

# Is Development Worth It? : A Neo-Colonial Reading of Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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**Abstract –** *The world is now becoming concrete jungles. Among them Aathi was a nature utopia filled with water and serene people. It had its own culture and Aathi was a lifestyle. Into it comes a modern man, the lost son of Aathi, Kumaran. He is no outsider but now has become one. He uses foreign capital for exploitation and personal greed rather than development. His attempts to control the people as well as the culture can be seen similar to colonizers. The erosion of culture, the resistance that comes from within Aathis are attempts of decolonization. The paper attempts to critique the notions of development and show how globalization becomes the modern colonization.*

**Keywords:** *Neo-colonialism, Cultural Imperialism, Erosion, Globalization.*

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Modern consumer culture is strongly mapped by 'Westernization' and 'Globalization'. *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph discusses modern colonialism, globalization and commodity culture. The novel examines how globalization becomes a new global colonialism, based on the historical structure of capitalism and is a process that executes the objective of colonialism with greater efficiency and rationalism. The novel shows how the culture of 'Aathi' is transformed into a culture of consumption. It depicts the local situation to shape the writing in consonance with the existing reality. In her interview with Valson Thampu, who translated her novel Malayalam to English, Sarah Joseph speaks about how she modelled the land of Aathi. She says: "I recall my experiences while visiting an exceptionally beautiful island called Valanthakadu in Ernakulam district of Kerala" (370).

The novel narrates the story of Aathi, an island which lies with its natural purity and primitive beauty untouched by the outside life. Kumaran, who has left Aathi for a better life, comes back after years to transform Aathi into a modern paradise, for a huge profit. Conflicts of the people while facing the threats of pollution, diseases, displacements and migration and their form of resistance to the invasion form the central parts of the novel. The natives of Aathi revolted against the development minds, who upon the arrival in Aathi, had by devious means taken possession of the land and the government, reducing the dignified, independent native cultivators to the status of underpaid labourers. The novel points at the various kinds of invasions, ecological destructions, aftermath of environmental degradation and the possibilities of a united fight against the human right violations.

By narrating the unique practices and the eco-friendly culture of Aathi, the author throws light upon the rituals, traditions and life styles of the people of Aathi. By doing so the novel opens up possibilities of life practices based on mutual love and care and respecting the Mother Earth. The storynights in Aathi, selling and buying land strictly to the inmates of the place, not allowing the greedy developers to put their feet in the land, preservation and sustainable use of natural resources etc. are channels of independence and empowerment of 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 did not find comfort in that. It contains a resistance to the colonial minds who are thirsty for development.

In his *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkruma writes:

The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world. The struggle against neo-colonialism is not aimed at excluding the capital of the developed world from operating in less developed countries. It is aimed at preventing the financial power of the developed countries being used in such a way as to impoverish the less developed. (8)

One can see the people of Aathi too undergoing exactly the same phase in the novel when they succumb to Kumaran's dreams. They lost their

wealth, culture and customs for what they thought was their betterment. But actually it was the act of swallowing their culture.

A variant form of neo-colonialism which can be seen in the novel is cultural imperialism. It is the desire of wealthy nations to control other nation's values and perceptions through cultural means, such as language, education and religion, ultimately for economic reasons. The ultimate aim of land filling the fields, building of bridges etc is the personal prosperity of Kumaran alone. He even snatched away their Thampuran, who was the sole solace of them. In the novel Kumaran can be seen as an example of a neo-coloniser. He is the business tycoon who sees in Aathi the means of making money. He twists and turns the culture of Aathi for his own personal gain. Thus cultural colonisation becomes a major theme in the novel.

Aathi has many unique traditions and rituals in its culture. Among them an important one is the storynights. Aathi is a land of stories and storytellers. The storytellers were nomads who came to Aathi to tell stories. They came year after year and tell stories which are related to the people of Aathi in way or other. The people of Aathi believed the words of the story teller as their Thampuran's voice. "The storyteller identified dates for our daughter's weddings. He showed us where to dig wells. We received him as Thampuran's voice" (16). The storyteller will start his story and the people will listen to it with great reverence. All the stories are related to the spiritual celebration of water. In the appendix given at the back of the novel, the author links her environmental vision to the celebration of water in the Bible, the Koran, Zen stories and Sufi music. She says:

These stories have come down to us from an assortment of sources: the Bible, the holy Quran, Zen and Sufi traditions, the Puranas, folk narratives, historical events and those attributed to the life of St. Francis of Assisi. These stories have been created and reinterpreted within the alchemy of Aathi". (353)

As Aathi's decay started its storynights were the first to decline. Aathi was in turmoil.

As the storynights progressed after the arrival of Kumaran, the number of people who attended the storynights began to decrease gradually. Earlier, Thampuran's courtyard would reverberate with festive laughter and enjoyment:

But not anymore. Like the Aathi sky choked by clouds, the minds of every person was submerged in sadness. Thampuran's courtyard where they would have gathered as a people, had vanished (182).

Life had changed altogether in Aathi and so did their storynights. Never before in Aathi was there been the storynights so melancholic. People never again

attended the ceremony with the earlier respect and happiness. A rift occurred in between their minds and the culture of Aathi. "No one from the West of Aathi participated in the palm skirt ceremony. After waiting a while for them, the Karnavar pronounced, 'Let the ceremony begin'" (295). Finally when the storyteller didn't arrive to Aathi, the decline of the storynights became complete. But the people didn't want to surrender completely to the erosion of their culture. So a young man, Dinakaran, himself became the storyteller. The people did all they could do to continue the tradition.

Another important, unique feature of Aathi is its Thampuran. He was the creator of Aathi, their God. They paid reverence to him by lighting the lamp in his shrine. Like everything else in Aathi, Thampuran's shrine was also delicate and simple: "A roof over the place where he died and was buried. It has four walls. Darkness dwells within" (48). For the people of Aathi reverence was above all. They prayed to the Thampuran, obeyed and worshipped him. Unlike the city, they never built extravagant temples or shrines for Thampuran. But Kumaran was nothing like the rest of the people of Aathi. The urban life has changed him. After thirty six years, he had come to pay his obeisance to Thampuran. He did something that astonished everyone: "He prostrated himself before Thampuran and lay stiff and straight like a stick, his arms stretched forward and palms pressed together in a frenzy of devotion" (51). He was completely turned into an urban citizen. The moment Kumaran saw Thampuran, he decided to change him from his simple and humble shrine to a golden cage. He wants the shrine renovated. Before the people of Aathi could even blink their eyes a stunning spectacle materialized before their eyes: "a roof of gold, a gold lamp in the golden hut" (51).

Then came a priest, clad in white and carrying his Gods in a bag. For him Thampuran was only next to evil. This enraged the people of Aathi. For them Thampuran is the light of life: "Darkness: the womb of life" (108). But the priest was adamant and wanted to bring down Thampuran's shrine and build a new one. He even had alternatives for Thampuran. When Kumaran wanted to change Thampuran from his older shrine to a new one, the priest he brought wanted to change Thampuran himself. This created a void in the minds of the people of Aathi. The ones who stood in favour of the priest and Kumaran are the people who stand to profit from a change in the social order. Ambu and his friends can be seen from this angle. For them, the dreams that Kumaran had shown is everything. Thampuran cannot stay between their dreams.

However everybody did not come under Kumaran's black magic. There were people still in Aathi who believed in Thampuran, especially the women. They destroyed the golden shrine of Thampuran and made darkness- their deity return.

The women of Aathi freed Thampuran from his golden cage to the universe. But this didn't stop the downfall of Thampuran. The priest proclaimed: "Thampuran didn't belong to the pantheon of that superior pedigree of Gods. A new deity, a suitable God, had to be setup and daily obeisance offered to him alone" (122). In the new temple, Thampuran will not be allowed to sit in the sanctum sanctorum but he will be rehabilitated in a corner, close to the wall. When Kumaran came with development, everything that was primitive has to change. Same happened to Aathi's Thampuran. He was not superior like the city Gods and hence was sidelined. Here, what one sees is cultural colonization.

Through the decline of the storynights and the downfall of the Thampuran, Sarah Joseph tries to show that how Aathi was ruined completely in the name of development and township. Like Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, *Gift in Green* also raises the cultural resistance of the people of Aathi.

The rupture from cultural moorings, the exclusion from their own domain of traditional values resulted in creating a deep sense of alienation. There was a systematic destruction of the familiar world of symbolic order which made meaning for their daily occupations (Keralavarma 116).

This was the condition of the people in Aathi. The effects of neo-colonialism were profound and widespread. Before the independence if it was British who colonized the innocent common man, after the independence it is the wealthy bureaucrats. They robbed away the culture, tradition, land and water from Aathi and made it a wasteland. By the end of the novel, Aathi turned into 'anthyam' - the end.

Water is the biggest issue leading to the crisis in the novel. The non-linear narrative carries the water of Aathi from purity to putrefaction. A book that inspired the author was Dr. Marasu Emoto's *The Hidden Messages in Water*. He is an expert at interpreting the amazing messages that water holds out to those who have eyes to read them. The fascinating worlds immanent in water that Dr. Emoto reveals have enchanted the author.

Aathi was nothing without water. Everything, from birth till death, was related to water. The people lived the water-life, drawing sustenance from water. Their water-life meant that their daily immediate needs were met by the land and the water. Their rituals, culture and even their life depended on pure, serene water. They considered water next to God. Sarah Joseph said: "At one level, the novel deals with the socio-political aspects of human right to water. At another, it is an attempt to explore man's spiritual connection with water" (quoted in K. Santhosh's "Water of love seeps through" 1). The novel is the spiritual celebration of water as seen in the Bible, Koran, Zen stories and Sufi music. The people of

Aathi even took oath in the name of water. All their stories in the storynights started with the wordings 'Jalam Sakshi!'. Water was Aathi's breath. "Innumerable canals, water drains, ponds, water springs, wells, paddy fields brimming with water and slushy marshes criss-crossed the place-the network of Aathi's nerves" (33-34).

Sarah Joseph again goes on to show the importance of water and how it can cure mental ails. For that she introduces a small girl 'Kayal' and her mother. They were from the metropolis. Kayal had lost her way there and now only says 'po-po' to everyone she meets. One can only imagine the terrors she went through to suffer such nightmares. Water will cure her, the girl's mom is told. Water is their only hope. Let Kayal know the water. "Not know in the usual sense of the term. We must know the water as the lotus knows it" (61).

But when Kumaran came with development, modernism and westernization, things began to change. The serene, calm waters of Aathi began to get muddy, dirty and violent. An anonymous girl who cleans the water by herself is Aathi itself. She is sad over the muddy waters and tries to clean it. But deep inside she knows that it can never be. Here, the author gives us a ray of hope and brings the greatest law of water. "It is the nature of water to clear; it cannot help it" (35). This line suggests a powerful resistance against the colonizing factors. What the people felt were reflected in the waters of Aathi. Kumaran's arrival itself disturbed both the people and the waters of Aathi.

No sooner had they vanished from sight than Kumaran's army marched into the water. Booted legs kicked and splashed in unison. The battered water rose, splattered sideways and crashed flailing its head. Never before had Aathi witnessed such an exercise (39).

In the past, the water in Aathi had a sort of radiant clarity. But with Kumaran's arrival it was continually muddy. This clouded and burdened every mind on Aathi with sorrow and pain. They don't know what was happening. If the water gets continually muddy their cultivation and fishing won't occur and their livelihoods will be snatched away leading them to extreme poverty. In the water-land of Aathi, Kumaran was building bridges and massive structures. He trapped the flowing free waters of Aathi in the bridges and embankments. Kumaran was a stranger to the resistance of water. The moment she found herself trapped in the enclosures, she would resist and struggle to break out. If you provoked her beyond a point, water revealed an altogether different face; the snarling, shrieking face of death. She would come determined to wipe out everything and not be appeased until she is free. Here one can see the people of Aathi akin to water. To some extent man

can be controlled but after a certain point he will also become violent. But after a point he will break off the chains and become free like water. The people of Aathi were also like that.

When Kumaran land filled Aathi, he trapped the water in granite embankments so that water may not rise during high tides. During tides the people of Aathi could hear the "water wailing and howling, knocking its head against the granite bund" (203). Same way the people are also trapped in his new colonizing attitude. Now without pure water, the people are also wailing and howling. The sight of the trapped water gave strength to Kunjimathu to fight against Kumaran and his massive machines. "One by one, all the people of Aathi came to Kunjimathu, drawn by rumour and reportage. Even those who have come to dissuade her ended up staying on in solidarity with her" (203-204). This happened because Kunjimathu stood for the truth, the truth of Aathi, their plight.

Slowly Aathi was turning into stinking dirt. The waters of Aathi reflected Kumaran's dirty, stinking and selfish thoughts. Aathi was dying and so was her people. But they never gave up. Memories about the past inspired them. When the youngsters like Dinakaran and Ponmani sought the help of government, women like Kunjimathu and children cleared off the garbage and waste by themselves. But this didn't stop Aathi's death. As the clear waters vanished, its people too were vanishing. Every household was busy preparing for its eminent departure from Aathi. Aathi was being ripped apart. Even the waters of Aathi couldn't stop that.

In the midst of all these the monsoon came. Seeking revenge water flowed endlessly. "There was water everywhere, nothing but water" (343). The rain cleared away the dirt and filth that ruined Aathi's waters. The crystal clear waters were back, the fingerlings were back and so was hope. Water is Aathi's life breath and liberator. The resistance is from within Aathi. The waters were its soldiers. When it freed itself from the prison of the embankment, Aathi's people also freed themselves from the black magic of Kumaran. They now knew his real intentions. In short water becomes a metaphor for liberation for the people of Aathi.

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