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The Politics of Land and the Politics of Gender: Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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Abstract:

Globalisation and mammoth development projects impact heavily on nature, women, and children. Exposure to commercial culture topples the natural world as it price-tags everything based on its efficacy for profit. Land, water, and women become contested consumer items in the contemporary world, leading to ecological and ethical imbalance. Degradation and commercialisation of the land correspond to the objectification of the female. Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* highlights the perils of the profit-oriented paradigm of progress choking the earth. In the context of the accelerating patriarchal, imperial exploitation, the female is compelled to restore the productivity and serenity of the land grounded on her nurturing capacity and traditionally accrued knowledge.

Keywords: Globalisation, development, urbanisation, price, female, nurture.

Introduction

Globalisation, the catchword of the day, resonates differently in the minds of diverse sectors of society. Complexly coupled with development, it is a rubric in the world of traffic and commerce for progression policies and strategies for transnational business with an eye on fast-tracked production and consumption. While in political discourse it is the transformation of national societies to global communities, in common parlance it refers to development of global communities. *Development* is an uncanny word that in the contemporary global scenario is closely associated with market and consumerism. But it tactfully conceals the destitution, desolation, and displacement of the ordinary inhabitants who are enmeshed in the colossal development projects. Development in any given society is inevitably linked to urbanisation which hinges on the availability, ownership, and commoditisation of land. Vandana Shiva sees it as "a postcolonial project, a choice for accepting a model of progress in which the entire world remade itself on the model of the colonising modern west, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism entailed" (Shiva, 1989, 2). Women and natives, who are unaccustomed to the devious ways in which the knots of globalised consumerism strangle the life and natural resources, seem to be the worst affected by the consequent economic insecurity, political clout, social marginalisation, and receding founts of livelihood.

Land, water, and women are three interrelated concerns of development. Land is a strategic factor that confers identity: "More than a material source, it [land] becomes a metaphor for their culture, language, social and community norms, and indeed their very identity" (Rao, 2012, 5). The individual's affiliation to land is determined by his locus within certain sets of cultural parameters that structure his society. Water and woman are allied terms that mark the status of any society, dynamics that have been shelved till recently. They indicate the productive, reproductive, and symbolic values and synergetic nature of human existence. The link between the degradation of land and that of its women cannot be easily ignored.

Development which Shiva addresses as "mal development" is exploitative: "development projects appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival" (Shiva, 1989, 3). Destruction of soil, water, and vegetation systems impair the natural productivity and renewability. Policy shifts leading to alienation of communities that are closely linked to the natural resources not only disrupt the flora and the fauna, but endanger human species as well converting him from a productive individual to a dependent on alien cultures and structures.

The ecological crises rampant in the 21st century have emanated from a profound alienation from nature, and the consequent disrespect to it. In this Anthropocene age, nature has been degenerated to a "resource" to be manipulated rather than a "source" of life to be venerated. Unprecedented human assaults on nature including environmental pollution, destruction of ecosystems, biodiversity loss, population explosion, resource depletion, industrial, electronic, biological and toxic waste accumulation, deforestation etc. have impacted heavily on generations, leading to ecological calamities. Contemporary age has witnessed conversion of large tracts of agricultural land for development projects toppling the innate ecological balance. "Fragmentation and uniformity as assumed categories of progress and development destroy the living forces which arise from relationships within 'the web of life' and the diversity in the elements and patterns of these relationships" (Shiva, 1989, 3).

All over India the environment is being abused for callous business expansion by corporates and individuals. Even government-sanctioned ventures culminate in alienating people from their indigenous living patterns and in diminishing natural resources at a hectic pace. Watercourses, clogged with mass effluence from factories, either encounter a forced demise or become hazardous to humans and animals. Depletion of dense forests for multi purposes without foresight ensue both draught and floods. Mangrove forests that protect the shores, diminish soil erosion, and function as nursery for many a species of natural world are altered to construct mega-complexes. The realty boom has not only led to shrinking of agricultural areas, but also to the violation of rules regarding conservation of wetlands. All these slights against the earth have triggered in devastation and disaster. The individual and the corporate are engaged in rape: "There's rape at every level—rape of the earth, rape of our resources, rape of the economy, and rape of women" (Shiva, 2013).

The convergence of economic and political nexus, insulated from all law and order, engages in all levels of violence by altering laws and masking rules of protected areas. The

Kerala Conservation Act of Paddy Land and Wetland Act 28 of 2008, conceived to restrict the conversion of agricultural land for commercial purposes in order to promote growth in the agricultural sector and to sustain the ecological system in the state of Kerala, the southern state of India, is often violated by land mafia.

The paper proposes to analyse how the emergence of the developmental behemoth, a mark of global culture, threatens the ecological balance and degrades the untamed, pristine beauty of Aaathi, a small island, to pollution and putrefaction as it is carefully crafted by Sarah Joseph in *Gift in Green*. With six novels and a number of short stories from her anvil, Joseph has established her prominence in the contemporary fictional landscape of Kerala, India. Simultaneously published in Malayalam as *Aathi* and translated in to English by Valsan Thampu as *Gift in Green*, the novel is an avant-garde fictional enterprise that exposes the rapacious involvement of a society at the cost of the lullabying relationship between man and nature. The paper focuses on how the females expand their power of influence in their capacities of experienced cultivators and nurturers who understand the pulse of nature. It is her elemental superiority, though contested within the patriarchal context that empowers woman to release the land from ecological imperialism and sustain the natural productivity and livelihood by challenging the “superior” urban and patriarchal powers. Women-initiated grassroots synergistic energy can liberate the land, its women, and safeguard sustainable indigenous economies.

Gift in Green

Joseph subtly reminds us of the callousness towards the female and nature. In *Gift in Green* the male protagonist Kumaran’s attitude to both the land and his woman are the same, exploitation for his pleasure. The patriarchal, masculinist, urban attitude proves catastrophic to the spirit and body of the victims. Lured by the external world of profit and pleasure, this son of Aathi develops a disrespect and contempt for their traditional mode of living in close proximity with nature and would in no way hesitate to rape the woman, Kunjimathu, who loved him, before abandoning her. To him Aathi and Kunjimathu are the same, objects for pleasure and power, use and throw. The rape of the woman symbolises the impending rape of the land. Joseph echoes Shiva who insisted “the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked” (Mies and Shiva, 2014, xvi). Exploited women and exploited land suffer the same impoverishment and shame. On the day of departure for good from Aathi, Kumaran, being materialistic to the core, deliberately violates the virginity of Kunjimathu who succumbs to him without realising the treachery of it. The culture of rape continues as he returns, the target this time being Aathi. With the return of the prodigal son, not as the proverbial prodigal son, but as the business and political tycoon Kumaran, everything becomes a commodity with a price tag: “Everything has a price and nothing has value. Added to the traditional patriarchies of societies, that's created what I call a super-virus of patriarchy. When two viruses hybridize, they start to kill” (Shiva, 2013). Aathi now has only a price tag, but no value for its beauty, tradition, and culture.

The rights of the common man, the rights of the land, and that of imminent generations are threatened under the multiple, mega manipulators of land. Fertile land and

fertile women are equally exploited by the capitalist patriarchy. Shiva believes that “the growing culture of rape is a social externality of economic reforms” (Mies and Shiva, 2014, xvii). Material import and imposition alters the innate value of natural resources which become objects for consumption and commerce.

Kunjimathu becomes powerful on account of her powerful position as the inheritor of her father’s property and as the owner of Kumaran’s property which she bought from the person to whom he had sold against the will of his parents. The power equation alters as she expands her sphere of influence on the basis of her ownership of land and her traditional knowledge of the earth and its soul. It is the women rooted to the soil who network to empower themselves to sustain the serenity of the soil and to release her from the bondages imposed by the powermaniac. It is her spiritual superiority that enables her to challenge the imported urban, materialistic powers. In the simultaneous struggle between power and powerlessness, male and female, nature and culture, the female gleans power to challenge the corrupted wisdom of the exploiter with their natural, experiential knowledge. There establishes an increasing visibility of the bond between the female, the environmentalists, and the land itself. Kumaran failed to realise the power of the woman he rejected and the land he despised: “To know the mind of a woman, he has to know, first the mind of the land” (Joseph, 2011, 20).

The ecological awareness triggered by the environmentalists and the angry young men like Dinakaran and Ponmani, coupled with the pragmatic perseverance of the female icons, Kunjimathu and Shailaja, enables the community to challenge the ruthlessness of development imposed at the causality of nature, women, and children. Submission to cultural practices can be construed as an act of resistance. The people of Aathi witness “an epic contest – the contest between the rights of Mother Earth and the rights of corporations and militarized states using obsolete world-views and paradigms to accelerate the war against the planet and the people” (Mies and Shiva, 2014, xix).

The emergence of the development maffia, a mark of global culture that alienates many from their land and endangers the ecological balance of nature, degrades primeval Aathi to a carrier of effluence. The purity and fecundity of Aathi with the luscious mangrove forest, Green Bangle, encircling it creates an enchanted world self-sufficient in its natural resources of paddy and fish. In the conglomerate world Aathi’s “economic self-sufficiency is perceived as economic deficiency” as Shiva opines, “if the producers consume what they produce, they do not in fact produce at all, because they fall outside the production boundary” (Mies and Shiva, 2014, xv). Kumaran, started with Thampuran, the god who guarded the backwaters and its simple, satiated life. The conversion of Thampuran’s thatched shrine into a glittering edifice of gold initiated the process of divide and rule, a planned privatisation of power. While its glitter blinded the young men, a replica of young Kumaran who saw a life beyond farming, fishing, and water-life, it tremoured the heart of many who had close ties with their land and its Thampuran, their saviour and god.

Aathi had been drained of her robust youngsters like Kumaran who has returned now in the pretext of love for his roots. The Kumaran who returned looked much different from

the Kumaran who left thirty six years ago: accompanied by an elaborate retinue of policemen, private army, personal staff, caparisoned elephant, judge, and priest, resembling a carnival. No wonder, people felta reverential kinship with him who is on a mission, with government support, to transform Aathi to a paradise. They conveniently forgot that he never set foot on this soil for decades, not even when his parents were on their deathbeds. No doubt some like Dinakaran and Ponmani sensed some clandestine schemes under this belated love for Aathi, for it became frequented and assessed by strangers triggering an air of anxiety and uncertainty among the fauna and the sensitive minds. Before Kumaran's dream of a new glittering world of shopping malls, hotels, park, cinema halls, light and sound created by the magic wand, the ferry bank, the paddy fields, the slushy roads became a world of pale and burdensome shadows. Excited by the prospect and captivated by the imminent riches, the youngsters were instigated to leave Aathi, despondent with the water-life.

Aathi stands for the prototype that existed before man's hunger for more ravished the earth. "Fish or muscles: enough to meet one's daily needs. Add to this the two Pokkali harvests from paddy fields every year that anyone could reap. It was quite sufficient to live free from want. The rice they ate was of excellent quantity. Everyone cultivated pumpkin, white gourd, spinach and beans for their own use. Every household had a cow, a buffalo, hens and ducks" (Joseph, 2011, 21). But Kumaran's world was not confined to subsisting on the pickings from Aathi. Hence, he became the first one to sell hisland and leave, to abandon his father and mother. The severing of the ties with the land is as crucial as the severing of the ties with every other bond.

The history of Aathi is a history of marginalisation and exploitation wherein the untouchables, despised and ill-treated, terrified with no freedom even to cry were forced fledin the night, torn from kith and kin, the desperate flight of a handful of people reached this place where "the trees knew no taboo of untouchability, the birds parroted no religious bigotry. The trees, the birds, the fish, the earth, the water-all beckoned them; 'come, come...'"(Joseph, 2011, 44). The deep bottomless lagoon gave them solace. "Aaathi that began from athi became Aathidesham"(Joseph, 2011, 45).

With different narrative schema, Joseph warns the reader against the pillaging and plundering of the natural resources. Unlike the youth of Aathi mesmerised by the proposals of Kumaran, firebrand youngsters like Dinakaran and Ponmani are against such horrendous enterprises. The replacement of Thampuran with the glamorous goddess who would enchant devotees to the place and convert it into a major pilgrim centre minting money, and the relegation of the old to the corner marked as "darkness" underlines the commercialisation agenda. The magnitude of the ecological destruction in the evolutionary process is worst experienced by Shailaja who valued her Aathi above her marital bliss in an ecologically degraded nearby village Cakkarakandam. When the same fate engulfs her own Aathi, she refuses to be silenced.

The marginalised—women, children, disabled, and the old—become the primary victims of any form of natural or man-made disaster. Kumaran had political and economic power to ensnare the youth to sell this "sewage and swamp" for the dream project of

concrete houses with all modern amenities in the city and lucrative job offers. With the construction of the new bridge, the virginity of Aathi is exposed for manipulation, just as it opened gates of opportunities for the youth to emulate Kumaran. In the struggle between the stagnation of tradition and the lure of modernity, Kumaran won and the people of Aathi lost. Aaathi was turned into a sewage dump, another trump card played by Kumaran with which he could gain a messianic role for the removal of corporation waste. Those who protested faced hunger, police lathis, disappointment, and death. "Darkness began to roost, clawing the fetid garbage, the putrefaction and the greed that shrouded the stifled face of the water. Thampuran, sitting in his golden cage couldn't save them. Kumaran had made even their god powerless" (Joseph, 2011, 245). Only the death of the children on account of the toxic waste with which parts of Aathi was filled, and the betrayal of Kumaran as experienced by his first victims, Unnimon and his mother who were tricked to sell their property for modern facilities in the city, jerk them to the magnitude of the treachery and their irrevocable loss and the irreparable impairment to Aaathi. Joseph believes: "the current model of development sees nature as a cow to be milked forever but to be cared for, never. I have written *Gift in Green* to portray a way of life that predates this dogma and to sketch the dangers immanent in it" (Joseph, 2011, 213).

The novel exhorts the need to sensitise to and conscientise about environmental issues, especially in the light of the hazardous, androcentric development projects. The predatory paradigm shift has necessitated an equally vehement paradigm alteration to return to nature. Orchestrated attempts at devouring and poisoning has to be dealt with equally vehement resistance movements at the imitative of women and environment lovers who form a massive and sensitive group that tirade against the murderous, lethal covetousness that endangers the human existence. Joseph presents how the heroic operation of the females like Kunjimathu and Shailaja and the revolutionaries like Dinakaran and Ponmani, overtly powerless in their capacities before the muscle and money power of Kumaran who schemes through nefarious means to violate laws and to legalise the violations, become instrumental in reclaiming the stolen purity of land. She quickens the readers to the perils that are sure to eventuate from the deep and raw wounds we inflict on earth. While the social, economic, political, and cultural invasions ultimately alter the natural virgin habitat to an artificial environment of exploitation and destruction, it is the women who mobilise themselves to resuscitate the natural environment on account of their synchronised effort founded on traditional wisdom.

The apparent invisibility of the women folk engaged in production, distribution, and consumption transforms into a visibility motivating the young through service, rather than profit motif at the critical moment. "Women often play a primary role in community action because it is about things they know best. They also tend to use organizing strategies and methods that are the antithesis of those of the traditional environmental movement... These individuals are responding not to nature in the abstract but to their homes and the health of their children (Hamilton, 1991, 43). "We are really living through a period of collapse of all kinds in the patriarchal system. The collapse of the financial economy they've built; a collapse of the eco-systems they have raped. The UN has recognized that 90 percent of eco-

systems are on the verge of collapse, if not already collapsed. In this period, it's the creative principle which women bring to bear for the simple reason that they were left to look after the real stuff of life, the goals that really mattered" (Shiva, 1989,214).

Conclusion

Joseph, not a vehement opponent of development but like Mahatma Gandhi and the people of Aathi, thinks," there is enough in this world for everyone's need, but not for someone's greed" (qtd. in Shiva, 1989,6). The novel becomes a resistance towards invasion of land and life through the effective bonding of the female and environmentalists, extending the possibility of an eco-friendly existence. Women rise up to function as agents of change to establish a self-sufficient society, to counter the disruptive, intensified corporate commodification through synergised effort. Joseph reasserts female role in in the formulation of a sustainable environment against the hazardous impact of environmental capitalism. She asserts, "*Gift in Green* has been forged in the furnace of my anguish: anguish at having to witness the corruption of the earth and water that sustain human life and a host of other life forms. It is also my protest against the murderous covetousness that despoils the future of the generations to come. . . . the vision of development in vogue today favours the rich and the powerful , jeopardizing the very survival of the lesser mortals and the eco-system as a whole... .the idea of progress we embrace must be broad enough to accommodate the Creator's justice that confers on every form of life the right to survive with dignity" (Joseph, 2011). The book resonances the deep-felt concern and apprehension about man-engineered environmental disasters.Nature displays a mode of management that conceals its rising fury beneath equanimity, but warns mankind not to forget its capacity to obliterate the race. Humans are expected to realisethat the earth will remain in one form or other accommodating and tailoring itself to suit the times.

Community based multiculture, small-scale farming is threatened by monoculture, large scale profit oriented production.Land which had supported community subsistence has been violently abused for alien purposes hurling the people into spiralling debt.Out of the abundance of wateronly eight percent is fresh and portable (Warren, 1997, 70). The universal problem of availability of freshwater becomes acute when human programmed ventures affect the supply of water, especially in low-lying areas affecting both agriculture and quotidian existence. Depletion as well as contamination of natural water resources leads to health risks consequent on unsanitary water resources. Imported technology sans human ethics disturbs existing paradigm of community life. Health hazards resulting from toxic waste-landfill pose serious concern. Women and children become the major victims of environmental disasters resulting from urbanisation, depletion of uncontaminated water resources, toxic-waste land filling, and poverty. Poverty compels them all the more vulnerable to environmental hazards as they lack financial resources to move to safer locales, to remove toxic substances, or access to health care. Exposure to hazardous products from toxic waste dumps affect children critically: they suffer the brunt of environmental destruction. Institutional power is manipulated to kill the marginalised people and the very earth. Dominant class will squander natural resources for short-term selfish agenda, leading

to "the displacement of peasant farmers and indigenous peoples by agribusiness, timber, mining and energy firms" (Hartman, 1991, 27)

The assault on woman harbinger a system of assault on nature as the novel endorses. "Our individualist, capitalist society tends to destroy our sense of meaningful connectedness with nature, with all creatures and all people, and to replace these relationships with commodities" (Smith, 1997, 31). Kumaran's much advertised pro-family development programme turns out to be anti-domestic. The revolt against it becomes a political act representing many connected issues, just like the female-initiated, grass root level Chipko movement in India to protect trees. The Chipko movement, known in the vernacular as *chipkoandolan* began locally in the state of Rajasthan in the 1970s as a non-violent movement for the protection and preservation of trees and forest against destruction, snowballed to successful pro-environmental inspiring future environmental movements across the world. The name *Chipko* relates to the word *embrace*, the strategy adopted by the village women who hugged the trees to protect them from wood cutters.

Through the inset story incorporated about Hagar, mother of Ishmael, Joseph re-establishes the water covenant between the nomadic, tribal people and Hagar that water is life itself. Only a person who has known the value of the first drop of water for sustenance would realise the value of water. The covenant agreed upon between Hagar and the tribes reminds that it is not based on the spirit of ownership, but as a caretaker, without wasting the last drop of it (Joseph, 2011, 4). It remains a covenant between man and nature that he will be provided with life if he cares for it. When man breaks the covenant, water turns out to be a curse rather than a source of life.

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