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**Women, Nature and the Politics: An Ecofeminist Reading
of Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green***

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Abstract: Ecofeminism is seen as a valuable approach for understanding the close link between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. It challenges social systems which place humans above nature and within human society give men a superior status to women. From this viewpoint, environmental destruction cannot be viewed merely as the loss of forests, rivers and other natural resources since it also has an impact on people's livelihoods, communities, health, memory and social relationships. Sarah Joseph's novel *Gift in Green* (2011), which is a translation from her Malayalam novel *Aathi*, offers a strong literary illustration of these connections. The novel is set in Aathi, an island community in which the people's way of life is closely tied to water, paddy fields, mangroves, fishing and traditional agriculture. The arrival of Kumaran and his development schemes gradually disrupts this relationship. His concept of progress is based on construction, the acquisition of land, commercial agriculture and higher production. What he refers to as development, however, leads to ecological damage and social disruption. This article examines *Gift in Green* from an ecofeminist point of view, with a particular focus on the ideas of Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal. The article states that Joseph does not present women as being naturally or biologically nearer to nature; instead, their ecological awareness develops as a result of the daily work and their dependence on land and water. At the same time, the novel contains men who actively protect the environment, thus going beyond a simple contrast between men and women. In the end, *Gift in Green* encourages readers to think again about what development actually means and to consider whether economic progress has any worth if it undermines the ecological and social foundations of human life.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Sarah Joseph, *Gift in Green*, *Aathi*, women, nature, development, water, Vandana Shiva, Bina Agarwal

Introduction

Environmental destruction is not something which can any longer be talked about merely in relation to forests, rivers, animals and pollution. For every ecological crisis there are people whose lives are influenced by the changes occurring around them; when a river is polluted, someone loses their access to clean water, when agricultural land is taken over for building purposes, someone loses their means of livelihood, and when forests vanish, the communities that depend on them are forced to alter their way of life. Environmental issues are therefore also social, economic and political issues.

Ecofeminism is very helpful when it comes to understanding such connections; it combines feminist issues with environmental concerns and examines the systems of power which have in the past put both women and nature in a position of subordination. Ecofeminist thinkers have noted that the same kind of mindset which views nature as something to be controlled and exploited is also present in social attitudes towards women. Although the domination of nature and the domination of women are not always the same, they can arise from similar ideas of hierarchy, possession and control.

The word "ecofeminism" was first used in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. Ever since, the movement has taken on a variety of forms. Certain interpretations highlight women's traditional ties with the land, forests and food production, whereas others are more careful not to link women too closely with nature. For example, Bina Agarwal stresses the importance of material conditions. The way women relate to the environment is determined by the work they carry out, the resources on which they depend and their position within the systems of class, property and labour. Women are not environmentally conscious just because they are women; their experiences of nature are generally the result of their everyday responsibilities.

It is especially important to keep this distinction in mind when reading Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*. The novel does not show women as mere symbols of nature; the women in Aathi work on the land, rely on water, grow crops, clean the fish, look after the animals and take part in the various activities which sustain the community. Their knowledge of the environment is obtained through this day-to-day involvement.

The island known as Aathi is a significant element of the novel; it is surrounded by water and mangroves and has paddy fields, fish, birds and other forms of life. The people have established a way of life which relies on these resources. Farming and fishing are not merely jobs; they are part of the community's identity.

Things are different when Kumaran goes back to Aathi after a long time. With him comes a new conception of how the island should develop. He envisions the construction of bridges, buildings, markets and other kinds of development. He wishes for the agricultural land to be used in a more commercial way and thinks that the people of Aathi need more material comfort. Some of the villagers, in particular the younger ones, are drawn in by his promises while others see the risks in his plans.

The conflict that ensues is therefore more complex than a simple clash between tradition and modernity. Joseph inquires into the kind of development a community really requires and also questions who is entitled to decide how land and water should be used; most important of all, she demonstrates that the people who benefit from development are often not the same as those who suffer from it.

The article states that in *Gift in Green* ecological destruction is presented as a kind of social violence which is closely linked with economic power and gender relations. By means of Kunjimathu and the other women in Aathi, Joseph demonstrates that awareness of the environment can develop out of ordinary experiences. Moreover, the inclusion of male characters who also oppose ecological destruction stops the novel from being simply a tale about women against men. The fundamental conflict lies between a culture of domination and a way of life grounded in interdependence.

Sarah Joseph's Ecological Vision

Sarah Joseph is well known for her focus on the experiences of women, social inequality and marginalisation. In her writing she tends to highlight the people whose voices are ignored by the dominant social structures and her concern for ecological issues arises from these interests.

The environmental background of *Gift in Green* is also linked to the environmental struggles in Kerala, since concerns regarding the destruction of forests, water bodies, arable land and traditional ways of earning a living form a significant context for the novel. The reason Joseph's writing on ecological matters is effective is that she does not view nature as a beautiful setting detached from human activities. It is important that water exists since people need it. Paddy fields are important because people rely on them for their food. Mangroves are significant since they support a wider ecological system. When these things are destroyed, humans also suffer.

That is why Joseph's criticism of development does not mean that she rejects all forms of progress; rather, she is challenging a certain type of development—which defines success in terms of building, money, and commercial expansion while disregarding the well-being of communities.

Aathi: A Community and an Ecosystem

Aathi is not just the geographical location of *Gift in Green*; the island plays a significant role throughout the novel. The water, the fields, the mangroves, the animals and the people make up an interconnected system. The people of Aathi have learnt to live in accordance with the rhythms of this environment. They get their food and earn money by fishing and farming. Their knowledge of the land is transmitted from one generation to the next. Storytelling also serves as a means of preserving the community's memory.

It is important that this feature of the novel should be noted since knowledge is not always acquired through formal education. The villagers have a knowledge of their surroundings because they live there and they gain an understanding of changes in the water, the soil, the crops and the fish through direct experience. Women have a particularly important role in this kind of knowledge because of the work they do. They take part in preparing food, in growing crops, in cleaning fish, in looking after the animals and in managing the household resources. Their understanding of ecology is thus closely linked to their daily duties.

When Kumaran arrives, the equilibrium is disrupted. He views Aathi as a place that needs to be changed. The villagers now have to defend something which earlier had not required defence—their own way of life.

Kunjimathu and the Knowledge of the Land

Kunjimathu is probably the most important figure when the novel is interpreted from an ecofeminist point of view; she builds a relationship with Aathi through work and experience. She cleans fish, grows rice and fish, looks after the animals and works on the fields. She knows the amount of produce the land can give and the resources that are available in the water. In her view, Aathi already supplies everything that people need. This is quite unlike Kumaran's wish for more material comfort. She does not regard poverty merely as the lack of urban facilities; for her the concept of a good life is linked with food, water, work and community. Agarwal's ideas enable us to understand Kunjimathu without turning her into an idealised "woman of nature". Her ecological awareness is not biological; it has been gained through her labour. It is an important point since it stops ecofeminism from taking an essentialist view; if women are merely seen as naturally caring or naturally close to nature then their social and economic experiences can be left out of consideration. Kunjimathu's awareness of the environment stems from knowing what the land provides and what occurs when the land is damaged.

The fact that she opposes chemical farming shows this clearly. She realises that while the use of chemicals may boost production in the short term they can harm fish, frogs, butterflies and other forms of life, and her resistance is based on practical knowledge.

The Women of Aathi and Collective Resistance

Kunjimathu does not face the situation by himself; the novel shows a number of women who react to ecological destruction in various ways. For instance, Shailaja grows more conscious of the connection between pollution and health; the way in which she experiences water that is contaminated shows how environmental degradation seeps into everyday life. Pollution in water is not merely an environmental figurehead since it has an impact on drinking water, on food, on health and on the future of families. Other women too get taken into resisting the destruction of Aathi, and their resistance is based on the understanding that ecological damage will ultimately affect all people. A highly significant element of this resistance is the women's participation in agriculture; when traditional methods of cultivation become difficult as a result of the changes caused by development, the women take part in restoring agricultural activity.

From a feminist point of view this is important since they do not just rely on somebody else to deal with the problem; instead they take on the responsibility for the land and for their community. The fact that they resist also shows that work which is domestic and agricultural should not be regarded as insignificant. A great deal of the work which keeps communities going has traditionally been linked with women and is therefore often ignored. Joseph puts this kind of work at the heart of the ecological struggle.

Vandana Shiva and Traditional Knowledge

The views of Vandana Shiva provide a basis for understanding Joseph's criticism of commercial development. She has on several occasions challenged development models which substitute industrial methods for local knowledge and regard nature mainly as a resource. This is shown in Aathi when commercial agriculture starts to take the place of traditional practices. Instead of the aim being to produce enough food, the focus changes to producing more in order to make a profit. Traditional agriculture is not portrayed as flawless, but it is well adapted to the environment. The people of Aathi know the relationship between water, fish, soil and crops. Commercial agriculture disrupts this relationship by introducing chemicals and methods which are mainly designed to boost production.

The situation thus turns into a clash between two types of knowledge: one is based on long-term experience of the environment and the other arises from an economic system which places a value

on increased production and commercial efficiency. Clearly Joseph favours a model which respects ecological limits.

Bina Agarwal and Material Experience

Agarwal contributes an important aspect to this topic. She makes it clear that women do not have the same relationship with nature; a woman's relationship with natural resources is determined by the work she does, her economic status, her access to land and her social responsibilities. The women in Aathi make this abundantly clear: they are linked with nature since their lives depend on it in a material way and their knowledge has been acquired through ordinary activities.

The novel also means that environmental protection cannot be seen as being solely the responsibility of women. Both Dinakaran, Ponmani and Markose oppose Kumaran's project; Dinakaran, in fact, is very worried about birds and the natural environment. Through his character it is shown that ecological responsibility can be shared between both sexes. The true division in the novel is therefore not just one between men and women, but rather lies between those who support a system grounded in control and profit and those who realise the importance of ecological interdependence. Because of this the novel is more than just a simple ecofeminist allegory.

Land, Property and Displacement

The dispute about the land is at the heart of the conflict in Aathi. Kumaran views land mainly as property; if it can be bought, then it can be changed. The villagers, on the other hand, associate a number of values with land. It supplies food and enables people to earn a living. It holds the memories of ancestors. It links the different generations together and gives people a certain level of economic independence.

The fact that Kunjimathu is willing to give up her personal belongings in order to protect the land shows the difference in values she has. For her, the land must not be looked at merely in terms of its market value. Ponmani too realises the risks involved in selling agricultural land since if people lose their land they might eventually have to work for those who have acquired it. This is an important aspect of environmental justice because losing land does not simply mean losing a piece of property; it can mean losing the ability to support oneself. Development can thus create a paradox in that a project promoted as a means of improving people's lives may in fact leave them more economically dependent than before.

Water as a Symbol of Life

In *Gift in Green*, water is probably the most powerful ecological symbol; Aathi is surrounded by water and the people there rely on it for almost every part of their lives, since it supports agriculture and fishing and thus becomes part of the community's cultural memory. The stories about water also confer a moral value upon it; water does not belong entirely to an individual, but must be kept for those who will come after.

This idea is the exact opposite of Kumaran's. He views resources in terms of ownership and their use. The novel raises the question of whether something so essential as water can actually be considered private property. The various characters' experiences show how important clean water is. Once water is polluted, the difference between a healthy and a damaged environment becomes obvious. Joseph therefore makes water a symbol of continuity, since protecting water means protecting the future.

Pollution and Environmental Violence

The greater the Kumaran development project becomes, the more obvious the environmental damage is. Water bodies are filled, the agricultural land is changed, chemicals get into the environment and waste pollutes the water. Fish and birds start to vanish. These things demonstrate that ecological violence is not separate from social violence.

Fishermen lose their means of living when the fish disappear. If agricultural land is destroyed, farmers lose their source of income. When water becomes polluted, families suffer health problems. The hardship is not shared equally among all people. People with economic power are often able to leave or find other solutions. Those who are poorer have fewer options. Which is why the environmental conflict in *Gift in Green* is also a conflict over justice. Joseph enables readers to perceive environmental damage on a day-to-day basis; rather than treating pollution as an abstract scientific problem, she illustrates the way in which it gets into kitchens, farms, homes and people's bodies.

Aathi and the Politics of Memory

Storytelling is also a vital part of the novel's ecological vision, since the people of Aathi come together to hear stories and then talk about what they mean. The stories serve to keep knowledge alive and link the present with the past. This is significant since environmental destruction can also result in the loss of memory. For example, when a field vanishes as a result of construction, the stories connected with that field may as well disappear.

Joseph's novel serves as a means of preserving memory. It does so by documenting the life of Aathi, thereby preserving the memory of a community and an environment that is at risk. In this way, literature becomes an element of ecological resistance. The novel doesn't just inform the readers about the value of nature; it enables them to experience the relationship between people and their environment via the characters, the memories and the everyday activities.

Beyond the Woman-Nature Binary

A major strength of *Gift in Green* is that it does not depict all women as environmentalists and all men as exploiters. While the women play a key role in the ecological resistance, the male characters too take part in the struggle. Moreover, not all the members of the community support the resistance since some of them are drawn to Kumaran's promises. It is important that environmental awareness does not automatically result from one's gender.

The novel agrees with Agarwal's view that environmental relationships are determined by social and material conditions. Kunjimathu has acquired his knowledge through practical work. Shailaja's awareness has been gained as a result of her experiences relating to water and health. Dinakaran's concern for the environment arises from his careful observation of birds and the surroundings. Although their experiences are different, they all come to oppose destructive development. Joseph thus goes beyond the basic notion that women are nearer to nature; what is important is the kind of relationship people establish with their environment and the social structures which determine whether they can protect it.

Resistance and Alternative Development

In *Gift in Green*, resistance is shown in a number of ways. Some people choose not to sell their land, others oppose the building work, and some aim to protect birds and animals. Women go back to do agricultural work. There is also an attempt at legal resistance, with the community as a whole challenging the changes which are being forced upon them. The fact that there are so many different forms of resistance is significant since environmental resistance is by no means a single action; it may take the form of protest, legal action, the use of traditional knowledge, adherence to agricultural practices or simply refusing to accept the destruction of one's environment.

The book also indicates that a different kind of development could exist. Development needn't involve unlimited construction and consumption; it might consist in improved health and security, access to clean water, the practice of sustainable agriculture, and people's ability to stay connected to their communities. Although Joseph does not put forward a detailed economic programme, she clearly challenges the idea that greater consumption automatically leads to a better life.

Conclusion

Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* is a strong examination of the connections between environmental destruction, gender, development and life in a community. In the fictional setting of Aathi, Joseph casts doubt on a development model which bases progress mainly on construction, economic expansion and the accumulation of material goods.

Kumaran shows this model most clearly; at first his wish to transform Aathi seems appealing since it promises modern facilities and economic opportunity, but the results soon show its more unpleasant aspects, namely that water bodies are damaged, agricultural land is lost, pollution increases and the social unity of the community starts to weaken.

The women of Aathi are among the most vigorous in opposing this initiative. Kunjimathu's ecological knowledge is especially important since it is based on her daily activities; she does not see the land as an abstract environmental entity but rather as the foundation of food, one's means of living and the community as a whole. It is for these reasons that her resistance has both ecological and social aspects. Agarwal's feminist environmentalism provides an explanation for this connection. The women are not naturally or biologically linked to nature; rather, their awareness of the environment has been developed through their work, their way of earning a living and their social duties. Because of this, their resistance can be considered meaningful without reducing women to romantic symbols of nature.

Vandana Shiva's criticism of development also offers a valuable means of grasping Kumaran's undertaking. His focus on commercial agriculture, higher production levels and technological interference gradually supplants traditional knowledge and disrupts ecological relationships. The novel indicates that development turns out to be destructive whenever nature is seen merely as a resource and local communities are not allowed to take part in decisions about their own environment.

At the same time, Joseph does not reduce the conflict to one of men versus women; Dinakaran, Ponmani and Markose too take part in the protection of Aathi. It is important that they are involved since this demonstrates that ecological responsibility cannot be based solely on gender. The true conflict lies between domination and interdependence, between possession and responsibility, and between unlimited accumulation and sustainable living. Water brings all these different aspects together in that it stands for life, livelihood, memory and continuity. When the water bodies of Aathi are damaged, the whole community is affected. The destruction of water thus becomes a symbol of the wider breakdown in the relationship between humans and nature. The importance attached to land is the same. While Kumaran sees it as something that can be purchased and developed, the people of Aathi

associate it with food, work, memory and independence. It is therefore Joseph who reveals the social consequences that lie behind apparently simple economic transactions.

Gift in Green ultimately encourages readers to think again about what progress means. A society cannot be regarded as truly developed if its people lose access to clean water, fertile land and sustainable ways of earning a living. Furthermore, economic growth cannot be seen as significant when it damages the ecological systems upon which human beings depend.

The ecofeminist importance of the novel is exactly in this aspect: it links the situation of women with that of nature without turning either of them into a stereotype. It acknowledges that the effects of ecological destruction vary from person to person according to their social position, and at the same time illustrates that resistance can be collective. Aathi eventually becomes more than just an island in a novel; it stands for a way of conceiving of human life in which people come to see themselves as part of a wider ecological community. The land, the water, the animals and the people of Aathi are interconnected, so that when one part is harmed the effects are felt everywhere in the system.

Joseph's main point is therefore not that people should go back entirely to the past or reject all modern development; instead, she urges us to picture a kind of progress which does not destroy the conditions necessary for life. As *Gift in Green* shows, the land cannot be seen merely as property, water cannot be treated simply as a commodity, and development cannot be assessed solely on the basis of economic growth. If we are to have a more meaningful future then we must adopt care, a sense of responsibility, ecological awareness and respect for the communities who have for a long time relied on the natural world.

In this respect, Sarah Joseph's novel turns ecofeminism from a purely theoretical idea into a real-life experience. The people of Aathi show that preserving nature is also a means of protecting one's way of life, memory, dignity and community. The survival of Aathi comes down to acknowledging a simple yet deep truth, namely that human beings do not live outside nature; instead they live through it, with it and within it.

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