



## Women as Agency to Environmental Preservation in Joseph's *Gift in Green*

**Khum Prasad Sharma**  
**Lecturer in English**  
**Padma Kanya Multiple Campus**  
**Tribhuvan University, Nepal**

### **Abstract**

*Modern life is a manifestation of ecological crisis of different kinds. These adverse conditions are the consequences of the destruction of nature from fertility to aridity. This is a global problem. Human's greed to conquer nature has resulted in a deplorable state of humanity. In such a critical situation, when the world is facing depletion, a thorough eco-consciousness is necessary for its survival. Human beings with their unique literary talent bear the great responsibility to influence human behavior so as to enable them to maintain a healthy relationship with their natural environment. Eco-feminism, which is an amalgamation of ecology and feminism, is a concept which questions the patriarchal oppression and the exploitation of nature.*

*At this outset, this paper attempts at exploring Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* by applying ecofeministic perspective. In the novel, Sarah Joseph presents the essence of ecofeminism, especially with its post-colonial lineage in the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu, as a means of resistance to the invasion of land and life, towards the hope for the possibility of an eco-friendly and gender-just world order. The main objective of this paper is to analyze and interpret the textual and conceptual essence of ecofeminism in the mentioned novel. To achieve this, it is essential to explore the relevant ecofeminist theories and perspectives through literature survey.*

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, postcoloniality, ecological crisis, resistance and invasion

This paper explores Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* by applying ecofeministic perspective which has a great resonance in the writing of the Environmental Studies, may it be related with love to nature or protest against all sorts of evils of contemporary times or writers' challenge to elitist use of patriarchal ideology in favor of the language of the common masses. *Ecriture feminine* (Women's writing) in Indian English Literature is a promising, revolutionary phase in the post-colonial era. Sarah Joseph's novel is about Aathi (the beginning in Malayalam) an idyllic village, a green bangle that nourishes and protests a world of life forms both human and animal. It is about how this *Gift in Green* is ravaged in the name of development especially when it disrespects ecological balance. It presents the essence of ecofeminism, especially with its post-colonial lineage in the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu, as a means of resistance to the invasion of land and life, towards the hope for the possibility of an eco-friendly and gender-just world order. This novel from the seasoned writer and environmental activist expresses and exposes the idea that women and nature are productive and nurturing for the living beings. However, women are still not respected in the male-dominated society. Men, on the other hand, are seen not serious about the protection of the nature. They are hankering after the invasion of land and nature for so-called power and prosperity. As Barry Commoner's first law of ecology - "Everything is connected with everything else" (Glotfelty xiv), one disaster leads to another like a chain reaction. While facing the threats, people come forward to fight against the ecological destruction. However nature cannot be contaminated forever and the water of Aathi rise in a flood to purify the land.

In our culture, we tend to equate women with nature-biologically, spiritually and literally, thus creating a binary by equating men with culture and alienating women from the mainstream. Yet, it is ironical that women have less access to land, natural resources and property rights. Patriarchy has its pivotal roots in simultaneous environmental destruction and female subjugation. Ecofeminism is multi-faceted and multi-located, challenging structures rather than individuals. As a justice advocate for the entire web of life, ecofeminism resists dividing culture into these imbedded separate or dualistic arenas. In her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, editor Warren asserts:

What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination to nature. (4)

Ecofeminism's constructive worldview replaces hierarchical dualisms with radical diversity and relationship, modeled on both biodiversity and the feminist emphasis on the strength of difference. Contemporary life is a manifestation of many a crisis. These adverse conditions are the consequences of the destruction of nature from fertility to aridity. This is a global problem. Man's greed to conquer nature has resulted in a deplorable state of humanity. In such a critical situation, when the world is facing depletion, a thorough eco-consciousness is necessary for its survival. Mankind with its unique literary talent bears the great responsibility to influence human behavior so as to enable him to maintain a healthy relationship with his natural environment.

Eco-feminism, which is an amalgamation of ecology and feminism, is a concept which questions the patriarchal oppression and the exploitation of nature. It is simultaneously an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. As Greta

Gaard puts it, the basic premise of eco-feminism is that the “ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, sexuality, physical abilities is the some ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature” (“Living Interconnections” 1). By confronting systems of patriarchy, ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/ non-white. Established oppressive systems continue to manifest their abusive powers by reinforcing assumptions of these binaries, even making them sacred through religious and scientific constructs.

In *Gift in Green*, Sarah Joseph depicts a heart rending picture of how the consumerist urge rapes the virginity of the soil; ruthlessly kills the purity and existence of water, the basis of life. The mangrove forest, that the people of Aathi affectionately call Green Bangle, encircles Aathi. It is an enchanting world in itself, its waters cool and serene. The people of Aathi are the children of soil. They have woven their life in the mystery of Green bangle as well as in the magnitude story telling:

Watching the sallow leaves fall noiselessly on the water, then float towards and accumulate at the bank, he would weave the tapestry of his life – interpretations. He would listen to the blessing of flowers, watch the moss dance, the glow worms emerge from their hide outs, and read the trails of tiny worms. His mind would clear; his lungs fill with a new vitality and his stomach with heavenly happiness..... (25)

*Gift in Green* is abundant with such depictions which manifest connectedness of human beings and nature. Aathi is bestowed with the boon of Thampuram; the prime cause of its prosperity in the form of rice, crab, fish etc. Kumaran is the vicious character in the novel. In the pursuit of material advancements he forsakes Kunjimathu, his beloved. He abandons the water – life and often looks down upon it. Kumaran is the epitome of modern capitalist and consumerist tendencies. He is the representative of new generation which does not pay heed to emotions but neglect one’s own values for pomp, luxury and enjoyment. After many years Kumaran returns to Aathi and the place starts plunging into doom for ever. He wants to exploit the fertility of Aathi and thrives ahead. Kumaran turns his pristine motherland into a jungle of concrete profits. The people who have moulded their lives in the virtue of the soil succumb by selling their lands to Kumaran, the corporate landlord. The imminent fall awaiting them has never dawned upon them. Kumaran turns a lion – portion of Aathi’s youth folk his puppets. They hate soil. They forget the virtues of life. They feel so self-secured in the dresses of pimps, spies and party men. A new bridge is erected for luring them in to the fancies of the outer world and dumping the wastes of outer world to Aathi. Science, with its reductionist policy has discriminately exploited nature for its benefit. Deforestation, industrialization and other technological advancements many fetch far-reaching material prosperity, but only at the cost of this vast ecosystem.

Under the pretext of changing Aathi into a land of unsurpassed glory and material prosperity, Kumaran turns Aathi into a sewage dump. Kumaran has laws on his side; he is always accompanied by an elaborate menagerie: policemen, a private army, a retinue of personal staff etc. Dinakaran and Ponmani, who consider Aathi their heart and soul, smell a rat in the strategies of Kumaran:

They sensed that certain schemes and clandestine activities were under way. Strangers came, assessed, assented or dissented, and went away same came and tarried in the tent and roamed the mangrove forests. But why, and what it

was all about, remained wicker. An air of uncertainty and anxiety pervaded....  
(41).

The female characters share an intimate connection with nature. When nature is at risk they feel their last refuge is gone. Thampuran's shrine is a thatched one. As far as Kumaran is concerned, a thatched shrine does not suit, he wants to build an edifice of gold for Thampuran, the savior of Aathi. The youth of Aathi is mesmerized, flabbergasted by the proceedings of Kumaran. Dinakaran and Ponmani are against such enterprises. When they start quarrelling over these matters, the inner spirit of women saves the land-they demolish the shrine of Thampuran.

The deliberate attempts by the author to depict the intense exploitation of ecosystem become so intense and clear in Aathi. When we go through the novel, we feel conspicuous presence of total greenery, cool water and that pervades our every vein. It is explicit when Noor Muhammad says, "Water is not merely a means of washing away dirt. Since the inscrutable mysteries of life are encoded in it, we must deem water equal to God" (257). Sarah Joseph imparts an exquisite significance to green bangle in Aathi. Green bangle is so capable of bringing about variegated colour and richness to the narrative.

Women's intimate affinity with nature is expressed splendidly by Sarah Joseph. Not a single female character does harm to nature. Kunjimathu, jilted by Kumaran, pursues the water life steadfastly. Kunjimathu, being confronted with many an adversity, never succumbs before anything. She stands for the nature and its well-being. She has a blissful communion with nature. It was the women of Aathi who built Thampuran's shrine. Every year they come to thatch the roof a new. After breaking down the walls of the shrine, they feel quite unsecured. An inexplicable fear grabs them. They grope in darkness lamenting on the ill fate of being left without any place to light the lamp at sundown. Women believe in God. They worship nature.

Nature is venerated as goddess. Any violence on nature is indeed violence on themselves. Her perseverance and indomitable spirit to save her land are depicted in a heartrending manner in the novel.

Eco-feminism throws light on how female body is treated as a territory to be colonized by patriarchy. As Shiva states in Eco-feminism, "Colonization of seed, reflects the patterns of colonization of Women's bodies. Profits and power become intimately linked to invasion into all biological organisms" (29). A woman's body is her terrain. It is her environment. The entire right over her body is entitled upon her. A woman is completely objectified and alienated from her body. Thus "Know the water"- was the remedy prescribed by her Guru (61). Aathi, where the air is light, the water pristine and the wind pure will catalyse the recovery. Gitanjali tells a moral story to the people of Aathi. Aathi has its own codes and norms. A land abounds in rituals, traditions and specific customs. The plot is designed with a double focus. There is, on the one hand, the life and struggles of the people of Aathi, specific to the context and quite earthy in its portrayal. The plot pivots the decay, death and phoenix – like regeneration of Aathi. The inexorable progression of the plot is seemingly interrupted by the periodic ceremony of storytelling nights. Diverse stories are narrated. But all of them reflect profoundly on the plight and destiny of the people of Aathi.

Almost all the environmental issues are dealt in the novel. Eco-feminist discourse attempts to expose the metaphors which keep women, nature and animals bound together, there by revealing their collective subordination – "The darkness churned like placental fluid.

It throbbed with birth pangs. In the twilight hours before the crack of dawn, it would give birth to light...” (120).

A culture which extols nature as mother is exposed towards the end of the novel. “To Aathi’s children, even though they walked without a thought on Aathi’s bosom, she was like their own mother who, standing up to her neck in water” (278). The strong eco-feminist perspective is made explicit through these lines:

No human hand was allowed to touch that water, for the goddess of rice and fish dwelt in it. For the delicate water goddess to survive, the ceiling of the marsh had to remain wet. The water mansion would collapse if the marsh were to go dry. If and when that happened, the goddess would go in search of a wet marsh through the deep, underground water paths: a journey full of hardships. Her anger, more destructive than fire, would rise in proportion to the difficulties she faced... (102)

Here the author views nature and women are one and the same. The people of Aathi organize themselves and decide to reap harvest. Thus *Gift in Green* ends with a new eco-consciousness being imparted to the people of Aathi.

The novel becomes a canvas on which the author paints the intense agony of a community, the inevitable result of the horrendous consequences of man’s cruelty and atrocity to nature. The novel being one of the most evocative accounts of a contemporary issue, steals the hearts of the readers. It is a new land mark in environmental studies. It is quite impossible to this novel simply and remains unchanged at the end of it – That transformative capacity itself is the unique quality of *Gift in Green*. Women can bring about a sea change in the society.

They often share an intimate relationship with nature. Be it patriarchy or capitalism, they share the common male dominated practices that are biased and unjust. An ecofeminist perspective will bring about many positive changes as far as nature, women and the deprived are concerned. Such an alternative can certainly make our world a better place to live in and grow towards the development of the nation. Ecofeminists hope for a better future and a new society endowed with the equality of men and women and will surely make their relationships and interactions more just and fair.

By narrating the unique practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the novel opens up possibilities for life practices based on mutual love and care, respecting Mother Earth. Story nights in Aathi, selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not allowing greedy developers to put their feet in the land, preservation and sustainable use of natural resources etc are channels of independence and empowerment for the people. When certain people go out of these rules, the whole village had to pay for the huge loss and catastrophe. Even, those who have gone after development and modernity could not find peace or comfort in that.

Gitanjali comes to Aathi seeking a cure for her daughter Kayal’s mental turbulence and Shailaja leaves her bridegroom and his polluted village to remain attached to the purity of Aathi. The irony of Shailaja’s village getting more polluted later on than that of her husband, points to the critical analysis of environmental destruction and its huge and wide-spread negative impact on the whole living and non-living system. *Gift in Green* is a novel with a warning; it emphasizes the need to understand development not only as physical, but also as the well-being and happiness of people, the foresight needed for any activity concerning environment and the impact of invasion over nature and women. There is a nameless female

character in the novel, which is the village herself. The plight of the village is depicted through her worries, anguish and helplessness.

The attachment of human beings with the pristine nature is possible when they devote and dedicate themselves in farming, sowing and tilling. The act of farming, sowing and tilling give the idea that how nature has feminine affection with boundless love and protection. Once a man has good sense of love and attachment with the land, he has better understanding with the woman and her nurturing qualities. This idea becomes quite clear in the following thought-provoking line:

To be a man one must have a body made firm by working hard on the land, tilling and sowing. To know the mind of a woman, he has to know, first, the mind of the land. How Kunjimathu could be entrusted to Kumran who despised the land and was eager to flee from it. (20)

In the sense of truth, unless a man understands the nature he cannot understand the internal dynamics of female. In the above-mentioned quote nature and female are put in equal footing. In other words, nature is given to feminine attribution.

Nature offers everything pure, pristine and perfect for the human beings but them artificially construct social evils such as taboo, untouchability or religious bigotry. The people living in Aathi are in the lap of nature. As the narrative goes:

Water! Wherever they looked, water was all they found. Swimming and wading, 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...’ (44)

The ethos of these lines simply mean nature has been decoyed and polluted by human activities; otherwise the nature itself is something uncontaminated and glorious. However, the so-called culture or civilization is responsible to make the glorious nature as ignominious.

Ecofeminists are of the opinion that destruction of the nature is masculinist enterprise. They tend to strive and aspire for the destruction of the nature as they have the tendency to destroy and defile the virginity of women more often forcefully. Let us take a look to the following lines which give the sexual imageries. On the night of his departure, “putting his arms around Kunjimathu and donning a mask of melancholy, Kumran attempted to shed tears of sadness even as he tried hard to hide the excitement frothing within. As a memento of manly remembrance, he ruptured her hymen and took her virginity” (22). The evocation of sexual imageries support us to argue that destruction of nature is equal to the rape of the women, which not only defiles them but also rupture their purity— virginity.

The male inhabitants of Aathi are starving to destroy the nature while female ones are striving and aspiring to conserve and preserve the nature by worshipping, protecting and working in the land. Water holds an endless fascination for the inhabitants of Aathi. In its flow, writers have seen the continuum of experience in which events pass from the past to the present and to the future. As the narrative goes in the novel:

Life seemed to them like a deep, bottomless lagoon. They had no food, no clothes, no shelter. But one thing they had: water. It lay full and brimming, like the miracle of miracles. Water: the unending, ever-renewing fountain-spring of life. (44)

Here, the writer hints at the fact that water has regenerative qualities as that of the nature. Water itself is a symbol of nature in the novel. The inhabitants of Aathi do not have worldly

luxury but have water, the life blood of the entire creature in the nature. It is the water that revitalizes and renews life forms.

Fueled by the desire to become more developed and modernized, people are turning ideal village and island into industrialized sites. Demand for urbanized areas to cater to the increase in population, economic demands, and technological advances. Urbanization causes an increase in the emission of pollutants into the atmosphere, a higher need to clear lands, and a loss of biodiversity in virgin forests on in a massive scale. Narrowing the view point into two particular influential developing nations, such as India and Nepal focusing on how they have been affected, we have been able to examine, in better and more detailed ways, how urbanization has been bringing environmental problem of various sorts. In Aathi also some so-called developers are turning the cultivating land into farms which becomes clear in the following lines:

Many instead of cultivating their paddy fields were forced to lease them out to outsiders who turned them into pawn farms. They subsisted on the meager income from the lease fees, and remained helpless witnesses to the atrocities perpetrated on their fields by those who made big investments on the prawn farms and sought to rake in astronomical profits by hook or by crook. (151)

These lines implicitly assert the fact that how so-called land mafias are ruining the cultivating land into concrete jungle thereby killing the productivity of the earth. The gathering of land mafias in Aathi has negative impacts on the overall locations and situations. As the narrative goes:

A hoard of strangers, and the inscrutabilities that surrounded their coming and going; the hustle and bustle of new devotees who thronged to the temple in Aathi. Crowds could be seen everywhere: at the ferry bank, in the boats, near the remains of Thampuran's shrine, in the mangrove forests— all of them brashly indifferent to the spirit of Aathi. They broke boisterously into the green bangle, terrifying the birds and outraging the sanctity of their meditative tranquility. The birds in their nests became restless, and those keeping vigil over their little ones cart wheeled over the nests, screaming in terror. The persistent cries and desperate wing-beats disturbed the serenity of the forest. (152)

Here, the hoard of strangers hints at the land mafias, who simply want to change the fertile land into nothingness to quench their thirst for wealth and property. In order to fulfill their vested interest how they are performing eco-inimical activities. The sound coming from the construction sites of the bridge has really killed the peaceful and serene environment of Aathi. Due to “the intrusion of the bridge workers and the cacophony of their machines that ruined the peace” (152).

Male characters such as Dinakaran, Kumaran, Ambu and prakashan are in support of so-called development. They are devoted and dedicated to change the natural environment of Aathi by developing it with modern technologies. Even Kumaran has a special project called, ‘Billionaire to the Rescue of the City!’ Regarding this project and its possible impacts on the environment of Aathi, a journalist asks him few questions as:

Journalist: What do you propose to do with all this dangerous waste?

Kumaran: (Smiles) I am an entrepreneur. I see only entrepreneurial prospects everywhere and in everything.

Journalist: Sir, wouldn't that harm the environment and cause serious health problems for the people of Aathi?

Kumaran: (Smiles again) All your environmental problems, I wish to assure you, shall be buried under the earth. It is an insignificant issue; you can safely leave it to me. It is high time journalists became a little progressive. Why can't you think of the enormous benefits this project is going to bring to the city and to Aathi alike?

Journalist: Kumaran sir, have you obtained permission from the Pollution Control Board?

Kumaran: (Smiling) Kumaran does nothing without completing due procedures and formalities. That has never been an issue. Nor is it likely to be, in the present instance. (264)

On the basis of the answer of Kumaran, it becomes quite clear that he has nothing to do with the benefit of the inhabitants of Aathi from his project. He simply wants to earn big amount of money. Even he becomes indifferent to the possible negative impacts of his project for the ecology of the island. As the narrative goes:

With the advent of hospitals, the value of the properties of the other-siders skyrocketed. Farmers, frustrated that cultivating the land was no longer profitable or even sustainable, began to sell their land. Those who bought the land were not farmers. If paddy fields were left fallow for three years running, you could get them to be declared as non- agricultural land. (266)

Due to the encroachment of the nature of Aathi by some people within and out of Aathi, finally the system of the village collapses. The real attachment of people with the pure nature becomes dismantled. Some people even after leaving the village come back to Aathi. As in the case of the novel, Gitanjali comes to Aathi seeking a cure for her daughter Kayal's mental turbulence. Similarly, Shailaja leaves her bridegroom and his polluted village to remain attached to the purity of Aathi.

Before the intervention of the land mafias in Aathi, the place was so wonderful and beautiful. People were in a perfect harmony with the nature. Mostly women used to make friendship with nature. They used to conserve and preserve the nature as they knew the value of nature not only for human beings but for the entire creatures that share the same planet. But due to the aspiration of earning pelf, power and prosperity, some men let the outsiders come to the village sell their land for so- called development only leading the charming village into barren and charmless sites in the absence of natural beauties. As the narrative goes:

Farmers used to own the water body in measures of four or five acres. The people of Aathi called them the 'other-siders'. For generations, the people of Aathi, especially the women, had been planting paddy seedlings, and reaping and thrashing the harvests. Even as the harvest seasons finished, they would begin their work in the fish farms. Shailaja, too, had worked in those paddy fields. By the time she was in standard five, she could plant seedlings. (265)

Women are by nature loving and caring. Since they are compassionate, devotional and nurturing, they are more protective rather than destructive. Men mostly are destructive in nature. They are less compassionate, loving and caring. They simply want to be active, assertive and adventurous in nature. They, therefore, are conquering rather than conserving unlike men.

*Gift in Green* thus tells a wonderful story of Aathi, an island which lies amidst natural beauty uncontaminated by the rays of civilization. The novel also highlights on the conflict of



people, while facing threats of pollution, diseases, displacement and migration and their forms of resistance to the invasion of the land full of natural beauties. The novel also raises fingers at the various kinds of invasions, ecological destructions, aftermath of environmental degradation, and the possibilities of a united fight against human right violations. By putting the highest premium on the unique and wonderful practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the novel opens up avenues for life practices based on mutual love and care, respecting Mother Earth (Nature). The act of selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not allowing greedy developers to put their feet in the land, preservation and sustainable use of natural resources etc. are channels of independence and empowerment for the people. When certain people deviate from the rules, the whole village had to face great trial, trouble and tribulation. Even, those who have gone after development and modernity could not find mental peace or comfort in that. Finally they have to come under the shelter of Aathi.

*Gift in Green* is a story of Aathi, an island which lies with its natural beauty and primitive purity untouched by the so-called contaminated germs of civilization. Conflict of people, while facing threats of pollution, diseases, displacement and migration and their forms of resistance, more particularly by women inhabitants to the invasion are the reflective side of the novel. The novel darts the pungent criticisms against various kinds of invasions— ecological destructions, environmental degradation, and human right violations. By narrating the unique practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the novel opens up possibilities for life practices based on mutual love and care, respecting Mother Earth— the Nature.

The novel points fingers at the various kinds of invasions, ecological destructions, aftermath of environmental degradation, and the possibilities of a united fight against human right violations. By narrating the unique practices and eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the novel opens up possibilities for life practices based on mutual love and care, respecting Mother Earth. Story nights in Aathi, selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not all owing greedy developers to put their feet in the land, preservation and sustainable use of natural resources etc. are channels of independence and empowerment for the people.

Whatever may it be, the novel consists of female characters, who are striving and aspiring to keep the ideal of Aathi intact by performing their eco-friendly activities. While their male counterparts simply perform the so-called eco-inimical activities, that finally bring destruction and devastation in the island. Thus, it is concluded that Women are seen as being domestic, pious, moral, pure, gentle, kind, graceful, simple and beautiful have soft corner for the nature while men are seen as hard-working, industrial, rational, assertive, and independent and proud; none of which is easily connected with nature. Therefore nature is seen as the embodiment of all the characteristics that women possess.

Connections between environment and gender can be made by looking at the gender division of labor and environmental roles rather than an inherent connection with nature. The gender division of labor requires a more nurturing and caring role for women, therefore that caring nature places women closer with the environment. To cut the entire matter short, the mentioned novel not only strives and aspires to show the interventionist attitude of men to the land and nature but also unfolds the intense resistance from the part of female characters against the growing invasion of land and landscape in the name of development and civilization.

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