# Seizing the Sutradharan's Strings: Subaltern Counter-Mythography in the Short Fiction of Sarah Joseph

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## Abstract:

This paper reads three stories from Sarah Joseph's The Masculine of "Virgin" (trans. J. Devika) — "Black Chinks," "Asoka," and "Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan" — as instances of subaltern counter-mythography. The hypothesis is that Joseph does not retell the Ramayana but transfers its narrative authority, the thread held by the classical sutradharan, to the figures the canonical epic silenced: the crippled slave Manthara, the earth-woman Seetha, and a washerwoman descended from the epic's lowest voice. Four theoretical claims are tested against the text. Following Barthes, Joseph exposes the "innocence" of the dharmic order as manufactured ideology; following Guha and Spivak, she reads the elite epic-archive against its grain and restores speech to those it recorded only as functions; following Uma Chakravarti, she locates her subalterns at the crossing of caste and gender; and following the ecofeminism of Shiva and Warren, she builds a continuum of woman, earth, and vanquished. The paper argues that Joseph's decisive move is her refusal to sentimentalise the subaltern, which makes these stories arguments about agency rather than sympathy, held together by a horizontal solidarity among the defeated.

## 1. Introduction

The sutradharan of classical Sanskrit theatre holds the sutra, the thread. He stands at the edge of the play, names the characters, and manages the illusion the audience is about to accept. In the Valmiki tradition the thread of the Rama story has stayed in one kind of hand for two thousand years, Brahminical and masculine, committed to dharma as the ruling order's account of itself. Sarah Joseph's short fiction takes those strings away. The figures who were props in the canonical epic, the deformed slave and the enemy's widow and the washerwoman, are made to hold the thread and to narrate the myth against itself.

This is the difference between counter-mythography and ordinary retelling, and it is the paper's central distinction. A retelling keeps the frame and moves the furniture. Counter-mythography takes the frame apart and asks who built it and at whose cost. The hypothesis of this research is that the three stories examined here of Sarah Joseph performs exactly the same operation of. She exposes the innocence of the dharmic-masculine order as a male thing rather than a natural one. She recovers the muted consciousness of the epic's villains and servants by reading the canonical text against its grain. She extends subalternity structurally, so that even elite women are shown subaltern to what one story calls "Aryan manliness." And she refuses to turn any of these figures into a saint, which is what keeps her project an argument about power rather than a plea for pity. The three stories are best read as three registers of one operation, tragedy, endurance, and farce.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Roland Barthes posits that myth transforms history into nature, presenting ideology as self-evident. The dominant narrative of the Ramayana illustrates this by depicting the king's authority and a woman's virtue as unassailable truths. Counter-mythography, as exemplified by Joseph's work “Black Chinks,” reveals the underlying truths beneath these façades. Gayatri Spivak discusses epistemic violence, highlighting how figures like Manthara are reduced to mere functions without agency in the dominant text. Ranajit Guha advocates for reading elite texts against their grain, exposing what they attempt to obscure. Further analysis by Uma Chakravarti and ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva connects caste and gender, revealing how women and nature are similarly exploited. Joseph’s text draws these connections, ultimately reframing the portrayal of women and earth as a assertion of permanence rather than subjugation.

## 3. “Black Chinks”: The Slave Who Pulls the Strings

The story takes place on the same night when Manthara, the blemished (bhlimi) one of Kaikeyi's slaves, escapes Ayodhya and plots the exile of Rama. The hag ‘slouches’ toward the stable walls, creeps and hides from the light or from the spirits that hover over the stable, and says that she ‘slopes’ to its walls, “creeping” (77). Canonical Manthara, bent body bent mind, the means of a queen's corruption. The translator's note to the story explicitly spells out the reversal: the epic will not talk much about Manthara's destiny, “This story radically retells the character and her intentions,” and “introduces into the mix intrigue and power-hunger among the elite” (77). Joseph creates its mechanism a mind.

The 'Demystifying' heart of the story is the one part where it is said that Manthara read Ayodhya as a theatre. “Ayodhya is a fine stage, for sure!” she thinks; it is a “strange play in which all the players hold the strings of the story as sutradharans" and “all actors, male and female, wear the make-up of innocence” while their “fangs and invisible bestial horns remain beyond the viewer’s eye” (80–81). Then, she takes over the job herself: “I am the sutradharan; I pull the strings” (81). I'm Barthes's acting as an actor within the fiction. The mycological mask of the “make-up of innocence” is precisely the mask of nature that those "candidates for the Lord" on the top of the caste hierarchy have, and the low-caste woman – the one who sees the greasepaint for what it is – is the one who sees the violence of dharma for what it is. Her insight is a gift of the spirit and is not of the character. Come from her position, Joseph's precise, indeed, it could not be more precise, about the position: “Manthara hated it here, an insect life, how many fake lives they had to fake, little men like her, to eat, three square meals?” (84). In

the place that is neither gendered nor a limited section, here Chakravarti's grid is readable as being made of caste and labour, rather than merely gender.

The story does not simply switch the moral sides because Manthara does not grab the thread to make himself good. She turns into an agent and that's much sharper. She then admits to Kaikeyi that she doesn't believe in fidelity whatsoever: “I am no more loyal to you, nor Aswapathy, nor to Raman, nor to Dasarathan, but only to my reward” (86). Kaikeyi recoils, and calls her a demon, and Manthara throws the word back: “A demon now, a goddess earlier! O Daughter of the Kekaya, royal thrones are consecrated with the blood of innocent men and only the cry of murder will come forth from them” (86). From the far side of the sublime commitment to the subaltern's generational nobility, Spivak's wariness is answered. With Joseph not making Manthara noble, it is her speech that makes her so. And the facets of her speech are mercantile and bear the political weight. The demon who takes the name of the blood of the throne is more potent for the myth than any martyr.

The story also bears Joseph's structural-hegemonic assertion that it's all about "the elites" and their "subalternity. But Kaikeyi, the queen, spends the night crying out to the slave under a peepul tree, “Take me to my mother! (85). To one of your 'loving' fathers Aswapathy, says Manthara, coldly, who is worth something at this point?” When you come swinging down to him do you believe he'll give you a hundred arms, you who have lost Ayodhya? What does anyone need you for?” (85). The slave hangs onto a jungle vine and takes her promised land and palace, saying “we will live like human beings. Not like worms” (86). Here the queen is left in the dust: “‘Take me with you! Kaikeyi's "pleading shrieks were stilled by “the creaking wheels of a single-ox cart” (86). The subalternities of two women are not equal but both are subordinate to the same masculinity. Manthara is a structural one and it is escapable as a result of her own craftsmanship and her honour, her pay. Kaikeyi's rank came as a pall aura over her throne; and as it wanes, it vanishes. Subaltern walks, Elite woman abandon. In contrast, there are two covered-notes rumours, the “Land of Maveli” in the creator's footnote and the “Order of Manthara” that is “the correct order” in the participant's own words elsewhere (78).

## 4. “Asoka”: The Daughter of the Earth

Seetha is free to meet Rama only after a year in the Asokavana via a Command, becoming “cleansed by the Word of Command” as time goes on. Joseph's first act is to search out and name the woman's body with the ground, and to list the two as one sound body: “Body! Assaulted by the cold, the rain, the sun, ravishing glances, and threatening, evil looks, “earth—shattered” (Joseph, “Asoka” 27): literally, the face, the neck, the breasts, the navel, the waist, the legs and feet. Ecofeminist continuum in a single sentence. The story does not so much

illustrate Shiva's argument that woman nature has become "woman," that woman with nature has come to license the appropriation of both, as that she embodies it. There's irony in the following that follows, yet the words are the same: “Which of these impurities was to be cleansed by the Word of Command?” (27). Before the trial, it is reversed, meaning that the wounds are ones she has inflicted on herself, not ones that stain her.

Joseph then shifts the entire focus of the story from Seetha's chastity to the dead in a war. In the scene preceding the Victor's speaking, the reader is obliged to observe “soot, ash, burning coals, pieces of flesh, carrion crows” and “the enormous shadow of the vulture descending on Lanka” (28). In these fields the text has its main question which is not a question about a wife's virtue, but one about caste and conquest. Of the Aryan manliness that cut off her nose and the breast of the woman of the Lower-folk for her mistake of begging for love? (29). The woman belonging to the lower folk is Shurpanakha; Joseph points out that this was the first cause of the war, and names Seetha, Mandodari and Shurpanakha together, as women in one category subordinate to the same masculinity. In some ways, “Aryan manliness” is a racial-caste word and “the Lower-folk” (Chakravarti’s expression) is a racial-caste word. The combined effect of these words is significant here, since it is going on these two words that Chakravarti is making a point about how caste and gender work together.

The solidarity is shown, not asserted. After reaching the shore, Seetha stands by the enemy's widow, “Mandodari stood watching the sea non-stop; ashen-faced, Seetha went and stood by her” (29). The victor's wife is the guy who was abducted and the victor's widow is the other guy, whose wife was abducted—these two are sort of two halves of one story, because the two great stories rely on the line being drawn between them. It's there that the best of the subaltern class is seen simultaneously on both sides of the war. Both Mandodari and Seetha are wreckage, a queen and a princess.

When the man speaks, the Victor is in agreement, “The woman is a token of honour not a person.” “I did not fight this battle to reclaim you; quite the opposite; this insult has landed on my head and my family head,” he says, and offers away; “You can live with Lakshmanan, Bharatan, Sugreevan or Vibheeshanan” (31–32). The crowd provides epistemic violence. Spivak describes, turning my survival to guilt: “How long could he have stayed-done you, his captive,”/ “How long could he have resisted/” I am his captive, so great my beauty”. (31). Joseph's wife Seetha can't respond with a wife's desire. He coldly refuses her, which is the point because “never will his kiss make his sinews throb” (33) she knows the Victor will have. She is no longer the canting glorified wife of the canon longing to be vindicated and Joseph's rejection of becoming her is rejection of her being a saint which is what applied to Manthara.

The rewriting of the Agnipariksha is the climacteric of the counter-mythographic text form. Valmiki: The world watches the fire give a trial to woman; Chastity of the woman is being tested by the fire when it is on trial. Joseph Maintains the wood for a pyre and also turns things back from the get-go. Seetha does not enter the fireplace as the chaste woman, but as the ground itself: “The Daughter of the Earth stepped upon the pyre right foot forward. I, Seetha, Earth that holds the power to quieten Fire! (33). She is not the burnt but she is the greater and older one who burn can't destroy as it actually is the basis of fire, and the whole grammar of proof disappears from the trial. The ending picture is the reverse of the beginning: “Then the earth lay bare and unfilled, ready for the rain and the seed” (33). The logic of domination -- the logic and theory of humanizing nature and women as a single object (Warren) -- is placed in a conflict with itself. Whereas the equation woman-equals-earth that is, the woman-as-the-owner-of-the-fertile-field” is most traditionally the man's property, here it is a statement that the field will last beyond any things that stand on it. Bonita and the burnt island are like Seetha and Lanka, what is defeated is what remains (31)

## 5. “Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan”: The Emperor Has No Clothes

The third story takes place in the present and transfigures the tone of the drama into farce. A strongman now (and always), Jatiguptan is a public man, with a fawning P.A. and cameras that are never off, and Joseph slips his character into a parenthesis: he sprains his hip and must “limp about for the rest of his life (like a fascist)” (Joseph, “Jatiguptan and Janakiguptan” 35). This will burst masculine-nationalist Kshatriya Arm and Border and chivalric Dharma Myth inhabited by the body. The man's true problem isn't the country, it's his bowels: The first problem occurs when he is constipated for two weeks; the climax in the story is at 2.15 pm, where he suffers “a loud explosion” (35).

Joseph modernises the sutradharan just so. All that embroidery of being is being pulled by the media – in “Black Chinks” it was pulled by the palace theatre. His wife's flight is “captured on film” (35) and “that picture will appear in the papers” (39), the P.A. notes, while the one on the door will be the nation's conscience (39). The “make-up of innocence” has become the constructed image; Barthes makes no wrong turn with the idea that this apparatus of the making of the public man's virtue is the recent updated myth-machine. Defying that machine, Joseph has a counter-narrator that won't shut up. But in the dream-forest the bird torments the naked Jatiguptan by shouting, “You're no mundu, no mundu,” (37), but not his wife's. This strong man himself is the naked emperor: in waking life the P.A. states, “You are stark naked” (39).

This wife is Janakiguptan or Janaki that is the story's counter-narrator in dream, Seetha folds in. For her, it's a failure of the body - the cult of arms. Observing his grasp for his weapons,

she enquires in the Sanskrit tag of the story, “Kwacha shastram kwacha vanam?” which she translates as, “During the Age of Kali, you will get constipated and get to hold the weapons!” (36). The warrior's shield is figured as a failure to "put it down" and it is the wife that names the diagnosis. The satire is on the contrast between the man's idealized sense of himself/self as an epic hero and his under-exposed, open body.

The washer-woman of the third dream is the subaltern figure proper, and it is she who does the best recovery in the story. Here it is a washer-man, a rajaka, who’s idle liquation about Seetha's purity banishes the queen here, his being the lowest in the epic, and strangely, so is his word which banishes a queen. Joseph dresses that voice in a woman's clothes, a dialect, a labour complaint and turns it against the master. She beats the bloody clothes on the rock next to burning tents: “What are you doing, sir?” Without a mundu and without a piece of cloth and swinging ‘tha’ thingamabob? Aren't the l'l kids all clobber'd t' death so that five rottin' old wrinklies could live?” (40). Line performs two actions at once! It brings the corpses of wars, the dead and slaughtered children of the Mahabharata allusion with it into the dream of the strong man and it gives class contempt to the woman who washed the blood. This washerwoman's words burst through a man's head, while the woman's words explode the man's wife. Guha’s reading that goes against the grain and Spivak's question about ‘subaltern speech’ converge in her: the speaker who brings ruin to an innocent queen is interpreted as subaltern gnawing away at the rule.

The deflation comes full circle in the story's denouement and in this climax, Joseph's non-sainthood is most bold. A media martyr, Janakiguptan is locked in the storeroom undergoing a “fast unto death” for the sake of “Universal Humanity”, which the P.A. dubs as the “Soul of the Nation”, which he likes to hear “jolted awake” (38). First the washerwoman reveals the truth, handing over the clothes that are now stained: “These aren't your clothes, sir. They're Janaki Amma’s. Stained. She's in her period” (40). It is confirmed at the end of the jersey offset. After her four-day bath, Janakiguptan comes out clothed, and coos at the naked man, saying that “novelty on how to spend the monthlies” (41) is the whole issue. The nationalist spectacle, the martyr, the Soul of the Nation is reduced to the menstruating female body that cannot be manipulated or controlled by the strongman. No, Joseph will not allow Janakiguptan to suffer as the world's noble Seetha. As he shut the door of the toilet, she's the trickster whose normal body successfully renders the myth-machine useless far better than can any martyrdom piety—her constipation is the one crisis that began as this one, after all.

## 6. Three Registers of One Operation

The stories tell three ways of authority transfer; in the order the thread was taken. The slave Manthara takes hold of it, the de-mystifier, and takes away "richer than the queen, the queen's blood is what I call. The surviving element, Seetha, picks it up, and the test is made upside down, meaning that the woman isn't standing in the fire, but is rather the one that it burns out on. It is grasped by the washerwoman and Janakiguptan to deflate the masculinity of the myth, that is, a naked, constipated body and a menstrual bath. Tragedy, endurance, farce. In all of them, the innocence of the elite and the male order is proved to be a costume, a patch of greasepaint in Manthara's theatre, the prettied-up image in Jatiguptan's press, and the sanctified justice in Seetha's Lanka.

The most powerful, and most original, of Joseph's moves is the denial of sainthood, the move shared by the three- story narratives. Manthara is a mercenary, Seetha is cold — Janakiguptan is simply a patently ridiculous trickster at her period. That is why it is not the "needs saving" victim-heroine who a proper narrative would have made, so the work isn't really an appeal for pity, but rather an argument for agency. It also is the answer to Spivak's deepest concern hidden deep within. The threat she speaks is one that the other whose plan she carries out imputes to herself, gifts her nobility of which she has nothing, silences her again (Spivak). Joseph lends her subalterns no nobility. She puts her interests in their place, her contempt in their place, and her last laugh there and it's enough. There is no vertical redemptive solidarity; Seetha watches as Mandodari is conscripted, Manthara negotiates with Valaakan, and no one is saved by a benevolent superior.

## 7. Conclusion

Against all odds, the elite archive of the Ramayana, it surrenders what it was designed to conceal: the servant's notebook, the silence of the widow, the endurance of the earth, the contempt of a washerwoman. Joseph does not include these voices in context as “nice guys.” She gives them the thread. Once the myth is demonstrated to be a "made up" thing – an ideology dressed up as nature as Barthes described – it no longer is fixed and thus becomes contestable, and the string – that the Brahmin and Masculine sutradharan held for 2000 years now passes to (other) hands. Because that's not retelling, that is it is counter-mythography. Joseph doesn't request a seat of honour inside the show. She touches the strings, and the silent figures of the canon call out something for the first time—not to bring tears to anyone's eye—but to make the blood with which the throne is consecrated, the fire it withstands, and the foe it expels laugh.

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