

Struggle for Ecological Justice: A Study of Ecocentric Myths in the Works of Sarah Joseph

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Abstract

The 21st century literature is concerned not only man's deviation from nature but also exposes his atrocity over it. Sarah Joseph, a prolific writer and an ardent supporter of nature, expresses her concerns for nature and vehemently castigates environmental abuses which jeopardize entire ecosystem. She believes the interrelationship between nature and human beings which is interlocked in the form of ecosystem. Therefore, any disturbance in any form to them will also affect the remaining part of it.

The postmodern scenario of globalisation has deviated man from this exquisite ambience in the name of modernization, which has given rise to ecological problems such as deforestation, famine, drought, and the annihilation of animals. Hence, it is necessary to preserve nature from dilapidation. Eco-criticism, one of the recent literary criticisms, lends its hands to retrieve nature from degradation. It evaluates a work art on the basis of its significant tropes and myths that shape our environmental imagination and action.

Joseph, in her novels, uses Indian myths to showcase how nature suffers in the ancient time and also applies eco-feminism concepts which synchronize ecological issues with women problems. This research paper aims to focus on the ecological injustice that is done to nature and woman with reference to the works of Sarah Joseph.

Keywords: *Ecological Issues, Eco-criticism, Eco-feminism, Nature, Myth, Injustice.*

Struggle for Ecological Justice: A Study of Ecocentric Myths in the Works of Sarah Joseph

As the Upanishads uphold, nature is honey to both living and non-living things in the world. It is inconceivable to think of a life without the existence of nature. The relationship between nature and human life is unconsciously interlocked with one another in the form of ecosystem. Therefore, any disturbance in any form to them will also affect the remaining part of it. The postmodern scenario of globalisation has deviated man from this exquisite ambience in the name of modernization, which has given rise to ecological problems such as deforestation, famine, drought, and the annihilation of animals. Hence, it is necessary to preserve nature from dilapidation. Ecocriticism, one of the recent literary criticisms, lends its hands to retrieve nature from degradation. As Kerridge rightly asserts, “Ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis” (5). Thus, the researcher aims to focus on the ecological injustice that is done to nature with reference to Sarah Joseph's novels *Gift in Green* (GG) and *The Virgil* (TV).

In the postmodern literary world, ecological ideas and thinking play a pivotal intellectual role and have brought a drastic change in the fields of literature. The term ‘Eco-criticism’ studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment. As Greg Garrard, the renowned eco-critic, defines the term “eco-criticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, through human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself” (5). Unlike other literary criticisms which focus on issues of class, race, and region as important criteria for critical analysis, eco-criticism views the problems of nature in a holistic pattern. Eco-critics examine a work of art on the basis of its significant tropes and myths that shape our environmental imagination and action. The concept of environmental justice is also developed along with eco-criticism which is defined as “the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment” (Adamson, Evans and Stein 4). This theoretical approach is used for studying the structure of environmental problems in literature and attempts to achieve pluralism in environmental discourse.

Sarah Joseph, one of the leading feminists and social activists in India, in her writings, has unveiled her benign interest towards nature and Indian culture. In her novels, she has explored the relationship between the human world and environment with a spirit of commitment. She herself states, “My environmental activism stems from my intuition of the umbilical cord that connects human being with the earth” (GG XVII). The novel *Gift in Green* was originally written in Malayalam, and it is Valson Thampu who has translated the novel into English. Joseph, an avid lover of nature, expresses her fascination towards nature in the beginning of the novel. She portrays an exquisite village, “Aathi” which stands with tradition and its innumerable rites and rituals. The village itself is a source of survival for a number of living and non-living things and also provides accommodation for those who seek shelter in her. Mangrove trees and water, which present an abundant scenario, encircle the village. The people of Aathi describe it as:

Water! Wherever they looked, water was all they found. Swimming and walking, they reached this place. The trees here knew no taboo or untouchability. The birds parroted no religious bigotry. The trees, the birds, the fish, the earth, the water – all beckoned them: 'come, come...' (GG 44)

Through this novel, Sarah Joseph has also highlighted the interconnection between nature and man. As the ancient people have led their lives in harmony with nature, the people of Aathi, every year, pay their homage to the land and their shrine of father Thampuran, the deity and the founder of the village, by celebrating a festival for seven nights. Each of the seven nights, a story teller who comes from the outside of the village, eulogizes the tradition and the glory of the village. Noor Mohammed, the first story teller, narrates the melancholic story of a woman named, Hagar who is abandoned with her child in a mountain by her husband. The child, Ishmael, begins to cry of hunger, but she herself feels terribly thirsty and the scorching sun has shrunk even her breast milk, and she could not feed her child. As she cries:

In the darkness of this terrible night,
Wintry winds howl and needle me.
Oh, open not your cavernous mouth,
You hungry desert loneliness,
To swallow my baby! (GG10-11)

Sarah Joseph highlights the Wordsworthian concept that nature never betrays. It is the land of Aathi which quenches Hagar's thirst and feeds her child. The narrator concludes the story by stating that the land has never extended empty hands to those who come to her. This incident synchronizes with the incident of Hagar in *The Bible* (Genesis 21), where she meets with the same thirsty predicament. Nature in the form of a spring, identified by an angel quenches her thirst. Nature is life-saving. The world is essentially bio centric. Man is in no way superior to other living species or non-living bio-geo factors. The earth's ambient energy holds a parallel relationship with the transient human breath and in a context holds the human world beneath the nexus of the ecosystem.

As eco-critics argue, man is a part of nature, but nature never depends on human beings except for its survival. Moreover, as nature is considered as the mother, the all-giving, with no expectations, Sarah Joseph projects it through the character Gitanjali, who comes to the village and seeks shelter in Markose's house. As singer of the village, she wants to recover her neurotic child, Kayal. Gitanjali elucidates the pathetic story of her child to Markose. She and her family live in a metropolis city where she has missed her daughter. She says that her daughter likes to eat and drink in zoological picture cups, mugs, and plates. As she describes:

Kayal was fond of animals, and their pictures adorned her cups, mugs and plates. Her father and mother bought them for her on various occasions, as doting young parents do. While eating a dosha from the 'elephant plate', Kayal would cup her chin in her hands, open her eyes wide and say, 'Ah-ha, elephant dosha!' There were other zoological delicacies as well. Giraffe juice, monkey murukku, cheetah idli, jackal upma... (GG 58)

The depiction of child's zoological interest has revealed Sarah Joseph's compassion towards flora and fauna. Gitanjali misses her daughter and finds her out after two days in an unconscious condition, repeating the word "poh poh". Ravi, the father of Kayal could not bear the state of his daughter and runs away from the house. At last, Gitanjali's guru suggests her to keep her daughter near the water of Aathi which has the power of healing lunacy. Having heard of the story, Markose, himself comes to know the power of his land and remembers the words of Dinakaran, the protagonist,

who used to say: “We need to understand the water, Markose. Not “know” in the usual sense of the term, we must know the water as the lotus knows it: rooted in the sludge below, growing its stem in the water, unfurling its leaves on the surface of the water, and offering its wet and watery face to the sun.” (GG 61)

As a social activist, Sarah Joseph sheds light on the concurrent ecological issues of her time through the characters, Jayan Munakkakadavu, Parinju Maash, Dr. Johnson and Chandramohan who have come to the collector office in seeking justice against different kinds of perennial problems. Firstly, Jayan Munakkakadavu, the secretary of the Gymkhana Arts and sports club, states the problems in his village, Kadappuram which is sandwiched between the river and the sea. The village, which has soothing atmosphere, has lost its glory due to the encroachment of the sand swindler. Therefore, he has come to the collector officer to seek justice against the mutilation of the land. Sarah Joseph as a radical socialist courageously raises her voice against this sort of unlawful land acquisition.

Sarah Joseph, then, introduces the character, Parinju Maash, who is over seventy years of age, seeking salvation against the drainage problem of Guruvayoor. He has shown a letter, which has been written by Nithya Chaithany Yeti to the collector, to Chandramohan and Dr. Johnson. The letter contains the complaint of the decrepitude condition of Guruvayoor. As the report of tenth Assembly of Kerala describes: “The toilets and convenience facilities constructed for the pilgrims who come to Guruvayoor in their teeming millions are grossly inadequate. Human excrement dumped on the roadside or in the stagnant waters of the canals stays underrated and breeds disease-causing bacteria and microbes and has already become a major health hazard for the people in the city...” (GG 93)

Finally, Sarah Joseph depicts a village named Chakkam Kandam where the environmental activists, Chandramohan and Dr. Johnson live. The village is encircled by bountiful water which is the only source of their livelihood. But the water is utterly ruined by defecation of effluent water from factories. As Kate Rigby says, “There is no place on the earth that has not been affected in some way by humanity’s alteration of the natural environment” (154). The land, like a barren woman’s womb, has lost its fertility and could not yield anymore. This dystrophic situation brings misery to the

people of Chakkam Kandam who could not sell their land. Even the marriage proposals from outside of the village have also stopped. The village itself freezes in sorrow of their future. The depiction of these decayed villages pours light on numerous ecological issues rampant in Kerala. This takes on a universal significance, since nature takes on global reflection in its anguish from human subordination.

In this novel, Sarah Joseph addresses one of issues of the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers which wipes out the entire insect species. Joseph epitomizes it through the character, Kunjimathu, the owner of Pokkali paddy field, who leases her land to Komban—the abuser of the land by using enormous chemical pesticides. He obliterates the land's fertility and makes it sterile. Likewise, another woman character named Shailaja, who is married in a nearby village called Chakkam Kandam could not bear the polluted atmosphere there. That village which has savagely been affected by the garbage of the factory promulgates noxious smell throughout the village. She decides to leave the village and wishes to lead her remaining life in her own village, Aathi, where she again encounters the same plight of plundering nature. Human disturbances in the ecosystem lead to the quick disappearance of several wild plants and insect species in the ecosystem.

Man's misuse of nature is not a recent activity. It is dated, as *The Holy Bible* describes, with the transgression of Adam and Eve by eating the forbidden fruit. Further, for a few centuries, ecological consciousness goes unnoticed due to the development of technology and the human beings are so much engrossed with new innovations. Nature is not given ample importance in the era. Sarah Joseph, as a writer of the environment, focuses on ecological issues through the character of Kumaran, an ardent supporter of anthropocentrism. Kumaran, who has ran away from the village, returns with the ideology of penetrating modernity into the village. As he enters the village, the people of Aathi, mesmerizingly stare at him, but he flays and sniggers at the people for being unchanged. He wants to completely reinvigorate the village and rebuild the Thampuram temple. But Dinakaran, who vehemently opposes the ideology of Kumaran, wants the village to hold the tradition as it is.

Though there is a strong opposition, Kumaran manages to buy the land of some people in the village and tries to build a bridge to connect the village to the

metropolitan city. In due course, as lorries carry the garbage of hospital, spreading vicious smell all over the village, Dinakaran and the village people try to restrain them. Kumaran and the police men have brutally attacked the people with the help of law and filled the land with garbage. As the malodorous smell diffuses all over the land and water, fishes, birds and moths have fled away from the land. Though Aathi is surrounded by water, people don't have even a drop of water to drink. They lament as in the poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by S.T Coleridge, the crew mourns:

Water, water everywhere
And all the boards did shrink;

Water, water everywhere
Nor any drop to drink. (7)

At the end of the novel, Sarah Joseph explicitly points out that whenever man tries to rule over nature, it will exhibit its cruel face in the form of natural disasters and subjugate man under her custody. The village, Aathi is completely wiped out by rainstorm which deluges the entire village. After the rainstorm, the village is replenished to the former condition. Nature eventually succeeds in upholding its authority. Man is forced to submit to its power.

Sarah Joseph's another important novel, *The Virgil*, also scrutinizes the story of environmental extermination and injustice done to Vali and his son, Angadan. Though the story is a retold version of one of the cantos of Ramayana, Joseph does not sluggishly replicate it. She looks at the story from a different perspective and throws limelight on the hidden truth. Through this novel, she brings out Raman's unfair attitude against Vali and his family and also depicts how the Lankan war damages nature to extricate Sita from Ravan's subjugation. Two injustices are focussed here – one on man and the other on nature.

As per our philosophy and religion, nature is intimately associated with divine qualities. Joseph evidences this assertion by relating the divine characters with nature. At the outset of the novel, she delineates the life of an innocent boy, Angadan who lives happily under his mother's warmth of love. This cosy atmosphere is scattered by the tragic news of his father Vali's death. Vali is a man of courage and the king of Kishkindam. The place Kishkindam is enveloped by numerous trees and plants. It is

Vali who has an immense love for nature and rears these trees and plants, brought from different regions with utmost care and devotion. As Sarah Joseph describes:

Have you noticed the flower gardens of Kishkindam? Is there any region without a forest? All these rare trees were planted and nurtured by Vali. He brought back seeds, saplings or cuttings from every place he visited and planted them in Kishkindam. Flowering trees, shrubs, creepers and medicinal plants. Is there any city like ours in the world?... (TV 25).

The people of Kishkindam are all vegetarians and even they cannot endure the harm done even to an insect. But the war between Vali and Sugrivan who has forged a friendship with Raman, has not only brought Vali's demise but also has decimated the trees and plants in Kishkindam.

Sarah Joseph, then portrays the lake, Pushkaram which is surrounded by hills and which is believed to have divine power. The Lake is isolated from Kishkindam and no man has dared to enter it. If a man goes there unknowingly, he is subjected to contempt and has to lead a hellish life. As Joseph depicts, "Lake Pushkaram had the mysterious aura of a seductive woman. In solitude, she lay facing the sky, fully revealing the sensuous beauty of her body to the plants" (TV 58-59). After the death of Vali, Tara, mother of Angadan, feels that her son's life is in danger and she wants to give refuge to his spirit in her womb to save him from Sugrivan. Therefore, she goes to the lake and invokes his spirit, places it in a sealed pot and entrusts it to the stomach of the lake Pushkaram. Joseph has used the lake Pushkaram as a symbol of revitalization that can bring back life in man. Our ecosystem contains the power to rejuvenate the body and give back its spirit. Nature has the immense potential to replenish the spirit and protect it. When nature is endangered, it leads to the ruin of man too.

Sarah Joseph finally elucidates the cruelty of war which brings enormous damage to both the nation and the environment. She also expresses her condemnation for war as she says that she has hesitation even to use the word 'war'. She describes it as "War! What a small word it is, caught between two sounds. But what a terrible resonance it has! It will convert the region into a heap of leftovers" (TV 189). Sugrivan, who has betrayed his brother Vali, assigns Angadan and Maruthi to find

Sita, who has been abducted by Ravana. The command given is: “The woman will have to be found within a month, churning all the forests, oceans and mountains if necessary” (TV 37). Joseph records Sugrivan as an epitome of evil who is diametrically opposed to Vali in observing ecological ethics. Though Angadan has a sense of revenge on Sugrivan for his father's death, he is forced to be involved in this mission. Maruthi, after a prolonged struggle, finds Sita in Lanka which lies in the midst of the sea.

Raman instructs Sugrivan and his clan to prepare for a war against Lanka and this is a threat on the ecosystem. The paddy fields in Kishkindam which are newly ploughed and sowed become the grounds for practising archery. He also orders them to build the bridge to Lanka, the process which has uprooted enormous trees and mountains. As Huggan Graham and Helen Tiffin rightly point out “... one of the axioms of postcolonial eco-criticism is that there is no social justice without ecological justice” (33). Though Rama seeks justice for his wife's abduction, he forgets to follow the ecological ethics. Through this novel, Sarah Joseph brings in allusions from the epic Ramayana to focus that even traditional gods are not exceptions to committing violence on nature. The disturbed actions on the ecosystem by human intervention are to be set right by human deeds or the reactions from nature will wipe out humanity. Joseph advocates building up a benign relationship with nature.

Sarah Joseph, being a feminist activist and the founder of Manushi, an organization of thinking women, projects eco-feminist ideas through the eyes of Tara. Though Tara has lost her husband, she has enough courage to dispute with Sugrivan and Raman. As Joseph, in an interview with Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, the translator of the novel, says that “A woman can communicate with and talk about nature more effectively than the leaders of a hundred nations who meet to discuss global warming and other environmental issues” (TV iv). She correlates Tara's mental oppression with the oppression of nature. For instance, as nature is forcibly plundered in the war, Tara is forced to obey Sugrivan's sexual perversion.

Sarah Joseph has excellently used the eco-critical symbols of entropy and symbiosis. Entropy is the negative energy within the physical system, which leads to

breakdown and disorganisation, and symbiosis as opposed to this, denotes the mutually sustaining co-existing system. In the novel, *Gift in Green*, Joseph vividly expresses mutuality between nature and human beings. For example, the land Aathi denotes the cordial relationship between nature and the people and the Shrine Thamapuram temple links the people with their tradition. Likewise, in the novel *The Virgil*, Joseph portrays the lake Pushkaram which is considered as the symbol of resurrection.

The physical factors, in *Gift in Green*, like chemical pesticides and garbage from factories and in *The Virgil*, the biological factors in the form of the characters like Raman and Sugrivan themselves typify the ideology of entropy. The dystrophic and malnourished land along with the unpalatable water in Aathi and the bridge which is built through destroying enormous trees, mountains and ocean life to rescue Sita serve as eco-signifiers that signify man's extreme atrocity against nature. They are the entropic forces that defile nature, through their corrosive nature. They, in fact dominate the symbiotic, benign attributes of nature. Man's relationship with nature ought to be symbiotic and man should co-exist with nature. This principle gets thwarted when man forcibly destroys nature as done by Raman and Sugrivan.

Through these novels, Joseph exhibits how nature suffers in the hands of modern monsters and creates an ecological awareness to the modern society on the catastrophe brought by entropic and dystrophic factors on the environment. She suggests that it is essential for the human community to restore the balance of the universe by an appropriate change in attitude and outlook on nature. She also considers eco-friendliness as the maxim for holistic living and envisions a world of sanity through an eco-friendly ambience.

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