

Indigenous Knowledge and Community Participation as Preventive Factors of 'Maldevelopment' and Unchecked Modernisation in Sarah Joseph's *Aathi*

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Abstract

Sarah Joseph's Aathi or Gift in Green, by detailing the lives and traditions of the inhabitants of a picturesque landscape called Aathi, and the repercussions of the intrusive forces of modernisation which disrupt the harmony and the ecological balance hitherto maintained by the natives, prove to be an ecological writing. Modernisation which is essentially the transformation of a 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' society to a modern society comes with the issues of 'maldevelopment' which Vandana Shiva describes in her work Staying Alive. The novel describes the fictional landscape of Aathi as a wetland which depletes over time due to modernisation. The bond that the natives of Aathi share with the environment and their indigenous knowledge that preserve the ecosystem are also expounded as they would prove to be the only instruments capable of saving Aathi from its impending doom. These observations gain universal significance when the experiences of the landscape and its people are looked upon as a microcosm reflecting a similar scenario at a global level.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, maldevelopment, community participation, modernisation, *Aathi*.

Aathi translated as *Gift in Green* describes the fictional landscape of Aathi and the lives of the inhabitants who share a kinship with the land on which they live. Aathi possesses the characteristics of an estuarine wetland that includes tidal marshes and mangrove forests which are endearingly called the 'greenbangles'. Wetlands support a large variety of flora and fauna and a unique ecosystem thus having immense ecological significance which warrants due attention and protection. The 'greenbangle' too holds equal importance in the novel and its gradual destruction due to unethical and irreverent human intervention is vividly etched. The novel begins with 'the people in the tent' who are forerunners to the future intruders, especially Kumaran (who was once a resident of the resplendent landscape), who would wreak havoc in Aathi. Kumaran and his men symbolically represent the forces of rapid and ruthless modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation that are sounding the death-knell of

nature and humans in the contemporary era. The shift in perspective from the “symbolism of Terra Mater, the earth in the form of a Great Mother”, to ‘Terra Matter’, that gives value to earth only as a source of resources to be exploited by humans, has been the reason behind this (Shiva 40). As opposed to this attitude, the author juxtaposes the indigenous knowledge and community participation of the native inhabitants of Aathi-Dinakaran, Markose, Noor Muhammad, Kunjimathu and Shailaja, which sustain the ecological balance of the wetland ecosystem of Aathi and preserve its unique biodiversity.

The natives of Aathi share a topophilic bond with their natural environment. Topophilia refers to one’s love of or emotional connections with his/her place or physical environment. In the novel, the residents make it a point to preserve their ecosystem through various means. The tradition of ‘kappukalakku’, the festival ‘pathamudayam’, ‘pokkali’ farming and use of words such as ‘jalamsakshi’ prove testimony to this. ‘Kappukalakku’ as mentioned in the text is the indigenous practice of harvesting the prawns cultivated in the fields and the day becomes one of celebration for the people. It’s an activity “celebrated as a great festival on the eve of Vishu by the natives...It is like a great carnival and it brings together all the men, women, and children of Aathi who would cast their nets to catch fish” (169). But, the contractors who later lease their lands, add potent chemicals such as DDT, endosulfan etc. to reap the entire harvest denying the natives, the use of their knowledge and practices for the activity. Similarly, ‘Pokkali farming’ is an indigenous practice of alternatively cultivating pokkali paddy and fish in the same field. Here, the residue from the paddy crop becomes the food for the fishes specially shrimps which are cultivated in this mode and in turn the residue of the shrimp culture forms the fertilizer for the paddy. Thus, the practice alludes to what Vandana Shiva calls ‘sustenance economy.’ The sustenance economy is based on “a creative and organic nature, on local knowledge, on locally recycled inputs that maintain the integrity of nature” (Shiva 43). The significance of ‘Pathamudayam’, due to its association with agricultural activities, is also foregrounded in the text. Traditionally, the tenth day of the month Thulam (October-November) and Medam (April-May) are known as ‘Pathamudayam’. ‘Pathamudayam’ of Tulam (October-November) is known as Thulapath and that of Medam (April-May) is known as Medapath. Both are important for agricultural operations. Infact, the residents of Aathi associate the arrival of their ‘Thampuran’ with divinity since it happened on the auspicious day of ‘Pathamudayam’. The word ‘jalamsakshi’ that is uttered by the Introducer during one of the story telling evenings in Aathi, when translated literally refers to water as a witness to some activity which is of grave concern. The natives of Aathi use this phrase to imply the integral role that water plays in their lives. This seems to be an act that elevates the position of water from that of a natural element to that of a divine being since it is connected to the omnipresent God who bears witness to all actions on earth.

The significant role of religion in conserving nature becomes evident in the text when the natives proclaim that they have allowed the preservation of the ecosystem in its pristine

form as they believe that their deity the 'Thampuran' dwells there. As the author notes, "for generations, the people of Aathi had deemed the land to be Thampuran's. No one had ever dared to take advantage of it in any way...Other than the birds, squirrels, snakes, garden lizards, chameleons and crickets...none had ever laid claim to it" (4). Wangari Mathai remarks in her speech, the notion that the divine inhabits the natural world and objects around, can persuade humans to pay more respect to nature and thereby avoid the largescale exploitation and plunder that has been continuing for ages. Vandana Shiva too makes a similar observation when she says "in the indigenous setting sacredness is a large part of conservation" (169).

All the above, points to the fact that the natives value their natural surroundings as they would value any other human life. Their attitude thus seems to be 'ecocentric' rather than 'anthropocentric'. They are able to perceive nature as a vital component connected to their lives and as a part and parcel of their existence. They possess the insight that the destiny of mankind is inextricably bound to their natural environment. They view 'Prakriti' (Nature) as exhibiting traits of "connectedness and inter-relationship of all beings, including man; continuity between the human and natural; and sanctity of life in nature" (Shiva 39). Hence they clearly possess an 'eco-self' rather than an 'ego-self' as Kumaran and his men do. The former are able to view the world with green tinted glasses while the latter turn it into a site of violence and destruction to suit their selfish pursuits. Kumaran boasts of bringing development to Aathi and begins work in this regard. Actually, his actions tend to cause what is called 'maldevelopment' by Vandana Shiva. She says, "the dichotomized ontology of man dominating nature generates maldevelopment because it makes the colonizing male, the agent and model of 'development'" (40). Kumaran lures the natives with the promises of bridges connecting them with the city, hospitals, schools, and industries which would elevate their standard of living. Some of them fall for this trap. But, very soon, due to Kumaran's interventions, Aathi heads to its 'Anthyam' (death). It's definitely his ignorance, absence of an eco-self and the endorsing of a Cartesian view of perceiving nature merely as a resource that brings the down fall of what was once a paradise on earth (Shiva 39). He is only capable of seeing darkness and dullness in Aathi and its inhabitants.. To him the darkness of the forests and the people who live in harmony with the nature are symbols of under development. He lacks insight to see the value of things for what they are. He clearly is a representative of the Cartesian world view which perceives nature as "separable and fragmented within itself; separate from man; and inferior, to be dominated and exploited by man" (Shiva 39). The futility of the Coleridgean concept of 'eloignment' is also vivid in his case. Though Coleridge speaks of the idea of 'eloignment' with respect to an artist, it applies to any individual as it proclaims the need to "first eloin from nature in order to return to her with full effect" and thereafter recognise and savour the value of the natural environment where he/she once belonged (11). But in the case of Kumaran who leaves Aathi and returns

to it after many years, this seems to be futile as he solely indulges in actions that cause misery for Aathi and its inhabitants.

Kumaran commences the work to 'develop' Aathi. Very soon, unprecedented sufferings due to lack of fish and oysters, the presence of muddy waters emitting foul smell and squirmishes among the natives, begin to plague them gradually. Aathi which had its own "life and lifestyle, it's own truth" could no longer adhere to it "because of continual incursions from the external world. Not only human beings, but also animals, birds and fish were being affected" (151). As many are forced to lease their paddy fields to outsiders, atrocities perpetrate on these pieces of land. The intruders try to make big investments on the fields converted to prawn farms, seeking to "rake in astronomical profits by hook or by crook" (151). The power of the intruding forces of modernisation that create great havoc in the area becomes stark and naked with the "settlements sweated out of existence with fists of steel strong enough to uproot anything in its way" (200). Aathi "what was once a massive lagoon, abundant and brimming with water, stretching beyond the reach of human eyes became a landfilled, barren land" (195) at the hands of intrusive forces and reaches its ultimate doom with Kumaran's generous offer to buy the wastes produced in the cities and to dump these hazardous wastes in Aathi. When questioned about environmental repercussions of this decision of his, he casts it aside as an insignificant issue. The waters of Aathi eventually turn black, gluey, stagnant with an array of decomposing elements on it and diseases breeding over it. The children of Aathi who hitherto had no history of any serious illnesses, begin to behave strangely and snivelling as never before giving rise to the first epidemic in the history of Aathi.

Such repercussions which are the results of unhealthy planning that does not involve the participation of the natives nor gives much food to thought on the impact it has on the environment are persistent issues in many parts of the world today. Sarah Joseph through the novel implies the need to revive the indigenous practices that are in harmony with the ecological cycle and to encourage community participation in rebuilding the devastated ecosystem. The festivals celebrated by them whether it be 'kappukalakku' or 'pathamudayam', the story telling evenings that they cherish and the general air of sharing that they indulge in, all add to the community bonding that mark their existence. In fact, Kumaran had the power to disrupt this unity of the natives which ultimately led to the doom of Aathi. As Samuel Paul has defined, "in the context of development, community participation refers to an active process whereby the beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receive a share of project benefits" (Waweru14). It seems to be a viable solution that will be able to address the menace created by the intrusive forces in not just the fictional landscape of Aathi but, the world in general which is the macrocosm that inhabits numerous such 'Aathis'. A reference in this regard is made in the novel where the author speaks of a Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto who rallied people together at the Biwa Lake which had been polluted with the city's wastes, discharge

from hospitals, markets and remains of fish, fowl and animals. “As the people assembled at the lake, concentrated their voices and hearts and repeated the pledge administered to them, in the fervent oneness of their love for the lake, an ultrasound strong enough to churn the water was generated. In all likelihood, it was this that cleared up the lake” (Joseph 259). The author here is showing that determination and total focus from the part of a community can revive nature. “One mind, one vice, one will was what was required of them” (Joseph 260). The role of women in community participation and in sustaining and preserving the environment, is also highlighted and foreshadowed in the story of Hagar told by Noor Muhammad in the text. Hagar as in the tale told, makes a covenant with the nomads in the desert insisting that “not a drop of water shall be wasted” since she “could understand the thirst of the people, the infinite value of water and the secret of life scripted into it” (14). Thereafter, they acknowledge her as the “caretaker and protector of the water” (14). This echoes the observation made by Maria Mies that “women not only collect and consume what grows in nature, but they make things grow” (Shiva 41). Kunjimathu and her companions, Shailaja, Advocate Grace Chali, Gitanjali and the girl whom only Noor Muhammad has seen and conversed with, all become an extension of Hagar or rather the feminine who can act as the protector of the environment. Kunjimathu steadfastly pursues her water life, rather than leave Aathi with Kumaran. She buys back the land sold off by Kumaran and toils on it day and night. The women by force of habit, encourage their husbands to begin work in the paddy fields while the men retort: “what’s the use, it will yield nothing” (333). Thus, a band of mothers led by Kunjimathu, make a move to build a bund and farm the field. Though they remained just helpers until then, “on that day however, the women worked, on their own despite their dearth of experience and the diffidence that nagged at them” (334).

Thus, Sarah Joseph through her novel addresses the pertinent issues of the current times with respect to environmental concerns and its redressal by vividly sketching the plight of the once resplendent landscape called Aathi and its eventual fall due to unchecked human intervention. The author throws a ray of hope as the novel concludes by suggesting that it’s not too late to gain awareness and the need to preserve the natural environment for, with community participation that includes women and the return to indigenous practices that are in harmony with the environment, the redemption of the ailing earth is actually possible.

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