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Indigenous Stories: An Exploration in Sarah Joseph’s Gift in Green

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Abstract

Stories are the first form of literature that is familiar to people of the world irrespective of their country, language, and other differences. Every nation, language, tribes has stories of their own. The researcher has chosen a translated literary work Sarah Joseph’s Gift in Green (2011) that was written in Malayalam language published and simultaneously translated into English by Dr. Valson Thampu. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that deals with ecological aspects in literature. It is wrong that Literature has nothing to do with the environment. Indeed, the environment has been hidden or neglected in text, but ecocriticism foregrounds and brings the hidden and neglected environmental elements to the forefront. In sum, literature has everything to do with the environment. The natural elements found in the chosen novel Gift in Green are water and land. The chosen novel Gift in Green deals with the island of Aathi and its people who led a life with water. This study interprets ecological perspectives, stories and its usefulness to the people.

Keywords: Textual Analysis, Aathi, Indigenous and Ecocriticism

Introduction

The struggle for urbanizing the island of Aathi is the major plot of the indigenous novel. The characters in this novel include Kunjimathu, Kumaran, Devaki, Dhniakaran, Gopi, Prakashan, Chandramohan, Dr Johnson, the environmental activist, Jayan Munakkadavu, Sunil Balakrishnan, Nitya Chaithanya Yeti, Pariju Chakramakkal, Parinju Maash, Baaji, Siddhu, Ponmani, Ambu, Kunjootan, Kunjan Karnavar, the hundred-year-old elder of Aathi, Kannettan, Thankechi, Chandrettan, Shailaja, Chandramohan, Ayyappetta.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that deals with ecological aspects in literature. It is wrong that Literature has nothing to do with the environment. Indeed, the environment has been hidden or neglected in text, but ecocriticism foregrounds and brings the hidden and neglected environmental elements to the forefront. In sum, literature has everything to do with the environment.

The natural elements found in the chosen novel Gift in Green are water and land. The characters like Kunjimathu and Kayal are

attached with water. Kumaran is a character who seeks for sophistication in life and hence he settles outside. As a result of which he plans to urbanise Aathi. In contrast, Kayal gets pacified by the waters of Aathi. The character of Hagar which is story within a story in the novel advocates not to waste one drop of water. The story of Hagar brings the importance of water: “To me, the value of the first drop of water is the value of my firstborn... Not a drop of water shall be wasted. I won’t allow it” (Joseph 14).

“As long as there is water, stories are sure to sprout” (Joseph 16).

It is a ritual in Aathi that the storyteller likes a dip in the pure water of Aathi, given the privilege of sitting on the ferry bank after wearing fresh white attire. Water gave birth to stories. Infact, the people of Aathi have a tradition of storytelling. The storyteller will be given respect, and he will be asked to take a bath in the cool waters of Aathi. Then, he will be given the privilege to sit on the ferry bank. Furthermore, he will be given white cloth to wear on the occasion of storytelling. Moreover, the introducer of the event and people gathered would proclaim: ‘Jalam Saakshi!’ which means water is the witness. This shows the amount of significance the people of Aathi give to water and how this element is treated with a religious sense.

The book contains seven stories. The first story is inspired from The Holy Bible. And it deals with the woman Hagar who has a child. And the child is named Ishmael. And, she was sent by her husband with her son to the wilderness giving her only a bottle of water and with a few dates. Besides sending them away from their home he also led her to a place where the heat was unbearable for both. She could not withstand the heat of the sun there with the water also in the bottle getting over.

After he leaves the place, Hagar and her son experience strong wind that splashes mud upon both. Because of the heat, all the fluids in both of their bodies get extinguished. And her son began to cry, unable to bear hunger and thirst. In addition to it, cold wind blew in the night time. She tries to protect her baby in all manner from the dust storms that are approaching them at night. Infact, she thinks who will be the first to die between them. At one point she assumes her son to be dead. But she hears a voice that makes her follow it. In doing so, she finds a raven drinking water near a spring. Thus, she gets water after her husband deserts and leaves her in the wilderness.

Ishmael has been dispossessed by father. His mother Hagar sitting on the banks of a lake led by a bird. God has sent a bird to guide her to the lake (14). People around the place gather on hearing it. People around the places seek permission from Hagar to drink water from the lake. Since she previously underwent struggles to get a drop of water in that wilderness. Now, she could have empathy over the people. And hence she grants them permission to drink water from the lake. She knows the value of water unlike today the people don’t, and wastewater like anything. According to her, each drop of the water is precious and wasting it should not be allowed. Hagar becomes the guardian of the water body where she allows the sellers to use it and prevent the abuse of it: “You must know that water is life itself” (14). Thereby, she decides to act as a guardian for water. She knows the value of each drop of water, especially the first drop after suffering and was about to die in the desert with her baby. People around her accepted her as the guardian of the water. Thus, a water covenant was made between Hagar and the people. People gave her the products of their harvest cultivated with the help of water.

Noor Muhammed says another story inspired from the life of Buddha and his follower Ananda. Both were travelling from one place to another. Buddha got thirsty and hence he sent Ananda to fetch some water. Ananda returned to the stream to get water to Buddha. But it was found to be mixed with sludge. Once clean water had turned into ‘muddy’ and unusable water. However, he was asked by Buddha to wait until the water cleared. Ananda learnt patience and finally it did. Then he took it and met Buddha. He apologized for despising him at heart for getting double work from him. Waiting eradicated his anger and resentment within him. This story elucidates the moral

code one has to learn observing the nature of water. Human mind is muddled up like water with so many disturbing emotions. Given the needed time and patience clears up all the pollutants from it.

The second story is told by the character Gitanjali. This story is inspired from the epic The Mahabharata. Gitanjali tells a story about two boys named Bhima and Duryodhana. Both say that ‘I am stronger than you’. And, they begin to fight until one loses in the fight. Another person would come and separate them. But a few were of the opinion that they would cease to fight one day. Both would punch at each other. However, most of the punches both aiming at each other would go to air not hurting both. One of the boys asked how to end the fight. As it goes on in an unending manner. Both decided to seek a middle person. They walked and reached a village. Infact, she was a woman who had kept vessels in her head, a large basket on her hip and carried a baby at back. At first, they had second-thoughts over making a woman as mediator for their fight. She is busy on her way but they went to ask who is stronger between them. She asks both to walk along with her. Both became tired since she walked at a very slow pace. She decided to carry both of them in her palms. Her husband and her buffalo are waiting for her. She gave food to both. She did her household and domestic chores like washing vessels, cutting grass, making cow dung cakes, and gathered firewood. And she made her baby bath. After completing everything she felt free. And when she was engaging buffalos her husband asked her to bring curd rice, unable to bear the heat. Meanwhile, she plucked chilies and rushed to her home. Bhima pleads to do justice for their cause. Since she has many works lined up to be done. Once again, both began to fight all of a sudden.

Finally, Bhima made Duryodhana fall down. Since he got the weakest point in the body of Duryodhana through the third person. Bhima won in the fight and in the eyes of people. However the issue continued until Vidur, the wise came. He suggests solving the issue in a novel way but not to fight. Bhima hides guilt and goes to the forest where he realised that there is no mightiest man remaining in the world but only the wisest men remain. After this inorder to use the story, questions and answer sessions took place until the daybreak where Dhinakaran, Markose discussed the practical significance of the story.

The third storyteller is a ventriloquist and his talking monkey. Both had to enter Aathi by travelling by boat inorder to cross the waters encompassing Aathi. They both were outsiders and they could see new people in their boat journey, particularly people working for the construction of bridges. The storytelling event and storyteller is given much respect by the people of Aathi. And the storyteller is sure to be honoured by the cool wind of Aathi too. Furthermore, the eldest of Aathi would welcome him to narrate the story. In contrast few people felt that their tradition of storytelling is degrading by making women and ventriloquist as storytellers. The ventriloquist and monkey saluated all present in the storytelling event. For the sake of story, they assumed their name as Ravana and Rama. It takes place in dialogue format. Ventriloquist says about the suffering of the people. Stating that there is: “No bridge. No electricity. No school or hospital. No post office. Nothing... nothing... nothing; not even a tea shop” (Joseph 137). The conversation informs people that a bridge is being built in Aathi for tourism purposes, not for the benefit of people. Their conversation certainly created a strong reaction in their hearts. In order to make people feel better they both decided to tell one more story about father and son. Both were carpenters by profession and they were well renowned for their work. And hence both started to build a bridge in order for people to cross the river safely. However, the father carpenter made a trick in building the bridge. The practical application of this story made people think that if a bridge is built in Aathi. It would definitely harm the natural environment of it. Since it would cause the fishing to cease and the reply was given by Thankechi.

The fourth storytelling event took place in a rainy season. And the previous day the climate there was bad. In contrast, this day has fine weather. The storyteller will be given a palm skirt

to wear. And the palm shall be contributed by all families living in Aathi. The first word of this story is 'Soil' denoting the importance of soil in Aathi. The story is about Villuvandi where it was not allowed to ride on the road because of discrimination that existed many generations ago. The storyteller speaks about discrimination that existed between ordinary people and the pulaya division of people. He also speaks about the school education for children working in the lands of landlords. At first the education was given to children of rich people also called 'gold- children' and the children of the untouchable called 'charcoal-children'. This story aims to remove all the divisions that exist in the lives of people through villuvandi.

The fifth storytelling event took place. The storyteller is Maash also called Govinda. Maash worked as a teacher at school. He struck a child named 'Govinda' for not answering a question unfortunately. As a result of which he was sent to jail. Only voice he could hear was Govinda in his ear. After coming from prison, he forgot everything and kept on chanting Govinda.. He was chosen as storyteller this time. The story is about people living in a mountain valley. And their livelihood depended on the cow, its milk and butter. The mountain valley is rich for cows to graze. Once a year, they go to the top of the mountain to do puja for Lord Indra. They did this inorder to get good rain since he is considered as lord of rain. A new person came and said to do puja for the mountain since it is solely responsible for rain to shower in this valley. Based on his saying they worshipped the mountain that year, Lord Indra got angry. He ordered it to rain until the mountain collapses. Then the people worshipped Lord Indra that year. The person who supported the mountain went and gave a huge blow to the mountain that caused landslides and floods to occur. Again the people worshipped the mountain alone and Lord Indra accepted his defeat.

The sixth storyteller is Dhinakaran. Unlike other storytellers coming from other parts of the world. He is the first storyteller from Aathi. His story comprises three tiny stories titled A story from the Past, A story from future and A story of the present. His second story is about a dystopian event where the water is the right of the nation who wins in the First World Water War.

And the last and seventh storyteller is Kayal. Due to the anthropocentric activities of humans at Aathi its every development is made by humans, floods destroy the western part of Aathi. Kayal's storytelling event has no participants except water. Thus the narrative ends finally.

Conclusion

The study clearly interprets the ecological perspectives and seven stories that features in the novel by employing qualitative methodology and textual analysis. This research contributes to the already existing body of research in the select novel. The finding of this study is that indigenous people gain spatial knowledge and exhibit spatial resistance through the memory of stories that is conveyed to them. Stories educate them and make them to good enough to make decision making in life.

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