



JOURNAL OF INDIAN LANGUAGES AND INDIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Journal of Indian languages and Indian literature in English, 02(04), 1-10; 2024

SARAH JOSEPH'S GIFT IN GREEN: WOMEN'S CONNECTION WITH NATURE

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India APA Citation:

JOHNSON SANGEETHARAJ.M (2024). WOMEN AND NATURE IN SARAH JOSEPH'S GIFT IN GREEN, Journal of Indian Languages and Indian literature in English, 02(04),1-10; 2024

Submission Date: 10.10.2024

Acceptance Date: 15.10.2024

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between women and nature in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*, analyzing how the novel portrays a deep, symbolic connection between the two. Set in the ecologically rich but vulnerable village of Aathi, the narrative positions women as primary guardians of the land, embodying an intimate understanding of ecological balance and sustainability. Through characters like Shailaja, who lead efforts to protect Aathi from external threats, Joseph reflects an ecofeminist perspective that aligns the nurturing qualities of women with the preservation of nature. The novel critiques patriarchal and capitalist systems that seek to exploit natural resources, drawing parallels between the oppression of women and the degradation of the environment. By depicting women as custodians of both culture and ecology, *Gift in Green* underscores the need for an ethical, balanced approach to development—one that respects the intrinsic value of both women and nature. This analysis reveals how Joseph's work advocates for ecological justice through gender inclusivity and sustainable practices.

Key words: Ecofeminism, environmental degradation, gender dynamics, androcentrism, ecological justice, sustainability

Susan Griffin in *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* states:

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. That the dead sing through her mouth and the cries of infants are clear to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (29)

Ecofeminism gives due reorganization to women by establishing women's identification with nature. Ecofeminism examines the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. Greta Gaard in —Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature explains that:

Ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. (1)

Ecofeminism links the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment and maintains that there is a connection between women and nature that stems from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. The suppression and long-standing restrictions finally drove them out of their cocoons. Recognition of women's identity will pave the way for the revival of marginalized categories. Sarah Joseph has powerfully portrayed the suppression of women and nature and the rejuvenation of the contaminated motherland through the painstakingly hard work of the women folk in *Gift in Green* (2011). The stance of ecofeminists that women are saviors, nurturers and care takers of nature is clearly reflected through a few women characters such as Kumaran's mother, Kunjimathu, Shailaja, Karthiayani, Devaki, Divya, Gitanjali and others. Sarah Joseph very explicitly narrates the intimate relation between women and nature as:

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. (20)

Kumaran's mother is very upset with Kumaran's indifferent attitude towards his age-old agrarian occupation and Aathi. Her fear of his son's attraction to the city, modern life, and his disregard for land and water are painted in his words of warning:

—Don't forget your root, boy. (19) Kumaran's mother is always busy in weaving mats, tending cattle, cleaning fish, cutting slings, etc. The next important figure is Kunjimathu, the daughter of a fisherman. She also deals with cleaning fish, raising rice and fish, digging pools around coconut trees, bathing buffalo, planting bean seeds, working in rice fields, and

growing shrimp. Their world is limited to rice, fish, water, rice paddies, and salt marshes. She works her domain very religiously. Above all, he has great confidence in the water, as she says, —water knows everything and forgets nothing! (21).

Kunjimathu's thought process gives us the image that women's concern for nature is broader, visionary, has fundamental human values, and is not touched by the modern, materialistic world. When Kumaran wants to go to town for a modern and comfortable life, she is stumped:

What did Kumaran lack here? Even if you fished only till noon, you could make enough to feed a whole family. Fish or mussels: enough to meet one's daily needs. Add to this the two Pokkali harvests from the paddy fields every year that anyone could reap. It was quite sufficient to live free from want. (20-21)

In addition to growing rice, they grow very good quality rice, squash, white squash, spinach, and beans, showing patterns of Indian multiculturalism. In addition, they raise a cow, a buffalo, chickens, and ducks. Kunjimathu cannot get an answer to the question about Kumaran's indifferent attitude towards Aathi and his passion for the city. Kunjimathu loves the land so much that she sells all her gold ornament which her father has preserved for her marriage to release the land for Kumaran's parents as Kumaran has sold all the land in order to settle in the city. She also opposes the deed of Kumaran and Komban Joy for inorganic farming which kills thousands of fish, birds, and animals. She pours out her remorse, —No one farms prawn in this place (174). She explains that with tides, thousands of little prawns come into the mangrove forest in which natural prawns as well as fish that get into the farm stay and grow there. Therefore, there is no special need to look after them. Sarah shows that the women are not greedy to get more money or harvest by following the new way of farming followed by Komban Joy. Komban Joy wants to use inorganic farming by spraying DDT to get more yields. However, the result is that thousands of butterflies and green frogs are killed. But, Kunjimathu wants to save butterflies, frogs, prawns, and fish by supporting organic farming. Therefore, she gives a very strict warning and asks him to do organic farming by informing him that pesticides and chemicals are not acceptable.

Sarah Joseph through the characters of Karthiayani and Devaki depicts the love for nature. The two warn Komban that the Kunjimathu field produces fish and rice. He should follow it and not use a new cultivation method or use inorganic chemicals like quicklime, poison, pesticides, and fertilizers. Furthermore, they have a deeply rooted religious faith and a deep respect for their land; for example, to keep the soil fertile, they are ready to keep the land uncultivated, but at all costs, they don't want to give it up for inorganic agriculture. Specifically, they are real scientists. Kunjimathu then wants to protest to save Aathi's bodies of water, each of which is a treasure and a source of income for the people. However, it is at stake due to the modern monster. Therefore, Kunjimathu sits in the water up to her waist in protest, to save Aathi's natural life. She wants to sacrifice her life to save bodies of water that are full of garbage due to the construction of the municipality. She thinks they are losing their connection to water:

Paddy fields, parched. Trees, dry and withered. The earth, cracked. Wells, dried up.

Cattle, tormented by thirst. Birds, perishing. Children, howling in hunger...Desert storms raging with a vengeance. The burning sand it brought along, covering the land, Red-hot rocks. Thorny bushes. Scorching heat. Freezing cold. A woman who wandered about, aflame within and without in the wilderness: Kunjimathu! (196-197)

The people of Aathi reject the idea of Kumaran who wants to offer them work and comfortable life in flats because they do not want to lose their intimacy with fields and water bodies. Kunjimathu says:

I shall live working on my land and water. I'd rather die here, right now, than accept anything less. If all these water beds are landfilled and erased, how can we work on the land and survive? (203-204)

Shailaja is a nurse at the hospital. She suspects the sweeper, Mary. Shailaja asks Mary where she throws up the childbirth remains, such as the placenta, umbilical cords, sanitary napkins, blood-soaked rags, and cotton swabs. Marie says she buries them in the ground but, the truth is revealed by the assistant. Mary throws everything into a large pipe that returns to the bottom of the primary water. Shailaja bothers her like anything. She begins to investigate the root of the problem. She later learns that all the garbage cans dump into the water. This shows her passionate desire to save bodies of water. In the incident, Sarah Joseph shows the relationship between women and nature through Shailaja's response to her husband Chandramohan's village, Chakkam Kadam. She urges her husband to take her to Aathi as she cannot bear the polluted water and cannot live without Aathi and she also informs him that when the water of Chakkam Kadam gets pure, she would come. She also worries about the polluted water of Aathi because of Kumaran's project. Shailaja's fervent religious call or sentiment for nature is only a representation of the essence of spiritual ecofeminism:

Wouldn't I have circled the land, cleaning it as I flowed, nourishing the grass and plants? From the earth to the sky, from the sky to the earth. Seeping through the soil to the depths of the sky to 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. (208-209).

Aathi residents gather to protest against Kumaran's plan to build a township in the village. Despite the blood gushing from their wounded heads, protesters blocked the road and stood firm under the responsibility of the police. They scream, —Kill us. Kill all of us and bury us. We don't want your mansions. Our earth and our water that's all we need! (217). As she watches the police brutally beat up the residents of Aathi, Shailaja empties the kerosene canister over her head and challenges the police that if they touch one of the protesters, she will go on fire.

Another passing reference is Gitanjali, a woman from a city who comes to Aathi to cure her daughter's strange disease in the unfeeling metropolis. She sets out from the city in search of water bodies which would be a healing poultice to her daughter, —When I set out, I had no idea I would reach a place like this . . . It is Aathi that restored Kaya to me. I now know that water is the synonym for peace. Peace is healing

and healing peace (328). Further, Gitanjali discusses the indispensable relationship between human beings and nature, —My Kayal is everywhere here. She is at one with Aathi. She and Aathi are one (329).

Due to landfilling and leveling, most water bodies and rice paddies, and fish farms are out of the reach of the Aathi people but it presents them with a challenge to unite and face the crucial and difficult moment of saving nature. Therefore, all the women of Aathi are determined to cultivate. Without intimidating the men of the town, they begin their cultivation work. They collect the mud from the bottom of the standing water and take it to the fields, first a layer of clay, plus a layer of grass, then another layer of clay. In fact, all these tasks were entrusted to the men, but this time it was difficult for the women to build the bund: On this day, —however, the women worked on their own despite, their dearth of experience and the diffidence that nagged at them (335). Vandana Shiva's assertion goes in a similar vein:

Women were the world's original food producers, and continue to be central to food production systems in the global South, in terms of the work they do in the food chain. Agriculture has been evolved by women. Most farmers in the world are women, and most girls are future farmers; they learn the skills and knowledge of farming in fields and farms. What is grown on farms determines whose livelihood are secured, what is eaten, how much is eaten, and by whom it is eaten. (ix)

It is Kunjmathu's identification with nature that enabled her to retaliate against its exploiters. There are numerous instances where women have prevented threats against the environment either individually or collectively. Women have made mass awareness against environmental depredating proposals like Narmada multipurpose dam, Plachimada project, Niyamgiri mining site, etc. Presently, environmental degradation is carried out on a massive scale. Women who used to be the soul mates of nature are now turning a blind eye toward its destruction. Pollution and deforestation have aggravated the crisis of global warming and health hazards. Hence, many more Kunjmathus should evolve from the present world in order to protect our earth for future generations. Thus, there are many sketches that show that women have indispensable love, reverence, and dedication to the water bodies and land. *Gift in Green* (2011) paints a picture of the impact of developmental attitude on land and water, which is the base of human subsistence and sustenance.

In addition to these fundamental concerns of ecofeminism, we explore some other aspects of the ecological crisis. Like feminism, ecofeminism distinguishes between sex (physical differences) and gender (meanings that society assigns to these differences). Ecofeminism is criticized for the oppression of the patriarchal genre. This system places women in a weaker position and is also inherently destructive to the poor, children, racial minority groups, indigenous peoples, and the natural world itself. Kunjmathu is the embodiment of women's long-standing relationship with nature. She identifies with nature. She even tries to sacrifice her life in the name of her homeland. Defying all patriarchal norms, she emerges as a voice for all these classifications that have hitherto been devalued by.

In conclusion, *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph presents a profound exploration of the interconnectedness between women and nature, portraying how both are similarly impacted by forces of exploitation and degradation. By positioning women as essential protectors of the environment, Joseph advocates for a paradigm shift towards ecofeminist values that emphasize mutual respect, sustainability, and harmony with nature. The novel ultimately calls for an inclusive approach to ecological justice, where honoring the role of women in environmental stewardship becomes key to building a more balanced and ethical world.

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