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Against Globalization: Women's Voice in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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Abstract:

Globalization has created a tremendous impact in the lives of women in society. It causes violence against women in the name of development. 'Modernization' and 'Commercialization' are terms introduced to disturb the lives of living organisms. Sarah Joseph, a feminist writer deals with varied experiences of women in the male dominated society and their struggles against environmental issues. She highlights the fact that women's relationship with their environment is an ambivalent one. *Gift in Green* is one of her famous novels which focuses on ecofeminism. This paper attempts to argue that globalization has created a tremendous impact on the lives of women. The objective of this paper is to present how women characters in the novel struggle from the violence caused by male characters in the name of development. It also points out that women have to be empowered to safeguard the land in which they live.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, environment, feminism, globalization, empowerment.

Globalization has created a tremendous impact in the lives of women in the society. It causes violence against women in the name of development. 'Modernization' and 'Commercialization' are terms introduced to disturb the lives of living organisms. Women and nature have been having a strong bond relationship since time immemorial. Hence, ecofeminism analyses the intimacy between women and nature. It is a movement which addresses issues like pollution of nature and oppression of women. It is a political theory which combines ecological concerns of feminists against male domination. The term 'ecofeminism' was first invented by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne who gave importance to ecological revolution organised by women. The connection among literature, women and nature has gained more attention in literary works concerning environment.

Ecological science concerns itself with the interrelationships among all forms of life. It aims to harmonize nature, humans and nonhumans. It is an integrative science in an age of fragmentation and specialization. It is also a critical science which grounds and necessitates a critique of the existing society. It is a reconstructive science in that it suggests directions for reconstructing human society in harmony with the natural environment.

Ecofeminism recognises that ecological problems are social and cultural problems. Ecofeminists, unlike more mainstream feminists, do not demand equal access to everything. Instead, they call for social changes that foster egalitarian social relations and believe that such changes are a prerequisite for an ecologically healthy society. Many ecofeminists share “the perception that the oppression of women and ecological degradation are connected in that they both arise within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Carlassare 90).

Sarah Joseph is an eminent Malayalam ecofeminist writer and social activist. She has written several novels, short stories, essays, plays and won many awards like the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award, the Vayalar Award and the Crossword Award for Translation. *Othappu (The Scent of the Other Side)*, *Aathi (Gift in Green)* and *Oorukaval (The Vigil)* are some of her novels that discuss the varied experiences of women in the male dominated society. She is a leading literary figure who has contributed to the foundation of the later twentieth century feminist movement in Kerala. She raises her voice mainly “on the marginalised, deprived, misinterpreted and misused women as well as the environment” (Krishna 105).

Sarah Joseph's *Aathi* is written in Malayalam and translated by Valson Thampu in English and entitled as *Gift in Green*. It is a novel written in ecofeminist perspective and portrays an ancient village, Aathi which is known for its serene beauty. According to Joseph, “Aathi, in the *Gift in Green*, is such a lagoon. It lies, cool and serene, in the womb of an inviolate purity” (350). The village is surrounded by mangrove forests and water bodies are located far away from the noise of motor vehicles.

Aathi houses people who wish to get rid of their distress. The people of Aathi “felt themselves to be one with trees, the birds, the water, and the land” (44). They till the land for the cultivation of paddy, pumpkin, white gourd, spinach and beans. They worship at the shrine of Thampuram which is located inside the forest. Aathi is an ideal world where people can live their life peacefully nourished by the purity of the water around them. But water gets polluted after the arrival of Kumaran and his companions. They pollute the environment of Aathi under the pretext of modernisation and development.

Gift in Green enfolds equal men and women characters. Kumaran, Chandramohan, Kunjimathu and Shailaja are some characters who play a prominent role. Kumaran belongs to the village called Aathi whereas Chandramohan belongs to another village called Chakkam Kandam. Both villages are surrounded by mangrove forests and water bodies are located far away from the noise of motor vehicles. For generations, the people of Aathi consider their land to be Thampuram's whom they worship as a god. No one had ever dared to take advantage of it in any way not even draw a line on it, much less cultivate a square inch of it. The seeds that sprouted on their own had grown over time and become a dense bush around Thampuram's shrine. Other than birds, squirrels, snakes, garden lizards, chameleons and crickets which are familiar denizens of the forest, there are amphibious creatures like turtles and frogs. The network of Aathi nerves innumerable canals, water drains, ponds, water springs, wells, paddy fields brimming with water, and slushy marshes criss-crossed the place.

Chakkam Kadam had backwaters, mangroves, fish, and mussels as like Aathi. Even the paddy cultivated there was Pokkali.

A number of characters who appear at the beginning of the novel, the new tent dwellers by the side of the river, with their sly smile, magic charm and sweet cart try to attract children, paving a way to get into the village. They entice them with telescope and toy pistols. They are Kumaran's men. The men at the tent illustrated as "man in dark glasses" (1), another one "wearing a white topi" (5) begin their plunder first of all by shooting down the water fowls. They allure the people with the promise to "rescue them from the mud and marsh of Aathi" (43). Ambu, Praskashan, Chandran and several other young men were attracted by their promises and were ready to give up their little plots of land. Thus begins their heartless encroachments.

The people of Aathi are soon left without their land and water, and "the capitalist corporate who is fed by the sweat of the poor peasant and fisherman is empowered even to draw line on the land and waters preventing the people of the land from their daily arena of work" (Dasan 305). Shankaran who has an uncanny knack of catching prawns is given the order, "You are not allowed to fish here" (47). The wisdom of the old of Aathi recognizes that "We've lost forever the way we lived, cultivating rice and catching fish" (156). They alarmingly ask: "Has it come to this, buying fish with money?" (159). They are literally uprooted from their tradition, culture and familiar habitat.

Kumaran is a brutal male character in the novel. He is a greedy businessman who thinks more of making money by transforming Aathi into a "township crackling with industry" (156). He abandoned the natural life of Aathi and sought wealthy life outside. He returns to Aathi as a wealthy man after thirty-six years, but he is unable to adapt himself to the environment. He "brings modernisation, corruption, greed and pollution resulting in the destruction of the Aathi" (Suneetha 101). He has forgotten all his memories of the village. People who have seen him earlier could hardly recognize him. Though he returns to the village as a prosperous man, not only the people but the land also could not recognize the face of Kumaran and they could only say, "I know you not" (24), since he is responsible for the destruction of Aathi and its prosperity.

Kumaran has planned to transform Aathi into a paradise of modernity. His men helped him to plough the riverbed, to crush the empire of oysters, to trample the growth of mangrove forest and to threaten the birds of Aathi. The activity of bringing modernization completely disrupted the agrarian life of Aathi and cause violence to the gentle female character like Kunjimathu. She is betrothed to Kumaran but he runs away from her life and also from the natural life of Aathi in order to make money. Kumaran who is a multimillionaire starts investing money for developing the place. He replaces the natural life of Aathi with buildings. Aathi has completely changed its form into a modern world to Kumaran. Kunjimathu, as a lover of nature feels very bad on seeing the activities of Kumaran. She starts to mourn for the destruction of nature. She feels as if her heart is broken and prays to god Thampuran when suddenly she envisions an empty future without water. In that vision she could see all wealth of the village getting smashed one by one. For instance,

“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” (196) are scenes mentioned by Joseph in this novel.

Sarah Joseph depicts the present-day issues of Kerala in this novel. Some of the places in Kerala are fully affected by “water contamination, lack of proper waste disposal systems, dumping of biomedical waste in waters in rivers and water bodies, the use of endosulfan to ensure profit in farming, the problems of landfilling, destruction of marshes, disposal of plastic and biomedical waste and so on” (Suneetha 104). In the novel, Chakkam Kandam is declared as a place unfit to live by Shailaja who is married to Chandramohan. He is one of the natives of Chakkam Kandam. The toilets in many of the lodges in Chakkam Kandam have no septic tank and thereby create a very pathetic situation to the people there. The excrement from the toilets usually falls into Valiathodu, a large canal and reach the Chakkam Kandam. It produces bad smell and people living nearby places fall sick. This waste “stays undegraded and breeds disease causing bacteria and microbes and has already become a health hazard for the people in the city” (93). Such scenes forced Shailaja to vacate Chakkam Kandam and find a healing place in Aathi.

Sarah Joseph portrays another kind of trouble which is caused through biomedical waste. The biomedical waste is that which is dumped into the immediate environment from hospitals. It is proven that each patient generates about three hundred grams of biomedical waste every day. Shailaja, who works as a sweeper in a hospital is curious about the waste that she dumps daily into a large toilet bowl inside the hospital. The waste collected by all sweepers are “blood, leftovers like placenta, severed umbilical cords, sanitary napkins, blood-soaked rags and cotton packs” (72) which ended up in a waterbody close by the hospital.

One day, Shailaja began to climb the steps of the massive granite fortification that separated the hospital from the lake of death behind it. Halfway up the steps, her legs and hands began to tremble. When she was climbing the narrow and steep steps, a security guard noticed her when she had some twenty steps more to climb. He mistook her, at first, for a huge white heron among the rocks. The next moment, he raised an alarm by blowing his whistle frantically. Shailaja was in the vortex of a gale. Stamping down the clamour of the security guards, she clawed her way up to the top of the rocky structure. The sky alone was above her now. There was an endless stretch of water beneath her. The gale lifted her clothes and made her to stagger. Shailaja looked like a white heron with its wings ready to fly. The security guards ran helter-skelter.

One of the guards shouted at the top of his voice “Who are you? Come down, you daughter of a bitch. What do you think you are doing? Come down!” (74). The gale snatched and scattered his words, so Shailaja did not hear any of it. Even otherwise, neither the security guards nor their whistles, nor the crowd gathering below, nor the hospital authorities, mattered to Shailaja at that point in time. She was searching for a mirror in the heart of the water to settle her suspicions and misgivings. “Oh God! Nothing was clear. No sky. No clouds. No sun in full blaze. Only a dark stretch of water” (74).

Placentas were putrefying in the water. They were not buried in the earth. Nor did they decompose to become manure for trees. Besides placentas, there were aborted fetuses. Shailaja had carried such fetuses in buckets in the past.

Shailaja, after monitoring all these irritating circumstances, plans to leave Chakkam Kandam and goes to Aathi. However, Aathi also becomes polluted and lacks space for peaceful survival. She wants to protect the village by protesting against modernisation. She comes to know that Kunjimathu also has an idea of protesting against the destruction of Aathi. They both unite to face the problem boldly. Kunjimathu, with all her daring courage, steps into the contaminated water, remains there and refuses to come out. The bond between nature and women of Aathi is clearly revealed here. It is as if she is ordering nature to give them pure water for their survival. She says, “You will give us water and livelihood. We shall work with you and take care of you” (201).

Kunjimathu and Shailaja are bold women of Aathi. They come to rescue the village. They start to cultivate paddy in the fields across the village. This gives a good result and helps Aathi to regain its greenery. Kunjimathu and Shailaja pave way for Aathi’s miraculous recovery by using their full strength. People belonging to Aathi happen to witness the glory of the land. They happen to see “the whisper of seeds sprouting in the dark, the aroma of clay from the Pokkli fields, and the fingerlings playing in the waters of Aathi” (348). People of Aathi win the battle against the people who have come to destroy the land.

Another important woman character in the novel is Gitanjali. She comes to Aathi with her daughter Kayal, to seek the healing power of the purified water. She was advised to “let her see water, hear the sound of water, play with water. She is sure to improve” (57). At that time Aathi’s water was as pure as crystal and one can see the bottom of water. Sarah says, “In Aathi, the air was light, the water pristine and the wind pure” (61). With the cool fingers of water, Aathi touched Kayal and healed her mind and body.

The struggle to obtain clean drinking water is written into the lives of many of the countrywomen that a former member of Planning Commission once remarked, “If men had to fetch drinking water, then two hundred thirty thousand villages would not have remained without the provision of drinking water after thirty years of planned development” (Philipose 72). By and large, Indian women have not organised enough to fight for their rights to get clear drinking water. There have been, some remarkable mass actions, initiated or supported by women.

Sarah Joseph sketches the contemporary reality of Kerala with regard to the use of endosulfan in the boarder districts like Kasargod and Palakkad which has caused all the water fowls and fish to die and float on water. Even though the state pollution control board has announced a ban on endosulfan, it is obtained from the border states by the corporate landholders. Endosulfan is carcinogenic, neurotoxin and genotoxin which damages the DNA. The Stockholm Convention, a global treaty to protect human health and environment from such chemical compounds, has declared endosulfan as a persistent organic pollutant.

The people of Aathi are well aware that, "If endosulfan has been used, it's not safe to eat the fish. Those who eat it will die of some incurable disease" (169). They have no idea as to how Kunjimathu's five-acre paddy field which is poisoned to death can be farmed again. It is again the sly plan of Kumaran to make Komban Joy to take Kunjimathu's land for lease-farming; poison it and gradually obtain it for himself. Kunjimathu retorts Kumaran with her sharp words, with the courage of a woman.

The notice which is prepared by the fishermen of Varapuzha against contractors and monopolists is an enlightening and conscientising one. The notice is read as follows:

Friends, Over the last two or three years, the owners of our prawn farms have been putting poisonous substances of various kinds into our paddy fields. Ever since this covetous practice – the true nature of which is masked under the euphemism 'eradication' – has been started by greedy profiteers, fishermen have been reduced to lives of poverty and destitution. The massacre of fish having now become a routine practice, many varieties of fish have become extinct. We demand that those who take our paddy fields on lease should refrain from the despicable practice of killing every fish and sinking every fisherman into grinding poverty under the guise of 'eradication' (176-177).

After taking the land for lease Komban Joy, a delegate of Kumaran, dumps DDT on the prawn farm. As an aftermath yellow butterflies fall dead on the ridges of the paddy fields, in courtyards, and in front of Thampuram's shrine like withered flowers. Next the tragedy befalls on the green frogs. The children of the village are saddened at the sight. They sit by the dead butterflies, strike their delicate wings and try to blow and revive them.

Sarah Joseph mentions all the related issues on destruction of nature in *Gift in Green*. It is clear that women hold greater responsibilities than men in the society to protect the environment. Many women across the world voluntarily take responsibility in preserving nature against destruction. Here are some examples which illustrate the struggles faced by women across the globe which clearly point out their anger, anxiety and responsibility to preserve nature and put an end to the destruction. Women boldly voice against the following:

...atomic power plants in Germany, against chalk mining and logging in the Himalayas; the activities of Green Belt Movement in Kenya; and of Japanese women against food pollution by chemically-stimulated, commercial agriculture and for self-reliant producer-consumer networks; poor women's efforts in Ecuador to save the mangrove forests as breeding-grounds for fish and shrimp; the battle of thousands of women in the South for better water management, soil conservation, land use, and maintenance of their survival base (forest, fuel, fodder) against the industrial interest (Mies and Shiva 3).

Development is imperative as it decides the growth of the country, but sustainable development is the need of the hour. *Gift in Green* advocates that development should take

the whole ecosystem into consideration, and that this is the only way to benefit not only the present but also the future generation.

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