

Deciphering the semblance of violence in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*: A spatial disquisition

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Abstract: The conventional from of literature has given much importance to aesthetic sense alone which theories like spatial criticism breaks it. Sarah Joseph, environmentalist, poet, novelist and short story writer hails from the state of Kerala. She is a living author and she is the recipient of a series of medals like Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award given by the union government of India, the Sahitya Academy Award given by Kerala. And the researcher has chosen her translated novel *Gift in Green* (2011) for the course of this study. The method of analysis employed in the study is interpretative one. The text analysis is carried in word to word manner. A close reading of the text with reference to the Lefebvre categorization of space and concepts like violence is fused to together as a novelty for this study. The researcher has found out that influential people like Kumaran, Government and non-governmental organizations misuse the space in Aathi. The violent activities of them ended in destruction of entire place and space of Aathi. This study induces and creates awareness among readers and other researchers to look after their nature and the gender problems as well.

Keywords: *Gift in Green*, Aathi, space, violence, urbanization, gender

Introduction

The conventional from of literature has given much importance to aesthetic sense alone which theories like spatial criticism breaks it. Spatial criticism is one such theory that mainly gives importance for spatial elements. Bertrand Westphal brings out a geocentred approach to literature in his book *La Géocritique: Réel, fiction, espace*. People have realized that life is impossible in earth by squandering the spaces of the earth. Humans in earth cannot survive without the spatial elements. Wherever there is good space, human can live in a peaceful

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manner. But the activities of humans have brought damnation to themselves as their activities spoil their space.

Sarah Joseph, environmentalist, poet, novelist and short story writer hails from the state of Kerala. She is a living author and she is the recipient of a series of medals like Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award given by the union government of India, the Sahitya Academy Award given by Kerala. Some of her works include novels include *Aathi* (translated as *Gift in Green* by Valson Thampu), *The Woman-Enemy*, *The Daughters of Alaha*, *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side* (translated by Valson Thampu), *The Vigil*, *Budhini* (translated by Sangeetha Sreenivasan). *The Masculine of Virgin* is the collection of select short stories of Sarah Joseph published in 2012. The researcher has chosen *Gift in Green* novel for the course of his work.

Gift in Green deals with the island of Aathi. And the main characters in this story are Kumaran, Kunjimathu, Shailaja, Kumarettan, Siddhu, Dhinakaran, Ponamani, Baaji, Prakash, Kunjan Karnavar and Noor Muhammed. Kumaran is the native of Aathi who sold his land and went in search of good fortune in city. Nonetheless, he comes back with a plan of urbanising Aathi after a span of thirty past six years. He is assisted by the government and many people from cities. The struggle between the natives of Aathi for saving their land and water from the troops of Kumaran is the major plot of this novel. Even though, Kumaran cheats all people including his parents, Kunjimathu and the local people. Nonetheless, land and water wins the crew of Kumaran by accepting all the harmful activities done to the land and water of Aathi and retaliating in the form of flood cleanly sweeping every development made by him with the aid of the government and other agencies.

Methodology

Michel Foucault is the first person to talk about space. In his essay “Of Other Spaces” asserts that the current era is the era of space. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed (see Foucault 1986, 22).

Space decides who the super nation is among the other countries of the world, because of spatial politics; they are in war with each other by occupying the territorial spaces of neighboring countries and other countries; space is not an empty container. Henri Lefebvre, in *The*

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Production of Space (1974), critiques about how urbanization harms the natural space, mentioning,

the emergence and development of capitalist modernity occurs through a particular '(social) production of (social) space' (Wegner) - that a space is fundamentally produced by and through human actions, and which is thus 'constituted neither by a collection of things or an aggregate of (sensory) data, nor by a void packed like a parcel with various contents, ... it is irreducible to a form' imposed upon phenomena, upon things, upon physical materiality (Lefebvre 1974, 7)

Further, Dr. Sonia Freire-Trigo (2021) elaborates about Lefebvre's notion of space into three categories,

Lefebvre presents space as the evolving product of a never-ending dialectical relation between mental space (i.e. its Cartesian conceptualisation), physical space (i.e. nature), and social space (i.e. itself a product of the dialectical relation between perceived, conceived and lived spaces).

The method of analysis employed in the study is interpretative one. The text analysis is carried out in word to word manner. A close reading of the text with reference to the Lefebvre categorization of space and concepts like violence is fused to together as a novelty for this study.

Discussion

By applying Henri Lefebvre's conceptual framework of categorization of space, there are two category of space that could be found in the translated work *Gift in Green*.

Nature as space in Aathi

The text gives much importance to the nature in the novel. The natural Space of Aathi is encircled by Mangrove forest resembling a 'Greenbangle' (Joseph 2011, 33). "Water is the life of Aathi, which is encircled by forest as circle cover as a green bangle". One could see the abundance of water in water bodies of Aathi especially in canals, ponds, water, springs, wells and also in fields and marshes in it. Further the children in Aathi had their schooling, employment within or nearby the land of Aathi. All children possessed good health since the physical environment was very conducive. And it is an island consisting of water on four sides surrounded by backwaters. Moreover, water will be available at all the days in Aathi, and hence rice cultivation, prawn farming and fishing were the main livelihood for the people of Aathi. In sum, water nurtured them by giving them harvest at

the right time. Further in the novel, the characters like Kunjimathu and Kayal are attached with land and waters of Aathi.

Kayal is a school child who is sexually abused in the space of metropolitan city. She came to the space of Aathi to get peace and get good physical and mental health. And she gets pacified by the space of Aathi. The characters in the novel have great affinity with water. Kunjimathu is a woman born in Aathi. She considers the space of water and land in Aathi as her life. According to her, the water of Aathi is omnipotent and knows each one's past, present and future. She loved the space of water and land in Aathi. She bought the land of Kumaran's parents from an outsider through her own money saved for her own wedding. She puts all her efforts to save Aathi from Kumaran's plan of converting the space of Aathi into a tourist spot and revenue center.

There existed a treaty between the people of Aathi and waters of Aathi such that each will protect one another's interest. Since the people of Aathi had good waters, the women who were married to outsiders suffered because of bad quality of water. Water of Aathi serves not just as a source of livelihood, but it comforts and soothes the troubled minds of all the inmates in various ways.

People like Divya, elder sister of Siddhu and Dhinakaran, had to leave her native place of Aathi and move to the new space of Mumbai. She got married to Balettan. And they both live in Mumbai where the quality of water space is poor and chlorinated. In fact, the quality of water is not fit for bathing too. Because of this they had a compulsion to buy drinking water for money. Another example is Shailaja who is a native resident of Aathi. And she married Chandramohan of Chakkam Kandan and goes there to live with him. But returns to Aathi on seeing the condition of water there. Thus, there has been an affinity between people and space of Aathi.

The breeze and water of Aathi act as a pacifier to the suffering people who had lost their loved ones. Also it serves as a source of inspiration. Further water acted as medicine to the people. For instance water gives relief to Markose when he suffers from the loss of his mother. On the same day, he finds a woman keeping a weeping child on the ferry bank. And, these above lines express the natural space of Aathi and how the people of Aathi had been blessed to have such a space of comfort in their land. It is this space that helped artists like Markose to compose poems, made people to rejoice inwardly than all naturalistic space.

True. Instead, I succumbed to the sleep this forest induces. Although I can't have slept. My mind was overflowing all through the night. Words came knocking at its door and made me write a poem, which I shall recite for you. I doubt if I'll ever find a morning more conducive to the sharing of my poem.

'Why only for me? Aren't the birds and the trees also waiting to hear it?'

Noor Muhammad smiled.

'And don't forget the fish and the water. The reason? It is water that composes all poems: the most enchanting as well as the most perilous' (Joseph 2011, 27).

Human beings do not realise the value of resources available at hand. The violence done to the place and space of Mumbai, Chakkamkandam made people to return to Aathi itself. The sexual violence done to the children like Kayal makes her to come to Aathi to overcome it.

Urbanizing the land space of Aathi

Urbanization in the land of Aathi destroys the natural space as well as infuses violence among the men and women of Aathi. Kumaran is a character in the novel who seeks for a sophisticated life and hence he settles outside Aathi for a span for thirty six years. Kumaran hates living in Aathi and he abhors water to the utmost level. He doesn't regard water as an essential entity. He comes back with a plan to urbanise the entire space of Aathi. Sustainable life is getting pure water, air and fresh food cultivated from soil that is not marred. To live a life being one with nature and enjoying the unadulterated resources is a blessing in itself. It's a pity that people like Kumaran not only realise it but also try to exploit it. He sold his land and went to seek a decent life outside of Aathi. In fact he had to leave his mother, father and the girl Kunjimathu who was waiting for him as a spinster to pursue a decent life. He comes back with plans to modify Aathi. He brings with him a private army, backed by the government. The government with the only motive of getting revenue from Aathi's land agrees to everything and supports Kumaran and his team from behind. Thus, government approves the violence to be inflicted in the land of Aathi and the space of Aathi is affected by anthropocentric activities of Kumaran and his army. This can be seen from the very first chapter in the novel.

Kumaran opens the door for the land encroachers to enter Aathi. Siddhu is the brother of Dhinakaran. And when he is asked to get inside the tent pitched by the newly arrived encroachers who are the

outsiders of the Aathi, so they can get some information about Aathi. In fact, there is a serious land dispute already going on between the encroachers and the native people of Aathi since the encroachers have annexed some parts of the Aathi. And they claim the land of Aathi to be theirs by producing the documents approved by the government. As a matter of fact, in the village administration office, documents produced by encroachers prove to be original than the documents produced by the people of Aathi. Through this incident, it is evident the documentation and registration adopted by the government is not people friendly or environment friendly rather it is influencers friendly and revenue friendly. Land is commoditized by the process of registration. As a result, the already registered lands are sold to multiple people showing it as new land and yet to be registered. Moreover, this in turn encourages real estate and document writers to treat the land as a commodity. To sum up, every environmental problem entering Aathi from outsiders is backed up by the government just because of the only reason that the government will get good profit and revenue from Aathi.

The land encroachers being outsiders get access to every first quality resources in the land and waters of Aathi. This is done by bribing local people, officials and others by knowing the weakness of certain people who can be conquered by giving more money in general. For instance, the good example is Baaji's father who is eyed by the encroachers. Accordingly, they buy his fish by giving more money than normal. The political space made foreigners to enter Aathi. The encroachers of the land of Aathi are handy in using machines like video cameras, telescopes and guns. Through which they can control Aathi and its people. Their Agency is exercised over the land, nature, people, waterfowls that are in Aathi. It is the liking for a gun 'machine' that made Siddhu to go inside the tent after men had smiled. Moreover, Baaji is the friend of Siddhu. His father's activities like selling fish, smoking and throwing the lit matchstick in water are recorded by them. Thus the land encroachers use machines to exercise their agency over native people.

The desire for urban space is instilled by Kumaran. He sends magician to admire children and to grab their attention by showing them a glimpse of new Aathi within a second and makes it to disappear. The glimpse of new Aathi contained cinema halls, parks, hyper malls, apartments created exclusively for the art of magic. Every business begins with an advertisement. Likewise the advertisement for

Kumaran's mega project is done by a Magician. The people are deluded to believe that a place is filled with malls, theatres, bridges and other facilities such as broad roads etc. They are tempted to live a life like the life of metropolitan. But, the cities as they do not know how much those people in the cities live a life of poverty devoid of any fresh and pure elements.

People of Aathi had access to good food and a better environment which they failed to understand. Aathi had been a place of refuge to the settlers as they had been ill treated, and discriminated against by the high caste people. When they sought refuge in Aathi, they supported the livelihood of those people. Those people learnt the art of cultivating rice in saltwater of Aathi and improved their style of living. Those who did not realise the struggles of their ancestors were longing for the illusory world outside Aathi. Indeed, youths of Aathi are first to fall prey to this advertisement. Ambu, Prakashan, Chandran are some of them since they are bored of the regular activities carried out in Aathi.

New Aathi is the place built with 'recognition' and 'shaped' by often 'oppressive institutional forces and social relationships.' This in turn makes native people to opt out of better place. The activities of Kumaran to sell the entire space of Aathi to foreigners began leading it to a land of commercial space. Later, many people came to exploit the land and waters of Aathi. People of Aathi found most of their lands to be registered in Kumaran's and newcomers' names. Even the land which was bought by Kunjimathu through the money that she saved for her marriage was found to be registered in the name of outsiders. And hence, the people of Aathi were helpless before the documents, As said by Doreen Massey, Places and the social relations within and between them are the results of particular arrangements of power, whether it is individual and institutional, or imaginative and material (Massey 2010, 7).

The man centered activities induced violence even in the Agricultural lands of Aathi into property land as led by Kumaran. Moreover, the livelihood jobs like rice farming, prawn farming, fishing which were the sources of living for the people of Aathi was destroyed by Kumaran since he bought the entire land of Ganesha Subramaniam that gave them employment. But he does everything with the intention of urbanising the space of Aathi. Moreover, he plans to buy the entire land for commercialization thereby making the people deprived of their livelihood; the sweat of the people of Aathi shed from their first

generation to till now has made the soil of the land to be fertile enough for cultivation. Nonetheless, the lands were bought and land filled which included the three hundred acres of Ganesha Subramaniam, where people used to cultivation of rice and fish were carried for generation. The people were now asked to do the work as daily wages to fill land which made the elderly people of Aathi bleed in their eyes. Thus, he creates a space for real estate merchants. He had also taken up the project of getting wastes from the nearby cities. As a result of which he is portrayed in the front pages of the magazine as a Superhuman.

The consequences of destroying the natural space of Aathi led to destruction of very Aathi itself. The wastes are dumped at the agricultural land of Aathi. The natural health of Aathi is spoiled by the dumping of wastes made the children of Aathi who went to school to get sick; previously there was never an occasion that they were ill continuously since the children enjoyed good drinking water and healthy food cultivated in Aathi itself. Because of this they got infected with diseases like typhoid, fever and diarrhea.

Kumaran hires people to destroy the natural space. He makes Komban Joy to take Kunjimathu's paddy field on lease to farm prawn. Driven by Kumaran, he dumps DDT in the land which leads to the death of yellow butterflies, and green frogs. Later he reveals that he mixes Endosulfan to get maximum fish. Such acts were done by selfish people to extract all fish in the last days of lease. Moreover, the mixing of endosulfan, quicklime, poison, pesticides and fertilisers in water in order to extract every fish for business purposes is also revealed. Kumaran also decides to buy all the paddy fields in western Aathi. He assures people to give one lakh rupees in compensation and a good housing in a nearby city. As a result many people leave Aathi and try to get Kumaran's offer.

Kumaran wants Aathi to be Man-centred, no longer water-centred or nature-centred and hence he works tacitly to make his ambitious plans for Aathi possible by the help of machines and government. The domination of machines in the land of Aathi is evident slowly. The use of guns to scare and hunt the water fowls, birds that are commonly seen in the mangrove forest of Aathi. Further, the huge transport and destruction vehicles were used to landfill the agricultural lands.

Chakkam Kandan is another space like Aathi. It also had clean backwaters. And the waters in Chakkam Kandan were also clean but violence induced activities transformed the place into an unsuitable

one to live in. The pure water of Chakkam Kandan had changed into a dark liquid. During the monsoon time, rain has its downpour in Aathi. Water from all directions entered the western region of Aathi. The western Part of Aathi is a low lying area such that during flood or in rainy season it will be covered with water alone. The houses are flooded with water and the whole of Aathi gets destroyed due to anthropocentric and violence activities of Kumaran. Thus all his plans become thwarted before water at the end.

Natural elements like water and land are affected by violent activities of human beings like Kumaran. However, waters of Aathi in all conditions and emerges as the winner. The study suggests that prolonged violence towards natural space leads to major issues of contemporary catastrophes like global warming and climate change. Further, violence against women will not lead us to a peaceful society in turn it will lead to utter chaos. And this study induces precautionary steps within the readers and obviously with the researcher as well. The attitudes of common people who are affected by violence towards nature and gender in the name of development could be clearly seen. This study induces and creates awareness among readers and other researchers to look after their nature and the gender problems as well. The hypocrisy of corporate conglomerates and the revenue based mindset of governments that support the former and its alliance that is happening today in all the countries of the world is obviously seen in this study.

Conclusion

Applying the conceptual framework of Lefebvre's space, the researcher has found out that influential people like Kumaran, the government and non-governmental organizations misuse the space in Aathi. The violent activities of them ended in destruction of entire place and space of Aathi. The researcher through the academic interdisciplinary theory of spatial criticism has brought the effect of spatial violence. Thus, this findings and discussion has been written in order to preserve, conserve, protect and meliorate the way nature and other spaces are used. And it battles in words against human activity that harms, destroys and depletes the various spaces of human life. The scope of the article is that it exposes the various spaces of Aathi and the nuances of violence in it.

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