

Cultural Significance of Nature as a Tool to Protect Environment: An Ecocritical Reading of Sarah Joseph's *Aathi*

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Abstract: *Aathi* is a deliberately fabricated narrative by Sarah Joseph, a novelist and social activist, pictures the growing state of environmental unrest happening around due to mass urbanisation and unscientific construction, which result in paddy field reclamation, contaminating water bodies, etcetera. *Aathi* portrays how a serene island with mangrove forests abounded with fish, birds and butterflies turn into a wasteland. The indigenous culture of every land have customs and practices to protect the biodiversity, the sustainable life they chose to have never hurts the nature, in return nature provides them means of livelihood. But the external forces such as capitalists, governments, et cetera who advocates development act in a way which ends the life itself.

Keywords: Sarah Joseph, *Aathi*, Eco criticism, Culture, Nature, Development.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Anthropocentric civilizations consider human beings as superior to nature hence nature is 'Othered' and exploited. Throughout the world natural habitat is destroyed to meet the need and greed of humans; as a result studies like Eco criticism emerged which "explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (1) Sarah Joseph's *Aathi*, translated to English titling *Gift in Green* pictures how natural and cultural richness of a village is plundered and polluted for the sake of development, it explores the relationship between the people and the land they inhabit. People flourished in *Aathi* with the gift of nature, they depend the backwaters and the rich source of fish for a living. The novel is a journey through the life of *Aathi*; human life and "culture is always connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (3). Here, Joseph rhythmically narrates the past and the present of *Aathi*. How the inhabitants of *Aathi* treated the land as a gift in green and they forming myths and an indigenous culture to protect the land from greedy outsiders, however the land turns into a sewage dump due to the intervention of a few who wishes to transform *Aathi* into a developed land.

2. NATURE AND CULTURE IN AATHI:

Aathi is an island where human culture co-exist with nature, a heavenly place covered with glassy water on all sides. The people who live there equals the beauty of nature, they teach their children the value of the water, the importance of protecting the ecological diversity alive and how their forefathers discovered *Aathi* and worshipped the water of *Aathi*. Nature is their sanctorum, which nourishes them and which they cherish. They have their own rules and cultural practices to protect their land like listening to stories of mysterious storytellers for seven nights which helps to pass the tradition and culture of their forefathers to the coming generation. Indigenous people develop art forms and rituals to protect their interests; "Culture is thus a system of knowledge that is both timeless and temporal; timeless because it has survived hundreds of years and temporal because it also creates conditions wherein it can refashion itself" (5). Likewise in *Aathi* "Man created God" (4) their worship was towards the nature which acts as a shield against man's interferences upon nature. Hence, their beliefs and practices are not against development but to protect the life of Earth so they are not reluctant to draw economic benefits from the habitat; they live by picking mussels, fishes, et cetera. But they are not blind to the wisdom that natural wealth makes human life possible in the Earth. Like the early inhabitants who had a sustainable life, the cordial relationship between nature and man is maintained in *Aathi* through cultural practices.

3. OVERPOWERING OF NATURE FOR DEVELOPMENT:

As time passes man tries to overpower nature for economic prosperity and development. The catastrophe arises when Kumaran, a former native of *Aathi* who comes back as a wealthy businessman and sees *Aathi* as a means of

making money. He is an epitome of capitalism who is numb to the cry of nature. He attempts to convince people of Aathi offering economic prosperity; he questions their customs and beliefs later challenges their life itself. He plans to develop Aathi and build roads and bridges. Here, bridge is a powerful symbol which literally and metaphorically connects Aathi to the polluted as well as corrupted outer world which cannot understand the emotion and values people of Aathi have towards their land. For men like Kumaran, who represents each of us, development is a means to make money, they are insensitive to the needs of nature and fails to realise that human beings do not have an existence without co-existence with nature. Sarah Joseph is not raising her voice against development but she is trying to make us realise that unless the development is sustainable we are not going to lead a peaceful life.

4. RESISTANCE AND PRESERVATION OF LAND:

Culture is understood as negation of economic prosperity, “but, tribal or local people have their own understanding of development and well-being, and they consistently challenge easy assumptions about what they want or what constitutes the core of their values”(5). The people of Aathi, like Noor Muhammed; the story teller, Markose; a poet, Shailaja, Dinakaran, Ponmani, Kunhumathu has a deep understanding of life, they have the wisdom to envision the damage caused by plundering of natural resources. So, they are fighting to protect their land, they try to impart knowledge to the coming generation. In the novel, those who gone with Kumaran for the sake of development and modernity return because as they could not find peace in it, but, by then their land has turned in to a sewage dump. At the end of the novel the flood rises to protect and purify the land. Nature itself finds a means to purge it from the foul practices of human beings.

5. CONCLUSION:

Aathi, the term means ‘the beginning’, here, Sarah Joseph might be conveying that this is how the beginning of the end of the greenish Earth is going to happen. If nature is disturbed, destructed, human existence will be difficult because ““everything is connected to everything else” says Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology” (3). It means the whole ecological balance is being affected ultimately resulting in a huge loss for its inhabitants. To conclude, *Aathi* is a lesson to imbibe, the impact of development causing huge loss to nature should be evaluated because “we have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planets basic life support systems” (3).

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