

RESSURECTION OF PARADISE: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF *GIFT IN GREEN*

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Abstract:

Gift in Green is a novel by Sarah Joseph which she wrote in Malayalam titled *Aathi*. It has been translated by Rev. Dr Valson Thambu. In the novel she imaginatively recreates an idealized world which becomes the target of an industrialist who dreams of building an industrial township there. This world is modeled on real life incidents that occurred in Valanthakaad, an island, that is situated in the backwaters of Ernakulam District which had lush mangroves and plentiful fish. The islanders were self sufficient and engaged in traditional farming methods. There was a self-sustaining ecosystem and they practiced their own methods of farming as the water was saline in content. The mangroves were breeding grounds for fish and mussels. The islanders and all the creatures God created had an isolated paradise of their own. But one of their own kind who had left for the outside world and had grown rich now plans to build his dream project there. He not only snatches their land and water but gets in his custody the title deeds of their houses. Bereft of their home and their livelihood the islanders plan retaliation and in the forefront are the women. The novel underlines the exploitation of everything natural and pristine and rich in life by the mechanical forces of money and power. No land is safe haven for life to burst out naturally as the earth is bulldozed by imperialist forces looking for new colonies where resources are rich. It is up to the women and the young to safeguard their honor and life which is at stake.

Key words: *ecology, feminism, marginalized, industrial, activism.*

The novel *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph, recipient of Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award is a translated work by Rev. Valson Thampu, Principal, St. Stephen's College. The novel calls for deliberations from multiple perspectives. From the imaginary subplots incorporated in the theme to the narrative devices and allusions used to demarcate the cracked periphery of the

society, the novelist reminds the people of Kerala that the future they are awaiting is that of darkness. The story and the sheer size of the characters assume the depth and glory of epic proportion

The novelist Sarah Joseph, who has been in the forefront as an activist for the cause of women and the downtrodden wastes no opportunity to represent her cause through the medium of the novel. Her ecological anxieties are advanced through the transformation of the island Aathi. She locates the dawn of a civilization, on the churning of an age and regeneration thereafter through mythological frame. Through the narration of Hagar's water covenant Sarah Joseph conveys the value and purity of water that has been polluted. She narrates the story of the god that floated down the backwaters to express how man created god. The story of the black – complexioned Govinda who scooped up the mountain in his hands was used to illustrate divinity of the soil. She has also appropriated Attoor Ravi Varma's poem in the preface to imply that life itself was born out of water.

Sarah Joseph reworks on allusions, allegories and references from a variety of sources like Bible, Quran, epics, Sufi, Sen, Buddhist and St. Francis of Assisi's stories, legends, folklores through the story tellers in the novels. In one instance an episode in life of the social revolutionary Ayyankali has been alluded to taking cue from T.A Mathew's biography *Acharyan Ayyankali*

The novel *Gift in Green* as the title suggests pertains to a story of an eco-system. Therefore humans are not its protagonist; in fact they portray the dark and murky villainous roles. The characters of the novel constitute on the one hand Nature - the grasshopper, the green frog, the flying fish, the moss, the glow worm, prawns, sparrows, paddy, mangroves, springs, earth, water, sunshine, seed and on other hand man-made things like cement, steel, bridge, lorry, JCB, tiller and tipper lining the two opposed sides in the war ground. The allegorical strand is complete with the virtuous headed by Dinakaran and the vice headed by Kumaran.

The point of disruption is the dream of an industrial township by Kumaran, an expatriate over the verdant land, Aathi. He had left his native home 36 years ago for better prospects. "Kumaran was going to invest a whopping sum of Rs 10,000 crore in Aathi! Nearly 50,000 people would get employment. Imagine 50,000 jobs!" For this dream project what is at stake

are 200 acres of land, 25 acres of waterlogged mangroves, an eco system, a traditional culture, a way of living, a breeding spot and a child like unblemished verdant purity. Only a few see through the veil of falsehood; for the mind of the mass is swayed by the tune of the powerful piper, for the will of the mass is weakened by greed for money and utility.

With the help of a magician Kumaran recreated the model of a city and apartment complex to entice the local folk. He acquired the land of the landowner Ganesha Subramaniam which ended the practice of collective farming. He piled up earth, stone and garbage of the city with cruel unconcern into the enclosures where rice fish had been farmed alternately for six months so that the rest of Aathi would submerge. The stagnant water turned black gooey, spreading unbearable stench of putrefying matter. The slurry was covered with horseflies and became the breeding place for diseases. The children became ill and the western part of the land became inundated perpetually.

It was not just the land that was exploited. The thirty acres expansion of waterways that lay between Aathi Desam and the main land was filled with earth to build hospital. The waste from the hospital was let out into the river in which Shylaja previously could see her feet clearly submerged in the water. When the local people came for the ritual *Kaappu-kalakku* that coincided on the month of *Meenam*, the day before Vishu, they found the water fowl, storks and hatchlings, the fishes and prawns all either dead or captured by Komban Joy. He had mixed the deadly Endosulfan and DDT in the water leaving the water uninhabitable and unusable for a long time. Life in Aathi lost its serenity due to the continual incursion from the external world. Sarah Joseph's novel not only draws the picture of defenseless, stupefied, supportless, helpless, dispossessed, indigenous people whose traditional land, water and livelihood were wiped out by the ruthless, materialistic, opportunistic city dwellers, but she also narrates how they were able to resist and regenerate out of ashes. She suggests various avenues through which resources could be secured for posterity. One of her character Ponmani is of the opinion that only through violent killing of the enemies and bloodshed can resistance be worked out. But Dinakaran puts forward the principle of peaceful negotiations and discussions as a plan for resistance. Shylaja prefers the path of self immolation as a mode of resistance. Kunjimathu follows the course of non-violent protest like standing in the water. She and her steel-hearted

friends begin the impossible task of redemption, reconstruction and re-farming from what is left. The ritual sacrificial offering of appeasement to God at the beginning of reformation turns out to be the martyrdom of Dinakaran.

The defenseless, insecure and impoverished youth of the marginalized and isolated community organize a show of unity to resist Kumaran's plans to cut them off oxygen by encroaching upon and choking the ecosystem with barbed-wire fences and thick stone walls which offer them their only source of livelihood. With their hard work, striving and relentless creativity they put a stop to the cantankerous giant of a machine that resembled the monster Behemoth of the ancient times.

The novel upholds the eco-feminist strands in the sequence of events where women lead agitation for protection of the environment. The ideology of eco-feminism was advocated by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne. She read in to the history of woman and nature a shared or common history of exploitation and oppression by the hegemonic powers. Vandana Shiva, an activist and feminist is also in the forefront leading the movement in India. She argues that woman's relationship with nature is spiritual though irrational. The day to day life of a woman resembles the pattern of interdependence of the ecosystem the pattern of interdependence of the ecosystem in nature.

Sarah Joseph's novel proceeds along this unique relation between woman and nature. A woman may transform herself as a ferocious power of nemesis or assume the shape of a benign merciful soul which is typical of the transition of Nature. In the interview with Rev. Valson Thampu, she has remarked that she was thinking of the world famous visual of the US bombing of napalms in North Vietnam of a mother, a poor farmer rushing to get help for her nine year old son who was hit by the bombs. Initially paralyzed and terrified by the bombing, the anger in her and vengeance for America turned to 'a more sublime and constructive response'. She and her neighbors started sowing and harvesting during the spells of silence (appendix). In the novel it is Kunjimathu who keeps guard, the last flicker of life of the soil alive. She is the first to realize that her erstwhile lover has as orientation towards evil. This patriotic soul protected the homeland from the greedy clutches of her ex-lover Kumaran, observed penance in water, sowed grains that grow in salty water constructed bund carrying

mud from under the river and remained faithful to the old parents of Kumaran taking care of them in their old age.

When the illiterate Kunjimathu broke the fence, Markose observed, “this moment belongs to the mothers of Aathi” (120). Seeing her fierce willpower, Sankaran commented, “Kunjimathu is of the primeval soil! It has an endurance of its own” (210).

What the water spoke to Shailaja was about their spiritual bond.

“From the earth to the sky, from the sky to the earth.... seeping through the soil to the depths of the earth..... creeping up through the roots to the tips of leaves.... into you as you cup me in your palm and gulp me down.... and back again from you into the earth.... Am I not the flow of life itself? If I were to stop flowing, life itself would come to a halt” (209).

Shylaja had rejected her newly wedded bridegroom, Chandramohan after feeling ‘retching revulsions’ on seeing the fly infested Chakkam Kadam waterways, her in-laws house. She swore not to eat from there till she was returned to her house which was surrounded by sparkling rivulets. She had burst the myth of still born or aborted embryo buried in the earth as was made to believe, while she worked in the hospital. Her mind swam around the irony that the river sang the swansong for the last journey of these wasted lives that once lay in the haven of amniotic fluid. She had remained as a pure lotus above the muck of Chakkam Kadam. She had boasted to her in-laws and their relatives and neighbors of the clean waters of her Desam. She had stayed on to see the plight of the water turn to black goey, horseflies covered, mosquito breeding, disease bearing, stinky, sticky sludge. So she had to transform into a fierce warrior in the moment of confrontation and even challenged the enemies by threatening to immolate herself.

The fight for justice from the clutches of industrial baron Kumaran was legally pushed by Advocate Grace Chali. She unearthed the underhand dealings of Kumaran, of how he had his *benamis* and shadow companions swindle ‘the backwaters, the paddy fields and the mangrove forests’ for a song. It was she who procured the stay order against Kumaran’s landfilling order. She orchestrated the revolt teaching solidarity to the fisherfolk, brought in media attention to Aathi and assisted in shifting the *lathi* blow injured to the hospital. But when she enlightened them of the legal impediments in selling their plots of land, they sneered at her and “looked at

her as though she was naïve woman dishing out nonsense to a world of smart men” (287). It was her strong and consistent intervention through the stay order that held Aathi Desam intact. The novel gains attention also through the innovative use of narrative strategies. Through a collage of 46 chapters and smaller units, the plot and the plot within the plot have been extracted using the means of Pastiche. The novelist borrows heavily from other worthy and priceless works and celebrates them. The novel has a kaleidoscopic display through poem, prose, short story, dramatic dialogues, letters and newspaper reports. The poem of Markose, the Sufi story of Noor Mohammed, the flashback of Gitanjali, Mash's, Chembraraman's and Dinakaran's stories, the letter of Nityachaitanya Yati, the report of the 10th Kerala Legislative Environmental committee, the report of journalist G.Nirmala, the humorous conversation between the ventriloquist and the monkey, the soliloquy of the formless water etc enriched the novel elevating it to the state of a complete novel.

As the novel encapsulates the story of a region, the viability for a cultural studies analysis opens up. Sara Joseph underscores a primitive culture in all its specificities. Culture is the collective wisdom engendered by a local population who over thousands of years, through experiments and observations, has acquired a wealth of indigenous knowledge. Ethnic culture is formed out of the bond between nature and man that has been transmitted over ages. The novel traces tradition from the time when ancient cultures created gods and touched upon events at the beginning of time when in the depth of darkness of the sea, life was born, to the time in the near future when there will arise a war for water. In the novel it is water that sustained life from time immemorial. It is sheltered by Thampuran who himself has an abode. As the civilization became refined there was a transition in the structure of the temple of Thampuran- from a roof made of grass, to that palmfronds, to that of tiles and later gold plated. It bears testimony to the signs of prosperity and power. Water offers the people their livelihood- on its precincts occurs oyster picking, fish catching, prawn farming and paddy farming.

The culture on the other side is diametrically opposed to this archaic culture. “The way of life there was marked by big houses broad roads, busy traffic, schools, hospitals, markets, the hustles and bustles of the people- a culture of affluence altogether alien to the people of Aathi. In this natural cultural ethos, the fisherman caught net full of fishes. They cultivated paddy in

the salty water. It is due to the ancient wisdom of Kaliappooppa that they were able to build a mound between the backwaters and land. As the water receded they made mounds of fertile clay. The black mounds of clay would be awashed of salt as the rain hits the earth. Then they sowed the seeds. As the rain gains momentum, the prawn hatchlings that grow in the mangrove forest drift to the paddy fields. For the people even during the famine, they had fish to rely on.

In this civilization, the people kept of the time according to the rhythm of the seasons. The diurnal passage of summers and monsoons, rising of tide and its falling, cloudy and windy, full moon and new moon, days of sowing and the passage of the sun, the rainy *Karkadakam* and the heat of *Meenam*, all serve as reminders of the passage of time. They also mark time with festivals and celebrations like *Kaappu Kalakku*, observance of day of sacrifice, water sports and folk arts. P. Sankaran Nair in *Nellum Samskrutiyum* opines that everyday utterances are words that have been spoken a thousand years ago. Through them we remember our ancestors and their history (96). Sarah Joseph admits that, "Here I calibrate the passage of time on the changing patterns in farming paddy and fish. The time it takes to build a bridge, or to develop a megacity, or to destroy a place and the life of its people" (appendix). She has not adhered to 'locational specificity, historical facticity or linear flow of time'.

The novel reconstructs the ancient ways of a rural timeless society. Indigenous art and objects such as measuring cup made of bamboo (*mulanaazhi*), contract farming (*pattakrishi*), the elders of the region (*deshakaaranavar*), the light houses (*vilakkumaadam*), the construction of a hut (*kottil*), the plaiting of palm fronds, the marshy area called *meenvari*, the medicine used to clear a puddle called *thettambaral*, the *pokkali* rice field and *villuvandi* are all markers of an erstwhile thriving culture. Kunjimaathu prepares a feast for Komban Joy. "They began to cook the delicious, high quality *pokkali* rice. They made curry with the leaves of colaccasia, chips with sliced plantain, *thoran* with spinach, chutney with smoked red chillies and prawn curry flavoured with dried kokum and a glass of boiled and cooled aniseed water" (179).

Another interesting aspect of the village Aathi is the nights of storytelling. The narratives of human adventures, legends, epics, spiritual beliefs act as cross reference to give depth and layers to meaning. The stories retold in seven nights have a few novelties and resembles the string of didactic tales as in *Thousand and One Nights* which determined the fate of the people.

The stories are moralistic and oracular, portending dire consequences in the future if left unheeded. The story telling itself is a performative act. Bathing in the water near Thampuran's shrine, cladding customary white clothes, with head gear and palm fronds around his hips, face painted and with wooden torch comes the story teller in divine form. As the ritualistic narration ends Dinakaran asks "how best to apply the essence of this story to our lives" (242). Signifying the changed times the stories are at times told by women and monkeys too.

Beyond all these technicalities lie Aathi Desam and its biodiversity. In his radical book *The Web of Life* Fritjof Capra diagnosing the problems that endanger biosphere remarks that the problems are systemic which means that they are inter related and inter-dependent(2). Sarah Josph's perception is along the same lines and she talks of her convictions. "My environmental activism stems from my intuition of the umbilical cord that connects human beings with earth. I cannot accept the man-centered approach to nature. In the spiritual vision native to our country, there is no discontinuity between human beings and nature" (appendix). She points fingers at the 'predatory paradigm-shift from agriculture to agri-business that has spoiled our land and water'.

Aathi Desam and its people, particularly the women folk, are the upholders of the rustic values of life which is fine tuned to Nature. It is through their female experiential knowledge that they form a natural kinship with Nature. Valson Thampu comments on the sensual lyricism used by novelist to portray Kunjimathu : '[. . .] Kunjimathu's communion with the full moon and the bliss of consummation that the high tide' (appendix). According to feminist ecology or ecofeminism, "the patriarchal domination of women by men is the prototype of all domination and exploitation in the various hierarchal, militaristic, capitalistic, and industrial forms"(Capra, xi). This school of thought points out that "the exploitation of nature, in particular, has gone hand in hand with that of women, who have been identified with nature throughout the ages" (Capra, xi). The novelist lends agency to women in all important arenas of struggle and pain in the plot. Kunjimathu, Shylaja, Adv.Grace Chali , Kayal, Gitanjali are all participants in the action and not in the sidelines. While the menfolk destroy their own home and family and resort to violence and bloodshed to restore home, the women make a pitch for life through

solidarity, reconstructing and reviving their livelihood, resurrecting values, and caring for Nature. The water element talks, plays and sings to Shylaja and Kayal. Sarah Joseph has deliberately encrypted the character in this manner as they have to protect their honor as well as that of nature. “ Pro-environment movements sponsored in particular by feminist and dalit activist groups, their insights and advocacies, now challenge all of us to engage with environmental issues urgently, like never before” (appendix). The novel therefore has a relevance as a record of the past, of the present and of the future, all of which has been fiercely defended and protected for the contemporary and the posterity by Hagar, Kunjimathu and Mukhtar, representatives from all class, creed and race and above all women – mothers, widows, daughters and sisters. It has a universal relevance in the larger picture as the local is a reflection of the global.

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