

Man and the Water Life: an Eco Critical Reading of Sarah Joseph's Novel *Gift in Green*

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Abstract

Nature and literature are closely connected. Regardless of the titles they go by, most works dealing with ecological issues share a common motive, namely, to make people change their conventional attitude towards the environment, or else to face the various types of global catastrophe. Ecocriticism is an essential area of literary and cultural analysis, and it also examines the closer relationship between literature and thenature from a variety of angles. The main aim of an eco critique is to understand the coherence and utility of texts from an ecological perspective and thereby put a proposal with the solution on regarding with the different reaction that arose from the variety of environmental problems faced by the society. Ecocritical analysis of text begins from the study of the relationship between human and nature, and how different type environmental problems represented in the text effect the imbalances in the human culture; it also depicted various attitudes of man towards nature. These are common ways of interpreting and analysing an ecocritical work. Eco critics use a texts not only to analyze the essence of nature in literature, but also to analyse philosophy and behaviour of the society in relation to nature. They also criticise the different ways through which a cultural position discredits and weakens nature. Eco critics have a more comprehensive, in-depth, and concise description of how and why environmental discourse communicates than the authors themselves, because the writers are engrossed in their own exclusive stories, though all these writings bring together the ideas of the texts and authors, and put them in a new perspective of environmental awareness.

The aim of this paper is to investigate several environmental problems which are depicted in Sarah Joseph's novel *Gift in Green* (2011), which has been translated by Valson Thampu. It also looks upon how environmental problems are blended in this novel through a reading of it in an eco critical perspective. The paper also endeavours to understand the extended role of such literature in spreading environmental awareness in the present generation.

Key words: Nature, Culture, Literature, Eco Criticism, Environmental awareness, Man-nature relationship

Introduction

Eco criticism is a branch of literary criticism that shows how literature examines the idea of interaction between humans and nonhuman creation in the environment. Eco critics read a literary genre from nature's perspective and approach it from a biocentric standpoint. To save the world from disasters of environmental imbalance, there is a need to have an eco-conscious attitude towards every aspect of life. So ecocritical works provide a significant role in the formation and creation of this kind of eco-conscious among the human beings. Such reads create a desirable perception in human beings in connection with the environmental issues and even inspire different ways to restore the environment to its previous state. Though ecocriticism speaks about nature, all

nature writing may not be necessarily ecocritical. The relationship between man and his fellow beings understood as a coexistence in a particular surrounding is the base of an ecocritical text. It is important to know how human beings interpret and represent nature and how this relationship is portrayed in literature. The analysis of literary work from an ecological or environmental point of view helps us in comprehending the immense impact of nature on human life and vice-versa. A concern with the relationship between nature and culture, especially in the highly technological postmodern times, draws us to analyse work dealing with such issues, from an ecocritical perspective.

Gift in Green (2011) is an evocative narrative that raises issues of environmental degradation, in an appealing lyrical fashion. The novel has the capacity to create certain vital impressions about the man-nature connection and thereby illuminating the reader's awareness in a new inner landscape. This shows the genius of creativity as it is perpetuated in the work. One is drawn to read this novel perceptively and it is impossible to remain unchanged at the end of it. The art of caring for nature and entrenching the notion of inviolability of nature and creation is so well demonstrated in the novel that it can surely claim a place in the canon of environmental writing. Indeed the novel is concerned with the connection between environmental degradation and technological, scientific and industrial development. *Gift in Green* preaches the importance of creating environment awareness through literature and Sarah Joseph ends her novel with a pertinent question; "How are we to apply this story gainfully in our life?"

Objectives

This research paper aims at fulfilling the following aims and objectives:

1. To attempt an ecocritical reading of Sarah Joseph's novel *Gift in Green*, which Valson Thampu translated from Malayalam language.
2. To understand the environmental issues raised in the novel in the contemporary context.
3. To understand the role of literature in creating environmental awareness.
4. To analyze how literature can tackle environmental degradation by making a case for sustainable living.

Hypothesis

Gift in Green, an unusual novel about people's relationships with the land they live on, transforms into a canvas that depicts people's massive agony as the horrifying effects of man's cruelty to nature. Sarah Joseph's feminist sensitivity is nuanced at its best that the reader is sure to find it as a refreshing welcome. Sarah's creative genius counterbalances the polemical with the poetic. The novel can be treated as Sarah's 'In Memoriam' on Aathi: an epic, multifaceted, lyrical lament on the monumental woes of its people. The author here depicts a latter day Hagar who in this novel insists on a water covenant and stands as a metaphoric vigil with a flaming sword in hand against anyone or anything that risks the purity and inviolability of water.

Methodology

Ecocriticism is a category of literary criticism that is gaining popularity as an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment around the world. It examines mankind's attitude toward nature through the observation of subjects such as science, literature, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, among others. The concept of Eco poetics, environmental literary criticism, and green culture are some of the more common names for this relatively new discipline. Eco criticism is the study of literature and art through the lens of ecology and its concepts. Presently in this area has become an important area in the present critical discourses. Due to the over exploitation of the natural resources, human beings are facing environmental and

ecological problems. Hence ecocriticism is also one of the ways chosen by humanist to fight for Protection of nature and thereby peaceful survival of the creatures in environment.

Eco criticism approaches the literary studies from an earth-centered viewpoint, much as feminist criticism explores language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective. Eco criticism can be further described by how it differs from other critical perspectives. The relationship between authors, texts, and the world is the focus of literary theory in general. "The world" is synonymous with the meaning of society and in most literary theories. Ecocriticism broadens the definition of "the earth" to include "the entire ecosystem." William Rueckert is credited with inventing the term 'ecocriticism' in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. In that essay, Rueckert described ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature."

The present study is an eco critical reading of the novel *Gift in Green*. It helps to understand environmental issues, man-nature relation, co-existence of human culture and nature etc. The theme of *Gift in Green* is concerned with man's interventions in nature as can be seen in the passage of time and the changing patterns in farming paddy and fishing. The time it takes to build a bridge, or to develop a megacity or to destroy the place and the life of its people is also shown. It also portrays a way of life that predates the dogma and sketches the dangers immanent in it. As an eco critical reading of the novel would make clear, it is crucial to sustaining human life along with a host of other life forms. The novel also protests against the murderous callousness that would jeopardise the existence of generations to come.

Environmental awareness in *Gift in Green*

Award-winning Malayali author and social activist Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* is one of the most perceptive accounts of contemporary issues linking environment and progress. Aathi is a picture-perfect village, a "green bangle" that empowers and preserves an environment of human and animal life. Such a lagoon can be found in Aathi in the *Gift in Green*. It rests peacefully in the womb of a complete purity. Sarah's plot rides through the landscape of Aathi which makes good sense from a holistic perspective. It narrates the story of Kumaran, a young man who left his homeland Aathi and later throughout his life experience the protagonist understood the importance of nature. He was the kind of man who aspired to live a decent life. And one day, he began to have disagreements with his parents about his plan to despise water life. Kumaran's mother reminds him of his ancient family roots. But for him staying in Aathi was a waste of time, so he decided to move to other place. Kumaran's wife, Kunjimathu, was also distressed by Kumaran's decision. Kumaran described water as something that has no shape or identity. Water, on the other hand, knows everything and forgets nothing, according to Kunjimathu. He was the first person in Aathi to sell his land and move to the city for exposure and hunger towards modernity. After he goes to city Kunjimathu his wife, who takes care of his parents. Karthiayani and Devaki who accompany Kunjimathu after Kumaran left her.

The novel begins with the return of Kumaran to Aathi after many years. Kunjimathu had given up hope of seeing Kumaran again. Kumaran, on the other hand, had completely forgotten her. When he returned to Aathi, he looked completely different. His love towards the homeland was whispered all over the village. But his arrival was not alone as a home coming; he came with a large crew and the government's full support to transform Aathi to a personal paradise. This has become an unpleasant thing to the villagers and it was not a promising start for Aathi. Aathi is a lagoon and this place rests cool and peacefully in the womb of unblemished purity. The people of Aathi have an unusual relationship with their homeland. It's a small island surrounded by water, backwaters, green bangles, birds, oysters, and fishes, among other things. It was also cut off from the rest of the land. There was a ferry bank on the western side of Aathi, with a deeper and wider coastline. Aathi's trees

and birds understood no such thing as taboo or untouchability. No religious intolerance exists there; the trees, birds, fishes, earth, and water all beckoned the people to come again, once they visit the place. The children of Aathi adore the variety of fishes, and they felt at one with the trees, birds, water, and land. The people of Aathi also reflect on how they landed in Aathi by swimming, groping, and stumbling. The people of Aathi saw life as a deep, bottomless lagoon. They had no food, clothing, or shelter at first, and the only thing they had was water. It lay complete and brimming for them, like a wonder of miracles. For them, water was a never-ending, ever-renewing spring of life that gave them hope for a better life. Aathi is an undiscovered island, untouched by human hands. The sweat of their ancestors, who had given them the land of Aathi, can still be smelt on the land of Aathi. The Thampuranshrines, guard and protect the Aathi's people and their property. The people of Aathi cultivated rice and their livelihood included prawn farming, fishing, and oyster collecting.

Dinkaran, Ponamani, Markose the poet and Noor Muhammad the storyteller were among those who began to oppose Kumaran's plans. Dinkaran had maintained a peace resistance, so Ponamani, his friend, had constant ideological clashes with him. Dinkaran and Markose alert the people of Aathi against falling into Kumaran's trap.

However, young people like Ambu, Prakshan, and Chandran were enthralled by the possibility. The young were the ones who were sick of the water life and were able to leave Aathi behind. Kumaran's dream was to purchase the lands of the Aathi people and sell them flats in towns. As a result, each of Aathi's lands is transferred to massive construction projects. Kumaran displayed his plans, which included building a new Thampuran shrine in Aathi, constructing a bridge, buying cultivating lands from people and pouring up chemicals, and totally destroying the green bangle, forest, and water life that was the life of Aathi, with the aid of his power and the support of young people. Aathi's children were the victims of his bad deeds as well. Since ChakkamKandamKayal was heavily polluted by the wastes of nearby cities, Shailaja, who lives in Aathi and is married to Chandra Mohan of ChakkamKandamKayal, returned to Aathi. However, Aathi was later subjected to the same kind of environmental devastation. For the character Gitanjali and her daughter Kayal, the land of Aathi was a relief from the traumas they faced in their life.

Readers can see that when Kumaran's greedy actions completely destroyed Aathi, the people of Aathi began to protest and resist, with help from the nearby village. But, since nature cannot be polluted indefinitely, even the people of Aathi who believe in water as a source of life. The flood comes as retaliation, destroying everything Kumaran had built in Aathi up to this point. But, in the end, Dinkaran had to become a martyr, laying down his life for the sake of his homeland and people. The tale of Aathi concludes with the promise of rebirth.

The plot is planned with a twofold core interest. There is, from one viewpoint, the life and battles of individuals of Aathi. The setting is explicit and gritty in its depiction. The plot turns on the rot, passing and phoenix like recovery of Aathi which was caught by covetous individuals. The inflexible movement of the plot is apparently hindered by the occasional function of narrating evenings. The tales described are different, however every one of them consider significantly the predicament and predetermination of individuals of the town. The story tellers offer them solace and rekindle their will to live. Life in Aathi is unthinkable without the periodic, and apparently preordained, arrival of storytellers "who are sure to come". The hearts in Aathi pulsate for their accounts and the recharging they bear. Kumaran is a youngster who leaves Aathi, for the innovation and openness of the large city. Numerous years after the fact his re-visitation of Aathi signals the start of the end, as streets and extensions gag the water. Birds and butterflies escape, mangrove woodlands wither. Synthetic compounds saturate the paddy handle that have taken care of ages more than a few many years. The idealism of Dinakaran, the fury of Ponmani and the perseverance of Kunimathu and her companions were not able to stop the relentless progress of the behemoth

destruction. The pulse of Aathiliesinthe human beings who arewilling to sacrifice themselves to preserve its integrity and solidarity.

An unprecedented environmental concern is being shared by the people nowadays. Pro-environment movements sponsored in particular by feminist and dalit activist groups engagesus withthe urgency of environmental issues as never before. People are not aware of the perils that are sure tocauseby the deep and un-healing wounds we inflict on earth and nature. *Gift in Green* assumes a particular significance in the context of the rising global culture. The emergence of development behemoth is powered by the twin turbines of technology and mega capital of which Kumaran is the brutal textual exemplar. The sheer helplessness of people is evident here. The invasive infliction of an alien way of life promises people a comfortable way of life, but in fact robs them of their land, poisons their water resources and barcodes their thirst. Here for greedy men like Kumaran, working on land is a mockery. The people of Aathi are dragged into a war against the water and the earth that sustain their lives. This contrived contrariness between earth and work, between life and livelihood that captures the spirit of anti life paradigm to which many of the unsuspecting locals succumb gladly and gratefully. The people of Aathi, who are simply not free to choose, is inflicted the insult of an illusory choice betweenKumaran's maniacal ambitions and Aathi's survival. As Kumaran's talons of progress go deeper into the vitals of Aathi, the water or the circulatory system that sustains its life starts to degrade and becomes a pathway of pollution and putrefaction. Kunjimathu's communion with the full moon and the bliss of consummation that the high tides offer her serves only to validate the author's anxieties about the waning environmental sensitivity. What should or should not happen to Aathiis the prime concern in this novel. The crime of exploiting nature to the extent of jeopardising its survival is peculiar to the species of human beings. Other animals are incapable of the sacrilege. The idea of progress is to embrace and accommodate. Every life form has the right to survive with dignity. *Gift in Green* portrays a way of life that takes into account the whole of Earth that respects and protects all life forms.

Conclusion

Eco-literature or environmental literature is essentially concerned with environmental issues and themes which explores human's association with the nature. In this era of environmental disaster, man's anthropocentric behaviour toward non-human beings and nature causes irreversible damages which result indisharmony inthe entire ecosphere and the ecosystem of the earth.

The novel *Gift in Green* by Sarah Josephcan be treated as an eco-literature as it ismainly focused upon the environmental issues, human relation with their land, water and nature. The changes that occur to nature closely affect the people of Aathi in the novel. An ecocritical reading of the novel reveals the significance of these issues, and thus contributes to create environmentalawareness in a very perceptive way. The depiction of the life in the village of Aathi and the unravelling of its gradualecological changes as the novel progresses vividly dramatises the scenario of degradation.

Gift in Green portraysanguish beyond the reach of the visual media, stretches the resources of a language and relies especially on images, metaphors and symbols. It is a tight rope walk, balancing oneself on a narrative string stretched between art and activism with the awareness of the tumult that roars from the abyss beneath one's feet.

The novel is not against development, not is it anti-technology. Instead, it attempts to create awareness by showing the unmindful cruelty against nature andthe insensitivity of the authorities to the misery of the victims of such adyingenvironment.. The concept of change that we accept must be large enough to accommodate the nature of all forms of life and their right to dignity in survival. It also presses upon human beings to dedicate themselves to the noble cause of preserving nature's integrity and inviolability. The stories depicted during each story night in the novel provide them

with comfort and help them rekindle their waning will to live. So, the paper tries to analyse novel *Gift of Green* to bring out the fact that when man moves beyond nature's reach, nature has the ultimate power to control man, so coexistence with nature would be a necessary part of man's survival.

Thus, *Gift in Green* is both a serious depiction of the contingencies of the modern profit oriented materialistic world, as also a delightfully romantic vision of the world as it was once and perhaps still can be. The warning is also evident from a glimpse into the dystopia that awaits us otherwise.

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