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Revival of the Earth: An Ecocritical Reading of Sarah Joseph's *Aalohari Anandam*

[Per Capita Happiness]

Abstract

The paper aims to project the ecocritical concerns of the novel *Aalohari Anandam* [Per Capita Happiness] by the Malayalam writer Sarah Joseph. The exploitation of the environment is a global concern. In Kerala various people's movements to protect the Western Ghats are taking place. The common people are the worst affected due to environmental destructions. Sarah Joseph is a writer and activist, who voices the concern of the marginalized. The central character in the novel Paul is an eco crusader who opposes all anti-environmental practices that take place in his village. He owns a few acres of land that he turns into paddy fields and other crops. Many people lure him into making his land a unit of stone crushing as an easy way of making money. But he refuses all and leads a rebellious life. For his support there are Anu, aunty Rahel and relatives like John Mathai and Emma. As the novelist delineates the eco-consciousness of the characters depicted using lot of symbols and images from nature, the novel opens up space for an ecocritical reading. Ecocriticism is a theory that sees connection between literature and environment. Paul's identity is defined in relation to his land. The naming of his farmland as the 'bhoomivathukkal'[at the entrance to the Earth] is very significant here because the land of Paul shelters the poor and discarded.

Key Words- Ecocriticism, farming, marginalized, eco-consciousness

The rural life faces a threat due to the development that comes along with industrialization and globalization. The twenty-first century witnessed several developmental projects such as dam construction, infrastructure development, founding smart cities, techno parks, airports and establishment of multinational corporate companies to achieve economic growth. The working of quarry or stone crushers, changing paddy fields into bypass and highways and constructing water theme parks have resulted in mass dispersion of villagers and destruction of forests and water bodies. Those who speak against these anti-environmental practices are labeled as Maoists and anti-developmental. The issues related to environmental ethics have been taken up by Sarah Joseph in the novel *Aalohari Anandam* [Per Capita Happiness]. Joseph is one of the most renowned contemporary writers in Kerala. She is a feminist, writer and an environmentalist too. Her writings pay due heed on women, environment, marginalized and the deprived.

Glen Love, in his essay, “Revaluing nature toward an ecological criticism” states that “nature oriented literature offers a needed corrective to our narrowly anthropocentric view of life, nature writing shows regard for the non-human and privileges eco-consciousness over ego-consciousness” (205). Current environmental problems are largely of our own making, a by-product of culture. As historian Donald Worster explains, “We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them” (27).

Ecocriticism, a holistic approach to literature that seeks to examine the relationship between man and his environment, maintains that literature cannot be approached in a way that sets man and nature in opposition to each other. Instead, it must be approached in a way that examines man as part of an ecosystem; he is neither master nor slave to it, but simply one

part of an intricate system. This approach to literature has shown itself to be especially relevant given the growing environmental crisis.

Environmentalism is a concern for the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the natural environment, such as the conservation of natural resources, prevention of pollution, and certain land use abuses. It often supports the struggle of indigenous peoples against the spread of globalization to their way of life, which is seen as less harmful to the environment. Environmentalism is a broad philosophy, ideology and social movement regarding concerns for environmental conservation and improvement of the health of the environment, particularly as the measure for this health seeks to incorporate the concerns of non-human elements. Environmentalism advocates the preservation, restoration and/or improvement of the natural environment, and may be referred to as a movement to control pollution. At its crux, environmentalism is an attempt to balance relations between humanity and nature. Bio centric approach claims that nature has an intrinsic moral worth that does not depend on its usefulness to human beings and it is this intrinsic worth that gives rise directly to obligations to the environment. Humans are therefore morally bound to protect environment as well as individual creatures and species, for their own sake. In this sense, bio-centric views, human beings and other elements of the natural environment, both living and often non-living, are members of a single moral and ecological community.

Ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. In this relationship they are so much interdependent on each other that any disturbance in one affects the other. History has proved this every now and then that with every change in the civilization the relationship of animals and human beings have also changed. The effect on civilization of the changes in environment has been so acute that sometimes it has wiped the whole civilization from the face of the earth. Therefore, concern for ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. It is the concern of every

country to replenish the diminishing factors of ecology which threatens human beings the most. Literature well known for reflecting the contemporary issues could not have remained unaffected from this theme. The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism.

Literature and environment studies—commonly called ecocriticism or environmental criticism in analogy to the more general term literary criticism—comprise an eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative that aims to explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment (Glotfelty 415). Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today. In this, ecocriticism concurs with other branches of the environmental humanities—ethics, history, religious studies, anthropology, humanistic geography—in holding that environmental phenomena must be comprehended, and that today's burgeoning array of environmental concerns must be addressed qualitatively as well as quantitatively.

Ecocriticism has grown exponentially from its inception in the early 1990s as an organized initiative. The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment has become a worldwide movement with chapters throughout Europe, East and South Asia, and Australia-New Zealand, though scholars from the Anglophone world, especially the United States and the United Kingdom, still predominate (Garrard 203). The word 'ecocriticism' first

appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" in 1978. Cheryll Glotfelty had not only revived the term but also worked for its use in the critical field. At present ecocriticism is in full swing and is a readily accepted theory worldwide. It is said to be the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. Its practitioners explore human attitudes toward the environment as expressed in nature writing. It is a broad genre that is known by many names like green cultural studies, ecopoetics and environmental literary criticism, which are some popular names for this relatively new branch of literary criticism. Literary criticism in general examines the relations between writers, texts and the 'the world'. Ecocriticism expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere. Ecocriticism takes an earth centered approach to literary criticism. Ecocritics and theorists are concerned with the questions if the nature is being represented in a piece of literature or if the physical setting has a role in the plot or if the values expressed in the work is consistent with the ecological wisdom. They also examine that in addition to race, class and gender, in what ways and to what effect the environment crisis is seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture. Ecocriticism, brings together environmental and literary studies. Ecocriticism is defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" when such study moves beyond treating the environment as background (setting) or symbol. (Glotfelty xviii.) While ecocriticism remains closely associated with literary studies, the term ecocriticism is increasingly also used to denote work in other disciplines focused on issues of environmental representation. Ecocriticism has always had an interdisciplinary component, although the necessary relationship between ecocriticism and science (especially ecology) has been complicated, and is also closely associated with political advocacy and specifically with theorizing "...about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction." (Lawrence, *Writings for an Endangered World* 302). Ecocritics seek to make their work

relevant to efforts directed at understanding environmental degradation and finding less destructive ways of living with and within nature than those offered by the dominant modern ways of the world. As Lawrence Buell claims, “The success of all environmentalist efforts finally hinges not on ‘some highly developed technology, or some new science’ but on ‘a state of mind’: on attitudes, feelings, images, narratives,” all of which can be found in “acts of environmental imagination.” (Lawrence 1-2). Ecocriticism has come to mean not only the application of ecology and ecological principles to the study of literature, but also the theoretical approach to the interrelational web of natural cultural and supernatural phenomena. It began to explore constructions of environment in literary texts and theoretical discourse. Even the aesthetic categories by which our feelings for nature are understood as the beautiful, the picturesque, the scenic, the sublime, the wild etc. have been defined largely by their use in literary and critical contexts. Most ecological work shares a common motivation, that is, the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet’s basic life support system. This awareness brings in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration, not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Ecocritics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. The abundance of imagery and metaphor included in this novel truly helps the reader to fully understand what ecocriticism is.

Another argument in this regard came from Indian environmentalist Vandana Shiva. Shiva argues that through the masculinisation of agriculture, globalization has an adverse effect on gender justice, turning nature and women into passive fields for sowing and permitting corporations to plunder local resources, removing capital from local hands while importing western concepts of individualism, ownership and the market place into cultures

that thrived on community, cooperation and respect for the nature. She uses her analytical ability to uncover the semantic engineering that goes on when global corporations colonize and destroy traditional agriculture in the Third World. Shiva's works uncovers the metaphors and the models underlying the so-called modernization of agriculture, attack on the nature and women. Shiva's approach can be read on two levels. First we have the factual, objective analysis of how rural traditions in India are being dismantled and the call to resist physically and politically. Then, on the meta-analytical level, Shiva critically delineates how the myths associated with neoliberal projects and 'solutions' are being formulated. From a critical discourse analytical standpoint it is significant to note that Shiva is a discerning observer of how language is employed in this process. In *Staying Alive*, Vandana Shiva looks at the history of development and progress, stripping away the neutral language of science to reveal third-world development policy as the global twin of the industrial revolution. As Shiva makes clear, the way this development paradigm is being implemented—through violence against nature and women—threatens survival itself. She focuses on how rural Indian women experience and perceive the causes and effects of ecological destruction, and how they conceive and initiate processes to stop the destruction and begin regeneration. As the world continues to follow destructive paths of development, Shiva's *Staying Alive* is a fiercely relevant book that positions women not solely as survivors of the crisis, but as the source of crucial insights and visions to guide our struggle.

Joseph's *Aalohari Anandam* is about the notion of being and the varied colours of happiness that human beings are capable of attaining. It can be seen that flexible relationships and identities have got equal status to the heteronormative existence. The novel aims to help develop both a sexual politics that demonstrate a clearer understanding of the biosocial constitution of the natural world and an environmental politics that takes into consideration how sexual relations influence nature and our perceptions of it.

The central character in the novel is Paul who is a farmer. He has a spiritual relationship with his land. The struggles he takes to protect his land from corporates and encroachers find fruition with the support from characters like Rahel, John Mathai, Anu and others. The novel portrays the life of 'Mannil'[meaning 'of the soil'] family that thrives in and around 'bhoomivathukkal' [Entrance to the Earth]. Paul is a graduate in Physics but selects farming as his occupation. His method of farming is purely organic. He is against the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in his land. He sleeps in a shed that he himself constructed at the corner of the field and he uses only a solar lamp. This constitutes the paradise called 'bhoomivathukkal'. Paul had to refuse many offers from business men, for giving away his hill for stone crush. He takes no interest in those offers because for him land is dearer than anything else. The thriving life in 'bhoomivathukkal' is depicted thus; "The life in 'bhoomivathukkal' is in a festive mood. He taught them to celebrate the sowing of seeds, blooming of flowers and growth of seeds. He kept a piece of land that belongs to none but belongs to all, at the same time. The land cannot be taken away by anyone" (347).

The surrounding places near 'bhoomivathukkal' are all destroyed for development. The old churches gave way to tall concrete buildings, large theatre complexes are made, jewelry shops and hospitals have destroyed the village already. Paul and his aunty Rahel did not give up their farming and hence the whole hill places remain unaffected. Man's two opposite characters are shown in these lines: "You are waiting. The maze blooms and had seeds. You harvested it and are happy. While you go to bed, you ask yourself 'what do you produce'? Something like nectar. You sleep peacefully. You can produce something poisonous. But you don't" (327).

Paul's marital life is so disturbed that he finds peace only at 'bhoomivathukkal'. For him, the paddy fields, the hill of Nambrath and ponds are the only solace. His interaction with

nature is more spontaneous. His approach to farming is traditional also. He never expects profit from his farming. He makes use of cow dung as fertilizer.

Sarah Joseph, in her novels has explored the relationship between the human world and the environment with a spirit of commitment. Thus the novel under analysis opens up a space for ecocritical reading. The term 'Eco-criticism' studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As Greg Garrard, the renowned eco-critic, defines the term ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, through human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself" (5). Ecocritics examine a work of art on the basis of its significant tropes and myths that shape our environmental imagination and action. This theoretical approach is used for studying the structure of environmental problems in literature and attempts to achieve pluralism in environmental discourse.

As ecocritics argue, man is part of nature. Moreover, nature is considered as the mother and the all-giving. The land of 'bhoomivathukkal' is portrayed as Eden, and Paul and Anu as Adam and Eve. They are abandoned from the Garden of Eden because of moral codes. Paul and Anu find peace only in the paddy fields and finds pleasure in drinking water from the ponds.

Sarah Joseph details the pesticide use of a clergy in his garden. This seemingly less dangerous action of spraying pesticides has serious implications on the environment, as the situation from the novel points out. As Kate Rigby says, "there is no place on the Earth that has not been affected in some way by humanity's alteration of the natural environment" (154).

Pleasure or happiness of humans is linked to nature. Life of Paul and Anu exemplifies this fact. When Paul finds his lover, he feels that they are connected through nature. That is

why, whenever Paul meets Anu, he gifts her a tuft of sweet smelling curry leaves. Many other people in the novel Rahel, Deepu Antony and Emma have a harmonious existence with nature.

The novel *Per Capita Happiness* tries to counteract the arrogant anthropocentric view that human beings are separate from and superior to nature, which exists to serve our needs. "Nature has unqualified intrinsic value, with humans having no privileged place in nature's web. Emphasis is placed on value at holistic levels, such as populations, ecosystems, and the Earth as a whole, rather than individual entities" (Barnhill 1).

Paul inherits much of his views towards nature and farming from his father. He believes that not all natural pieces of land on a farm should be used for farming purposes, since this will exhaust the soil. Paul's identity is dependent on the land he lives. His interaction with nature might reveal about his relationship with the other characters in the novel. As he respects and values the environment and the non-human, his acknowledgement of his wife's queer sexuality invokes no wonder. Theresa gets support from Paul to continue her life with her student-partner.

Paul is worried about the future of the land he protects. He places his faith in the land and taps its wealth by gentle means rather than by conquest or domination. His relationship to place is spiritual as well as economic, and he views himself as collaborating with the land rather than imposing his will upon it. Moreover, he is fully aware that his destiny and that of the land are inseparable. This attitude reflects many of the features of deep ecological thinking. As Fridjof Capra noted, the new ecological worldview represents "a shift from self-assertion to integration," accompanied by a "shift from the rational to the intuitive, from analysis to synthesis, from reductionism to holism, from linear to non-linear thinking" (24).

Aware of the primacy of nature, Paul respects and loves the land, knowing full well how fragile the farming communities are in the face of nature's adversity.

Paul's point here- that love and ethical responsibility to the land are the prerequisites for a reciprocal and sustainable relationship- exemplifies a shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. This idea is advocated in Aldo Leopold's land ethic and Arne Naess's philosophy of Deep Ecology. In his classic work, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold argues that land use cannot be based on economic expediency alone, but must involve ethical and aesthetic considerations. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). This and the following observation on the human place in nature are also at the centre of Sarah Joseph's novel:

A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these resources, but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state. In short, a land ethic changes the role of homo sapiens from conqueror of the land – community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow member, and a respect for the community as such. (Leopold 240)

Paul asserts that the conservation of natural sites is imperative. The wanton destruction of natural habitats, and source of water bodies as in the case of Cherian's attempt to start quarry at the top of Nambrath hill is symptomatic of a modern, rapacious rationality that considers nature as a disposable resource. In doing so Cherian seems to break the central rule in deep ecological thinking, namely that all forms of life have intrinsic value and a right to exist. It is valid and appropriate to read Paul's indictment of environmental degradation against the background of the global race for natural resources.

The growing moral and emotional distance between the land and those who make their livelihood on it is reflected in the mechanical farming methods. Paul anticipates here the shift from agriculture, rooted in the traditions of close-knit farming communities, to the industrialized farming operations of corporate agribusiness, a shift that threaten the solidarity of rural communities, the independence of individual farmers, and the health of the larger ecological community.

Paul defines himself in terms of the land, relates to it on an intuitive level, and understands that the health of the land is inextricably linked to the future of his family. In fact he sacrifices himself in order to protect the soil for the benefit of the future generation. John Mathai's words echo Paul's anxiety regarding his land: "Dear friend, this land will remain like this in your time only. What will happen after that? I hear the sound of a machine that comes to pluck your grandpa's cross from this hill. I hear the sound of a machine that comes to destroy your sacred well. Look beyond the horizon. The future is terrible!" (109)

If one examines Paul's work as a farmer, it becomes readily apparent that his complete integration into the local ecology precisely fits Fridjof Capra's definition of a deep ecological outlook:

Deep ecology does not separate humans from the natural environment, nor does it separate anything else from it. It does not see the world as a collection of isolated objects but rather as a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent. Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic values of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life. (20)

In life and death, Paul exemplifies a caring, ecologically responsible stance toward the land. He cares little that his neighbors, who employ tricks to lure him into business. He cares more

about protecting the soil as a source of future fertility. He accepts nature's adversity when rain destroys one year's paddy harvest. Again and again, we see him at one with the place in which he has invested a life's work.

Much of Sara Joseph's writings embody deep ecological thinking and provide a fresh opportunity for ecocritical readings. Her works provide insights into the human place in creation and offer a corrective to the still pervasive human dislocation from the biosphere. They caution us against jumping on the bandwagon of globalization if globalization disconnects us and others around the world from our cultural and spiritual ties to place. And they speak directly against the idea of ecological exploitation in the name of economic growth which is so often associated with globalization. The land which was rich for its rare varieties of herbs and ecological wealth was almost plundered away by quarry mafia. The land is stripped naked.

The beginning chapter of the novel, named 'a tray of fruits' details Anu's preferences. She likes guava very much among the fruits arranged in pyramid shape. But if she chooses the guava she likes, the whole pyramid structure of fruits may collapse. On the other hand, her husband Cherian's favourite fruit is plantain. The passage shows the contrasting character of Cherian and Anu. She is romantic and loves to dream always. "Anu dreamt of a pomegranate falling on the floor and each seed of it walks like little babies" (10).

Paul is always ready to help the poor and downtrodden. He is a member of Mannil family. The term 'mannil' means 'of the Earth'. He belongs to the Earth and created a farm house calling it 'bhoomivathukkal' [at the entrance to the Earth]. He helps the needy to get loans and other monetary help from the bank, where Cherian works as the manager. But Paul's attempts to help the poor are rejected by the crooked manager Cherian. Cherian's selfish attempts to own the hill of Nambrath for starting a crushing unit is right away rejected

by Paul. Cherian plans the deal like this: “A small deal. If Paul agrees, he and Cherian start a share business...At the top of Athamala, Cherian’s friend has a crushing unit with an area of ten kilometer. He earns lakhs of money through this business. Hill of Nambrath is the continuation of Athamala” (14). A friend of Cherian advised him to have a discussion with Paul on the subject of the hill. He says “the place is the sea of stones. It will bring huge profit” (14). But Paul refused the offer. He liked simple living. For him the farmland ‘bhoomivathukal’ is everything. It filled the gap in his life. The farm house there consists of minimum required for a person. “Bhoomivathukkal is a big hay thatched farm house. The windows are made of bamboos. Cowdung is used as tile. The veranda is wide. There is a single cot made of coir. There is a pair of table and chair, two benches, a small bookshelf and a solar lamp. There are cow sheds next to the farm house. The hay stacks are surrounded by curry plants. The air smells curry leaves” (15).

Hill of Nambrath has a story to tell. At the top of the hill, there is an old cross belong to the Mannil family. It is constructed by one of the ancestors to die there. That old man fasted for forty days on the cross only drinking water from the well. On the fortieth day death came to him as he wished. Thus the hill has got a spiritual ambience also. It became a practice among the villagers to climb the hill and fast there. The water in the well also thought to be miraculous. People feel rejuvenated and they attach some ‘holiness’ to the hill. But business minded people like Cherian and his friends think about exploiting the place for its treasure of rock.

The practice of farming in ‘bhoomivathukal’ helps to alleviate the gravity of the emptiness and bareness of the marriage life of Paul and Theresa. Being a lesbian Theresa fails to understand Paul. For Paul, ‘bhoomivathukkal’ was a place that he found as a substitute for the unfruitful married life. He watered the plants in the farm, loved the cattles and slept in the shed. Life attained meaning when he harvested at the end of the year.

Paul's approval of his wife's lesbian relationship created huge uproar in the society. The relatives and church discarded him and there was nobody to buy his vegetables. The situation is worsened by the desertion of his workers at the time of harvest. He could only watch his paddy in despair as "all paddy plants are fully ripe and they stoop to the ground. Above that there was mist and moonlight. The wind blows. And Paul could not sleep" (235). It started to rain over the hill of Nambrath. "Paul stood helpless near the field. The whole paddy of 'bhoomivathukal' is getting destroyed in the heavy rain as nobody is willing to reap it" (236). Anu is ready to help Paul. "Anu did not sleep. She did not go to Bhoomivathukal before. She did not see paddy fields in Nambrath. She heard people talk about the peacock there. She wanted to see the peacocks. At Nambrath, she heard that there is a well full of water always. And she knew that there is an old cross on the rock made by a grandfather who wished to die there. Everyone says that moonlight over Nambrath is clearer. For her, those things are wonders of a faraway land" (241). This pleasant memory of 'bhoomivathukkal' has now become painful. "Now, in Anu's imagination, it is Paul who is lying at the cross at Nambrath. The colour of moonlight is red. That red colour is flowing among the dried leaves" (241).

The paddy fields are destroyed in the heavy rain. "Paul stood outside in the rain with his paddy. He witnessed each and every plant touch the soil. He calculated the heavy loss. The loss is not personal. The food of others that is destroyed in the rain. The food is for the poor and the needy. It was for cattles and humans. But he could do nothing to save it. If he works hard, he can repair the financial loss. But the injustice done to the Earth, labour and the ripe plants is irreparable. The ripe paddy belongs not to the owner but to the poor" (248). Paul thought that the revenge of the society destroyed the right of the poor to have their food. When Anu came for the support of Paul they both walked to the fields. That moment is described as holy-"they both reached the field, they are baptized" (249). This shows the

author's earth centred spirituality. This passage suggests that Paul's ultimate allegiance lies with nature which he sees as the matrix of human lives. The values and wisdom Paul embodies are particularly pertinent at a time when multinational corporate agribusiness is engaged in the global industrialization of agriculture. The harmonious existence of human, non human and nature is essential for the existence of life on the Earth. The novel depicts how a non hierarchical society thrives in utmost happiness and satisfaction.

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