the attitude of the Aryans alarming and strange. She says:

The tree blossoms because of passion. The forest blooms because of passion. If a woman’s passion is denounced as wrong and harmful, it is the fruit-bearing earth that will suffer… In my forest no man has shown cruelty to any woman. Filled with passion, if a woman approaches a man and he is unable to fulfil her desire, he would speak to her as he would to his sister and show her another direction.
King Ravana has never lifted his sword to turn a woman’s body into a barren land.\(^\text{25}\)

In the story, Soorpanakha is found waiting for Ayomukhi who is expected to arrive with 10,000 women to forge an attack on the Aryans. She fumes with the insults she had to endure from the Aryan male. She says:

They severed the very roots of my clan; insulted my colour and race; despoiled my body and speech. They butchered the root and source of my breast milk. The roots of my clan and blood! (119)

From Ayomukhi, Soorpanakha finds out about the fall of Lanka. She states that not a single woman from the expected 10,000 turns up, fearing Vibheeshana. After hearing from Ayomukhi about Lanka’s fall, Soorpanakha asks:

‘Cheeta?’ (Sita). Ayomukhi whispers: ‘They did not cut off her nose and breasts, but for the sin of having spent her days fearful, weeping, in King Ravana’s garden, they prepared a blazing coal-fire and asked her to jump into it!’(125)

Listening to this, Soorpanakha roars with laughter. Soorpanakha laughs as she finds how unjust Aryan laws are to their women, let alone its injustice towards Dravidians and Dravidian women. The main charges that Periyar makes against Rama are his ill-treatment of Sita and the mutilation of Soorpanakha and Ayomukhi. Periyar contrasts Rama’s treatment of Dravidian women (Thadaka, Soorpanakha, Ayomukhi) with Ravana’s treatment of Sita. His identification of Ravana as the noble and righteous king of ancient Dravidas is promoted in Sarah Joseph’s story.

A marked difference one can see in the positions assumed by Periyar and Sarah Joseph is their attitude towards Sita. Even while taking a strong anti-Aryan stand, Sarah Joseph identifies Sita as a victim of the justice system of the Aryans. She, being an object of exploitation, identifies with the other objects who were exploited—the Dravidians and their land. However, some scholars find the charges that are raised by Periyar against Sita a bit ironic as these criticisms are based on the *dharmasastra* text – the Laws of Manu, which he burnt along with the picture of Rama in 1956.²⁶ Periyar’s negative interpretation of Sita is not a reflection of his anti-woman stand because his primary concern in deconstructing the *Ramayana* was to question Aryan supremacy mediated through the text. Moreover, he is known to be one of the very important reformers in this century. Periyar’s writings and speeches given as part of the Self-Respect Movement, questioned all traditional images of women. Apart from advocating widow remarriage and women’s education as did many reformers of the time, he de-ritualised marriages and stood against the system whereby women had to wear symbols of marriage (2956). C.S. Lakshmi points out that Periyar’s vision did not materialize completely, even within the movement, as women were not able to entirely abandon certain recognised and accepted roles that they had internalised. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai have studied the role of women, especially Brahmin women in the movement, and the different dimensions of it.²⁷ K. Srilata’s work provides important insights about submerged histories of women’s

involvement. However, one could assume that the demoralization of Sita by Periyar using the same Aryan morals works as an effective strategy to convince the masses. What Periyar attempts to do is to use Aryan morals to criticize Aryan heroes. He condemns Rama, Lakshmana, Dasaratha, Vasishta, and many other characters by employing this method. Although Sarah Joseph uses the mode of deconstruction employed by Periyar in recasting each Ramayana character in a different milieu, unique concerns render Joseph’s retelling attempts as distinct from that of Periyar’s. Periyar used his retellings and recastings to campaign for the Dravidian ideology to the popular reader, whereas Sarah Joseph’s attempts are more women-oriented. Periyar’s attitude about women expressed through the Self-Respect Movement would give us an idea that the demoralization of Sita does not come as part of his notions about a woman being pure, but as a means to attack the dharmasastra and an ideal woman character created through the influence of that text. Periyar used more popular ideologies for deconstruction, whereas the retellings by Sarah Joseph are more feminist and academic in nature.

“What is Not in the Story” portrays the meeting of five children–Rama and Sita’s sons Lava and Kusa, the Shudra sage, Sambooka’s daughter and son, and the Brahmin boy who got back his life after Rama murdered Sambooka for practicing asceticism–with the sage Valmiki in Naimisharanya. They all meet in the forest as Rama’s sons are going to recite the Ramayana in Naimisharanya, Sambooka’s children too are going there to sing about Sambooka’s tale, and the Brahmin boy has lost his way during his search for his

lost calf. They share their stories and realize how their stories are interconnected. Lava and Kusa, along with Valmiki, reach an open space in the forest, where they prepare to rest. They hear a song in the distance and Kusa asks Valmiki: “Everyone names you as the first poet. Then how can there be this song?” Later they learn that Sambooka’s children had sung the song. This question opens up the possibility of the existence of older Ramayana stories, and acknowledges the existence of other Ramayanas than the Valmiki Ramayana. After meeting Valmiki, Sambooka’s daughter asks him:

‘Writer, why didn’t you give us place in your writing?’ For the first time, during the journey through the forest, Valmiki fell into a deep meditation. Slowly a termite hill grew around him and covered him. (133)

Valmiki does not answer the question. The story ends as follows:

Did Unni get his calf back? Perhaps he did. Till his next death he may have lived suffering the pain of sleeplessness. In Naimisharanya, Sita’s son recited the Ramayana and they were the focus of the eyes and ears of all who listened, says the narrator of the epic. But what we do not have any information about is Sambooka’s children. Did they reach Naimisharanya? After the recital of the poet’s version, did they sing their version of Sambooka’s story? We do not hear anything of them in history, epics, or even oral folklore. (136)

The writer uses this story to ask questions about the politics of omission and simultaneously points to significant gaps in the standard narrative. It also gestures at the

possible multiplicity of versions and their loss, a result of the spread of the dominant culture.

“Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan” is vastly different from the other four stories. It could be considered a political allegory. Although not linked directly to the Ramayana, the names Janaki, the forest, and verses from the Ramayana used ironically suggests that it is a parody of the Ramayana, intended to make fun of contemporary politics and bureaucracy. Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan are the new incarnations of Rama and Sita in Kaliyuga. Janakigupthan is hysteric and her hysteria is a favourite subject of the media. Jathigupthan is portrayed as having severe constipation problems. This is the result of a curse given to him by Janakigupthan in their previous life. Janakigupthan and Jathigupthan appear as if they constitute a well-known scene from the Ramayana, where Sita asks Rama why he carries weapons even in what appears to be a harmless and beautiful forest. Sarah Joseph at this juncture, uses the same verse from the Ramayana, as a narrative technique to take her readers back to the myth. Janakigupthan curses Jathigupthan for not paying attention to the question: “Because of your passion for weapons, in Kaliyuga you will suffer from severe constipation.” Jathigupthan’s main concerns are his constipation and his wife’s hysteria. Throughout the story he appears naked, desperately trying to cover himself with weapons. Jathigupthan’s personal assistant, who we see is frequently slapped by him, draws a parallel between the current bureaucratic system and monarchy. The story exposes the absurdity of contemporary

politics and the triviality of bureaucracy. This could be one of the ways of retelling the 
*Ramayana* in modern times, where the ideal images are again destroyed. It deconstructs 
the text by trivializing its high-sounding verses, exposes the marital discord in the 
relationship, and the fears of a leader and power-monger.

“Bhoomirakshasam”\(^{31}\) is a story about the pre-*Ramayana* times of Aryan invasion on 
subaltern lives and women. Dandhakan, son of Ayodhya’s king Ikshvaku, who 
encroached the forest land and forced his rule among the Danava tribes, comes to 
Dandhakaranya and accidentally sees Araja, the daughter of the Asura sage Sukhracharya. 
He forces himself on Araja and rapes her, not paying attention to her please to leave her 
alone. Sukhracharya, while coming back, sees that the forest, which was in full bloom, is 
now completely destroyed. Trees have shed their leaves and flowers, all the greenery had 
turned grey. Slowly they heard the sound of something falling like rain from the sky. And 
for seven days continuously the soil rained on Dandhaka’s kingdom. Cities, people, and 
houses–everything went under the earth.

Araja, feeling the insult and pain, kept her ears close to earth and listened to the 
thunders of Spring. The land around her was still green and alive with trees, birds, 
water, and breeze.

For several thousand years, not even a single blade of grass sprouted in 
Dandhaka’s kingdom and it was called as Dandhakaranya. People were terrified 
to go near that. (37)

\(^{31}\) Sarah Joseph, “Bhoomirakshasam,” *Puthuramayanam: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* 
(Trissur: Current Books, 2006).
There is an obvious association between woman and nature in this story. But more than that, it records the Aryan invasion of subaltern land during pre-*Ramayana* times. It also records the arrogance and lack of respect towards others’ lives on the part of an Aryan male.

“*Oru Prayopaveshathinte Katha*” tells the story of Angadan, the son of Vali who was killed by Rama. Angadan, his father dead and his mother and country under the control of his father’s brother Sugriva, is ordered to head the group which searches for Sita. In their journeys to unknown and unfriendly terrains “in search of a woman who none of them have seen or would recognize” (44), Angadan remembers a golden past when his father was alive. The story narrates the Aryan colonization in Kishkindha, Vali’s kingdom, from the point of view of Angadan.

In a recent novel, *Ooru Kaval*, Sarah Joseph revives the same plot to deconstruct the much valorised episodes of the search for Sita. The novel focuses on Vali’s kingdom and its culture, thwarted by Aryan invasion. Characters like Thara who was forced to become Sugriva’s wife after Vali’s death and Maruti (Hanuman) are given prominence. The novel narrates how Aryans under the leadership of Rama make use of Sugriva’s desire for Kishkindha’s throne to impose their domination on the Vanara clan. The novel which has the same theme as that of the short story lacks precision compared to the latter. However, this is a theme that has relevance to Dravidian ideology as Periyar cites the killing of Vali as one of the most unjustifiable acts of Rama.

The story, “Kantharatharakam,” I think, is crucial because it redefines the ideology behind Sarah Joseph’s Ramayana stories. The story tries to express the thoughts of Lakshmana after Sita is abducted by Ravana. Lakshmana is convinced about their actions against the Rakshasa clan, but he remembers how Sita was against coming to Dandhakaranya on the requests of sages. He also remembers how his anger which resulted in the mutilation of Soorpanakha has caused the abduction of Sita. He recollects how, like Sita, his mother Sumitra and step-mothers Kousalya and Kaikeyi used to criticise sages for inducing violence among young children. In Sarah Joseph’s words:

Why do sages give weapons to children and make them do things? Sages have powers to kill any mighty Rakshasa. Then why are they making children kill them? Sumitra asks. “The fate of Kshatriya,” answers Kousalya.

Rama and Lakshmana have heard their mothers and wives talking among themselves, objecting to the widespread use of weapons and criticising a justice system that concentrates on killing innocent people. However, Rama and Lakshmana are portrayed as those who classify such attitudes as womanly, and of the weak-hearted. Here we can also see the attempt on the part of the writer to view Rama and Lakshmana as victims of sanatana dharma. They believe it is their duty and follow it blindly.

Looking at all the characters with sympathy was definitely not Periyar’s mode of telling the story. Therefore, the ideological similarity that we find between Sarah Joseph and Periyar is limited. Periyar’s de/reconstructions had a strong motif because it referenced a movement, more specifically, a people’s movement. Sarah Joseph’s stand in “Kantharatharakam,” may appear as if she were assuming Rama and Lakshmana’s
perspective, the very villains of Dravidian ideology put forward by Periyar. But this does not mean that Sarah Joseph’s intention is to retell the story along lines of the dominant versions. More than looking at Rama and Lakshmana sympathetically, Sarah Joseph here attempts to look at the internalization of the ideology and its source. In this sense, Sarah Joseph’s retellings function more like a woman’s version of the Ramayana, the kind put forward by Navaneetha Deb Sen. However, they go beyond the agendas of feminist retellings to incorporate racial and ethnic identities. In her writings, these stories mark an ideological shift, a manoeuvre that inaugurates discussions of caste.

Retelling the Ramayana has been an ongoing project in several research circles, and Sarah Joseph’s undertaking can also be included in this category. The stories have appeared in English translation as *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (2005). Although the book identifies different versions of the Ramayana, it continues to attach these retelling traditions to the Valmiki Ramayana, while placing that text in the centre. It does not abandon the idea of considering the Valmiki Ramayana as the text from which all other Ramayanas descended. From the cover illustration she uses (*Sita Bhumipravesh* by Raja Ravi Varma), to the dedication of the text by the translator (Dedicated to her mother who taught her from age seven, to recite the Ramayana flawlessly and rhythmically, without making any mistakes), the book appears to contradict its own content. As a result, the English translation reproduces the dominant and re-subverts the subversion, while presenting it to a foreign audience. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* also includes a play called *Kanchana Sita (Golden Sita)* by C.N. Sreekantan Nair. The Malayalam book contains only Sarah Joseph’s stories, which include three
more stories that are based on *the Ramayana*. The Malayalam book is named, *Puthu Ramayanam: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (New Ramayanam: Retelling Ramayana Stories). It does not carry a dedication and the cover illustration does not suggest any scene from the traditional *Ramayana*.

Periyar’s attempts to critique North Indian cultural domination through criticizing their religious/cultural icons like the *Ramayana*, is still carried out by the Dravidar Kazhagam, the party established by him in 1944. Although Periyar’s opponents and the supporters of the dominant culture mock his attempts, his method still continues to be the most popular and mass movement against the *Ramayana*, Rama and other Aryan cultural symbols. Its appeal to the comprehension of the common people makes it different from other similar attempts. Sarah Joseph’s attempts, which are a result of her feminist and activist sensitivities, are definitely influenced by Periyar’s readings of the *Ramayana*. Both these retellings, along with countless versions of the *Ramayana* from different locations, demonstrate how a particular text has been used as a way to normalize and standardize the dominant.

These three renderings—Periyar’s interpretation of the *Ramayana*, Sarah Joseph’s retellings, and the English translation of Sarah Joseph and Sreekandan Nair’s writings—address different publics. Periyar’s public was constituted by people, the masses. He used the deconstruction method, to awaken the masses from Aryan indoctrination. It is not creative, imaginative or aesthetically appealing. It is done based on pure reasoning and ideological commitments. And these renderings were part of a political or social
movement. The public that Sara Joseph addresses is a literary/reading public. This kind of writing is also political as it spells out the political stand and views of a writer. What both Periyar and Sarah Joseph are trying to do is to question the dominant justice system. Sarah Joseph tries to fragment the text into many versions. And Sarah Joseph, unlike Periyar, is not part of the Dravidian movement.

The different nature of the publics addressed by the translation and the Malayalam collection is obvious from the author’s note in both the texts. The author’s note in the English collection focuses on the doubts that form in a child’s mind while listening to stories from the Ramayana. She writes:

All the versions of Ramayanam that children hear and read were filled with cruel rakshasas and rakshasis. They had been obstructing yagas, and attacking hermits. I continue to read and study that Raman killing them has become even a child’s need. The death of every rakshasa is marked by devas showering flowers. Children love flowers. The innocent children desire the noiseless, painless showering of flowers (which trickle like honey on their heads) to a shower of arrows, the rivers of blood, and the jingling of weapons. As they grow up, some children may read and believe that the killing of the rakshasas signifies the victory or the defeat at the end of clan conflicts. That is the kind of reading that I also did. My reading is that all killings of rakshasas need not end in a ‘victory’ of human/divine beings.  

33 By publics, I mean different kind of interest groups in the public sphere. 
She further explains what makes her see the side of characters like Sita, Soorpanakha, Sambooka etc. She says that, for her, Sita and Soorpanakha are two aspects of the loss of love in ‘Rama Rajya.’

Oh, certainly! All children have doubts. When the ‘laws and justice’ that prevailed centuries ago do not coalesce with modern practices of justice, children feel confused. Only for a short span of time can we fool children offering lessons and prayers with the use of force. Truly, it is from the doubts arising from a deeply pained self that my ‘Ramayana Stories’ were born. (xv)

The author’s note is titled “Writer, where is the place for us in the story?” in Malayalam. Here she details the politics of Ramayana and its justice systems.

We can see that there is no work which has traveled so vibrantly and widely through speech and narratives like the Ramayana. The sources of Ramayana stories never get over, regardless of how much ever it is consumed. For each generation the Ramayanam becomes a different one. Each period and region owns its own readings. With each one’s justice, they measure the justice system of the Ramayana. That is how many Ramayanas take birth. All the versions of Ramayana that have been told from different locations like race, caste, region and gender search for an answer to the question, who is the complete human being.35

According to her, a different version of the Ramayana is born when Sita, Soorpanakha, Sambooka, and Nature challenge vibrantly the standard view of Rama as ‘a person’ who is ‘brave’ and ‘good.’ She offers:

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Rama stories become so vibrant and radiant because the characters in the boundaries mark themselves and search for a place in the story asking the ancient poet “writer, why haven’t you acknowledged us in the story?” The Ramayana is seen by generations as a touchstone for regional and temporal justice systems and cut it across with a new sense of justice. This will continue to be an unstoppable process. Each Ramayana story will be told as a new Ramayana… (vii)

The cover of the Malayalam collection has the picture of a bronze face on fire, whereas the cover of the English version has a painting by Raja Ravi Varma named Sita Bhumipravesh. Although the translator touches upon the Dravidian take of the stories by saying that:

Both are written from a woman’s perspective. Both bring out the political context of Aryan versus Dravidian, the upper castes versus the lower castes, rajya dharma versus the dharma of love and human relationships. Both emphasize the importance of questioning tradition and having a new outlook with regard to the language and literature of the land,36 her dedication nullifies this view: “To My mother who taught me, from the age of seven, to recite the Ramayana flawlessly and rhythmically, without making any mistakes.”37 A more interesting observation that one can make of the English collection, is the imprint used at the beginning of each section, of an artistic bow and arrow. And we can locate a reaction to this image in Sarah Joseph’s “Taikulam” and “Oru Prayopaveshathinte

Katha.” The image stands as the ultimate symbol of Aryan cunningness and shrewdness.

Soorpanakha says:

There are many weapons made of copper and iron in my people’s worksheds—swords, spears, axes—an endless number of weapons. As for the arrows! King Ravana is not fully aware of the strength of those arrows, that fell in the Dandaka forest like hail. Arrows pierced the chests of Kharan and other fighters and cut through to the other side, as they rushed, howling and holding their weapons aloft. In the time it takes to blink, those heroes fell like small mountains, their heads and torsos scattered, their chests and faces pitted with holes. I have no arrows that are as weightless as feathers, and can yet pierce rocks and speed off. (120)

Not many literary works have reflected the “Dravidian” feeling/identity of Malayalees in Malayalam Literature. When I read Sarah Joseph’s short story, “Taikulam” (“Mother Clan”), which portrays Soorpanakha as the main character, what caught my attention was the assertion of a Dravidian identity. Although the movement is centuries old in Tamil Nadu, it has had only a minimal presence in Kerala. Many Malayalam poets sang about Tamil being the mother of Malayalam language, while writing it out in Sanskritic Malayalam. In “Taikulam,” Sarah Joseph uses a kind of Malayalam which is a mixture of Malayalam and Tamil. This, for me, offered an entry point to connect Sarah Joseph’s Ramayana stories and the Dravidian movement. Later, in my interview with her, she said that she has been influenced by the writings of Periyar and that had motivated her to explore the Dravidian identity in texts like the Ramayana. However, Sarah Joseph has not mentioned Periyar and his influence anywhere else. These stories have appeared in
different times, and in different collections spanning 1990–2003. Only in 2005 was it put together as a collection in English. In Malayalam, it was complied only in 2006 with the title *Ramayanakathakal Veendum Parayumbol (On Retelling the Ramayana)*. However, in my opinion, in both the editions, the critical comments offered did not highlight the Dravidian import of these stories, though the word is used a couple of times.