

Coexistence of Culture and Nature in *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph

S. Krithika Devi

“The struggle forged by men at work, by men and women joined in harmony in the struggle against nature was the basic theme of all the mythologies of human life” (Rickward 130 - 131)

Culture and nature may be contradictory terms in the modern sense. But the relationship between man and nature are not just interdependent but also interrelated. The regional topography plays a major role to construct a culture in a community. It is usually believed that the ethnic groups are not civilized. They are not aware of the development that is going on in the outside world. But the truth is that they are living a self-sustainable lifestyle that helps them to avoid depending on the outside sources. The human activities was molded in such a way that it co-exist with the nature. Their culture is constructed by interweaving nature and human activities. This eco spiritual life style gives the myths, legends, gods, values, and songs. So the dependence is not needed for the ingenious community.

Sarah Joseph, novelist and short story writer of Malayalam, was born in a conservative Christian family at Kuriachira in Trissur city in 1946. Her father, Louis was inclined to Marxian ideology and her mother Kochumariam was a typical conservative Christian type house wife. She has been the forefront of feminist movement and a well-known activist and the forefront of several agitations in Kerala. Her writings have altered serious thinking on women's writing and subaltern literature in the literary circles of Kerala. She began her literary career by reciting poems. Later she wrote short stories such as ‘Manassile the Natran’, ‘Papathara’, ‘Oduvilathe’, and ‘Suryakanthi’. ‘Othappu’, ‘Aalahayude Penmakkal’, ‘Mattathi’,

‘OorKaval’ and ‘Aalohari Anantham’ are the novels written by her. The struggles of women in the dominant social, cultural and economic structures are the major theme of her novels. Her last novel Aathi (‘Gift in Green’), translated into English by Valson Thampu, throws light on the preservation of the ecological conservation. She has won Kerala Sahithya Academy Award and Vayalam Award for her novel Aalahayude Penmakkal (daughters of god the fathers). She has also received Muttathu Varkey Award and Kendriya Academy Award.

Gift in green is an unconventional novel about the relationship between the people and the land they inhabit. Kumaran is a young man when he leaves Aathi, serene land of water bodies and mangroves, for the modernity and exposure of the big city. Many years later, he

returns to transmogrify Aathi into a city for a huge profit. His developmental plans such as roads and bridges chokes the water life, birds and butterflies flee the dying mangrove forests, and chemicals seep into the paddy fields that have fed generations over several hundred years. As Barry Commoner's first law of ecology - "Everything is connected with everything else" (Glotfelty xiv), one disaster leads to another like a chain reaction. While facing the threats, people come forward to fight against the ecological destruction. However nature cannot be contaminated forever and the water of Aathi rise in a flood to purify the land.

The author depicts the land of Aathi on an island Valanthakkadu in Ernakulam district of Kerala. Here she throws light on the co-existence of human culture with nature. She portrays the simple lives of people who subsided in fishing, picking mussels and farming Pokkali rice. They earned as much as Rs.300 a day by picking mussels but never fished more than that. The land of Aathi is pristine covered with water on all sides. The people lived water-life that is their daily immediate needs are fulfilled from earth and water as they could collect enough food to feed the whole family just by working till noon every day. In Aathi people from ancient times lived the water-life, harvesting only what they need from nature. They spend seven nights listening to stories ritualistically related to the mysterious tellers. Every session ends with a query: "How are we to apply the essence of this story to our lives?". By narrating the unique practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi such as the story telling nights, selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not allowing greedy developers in the land, Preservation and sustainable use of natural resources, the author insisted on the priority of preserving nature. They live a life without making any disruption to the surrounding forest area. Also they never wanted to come out of it as the sources are abundant in their region.

The pioneers of Aathi have chiseled the land and their perspectives throughout the generations. The people with ugly greediness are not allowed inside their region. Even they believed in selling and buying lands among their own community people. This is because they believed that only the people of Aathi can understand the precious value of the water and land. The greedy people are not allowed inside as they might use the land to earn lot of money by destroying it. The regional topography highly affects their pattern of society, way of living and perspectives. The community in Aathi has the indigenous knowledge to live in that space in a harmonious way. They have a connection with nature and non-human entities. The fore fathers of the community have formulated their culture to live in a sustainable way. Even the geographical area was just a forest once. But they created a way to cultivate pokkali rice. This helps the upcoming generations to live a sustainable life without relying on outside resources. The culture is formulated in such a way that they don't have to depend on the outside sources. This indigenous knowledge and the sense of belongingness are transferred to the future generations through stories, rituals and myths.

One of the stories in a story telling night is about how the fore fathers of the community have reached the Aathi. The pioneers of Aathi wander around the deserted area with their community for a place with water. Finally they found Aathi and worshipped the water of Aathi

and they need nothing else than that. Through the story telling nights they transfer their story of their civilization has been passed on to the next generations

The whole village had to pay huge loss and face terrible catastrophe, when certain people don't adhere to the rules. The destruction of land and water starts with the arrival of Kumaran, who sees the Aathi as means of making money. The modes of living such as water-life and farming are replaced with the construction of building resulting in toxic waste and destruction of natural habitat. It also changes the customs and practices of the place. The Thampuran shrine is a thatched one. So that Kumaran wanted to build an edifice of gold for Thampuran. Without any concern for the culture and belief of the people of Aathi he replaced the age-old Thampuran statue with another god's idol in gold. By showing him as a saviour of Aathi, he turned some of the youth of Aathi as his puppets. The characters such as the story-teller, Noor Mohammed, a Poet, Markose, Shailaja, Dinakaran, Ponmani and Kunjumathu lead the people of Aathi against the destruction. Even, those who gone after the development and modernity couldn't find peace in it. Finally the flood rises to purify the land. Here the nature creates culture and when people move against it, the nature itself destroys what it has created.

In the novel there are various stories of the characters along with the main plot creates a strong impact. The novel gives the story in piecemeal manner. The characters are the inhabitants of Aathi and its surrounding area. They fight against the destruction of nature. It is because they understand that their culture and identity are related to the land they inhabit. Dinakaran, one of the main characters in the novel lives a life of 'simple living and high thinking'. Ponmani, his friend, fight against the invaders with rage. He violently fought by destroying the bridges built by them. Here the bridge denotes the connection between the Aathi and the outside greedy world. The destruction of bridge highlights the community's restriction to safeguard the land's purity land and their culture. Kumaran, the vicious character in the novel, forsakes his beloved Kunjumathu and the water life. He is the epitome of modern capitalist and consumerist tendencies. Kumaran is an example of how a person can turn into a dark path when they move away from their canopy cultural identity.

The female characters are more strong and memorable. Kunjumathu, betrayed by Kumaran, pursues the water-life and took care of the parents of Kumaran. The adversity never made her to succumb before anything she stood for the well-being of nature. Geetanjali comes to Aathi seeking a cure for her daughter Kayal's mental turbulence. Through this the author throws light on the healing power of nature. Shailaja leaves her bridegroom and his polluted village to remain attached to the purity of Aathi. Here the sense of belongingness with Aathi is highlighted. She was even ready to give up her marriage life for her land. The environmental destruction leads the village of Shailaja that is Aathi to get more polluted than that of her husband's village. It creates a negative impact on both living and non-living system.

Green bangle, the mangrove forest in Aathi, plays a powerful symbol that depicts the exploitation of ecosystem. There is a presence of total greenery throughout the novel combining the importance of water. The plot gives the degradation of ecology and ends with the phoenix-

like regeneration of Aathi. There is a flashlight view of events. The plot is deliberately interrupted by the ceremony of storytelling nights, begins with some exclusive rituals, and narrates the diverse stories such as the story of civilization in Aathi, destiny of the people of Aathi and so on. It consists of many stories taken from the sources such as The Bible, The Holy Quran, Zen and Sufi traditions, the Puranas, folk narratives and historical events, which is informed story teller in the story telling nights. Here the author insisted on the importance of culture. She put forth that one should adhere to their culture in their day –to-day life to become a better person.

The setting of the novel lies at the cool, serene and “in the womb of an inviolate purity”. She admitted that “This novel is my quest for such a heaven”. She was also inspired by the message in Dr Masaru Emoto’s “Hidden Messages in Water” that the water holds out to those who have eyes to see them, the fascinating worlds immanent in water. The natural disasters such as earthquake, tsunami and nuclear explosion in Japan move her very deeply to write the novel and it has created a strong impression in the minds of readers to turn away from the anthropocentric view.

The novel depicts the Environmental concerns of the writer as she describes the present day issues of Kerala. The author uses the natural parallels to illustrate the relationship between Island topography and the inner human landscape. The natural imagery of water plays a significant part in depicting the novel’s plot that is the degradation of the society. It also reveals the power of nature to purify itself is effectively conveyed by the rise of flood in the end. The impact of mindless development and the conflict of civilization and nature are visible throughout the novel. Sarah Joseph is not against development. She tries to portray the cruelty and destruction in the development. The novel paints the intense agony of community and men’s audacity to nature. The end of the novel makes it to grab a unique position by portraying the power of nature to cleanse itself. Like the flood of Noah, it cleanses the sins of human and once again flourishes into a new one. As Jay Parini in *The Greening of Humanities* comments that ecocriticism “marks a return to activism and social responsibility”, this novel gives a green vision to the reader to drift towards the earth-centric view.

The novel clearly picture the incorrigible aftermath that can germinate from the oppression of nature and disseminate to the future like a terminal disease, which can change the whole development and technology created by man into a quest or interrogation. The novel admits strongly that only through changing our day-to-day relationship and activities towards more harmony and sustainability, one can give to the well bring and empowerment of the whole ecosystem.

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S. Krithika Devi

Assistant Professor

K.S.G College of Arts and Science