

PERCEIVING WATER IN SARAH JOSEPH'S *GIFT IN GREEN* THROUGH THE TAOIST LENS

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Abstract

Water symbolically means life, motion, renewal, blessing, intuition, reflection, subconscious.fertilization, purification, transformation etc. It has a universal undertone of purity and fertility. Symbolically it is often viewed as the source of life itself as we see in countless creation myths in which life emerges from primordial water. Author Sarah Joseph, in her novel *Gift in Green* gives a dreadful account of how the consumerist urge kills the purity and even the existence of water, the elemental basis of life on earth. This paper is an attempt to look at how the author delineates the meaning and significance of water and how ruthless progress in the name of 'modernity' and 'globalization' kills the water life in Aathi, a serene and blissful island of water bodies and mangroves .This paper delves into the influence of Taoism in the centralization of water. The author herself has stated about the influence of Zen stories and *Hidden messages in water* authored by Dr. Masaru Emoto, a Japanese scientific genius who is an expert in interpreting the amazing messages that water holds out; in writing this novel.

Keywords:- Water, Tao, globalization, water lessons, *kayal* etc

INTRODUCTION

Water
That existed before heaven and earth
Without sound, without substance,
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,
All pervading, unailing
One may think of it as the mother
Of all things under heaven
Its true name I do not know

Tao Te Ching

Water symbolically means life, motion, renewal, blessing, intuition, reflection, subconscious, fertilization, purification, transformation etc. It has a universal undertone of purity and fertility. Symbolically it is often viewed as the source of life itself as we see in countless creation myths in which life emerges from primordial waters. Water is mentioned numerous times in the *Bible*, for example, “The earth was formed out of water and by water.” In the *Quran* it is stated that “Living things are made out of water.” In Hinduism it constitutes one of the five basic elements of the cosmos. Ancient Egyptians consider their beloved Nile River as akin to the birth canal of their existence. Ancient Greeks understood the power of transition water holds, from liquid to solid to vapor- hence is the epitomal symbol of metamorphosis. The ancient Greek philosopher Empedocles held that water is one of the four classical elements along with fire, earth and air and was regarded as ‘ylin’ or basic substance of the universe. Thales who was portrayed by Aristotle as an astronomer and an engineer, theorized that the earth which is denser than water, emerged from water. As a monist, he further believed that all things are made from water. Plato believed the shape of water to be icosahedron which accounts for its ability to flow easily. Correspondingly in any literature water is used as a symbol of purification. Examples include the crucial role of river in *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner and the drowning of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Charles Tomlinson, a prominent twentieth century British poet had written about reading the “water’s autumnal hesitations” in his famous poem “Swimming Chenango Lake”.

Sarah Joseph, a leading Malayalam writer and social activist who is the recipient of numerous prestigious awards including Kendra Sahitya Academy award and Kerala Sahitya Academy award is the author of the novel *Gift in Green* which was simultaneously published in English and Malayalam (*Aathi*), the language in which it was first written. The novel gives a dreadful account of how the consumerist urge kills the purity and even the existence of water, the elemental basis of life on earth. This paper is an attempt to look at how the author delineates the meaning and significance of water and how ruthless progress in the name of ‘modernity’ and ‘globalization’ kills the water life in *Aathi*, a serene and blissful island of water bodies and mangroves, a place which according to the author, “is neither an Utopia nor an escapist world of make-believe.” This paper delves into the influence of Taoism in the centralization of water. The author herself has stated about the influence of *Zen stories* and *Hidden messages in water* authored by Dr. Masaru Emoto, a Japanese scientific genius who is an expert in interpreting the amazing messages that water holds out; in writing this novel.

Tao is a Chinese concept signifying “way” or “path”. It is a metaphysical concept originating with Lao Tzu and it signifies primordial essence or fundamental nature of the universe and is a holistic concept of nature. Taoists believe that man is a microcosm of the universe and he should live in harmony with the natural universe. This all-encompassing broad-minded spiritual vision is practiced by the natives of *Aathi* in the novel who can’t even imagine separating themselves from their environ which is imbued with divinity. The classical element of water is one of the five elements in traditional Chinese philosophy along with earth, fire, wood and metal. It is the quintessential symbol of Tao in philosophy, art and science. According to Lao Tzu the most important visible facet of water is its softness and its reflection and through it Mother Nature is imparting a noble lesson that all we see around is a mirrored reflection asking us to be soft and yielding and this is exactly the inherent subliminal quality of the people of *Aathi*. They live in Tao by following the values of non-contention, non-action, simplicity, humility and duality.

In Taoist tradition, water is considered an aspect of wisdom. The concept here is that water takes the form in which it is held and moves in the path of least resistance. But unfortunately this ecospiritual vision and knowledge is despised by Kumaran, the antagonist of the novel for this very reason who returns back many years later only to kill and bury the land and water of Aathi. Kumaran's sardonic remark is an inversion of the Taoist thought, to quote:

Water-life? Kumaran despised water. The thing had no form or shape. In a pot it resembles a pot. Trapped in a pond it tamely takes on the shape of the pond. What is the water you are talking about? Does it have any identity? Will it ever be something in itself? The thought of it makes me sick! (21)

But Kunjimathu, jilted by Kumaran in love, knows "for sure" that "water knows everything and forgets nothing"(21). Kumaran had built a granite embankment, cementing every gap to ensure that not even a drop goes to the other side. Kunjimathu acts as the guardian angel of the waters of Aathi and leaves no stone unturned to shield it from the despicable and ruthless exploitation by Kumaran to which she had to succumb .Kunjimathu is totally at one with the waters that it is only she who is able to hear the wailing of water desperate to come out. Unable to withstand the heart-rending sight and sound, she feels 'drained' and her body becomes limp and she sinks into the ground.(196)

Noor Muhammad , the wandering story-teller keeps repeating the timeless ancient wisdom, "Kulli sai manal maa ee" meaning everything was from water(34-35). He elaborates further:

Water is not only a means of washing away dirt. Since the inscrutable mysteries of life are encoded in it, we must deem water equal to God. It is in water that people are baptized into spiritual vitality. (257)

In the section of the novel self-reflexively titled as "water-lessons", Noor Muhammad passes on the precious knowledge that "all stories irrespective of their lesson exist in the womb of water"(148).

The unnamed water-girl, Noor Muhammad's 'umbilical-cord' with Aathi, is on a silent crusade to cleanse the polluted water and does it in such an uncomplaining and wholehearted manner that we are made to feel the soul-relationship she shares with the water which resembles a mother-daughter bond. Gitanjali is one among the story- tellers and a guest in Aathi who stays in Markose' place to see her child Kayal recuperate and win back life through water from the ill-fated torments she had undergone in the "developed" metropolitan city. Here water is the elixir displaying its supreme divine power as it heals the inexplicable mental wounds of her daughter whose name 'Kayal' itself means backwater, lake or a lagoon in Malayalam language.

The author makes a dig at the social conventions of the Kerala society where marriage is the ultimate purpose of a girl's life. But in the novel the character Shailaja is a bride who "goes back a virgin" only because she can't stand the odious sight and smell of polluted water in Chakkam Kandam as all its water resources are "covered with layer upon layer of shit"(80). Sarah Joseph in the section "What the water said to Shailaja" innovatively gives an intriguing turn to the novel by giving a human voice to the water and makes it engage in a woman- to-woman dialogue with Shailaja, to overtly make the readers understand the inexplicable cruelties the egotistical 'educated' mankind is doing to the prime life -giver and preserver on earth. The passage would make anyone feel ashamed of the ignoble attitude towards water and the entire surroundings. Our heads would hung with guilt when the water emotively questions:

Who is it tell me that continually abides with you, washing and keeping you clean inside and outside? Ask your own heart. Ask your veins and arteries. Ask your lungs...ask your womb! You know only too well that I am not dirty in myself. On the contrary I bear the dirt away as a

sweeper or scavenger can... Why the am I stopped and my flow stalled? What have I done to deserve this? Wouldn't I have encircled the land cleaning it as I flowed, nourishing the grass and plants? From the earth to the sky, from the sky to the earth...seeping through the soil to the depths of the earth...creeping up through the roots to the tip of the leaves...into you as you cup me in your arm and gulp me down...and back again from you to the earth... How could I stop or rest ? Am I not the flow of life itself? If I were to stop flowing, life itself would come to a halt. (208-209)

CONCLUSION

The humanity is entrusted with the need to implement measures urgently to protect the life-blood of our existence – water and also the entire biotic and non- biotic surroundings before we commit an ecocide. We should join our hands with the author who is “a latter day Haggar who in this novel, insists on a water covenant and stands metaphoric vigil, a flaming sword in hand, against anyone or anything that compromises the purity and inviolability of water”, as the much-acclaimed translator Dr. Valson Thampu aptly praises her. Let me conclude with a profound Tao thought on water which is inscribed in multifarious ways within the novel:

The highest excellence is like water. The excellence of water appears in benefitting all things and in its occupying without striving the low place which all men dislike. Hence is near to the Tao.

Tao Te Ching

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