

WOMEN AND CULTURE: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF SARAH JOSEPH'S GIFT IN GREEN

By

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“The celestial witnesses wondered:

The world , was it coming to an end.”(GG, Prologue)

Abstract

We are a part of the world which is completely shaped by the technology that is proving to be a curse and not a blessing. With the accelerated growth and advancement of technology, deforestation, industrialisation, urbanisation, toxic waste, unregulated use of chemical fertilizers, etc. have lead to the extreme disturbances in our ecosystem. In 2015, United Nations member states had devised an achievable 2030 agenda for sustainable development to make a new path of balance for humanity and the planet. But it is our responsibility to contribute and make world a better place.

The present study aims to focus on the sustainable development of the tera mater(mother earth) through maintaining a balance between humans and nature. Sustainable development can be defined as the growth and maintenance of natural resources for the present as well as the future millennials. Ecofeminists have done a commendable job in discussing and bringing the relationship between woman, man and nature into the limelight.

An in-depth analysis of Sarah Joseph's novel Gift in Green will be done in order to understand the struggle of the humanity for the healthy survival. The uncontrolled and ruthless plundering of woods(forests) , lands, and farms for commercial gains has scourged nature and resultantly the living creatures who are closely linked and dependent on it.

Keywords: *culture, ecofeminism, sustainable development, tera mater, Nature, ecology*

Women- Nature-culture connection

Women and nature have always been closely attuned and thus directly affected physically and culturally. Women come in contact with nature daily through their household chores of provisioning, cooking, watering, clothing and cleaning. This can be clearly seen in rural areas where women walk miles together to collect water and wood for cooking and other household jobs. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Vandana Shiva, an ecofeminist , has mentioned about the rural women and their role as seed collectors. These women undergo various biological transformations and problems besides gender inequality in our society. Women and nature are therefore a very important parts of our culture. Culture can be defined as values, attitudes , customs and traditions of a certain community which are generally shaped by the nature. This same culture is passed on to generations by legends and the tales related especially by women.

Sarah Joseph's (an ecofeminist) famous novel *Gift in Green*, written originally in Malyalam and translated in English by Valson Thampu, will be analysed in view of the sustainable development of earth, acknowledging the role of both men and women. Sarah Joseph is one of the greatest novelists and a short story writer of the century. She was born in 1946 in an orthodox Christian family at Kuriachira in Thrissur city to Louis and Kochumariam. She started her career as a school teacher and grew to be a professor of Malayalam at a Sanskrit college, Pattambi. She is now retired and lives in Mulamkunnathukavu in Thrissur district. She is both a social and a political activist. She has written numerous short stories ,plays, essays and novels and has won major literary awards. *Papathara* , a short story collection won her Muttathu Varkey Award in 2011; *Aalahayude Penmakal* , a novel, bagged three awards-the kerela Sahitya Academy award, the Kendra Sahiitya Academy Award and the Vayalar Award.

Gift in Green is a saga of the natives of the island, Aathi, who struggle between life with nature and one without it. One can clearly see the role of women in nurturing everything around them from children to Nature and culture. Aathi is an island and that's why water is life for its inhabitants. They plough and fish only when it is required . It's a search for life which seems to be leaving Aathi with the devastation of the land caused by the younger

generation . Mothers of this place had always been narrating the history of Aathi to their children so that they understand and uphold the cultural tenets of their place. The ancestors were ill-treated by the inhabitants of the western part of Aathi which was marked by

“big houses, broad roads, busy traffic, schools, hospitals, markets, the hustle and bustle of people- a culture of affluence altogether alien to the people of Aathi.” (GG,P.43)

When people of Aathi saw the death of one of the elders at the hands of these people , they decided to run away from there , not knowing where. They got separated from their families and relations, but kept moving in search of a free life controlled only by God and Nature. They reached this island of Aathi and started feeling one with fish, water, trees, birds and the pure earth. They started fishing and farming to survive among the natural surroundings. Kaaliappan started growing rice after getting the handful of seeds and clearly realised the significance of cultivating rice together and not alone. Sarah Joseph writes,

“You must be united , just and fair. No one shall cheat anyone. If anyone does, the water will surely cheat him and everyone else as well.”(GG, p.46)

Men, women ,in fact, each and every creation of God must work in coordination with each other in order to have a sustainable life. Sarah Joseph narrates the cultural, ethical and social practices of the place through stories , trading land only with its inmates without being greedy for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The unconventional plot shows the decay, death and the rebirth of Aathi. Their indigenous knowledge and life provides them enough sustenance so that they don't feel the need to depend on outside sources. They lead a self-fulfilled life of contentment. In contrast to the city dwellers , Cherie Dimaline , in her futuristic novel, *The Marrow Thieves*, depicts the horrifying condition of the indigenous native Americans who are fleeing from the urban recruiters of North America for their survival. North Americans are suffering from the rare kind of ailments as dreamlessness, sleeplessness and incapability to reproduce. They are hunting for the native Americans to extract Marrow from their bodies in order to save themselves. Similarly Joseph's characters are also very pure and healthy that's why they revolt against Kumaran and his team. Kumaran wants to convert Aathi from a village to a city but forgets about the alienation that is forced upon them from their own land. He promises to give them work only to alienate them from work itself. He offers them to wage a war against the water and the earth which sustains their life.

The novel begins with a Noor Muhammad's story of Hagar and her son Ishmael abandoned by the husband in the wilderness. Role of men is clearly evident here as they had been exploiting mother earth and leaving it unattended since time immemorial. He gave her few dates and a half-full water skin and left forever. Hagar's struggle to live starts and she feels completely helpless after the life-giving water gets over and she is left with nothing to provide to her child. The child stops responding to any stimuli and then Hagar experiences a miraculous action of Nature- a bird with its beak starts knocking the earth until it opens the fountain of water. Hagar immerses her son in the pool of water to bring him back to life.

Hagar explains to the nomads who come to drink water from that pool, and says, that water generates life and she would take utmost care of it for her child's sake and also for the future generations.

This was one of the seven stories that the storytellers kept bringing from the traditions of their homelands and immerse in the water of Aathi in order to be ready to take the blessings of Thampuran (their God). Fear and power of God and nature was the basis of Aathi's culture.

Similarly, the story of Kumaran and his beloved Kunjimathu reverberates throughout the novel making us understand the connection between man-woman and man-nature. Kumaran, who left Aathi and Kunjimathu thirty-six years back returns to the land to realise his dream of transforming Aathi into a city by building sky scarpers, factories, roads, hospitals, hotels, cinema halls, multiplexes, etc. Men have always dominated and exploited earth

and women for the sake of their own dreams as is seen here when Kumaran after spending a night with Kunjimathu , exploits and fondles her as if she is an idiot. Joseph, in this context writes,

“Beyond that he would not let her interfere with his personal dreams. Subsisting on the pickings from this place was not his idea of life.” (GG,P. 22)

Later she says,” As a memento of his manly remembrance, he ruptured her hymen and took her virginity.” (GG, P.22)

Backwaters of Aathi could only understand the plight of this young girl because they were one.

There is a story of Kayal and her mother Gitanjili who have come to Aathi acknowledging the healing powers of the place especially the life pouring water. A 5 year old Kayal was physically molested by a city man while returning from school. She has lost her speech and mental balance from then . Further Gitanjili is granted a permission to tell a story (against the tradition),and be a part of the ceremonious culture. The dark picture of the noni-indigenous community is portrayed by the writer throughout indicating that it’s time to strive to a change for a better and sustainable life.

Another female character is Shailajaa who tries to commit suicide from the terrace of the hospital where she started working as a nurse. The nerve shattering experience of seeing the forced abortions and death of the foetuses, completely moves Shailja and Joseph writes,

“Each time a woman, her womb cleaned up, left her bed in peace, Shailja went to the large toilet bowl peered in and asked in a thunderous voice : ‘That woman who is leaving: whose mother is she?’ (GG, P 75) This is the plight of our tera mater whose bosom is full of the sins of human beings.

Shailajaa leaves her husband Chandramohan in Chakkam Kadam and returns to Aathi as she could not stand the sight and smell of the rotten place although Chakkam Kadam also had

“backwaters, mangroves, fish , mussels..... .” But Chakkam Kadam’s water was completely polluted. The people who continue to live in the polluted cities end up suffering with the consuming diseases like cancer. Rachel Carson writes about the contamination of our mother earth by excessive use of pesticides, in her book, *Silent Spring*. She says that all are exposed to dangerous chemicals from birth till death.

The blessings of Aathi’s God Thampuram were missing. Thampuram had always guided and blessed people through the story tellers, who were revered and considered for every activity in the village for example, dates of daughter’s weddings, place to dig wells, naming of children, where and how to dig wells, etc. He was seen in water, fire and forest. After the introduction of the story-teller (believed sent by God), he would tell the story and the session would customarily end with: “How are we to apply the essence of this story to our lives?”(GG,P. 17)

The strong culture and the faith in God that the people of Aathi are bound to, rescue them from this ecological upheaval. In the end , Nature authoritatively shows its anger and floods the entire region purging it from its sins. Man has always bowed before the power of Nature.

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