

# Symbiotic Serenity: Human-Nature Nexus in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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## Abstract

Human civilization's interaction with the natural world has led to environmental degradation due to greed and selfishness. This has resulted in habitat loss, declining biodiversity and ecosystem collapse. Nature operates through complex feedback loops and disrupting these systems can lead to ecological imbalances. Eco-fiction, a powerful literary genre, addresses these issues by weaving narratives around ecological themes and the complex relationship between humans and nature. The research paper aims to explore the relationship between human beings and nature on Aathi Island, where people lived in harmony with nature with reference to Sarah Joseph's novel, *Gift in Green*. The paper accentuates the eco-friendly life in *Gift in Green* by highlighting the destructive impact of human interference on nature and its resources and calls for increased awareness, education and advocacy to foster a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards nature for the collective benefit of current and future generations with the theoretical support of Ecocriticism.

**Keywords:** Control; Dominance; Ecocentrism; Nature; Protection.

## Introduction

Human civilization's history is intertwined with the natural world, from ancient times to modern technological advancements, as human beings have continuously shaped and interacted with their environment. Cheryl Glotfelty in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* observes, "We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life supporting systems" (xx). However, this interaction has often come at a cost - a cost that has led to a staggering level of devastation inflicted upon the very ecosystems that sustain people.

Human beings' insatiable demand for resources has fueled a relentless cycle of exploitation and overconsumption. Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, issued a dire warning in 2020: "Humanity is waging war on nature" ("Making Peace with Nature Report | UNEP"), in reference to how our production and consumption patterns are wreaking havoc on the environment.

UN's IPCC Report 2023 detects that human behaviour today has the potential to "fundamentally reshape the planet for thousands of years" (Plumer). Forests have been clear-cut, oceans overfished and land converted for agriculture and urbanization. These activities have led to the loss of vital habitats of countless species, resulting in declining biodiversity and ecosystems pushed to the brink of collapse. Peter Wohlleben's lament in his *The Inner Life of Animals: Love, Grief, and Compassion: Surprising Observations of a Hidden World* (2016) attest to the IPCC report, "Every day we transform our planet in some way and every day we lose more of Nature in its original form. We have already cleared, built on or dug up an unbelievable 80 percent of the Earth's land mass" (243). Pollutants have recently been widely released into the air, water and soil as a result of industrialization and urbanisation. Chemical emissions, plastic waste, heavy metals and agricultural runoff poison ecosystems and endanger human health.

Plastic pollution has become a major worldwide issue. The recent UN Environmental Programme Report alarms, human beings produce "more than 430 million tonnes of plastic annually, of which two-thirds are short-lived products" (Everything You) that quickly become waste, fill the ocean and frequently work their way into the human food chain. For the first time, microplastic pollution has been found in "human blood" (Carrington). The current UN Report alerts that, "19 and 23 million tonnes of plastic waste leak into aquatic ecosystems each year" (Koop) and points at the ubiquitous presence of pollutants in the environment that have the potential to alter habitats and natural processes, as well as reduce the ecosystem's ability to adapt to climate change, affecting the livelihoods and food production capabilities of millions of people. Developmental plans and projects, such as the construction of roads and bridges, inadvertently bring about unintended detrimental effects on water life, biodiversity, and agricultural lands. Large dams have numerous environmental consequences, including blocking fish migrations, trapping sediments and "transforming rivers into artificial reservoirs" (International Rivers). These changes disrupt the ecosystem and the natural communities of aquatic plants and animals.

Literature serves as a mirror for society, addressing pressing issues and furnishing a powerful lens to examine and contemplate the complex environmental challenges our planet faces. William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" contemplates one of the ecology's basic maxims, "We are not free to violate the laws of nature . . . . In Ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric vision and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (113). Anthropocentric vision, refers to the belief that human beings are the center of the universe and that the interests of humans take precedence over all other living beings and the environment. This perspective has been deeply ingrained in human societies for centuries, leading to various environmental, social and ethical challenges.

As a significant narrative representing ecocritical works in Malayalam Literature, Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* has been subjected to various literary and cultural studies by the scholars. Priyanka Selvaraj and Dr. Raichel M. Sylus examine the novel under the concepts of globalization and modernization in their research paper "Against Globalization: Women's Voice in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*". S. Krithika Devi in her research paper "Co-existence of Culture and Nature in *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph" examines the interrelated relationship between man and nature. "An Eco-Spiritual Search for Light and Life in a World Inching towards Dystopia in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*" by Dr.A.Latha reflects the ecofriendly ideas that human being and non-human being should follow.

K. Saraswathi and Dr.K. Balakrishnan in their article "Man and the Water Life: an Eco Critical Reading of Sarah Joseph's Novel *Gift in Green*" critically analyze the connection between environmental degradation and technological, scientific and industrial development. Lekshmi Gopinath in his research article "*Gift In Green: The Meeting Point of Fact and Fiction*" examines how contemporary reality is carefully and consciously woven into the texture of fiction. The works listed here facilitate a critical ground for analysing *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph and an extensive review of literature helped identify to study the novel as an ecofiction would further extend the scope of the genre.

Human beings have been exploiting nature to a great extent for various purposes, often with significant consequences for the environment and all life forms on Earth. Ecological sustainability and preserving the planet's natural systems require understanding and adherence to nature's laws. Human actions significantly impact the health of the biosphere and it is crucial to adopt sustainable practices to ensure harmony with the natural

world, preserve biodiversity and protect future generations' wellbeing and prosperity. The current research paper employs a critical inquiry of *Gift in Green* to highlight the consequences of man's intervention in nature and to accentuate human interconnectedness with nature with the theoretical support of Ecocriticism.

### **The Green Tapestry: Nature and Human Interactions**

The current development approach, often driven by short-term economic gains and industrial growth, poses significant risks to the environment and society. These dangers stem from the exploitation of natural resources, disregard for ecological balance, and the neglect of social equity. Sarah Joseph believes: "the current model of development sees nature as a cow to be milked forever but to be cared for, never. I have written *Gift in Green* to portray a way of life that predates this dogma and to sketch the dangers immanent in it" (Joseph 213). The metaphor of seeing nature as a "cow to be milked forever" resonates strongly with the prevailing approach that exploits natural resources without considering the long-term consequences. *Gift in Green* offers an alternative perspective by emphasizing the importance of viewing nature as something to be cared for rather than merely exploited. It also seeks to underscore the potential dangers and risks associated with an unsustainable approach to development.

*Gift in Green* (2011), originally published in 2005 under the Malayalam title *Pachakuthira* and translated into English by Valson Thampu, delves into the interconnectedness between human beings and nature, exploring the complex relationship between the two. This relationship is a central theme of the novel and is examined through the lens of ecocriticism, a literary theory that focuses on the portrayal of nature in literature and its reflection of environmental concerns. Ecocriticism, considered as "the environmentally oriented study of literature" (Buell 138), challenges anthropocentrism, promoting ecocentrism, by analyzing literature's portrayal of human interactions with nature, aiming to raise environmental awareness and inspire sustainable practices through literary activism. The present study aims to investigate the dichotomy of nature and human beings in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*.

Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* is about Aathi, an idyllic village, 'a green bangle' that nourishes and protects a world of human and animal life forms. It is about how this 'gift in green' is being ravaged in the name of development, especially when ecological balance is being violated. People's conflicts in the face of pollution, diseases, displacements and migration,

as well as their forms of resistance to the invasion, are central to the novel. Sarah Joseph discusses how she modelled the land of Aathi in an interview with Valson Thampu, She says, "I recall my experiences while visiting an exceptionally beautiful island called Valanthakadu in the Ernakulam district of Kerala" (Joseph 370).

Aathi encircled by water bodies, mangroves, birds, oysters, fishes, canals, water springs, wells, ponds and other natural features is connected to water, from birth to death. The people live in the water, relying on it for sustenance, rituals, culture and life. They rank water second only to God. Anupama Raja in her book review titled "More than Propaganda" writes that "Gift in Green is very much like the overriding metaphor in the book: water. It flows gently at times like a river, at times overpowering like a roaring ocean. Much of the time, though, it is a wild stream twisting and turning readers through an unpredictable ocean". All of their professions are eco-friendly, like cultivating paddy, fishing, catching oysters and cattle herding. They even know how to harvest saltwater.

The people of Aathi earned 300 to 500 rupees a day by picking mussels and fishing, but they never overexploited nature. They had a close relationship with nature. Their daily needs were fulfilled by earth and water. In turn, they respected nature. They lived a life without disturbing the nature and diversity of nature. They only satisfied their vital needs like food and shelter with the help of nature. Other than that, they did not disturb it. "Our truth, dear children, is our primeval oneness with this earth, this water, this forest, these birds, and these fish!". (Joseph 242)

Gift in Green beautifully portrays nature as a source of solace, inspiration, and renewal for the human characters within its narrative. Nature is depicted as a gift, offering healing and comfort amidst the challenges and complexities of human life. This positive connection suggests that nature can uplift and bring harmony to humans. Human greed acts as a disrupting force which adds complexity to this connection, highlighting the destructive impact of unchecked exploitation. The transformation of Aathi Island's serene atmosphere and pristine environment into a polluted and hazardous living environment after Kumaran's arrival reflects a powerful narrative device which highlights the impact of human actions on the natural world. This scenario encapsulates the broader theme of environmental degradation and its consequences.

Kumaran, a young man from Aathi island, chose to leave his hometown to seek new experiences, knowledge and opportunities for profit. After a period of exploration and learning, Kumaran made the decision to return to Aathi island to profit from its natural resources. He aimed to turn Aathi into a modern community with advanced technology and infrastructure, disrupting the tranquil village and fostering the creation of towns and industries. For his own selfishness, he destroyed nature and limited its diversity, lured innocent individuals with jobs and a sophisticated life. The lush backwaters of Aathi were transformed into a foetid development, causing people to lose touch with nature. The natural rhythms of life were lost and attitudes towards the land shifted, turning Aathi into a wasteland and causing both nature and people suffering. He built a dam for his personal purpose, disrupting nature's tranquilly. "The bridge was being built so that trucks, JCBs, drillers and tipper lorries could transport massive quantities of earth, stone, bricks, sand, cement and steel" (Joseph 142). The dam's construction resulted in the loss of numerous aquatic creatures and fish, causing significant harm to the people of Aathi and the fish.

The construction of dams indeed have significant impacts on aquatic ecosystems and fish populations. Dams are structures designed to regulate water levels for various purposes such as irrigation, flood control, hydro-power production and water supply. While dams benefit human societies, they also alter natural river systems and can result in various environmental consequences. Peter Wohlleben in his *Secret Network of Nature* insinuates, "Hydroelectric power plants impede the progress of fish" (29). Freshwater creatures cannot move freely because dams get in their way. Fish and prawns departed the area where the dam was erected to find a safe spot to reproduce. The residents of Aathi subsisted only on fishing and farming but when Kumaran constructed a bridge, they lost their only source of income and they suffered from hunger. The residents were unable to provide enough food for their families.

The visitors and the people working for Kumaran dumped garbage and plastic behind the bush, along the long narrow pathway. Nature and its beauty were suffocated by polythene paper bags, cigarette packets and other items. "Plastic carry bags were strewn about them like bolted fetuses, and flies and mosquitoes droned with a vengeance" (Joseph 207). Garbage deposited in rivers or bodies of water cannot decompose, leading to the release of toxic compounds that kill plants and aquatic animals. Contaminated water leads to various diseases in individuals who consume it. Helen Scales in her *The Brilliant Abyss* affirms the miserable truth about plastics that has become ubiquitous. Microplastics are found in even

deep-sea sediments. "Once the microplastics enter the bodies of individual organisms, growth rates fall and reproduction is interrupted" (215).

Plastic pollution and climate change are interconnected issues, with plastic production and disposal releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Improper waste management and incineration contribute to climate change, causing disruption of carbon sinks, altered ocean chemistry and feedback loops. "The world produced 9.2 billion tons of plastic between 1950 and 2017, with 438 million tons produced annually . . . Only 10% of plastic waste is recycled, with 79% ending up in landfills or nature and 12 percent incinerated" ("What Do"). The indiscriminate dumping of garbage into water bodies has emerged as a grave environmental crisis which not only poses immediate threats to aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity but also has far-reaching consequences for human health, economy and the overall well-being of our planet.

Water, the fundamental metaphor in the novel, representing fertility, longevity and energy, is described as the source of life in Aathi through a biblical reference: "The value of the first drop of water to me is equal to the value of my firstborn's life" (Joseph 14). Water was revered by the people of Aathi and their lives were a constant baptism of water. The novel's portrayal of their aquatic lifestyle attests to this. "'Am I not the river of life itself?" they said, fully responding to the call of water. Life would come to a standstill if I were to cease flowing" (Joseph 209). Kumaran's disregard for the water led to the inhabitants of Aathi admonishing him. Kumaran's arrival disrupted Aathi Island's tranquil atmosphere, causing garbage to accumulate in the lake, causing foul odours and posing a dangerous living environment. This pollution led to illnesses among the children. The foul odours and hazardous conditions in the lake mirror the real-world consequences of unchecked pollution and the degradation of water bodies.

The novel ends with water flowing indefinitely due to flood in search of vengeance, washing away dirt and filth from Aathi's waters. "There was water everywhere, and nothing but water" (Joseph 343). The return of clear waters symbolizes hope and liberation for Aathi, who had lost their life breath. The resistance came from within Aathi and when they broke free from Kumaran's clutches, they gained insight into his intentions. Water becomes a metaphor for Aathi people's liberation.

Human beings have no right to harm nature, according to Ecocriticism, unless it is to meet their basic needs. However, in today's world, people are demonstrating their dominion over nature and "violating the laws of

nature" (Fromm 113), posing a threat to human beings and other living things. Because certain Aathi individuals, such as Kumaran and his allies, asserted their dominion over nature, the people suffered. When people strive to assert control over nature, nature responds by asserting domination over humans, which is very harmful to people and other living creatures. Gift in Green portray nature as more than a passive backdrop and it is a force that reacts to human actions and has the power to shape events.

Kumaran represents the current age's greed and disregard for feelings, leading to the death of many living species, including fish, oysters, plants and people. Kumaran envisioned a technopark, a township, a hi-tech city and a cyber city being built. To realise his ideal, he polluted nature to a great extent. "They found the whole of Aathi so saturated with the smell of kerosene that it seemed ready to ignite and go up in flames at the first strike of a matchstick" (Joseph 225). Aathi was once an earthly paradise but it became a wasteland and the once-beautiful green countryside has been transformed into a trash dump.

The inhabitants were dedicated to their God, Thampuran and valued living in close proximity to nature and took great care to preserve it. They could not even think about harming nature as it is their lifeline. The residents of Aathi once enjoyed living in harmony with nature, enjoying boat rides and beach time. Soon, the water became dirty, causing fish and oysters to die and relocate and residents losing appreciation for nature's beauty. The contamination of water prevented the celebration of Kaappu-Kalakku, the fisher folk festival. The developmental ideas of Kumaran in Aathi caused significant damage, leading to the prawn contract being awarded to Komban Joy. The residents were compelled to relinquish their land due to financial constraints. Komban Joy dumps DDT in prawn farms, causing butterflies to die. Two days before Kappu-kalakku, Komban mixes endosulfan to obtain the entire fish harvest. The people of Aathi were shocked by the harmful impact of pesticides but this is the first time endosulfan is used for profit in Aathi, causing all of Kunjimathu's land to be poisoned.

Pouring endosulfan into the farm to get the last fingerling just before the kaappu-kalakku had already led to conflict in several places. In Aathi, however, it was the first time that endosulfan was used for the purpose...Does this mean there will be no kaappu-kalakku, Markosetta, or Baaji inquire? If endosulfan has been used, it's not safe to eat the fish. Those who eat it will die of an incurable disease. (Joseph 169)

Agriculture was once done without the use of chemicals but modernization and technology have led to a significant environmental impact. People like Komban Joy and Kumaran should not destroy nature because of their ravenousness, as it will result in serious issues. According to Sir. C.V. Raman, "Water is an elixir of life" (Shaalaa.com) and human beings should protect it, but today's world is largely destroying it. Joseph demonstrates how pollution impacts human life through Shilaja, who moved to Chakkam Kandam after marriage but could not survive due to pollution. Human excrement is dumped into water in hotels, causing ungraded waste that breeds disease and "becomes a health hazard" (Joseph 93). Shilaja returned to Aathi village, but due to contamination, she was unable to live in her own place.

Ecocriticism often highlights how human activities can disrupt ecosystems, deplete resources, and disrupt the delicate balance of nature. In *Gift in Green*, the prevailing model of viewing nature as a resource to be exploited reflects the environmental imbalance caused by human actions. Sarah Joseph attempts to demonstrate how Aathi was completely ruined in the name of development and township through the decline of the storynights and the fall of the Thampuran. *Gift in Green*, like Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, raises the cultural resistance of the people of Aathi.

In *Gift in Green*, major and minor characters emphasize the importance of restoring a harmonious relationship with nature and advocating for stewardship and care. These characters often serve as catalysts for change and provide insights into the novel's exploration of humanity's interconnectedness with the environment. Dinakaran embarks on a journey of self-realization to preserve nature and reclaim the peaceful lives of people. After a lawsuit against Kumaran, who was ordered to stop development plans and waste disposal, Dinakaran fought back, knowing that Kumaran would do whatever it took to overturn the judgement. Dinakaran understands ecological balance and as a true son of the soil, he protects his land and communicates the message to the younger generation, sacrificing himself for Aathi.

Kunjimathu is a powerful female character who adores nature and lives in Aathi, a village surrounded by rice fields, fish, oysters and water. She is deeply connected to the untainted, pristine nature of Aathi and is determined to preserve it. During the new moon, she enjoyed watching the rising tides. "Kunjumathu, betrayed by Kumaran, pursues the water-life and took care of the parents of Kumaran. The adversity never made her to succumb before anything she stood for the well-being of nature" (Devi).

However, pollution caused the earth's face to change and the tide did not rise. Two fearless Aathi women, Kunjimuthu and Shailaja, work together to save the village by cultivating paddy in fields and reviving the soil. Their efforts pave the way for Aathi's miraculous recovery, demonstrating their deep love for the natural world and their willingness to preserve Aathi.

Even though Chandra Mohan does not hail from Aathi but he joined forces with Advocate Grace Chali to safeguard nature and Aathi. Joseph has portrayed nature to have healing powers that has therapeutic qualities. Geetanjali comes to Aathi seeking a cure for her daughter Kayal's mental turbulence. She thought that the calm atmosphere of Aathi would heal her daughter's problems. Days passed and Kayal and her mother both spent time outdoors. Kayal began to play with water and became normal as a result of her surroundings. She began to communicate and after a few days, she became normal. Water's magical qualities and capacity for healing free Kayal from her trauma and muteness.

In *Gift in Green*, an individual's selfish actions lead to the degradation of the ecology, resulting in the pollution of clear water, destruction of mangroves, poisoning of paddy fields and forced labor for indigenous people. Sarah Joseph explores the impact of plastic pollution and dam construction in Aathi village, highlighting the global consequences of environmental degradation. The portrayal of nature as a healing gift that can be disrupted by human avarice creates a nuanced exploration of the relationship between human beings and the environment. This theme serves as a reminder of the delicate balance that sustains life and the potential consequences of failing to recognize the value of nature beyond its material benefits. The novel encourages readers to consider their environmental stewardship roles and emphasizes the significance of preserving the natural world for future generations.

### **Conclusion:**

Sarah Joseph's unique writing style creates realistic nature images, with characters and subplots that leave a lasting impression. *Gift in Green* underscores storytelling nights, where individuals share environmental issues and moral ideals. The emphasis on water as a fundamental necessity for all living beings and the portrayal of the dangers of contaminating it with waste is a powerful theme that underscores the novel's ecological message. The novel depicts water as a vital resource that supports ecosystems, human well-being, and the delicate balance of the natural world.

The author's stress on the irreplaceable nature of water and the imperative to acknowledge its significance while halting the pollution of water resources reflects a powerful ecological message.

The ubiquity of plastics, a pervasive and concerning issue in modern society, serve as an important element in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*. This theme aligns with the novel's exploration of environmental challenges and the human-nature relationship. The polluted environment on Aathi Island reflects the real-world challenges of waste management and pollution that many communities face. By portraying these issues in the novel, the author raises awareness and encourages readers to reflect on their own behaviors.

The natural world operates in a delicate balance, with every element interconnected. Human beings' anthropocentric nature is eradicating other species, threatening the balance and well-being of the environment. Eco-criticism emphasizes the significance of harmonious living with nature for the protection of human life and the earth from harm and destruction. Glen A. Love's essay "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism" proclaims, "We become increasingly aware, as our technological world begins to crack beneath our feet, that our task is not remake nature so that it is fit for humankind, but as Thoreau says, to make humankind right for nature" (Fromm 234). Human beings should shift their focus from controlling nature to aligning their actions and values with its principles, aligning with ecological and environmental philosophies that emphasize harmonious coexistence with nature, rather than dominating or manipulating it.

Recognizing one's place within the natural world carries with it a profound ethical responsibility to honor and respect the laws that govern the intricate balance of ecosystems and the well-being of all living beings. Ian McHarg's mandate from *Design with Nature*, emphasizing individual responsibility for the biosphere and the importance of "creative and cooperative activities" (Fromm 114), reflects a holistic and ecological perspective that resonates with contemporary environmental thought. Every step taken today contributes to reclaiming nature's former glory. By effectively conveying this message, the novel encourages readers to reflect on their own roles as custodians of the Earth and to make conscious decisions that contribute to ecosystem health, biodiversity preservation and planet sustainability.

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