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Critique of Patriarchal System: An Ecofeminist Rendering of Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

In the contexts of developing and underdeveloped nations, ecology that is exposed to massive exploitation, is often given a feminist approach. Different ecofeminist thinkers and theorists in these countries hypothesize the relationship between humans and his surrounding using various gender concepts. The ecofeminists use their social movements as well as theoretical inquiries to resist the formation of domination over certain groups and construct politics for planetary survival and social egalitarianism. They seek to promote the desired society where they oppose such aspects as misuse of certain beings that compromises global sustainability. The ecofeminists, therefore, assume an imperative role in preserving a natural order.

With the prevailing invasion of the ecosystem by men, women are often mistreated and denied their rights as equal members in the society. Tethering the patriarchal systems with the

exploitation of nature by the capitalist forces, ecofeminists posit that men are the cause of catastrophes such as desertification, pollution, and flooding among others. Using the paradigm, they unveil the invasion of the ecology and available natural resources by superior and developed countries in the names of development, urbanization, and globalization. Although the encroachment affects virtually every individual in these nation, it has more impacts on the marginalized groups such as women and children. That is because unlike other members of the community who may have other means of livelihood, the marginalized often depend on the natural provisions for survival. More so, in less developed and poor nations, the society depends on agriculture for food and other basic needs essential for survival. Therefore, invasions, coming in the names of urbanization and industrialization interrupts the weather patterns, results in erosion washing away the fertile soil, and leads to different forms of pollution that affect agricultural production. In times of such invasions, women and children are the most affected due to their dependence on the naturally existing resources for food, medicine, and clothing among other aspects.

Sarah Joseph, a cultural ecofeminist evaluates the experiences, exploitation and connection of women and nature. Men are brought out as enemies of the latter. They are out to commercialize all activities and use all at their disposal for personal benefits. Grounding the basis on Sarah Joseph's book *Gift in Green* it is vivid that the socialist ecofeminist accentuates a patriarchy community where women and nature are often subjugated and lowly regarded despite their contributions in sustaining the society

"*Gift in Green*" by Sarah Joseph reflects the beauty as well as the anguish and frustrations of an imaginary primordial village called Aathi, a primordial village. which is the nameless narrator of the novel. Aathi is an island that has retained its natural beauty as well as

primitive purity. Initially, it was untouched by invasion and interference from the outside world. However, the once pure island is later transformed through Kuraman who turns it into a city, with the intention of making huge profits. That brought in conflicts, diseases, pollution, displacement as well as migration in the village. *Gift in Green*, a book written in an ecological perspective, present the pain and panic that resulted from a disrupted relationship between man and the environment. Nevertheless, the book provides hope for restoration of the lost glory. Critically, the author employs water as the major metaphor where she predicts the roaming catastrophe on humanity due to the ongoing encroachment. That is done through the identification of various human actions that have resulted in the disruption of the naturally existing environment. She cites various issues that relate to development, urbanization, deforestation, tourism, uprooting, water contamination, and environmental pollution among others as the immediate issues of the people living in Aathi village. According to the author, the advancement in technology and science are responsible for the destruction of nature in its holistic form.

From the ecofeminists perspectives, the patriarchal civilization is not true progress. Instead, it is considered an extension of the domination by the individuals in power. That proves that the system results in further exportation of the inferior members of the society and nature as well. True progress results from the multiplicity of all beings working in unison. Ecofeminists promote the ideal of empowering diverse individuals where they are empowered through political, cultural, and environmental processes. It is, therefore, apparent that the overpowered should stand their grounds to oppose all forms of mistreatment that compromises the future of the society.

Sarah Joseph blames men for the different types of ecological destructions and invasions that results in environmental degradation and possibilities of fights or resistance. She criticizes

the existing models and practices and suggests workable and ideological ecofeminists perspectives that are founded on sustainability. This study presents an analytical study of *Gift in Green* and expounds the interconnection of woman and nature from cultural ecofeminists' perspectives. Moreover, the study accentuates the socialist ecofeminist's perspective that sees the anthropocentric view of the world, and places the man at the center and women and nature at the margins, leading to the prevailing societal destruction.

The novel *Gift in Green* is set in an unravished and unadulterated terrain of Aathi village. It is tailored as a counter space against the causes of various forms of cultural, material, and political invasions in the village. In the novel, the author describes the life in Aathi initially as pure and free from all forms of pollution. She states that:

For generations, the people of Aathi had deemed that land to be Thampuram's. No one had ever dared to take advantage of it in any way. (Joseph, 4).

From the description, it is apparent that Aathi was a peaceful community that nourished and protected all forms of life. That is viewed in the peaceful co-existence of different animal species. The village, for a long time, had successfully withstood the invasion and effects of modernization, urbanization, and commercialization. In the beginning, it had uninhabited marshy areas that were secluded from the mainstream. These lands formed the natural habitats for different animal species and plants. Unable to withstand the oppression and pressure from landlords and individuals in upper classes the outcasts of the society gradually began settling in Aathi. Although it was an arduous task to start life from the emptiness that existed, the outsiders eventually settled on the land, exploiting all its natural resources and interrupting the normal way of life. In the beginning, the entire people in the village; both men and women

worked untiringly to gold reap from the swamps, without compromising the existence of the natural resource. They had established a close connection with nature and showed their kids that forest cover and water bodies were integral sections of their lives. After the paddy cultivation was over, women grew fish in the water which was an alternative source of their livelihood. They had knowledge that the available resources also belonged to their future generations, hence, captured only what was necessary for their survival. They led a sustainable way of life that did not compromise the abilities of future generations to meet their basic needs.

However, that was until Kumaran an earlier resident of Aathi returned the village. Kumaran, who had left the land in search of better prospects and luxuries of life, came back with the intention of marketing the available natural resources for his financial gains. He facilitated the establishment of among other aspects, towns and industries that resulted in the interruption of the previously peaceful village. His plan was to transform Aathi into a modern village that had access to the latest technologies and infrastructure. For a seamless completion of his plans, Kumaran convinced the village youth about the benefits of his proposed development where he promised them an increase in the available job opportunities and an overall advancement of their lifestyle. Eventually, the village developed two distinct extremes separated by the Kumaran's proposition where some supported while others discarded modernity. Majority of the opposers were women such as Kunjimathu, who despite having a close connection with Kumaran, she silently supported the campaign against modernization of the village. He introduced scientific fishing methods that destroyed the tiny and immature fish. Birds and butterflies started fleeing from the destroyed mangrove forests. The chemicals used in different commercial activities started leaking into the paddy lands that had been a source of food for generations. Aathi, a land

that was once recognized for its pure and clean water was filled with sewage as well as pathogens.

Kumaran towers above the fortress of primordial simplicity of Aathi just like the global powers over the undeveloped and underdeveloped nations that are bestowed with natural resources, pure water, and air. The novel tries to protest against the power structures that are involved in conquest. That is because these powers not only victimize certain beings but they also result in the destruction of the only means of societal livelihood. Political domination as well as patriarchy system in Aathi resulted in the destruction of nature and victimization and mistreatment of women, who play a central role in ensuring the flow of life in the community.

To some, the invasion was viewed as a positive development for the village due to the associated financial benefits. They, however, they had overlooked the negative impacts of depleting the available natural resources. The invasion not only destroyed natural habitats for the animal species but it resulted in the death of many species due to the lack of food and pollution. Moreover, the encroachment exposed the community to abuse by superior nations. Joseph (5) brings out Kumaran as a representative of all corporate agencies, as well as business tycoons, who took part in and facilitated the misuse of the existing resources by the global market. The eventual embracement of industrialization and market culture exposed the village to global misuse as developed nations invested in search of natural resources, pure air as well as water.

In the name of urbanization, Aathi became infested by the encroachment that was designed and undertaken by men led by Kumaran. Critically, the exploitation is designed to meet selfish needs without minding the possible impacts of the actions and the threats they pose to the society and future generations. The author discloses a heart-rending image of the way consumerist drive rapes the purity as well as virginity of the land. The ruthlessness and greed

nature of men destroys the purity and the existence of water and other natural resources that are the basis of life. From the past, it is apparent that the community had affectionate feelings towards the Mangrove forest that they called the Green Bangle. The forest provided an enchanting world from its serene nature and cool waters. From the novel, Joseph defines the people of Aathi as the children of soil where they had surrounded their lives in the Green Bangle mystery.. That is viewed in among other instances, the people's storytelling. In explaining Kumaran's experience with nature, the author explains;

Watching the fallow leaves fall noiselessly on the water, then float towards and accumulate at the bank, he would weave the tapestry of his life – interpretations. He would listen to the blessing of flowers, watch the moss dance, the glow worm emerge from their hideouts, and read the trails of tiny worms. His mind would clear; his lungs fill with a new vitality and his stomach with heavenly happiness. (Joseph, 25).

That shows the strong connection between nature and the community. It is apparent that the community is blessed with the benefit of Thampuran, its source of livelihood and prosperity. The only source of livelihood is encroached by Kumaran, who in search of material advancement, he abandons not only his beloved but also the natural gifts such as water. From the depiction, he is a vicious character who represents the modern generation that not only disregards their emotions but also compromises their values for material gain, luxury, and enjoyment. It is apparent that after his exposure to the outside world, Kumaran came back to the village and promoted the urbanization and industrialization ideals, plunging the society into its doom. Kumaran intends to exploit the resources and fertility of Aathi community for his personal

economic gain. In his efforts, he turns the previously rich and pristine land into a jungle where the only concern is making profits. His actions changed the integrity of the society that had previously molded their lives in preserving the natural resources where they started selling their lands to him. He had become the corporate landlord, an aspect that gave him a chance to exploit the naturally existing resources for his economic gains. Unlike the male characters in the novel, females disclose their intimate connection with nature and they believe that destroying nature takes their only source of refuge away from them. As such, they take initiatives not only to preserve nature but also to prevent encroachments such as the one brought by Kumaran. These women characters who include Dinakaran and Ponmani, view the nature and land as their source of livelihood. They consider Aathi their soul as well as heart and believe that Kumaran's strategies pose a threat to the community. Joseph (41) explains that;

The characters sensed that certain schemes and clandestine activities were underway. Strangers came, assessed, assented or dissented, and went away some came and tarried in the tent and roamed the mangrove forests. But why, and what it was all about, remained wicker. An air of uncertainty and anxiety pervaded.(45)

The female characters in the novel are against the enterprises that focus on changing the way of life in Aathi with the premise of improving the way of life. Dinakaran and Ponmani opposed the construction of an edifice of gold for Thampuran, the thatched shrine that Kumaran believed needed improvement to embrace modernity. Critically, Kumaran and other men in the society do not only target nature but also all the activities undertaken by women. They have, therefore, created laws and army to justify their ill intentions for their selfish gain. Unlike men

who focus on destroying the resources bestowed in the community, women are presented as real developers and preservers of the available resources. For instance, Thampuran's shrine was built by women in the community. They ensured that the shrine is thatched every year. That proves that women held a close connection with their nature and their god, an aspect that miss among men who breaks down the wall of the shrine in the name of building a modern one. It is apparent that Kumaran's efforts made the women insecure and afraid as they are left with no place of worship. Moreover, they feared for nature, their goddess and felt that violence to nature was violence to them. The connection between women and nature is viewed in their objection to the various changes proposed by Kumaran. Their inner spirit saves the land where they not only oppose the exploitation but they also refrain from any activities that harm nature.

Kunjimathu, a female character and Kumaran's lover, pursues the preservation of nature, even after getting jilted by her lover. Despite the adversities that confronted her, Kunjimathu never give in to anything that destroyed nature. As viewed in the novel, her life was meaningless devoid of the pristine water life of her community. She stands for the preservation of nature to ensure its continued wellbeing. It is visible that she holds a blissful connection with nature, unlike Kumaran, who does not care if he results in the destruction of the surrounding for his economic gains. She knows that "water knows everything and forgets nothing" (Joseph, 21). Kumaran had constructed granite embankment that cemented all gaps to ensure that no water passes to the other side, an aspect that interrupted the natural environment. Kunjimathu, on the other hand acted as a guardian angel of the waters of Aathi and she does all she can to shield the natural resource from the contemptable exploitation started by Kumaran. As evidenced in the novel, Kunjimathu is totally connected with the waters. She is the only one able to listen and hear the wailing of water frantic to pass Kumaran's embankment. Unable to endure the pitiful sight

and well assound of the waters, she feels ‘drained’ and her body becomes limp, making her sink into the ground (Joseph, 196).

Kanjimanthu’s perseverance and indomitable spirit to save her land are depicted in a heartrending manner in the novel. Kumaran, on the other hand, wants to build hospitals, schools, and factories among other facilities to introduce modernity into the community. He teaches the society to dream and live a city life with new facilities that may enable them to lead a splendid and carefree life. All the social, economic and cultural invasions ultimately result in changing a place from its natural habitat to an artificial environment, an aspect that resulted in the objection from women. Women are brought out as the true custodians of nature that men are in the forefront exploiting. That shows the way Aathi community had placed men at the center where they hold all powers over nature and women. The latter, on the other hand, are given a place at the end where they live at the mercies of men, their superior.

Shailaja, who is married to Chandramohan of Chakkamkandan is the other major female character who discloses a strong connection between women and nature and their alienation and exploitation from men. From the novel, the character cannot cope with the filthy nauseating atmosphere of ChakkamKandam that is highly polluted. She discovers the unmeaning secret that no one would eat a morsel of food or drink a drop of water in their house. All the water sources that were spread upfront of the house are highly polluted. Shailaja does not like adjusting to maladjusted environment and her self-determination makes her return to her parents’ home. Like other female characters in the novel, Shailaja is in the forefront destroying the bridge built by Kumaran. She believes that the constructions are a threat to the environment and she tries her best to prevent the depletion of nature. From an analytical perspective, Shailaja and her marriage to Chandramohan not only discloses her interconnection as a woman with nature, but, it also

accentuates men as the root causes of societal and environmental destruction. That is viewed by the extent of pollution in her marital home where although everyone else was adapted to the polluted environment, she cannot adjust to the maladjustments and opts to return to her maternal home, proving her connection with nature. Her efforts to fight and destroy various constructions further shows her connection with nature as like other women, she does not want anything that will interrupt the normal ways of things. From the writer's perspective, men in Aathi are put at the centre where nature and women are not considered, despite their essential contributions in supporting life and prosperity.

That is viewed in among other instances, the visitation of Gitanjali and Kayal to Aathi. During their visit, Kayal has been inflicted with a strange disease and the two are seeking remedy for the condition. Eco-feminism throws light on the way the female body is treated as a territory to be colonized by patriarchy. As Shiva (29) elaborates in the book *Eco-feminism*, "Colonization of seed, reflects the patterns of colonization of Women's bodies. Profits and power become intimately linked to invasion into all biological organisms". (45) A woman's body is her terrain and her environment and she has the entire right over her body. However, from Sarah Joseph's novel, it is apparent that women are entirely objectified and alienated from their bodies. Thus "*Know the water*"- was the remedy prescribed by Kayal's Guru (61). Aathi, where the air is light, the water pristine and the wind pure will catalyze the recovery. Gitanjali tells a moral story to the people of Aathi, a land that has its codes and norms and abounds in rituals, traditions and specific customs. The plot is designed with a double focus. There is, on the one hand, the life and struggles of the people of Aathi, specific to the context and quite earthy in its portrayal. The plot pivots the decay, death and phoenix-like regeneration of Aathi. The inexorable progression of the plot is seemingly interrupted by the periodic ceremony of story-

telling nights. Diverse stories are narrated. However, they reflect profoundly on the plight and destiny of the people of Aathi.

The book speaks against the anthropocentric worldview which installs human beings, more so males, at the centre of the world. It gives a clarion call necessitating the inclusion of all species in culture and tradition that had faith in *vasudaivakudumbakam*. Sarah Joseph brings out the water- life in Aathi community as an exemplar of the proposed integral and primordial vision. In the book, she writes:

There had been a covenant between them and the water. The fish, the frogs, the crabs, the oysters, the birds, the butterflies, the reptiles, the grass, the bushes and the mangrove forest were all signatories to that water covenant. You will give us water and livelihood. We shall work with you and take care of you (201).

As deep ecology envisages, humans contribute only a part of nature and there is no ontological disconnection between our species and others. As Martin Heidegger has written, "*Man is not the lord of the universe. Man is the shepherd of Being*" (Glazebrook 22). Therefore, human beings have the moral responsibility as well as authority to ensure that every being and species on earth has their needed and essential share of food, water, air, shelter and dignity. That is confirmed by Barnhill (1) who elaborates that

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

Aathi retained its holiness and purity until the arrival of modernity in the disguise of Kumaran, who despised the uncivilized life of the village folks. Kumaran's proposed developments were initially for the welfare of Aathi community. However, they transformed the island into a filthy dump where all the natural resources had been destroyed. His plans facilitated the plans to exploit the pure village to earn him some money. He did not care about the harm he would cause to the village and its inhabitants including Kunjumathu, his lover. Unlike Kumaran, Kunjimathu, an innocent village girl was in love with him. Nevertheless, like most female characters in the novel, she could neither conform with Kumaran's hatred for village and life in it nor his fanciful wish for city life. She, however, hoped that he would, one day, recognize the virtue of the village. Taking advantage of Kunjimathu's blind love, Kumaran, possesses her virginity. He established mastery over Kunjimathu's body as he did to Aathi. That shows that through his actions, both nature and woman become the mute victims of male supremacy. Ecofeminists noted that women and nature were often portrayed as disorderly, irrational and needed control. Males, on the other contrary, were attributed with rationalism, and order, hence, were capable of controlling the use as well as the advancement of women and nature. The ecofeminists posit that the arrangement leads to a hierarchical structure where all power is bestowed on men who are allowed to exploit women and nature. The close tie between humans and nature is clearly depicted in the words of the omniscient narrator.

To be a man, one must have a body made firm by working hard on the land, tilling and sowing. To know the mind of a woman, he has to know, first, the mind of the land' (Joseph, 20).

From another perspective, it is apparent that the narrator insinuates that the society had the preconception that in becoming a man, one must have supremacy over both nature and

women, an aspect that has led to the easy victimization as well as the exploitation of both. Women and nature are considered man's subject that he understands and exploits for personal comfort and gain. Moreover, the narrator brings men out as commercialists who work on land, tills, and sows to make his body firm and concurrently earning income. From the novel, it is explained that unlike Kumaran who dreamt of transforming the Aathi into an urban community, the rice, fish, water, paddy fields, the lake, and the marshes dotted with dappled *pullichembu* completed the world of Kunjimathu. Kunjimathu knew the truth that water knows everything and forgets everything. She, therefore, maintained her union with nature throughout her life. Kumaran's elopement from Aathi and from her life shattered the rhythm of her life.

That proves that she wanted her life and, more so, life in Aathi community to remain as pure as it was at the beginning where the society endeavoured to preserve nature. However, awakening gradually dawned on her. She noted that beauty as well as ugliness sprout and spread from within, hence, she was focused on making a distinction between the two. She, therefore, made a declaration that she will never rely on anyone her entire life. Besides, she had Aathi with its water life as we as creatures at her disposal. All beings such as the roots of the grass, leaves of the plants and trees were received and integrated into her mind. Aathi was the sole witness to the betrayal she endured. That further shows the connection between women and nature and the separation of both from men.

Civilization and culture can be blamed for making nature ignominious. Economists believe that the exploitation of nature is masculinist enterprise. As seen in Sarah Joseph's novel, men strive for encroachment of nature just like the way they forcefully destroy and defile the virginity of women. That is proven by Kunjimathu's encounter with Kumaran. The author mentions that;

“.....putting his arms around Kunjimathu and donning a mask of melancholy, Kumaran attempted to shed tears of sadness even as he tried hard to hide the excitement frothing within. As a memento of manly remembrance, he ruptured her hymen and took her virginity” (Joseph, 22).

The evocation of the sexual imagery supports the premise that their tendencies or urge to destroy nature are equal to the rape that defiles women and ruptures their purity.

The males inhabiting Aathi strive to encroach and exploit nature women strive and aspire to conserve it through worship, protection and working in the land. Water holds an endless fascination for the community wherein its flow, a continuum of experience in which events pass from the past to the present and to the future is evident. In the novel, Sarah Joseph comments that;

Life seemed to them like a deep, bottomless lagoon. They had no food, no clothes, no shelter. But one thing they had: water. It lay full and brimming, like the miracle of miracles. Water: the unending, ever-renewing fountain-spring of life” (44).

Before the encroachment of Aathi by mafias, the place was so wonderful and beautiful and people lived in perfect harmony with nature. Women used to make friendship with nature and they conserved and preserved it as they were aware of its value not only for human beings but for all creatures that shared the same land. The aspiration of earning power and prosperity of men, led by Kumaran, let the outsiders inhabit the village where they sold their land for so-called development. This only made the once charming village barren and charmless sites, after the exploitation of its natural resources and beauties. In the beginning, the author explains that;

Farmers used to own the water body in measures of four or five acres. For generations, the people of Aathi, especially the women, had been planting paddy seedlings, and reaping and thrashing the harvests. Even as the harvest seasons finished, they would begin their work in the fish farms. Shailaja, too, had worked in those paddy fields. By the time she was in standard five, she could plant seedlings(265).

That discloses the close connection that the women in Kerala had with nature, they shared intimate relationship and connection with nature where they objected all efforts by males and did all at their disposal to preserve the natural bestowment .The connection is further viewed through the introduction of patriarchy and capitalism, that made women and nature share common male subjugated biased and unjust practices. It is apparent that despite their efforts to stop the exploitation, the society was male dominated, failing their efforts. Just the same way they are unable to defend nature, they are unable to protect themselves from exploitation by men. For instance, Kunjimathu was taken advantage by Kumaran and could do nothing about it. The novel criticizes the patriarchy showing that ecofeminist perspectives will facilitate positive changes on the issues of nature, women, and their deprivation. From an ecofeminism perspective, the alternative will make the world a better place where nations will engage in sustainable developmental plans. This insinuates that ecofeminists look forward to a better future that will be endowed with the equality and fairness between males and females.

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