

THE ECOFEMINIST STYLISTICS IN SARAH JOSEPH'S *AALAHAYUDE*
PENMAKKAL

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Sarah Joseph is considered to be one among the most renowned contemporary female writers in Kerala. She is considered to have contributed '*Ecriture Feminine*' stream in Malayalam Literature for the first time with her Collection of short stories '*Paapathara*' (1989) in which Poet and Critic K.Sachidanandan coined the term '*Pennezhuth*' in its introduction which literally means 'Women's writing'. It continued as a movement which paved the platform for women writers and critics to meet and form a fraternity. Sarah Joseph is considered to be the God-Mother of this movement. Being a feminist, activist and writer, she founded 'Manushi- an organization of thinking women'. She engages the whole field of gender theories through creative writing. Her writing focuses on the marginalized, deprived, misinterpret and misused women as well as environment.

Ecofeminism is both an ideology and a movement aimed at the welfare of women and nature, with the notion that there is considerable connection between the oppression of women and oppression of nature; along with the oppression of third world including all the marginalized classes because of the capitalist-patriarchal attitudes and practices. The term ecofeminism was first coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book '*Le Féminisme ou la Mort*' in 1974 explaining the inevitable part that feminism can have, in confronting environmental as well as gender issues. Somma, Mark and Sue Tollenson-Rinehartin their journal titled "Tracking the Elusive Green Women: Sex, Environmentalism, and Feminism in the United States and Europe" discuss further:

The term (ecofeminism) became the rallying point for a subculture within feminism which holds that women are especially attracted to environmentalism because of their reproductive biology and culturally defined role as nurturer. Three distinct but interrelated perspectives converge in creating the dimensions of ecofeminism as a feminist subculture (Merchant's 1992 exposition help- fully organizes these perspectives). The first, derived from cultural feminism, argues that women and nature are both dominated by an exploitative patriarchal culture. Hence women are more sensitive to the assault against nature than the men who exploit it (Merchant 1990; Griffin 1978; Caldecott and Leland 1983). Beyond culturally oppressive and culturally constructed gender role, some ecofeminists also argue for a biological basis in explaining

women's propensity toward consensus and nurturing. The confluence of biological determinism, gendered social role, and a shared sense of exploitation by the patriarchy constitute the basic construct of ecofeminism in these arguments (Henderson 1983; Griffin 1978).” (Pg. 153-154).

This remarks the importance of an ecofeminist understanding of the world where the paradox of development and environmentalism prevails. It is relevant to note further, Vandana Shiva's words from the introduction in her book 'Staying alive; Women, ecology and survival in India': Seen from the experiences of Third World women, the modes of thinking and action that pass for science and development, respectively, are not universal and humanly inclusive, as they are made out to be; modern science and development are projects of male, western origin, both historically and ideologically. They are the latest and most brutal expression of a patriarchal ideology which is threatening to annihilate nature and the entire human species. The rise of a patriarchal science of nature took place in Europe during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries as the scientific revolution. During the same period, the closely related industrial revolution laid the foundations of a patriarchal mode of economic development in industrial capitalism. Contemporary science and development conserve the ideological roots and biases of the scientific and industrial revolutions even as they unfold into new areas of activity and new domains of subjugation. (p xiv)

An ecofeminist reading essentially focuses on women, nature and the marginalized group. It is not against development, but it foresees the aftermath of ecological destruction in the name of development and fights against it. Sarah Joseph, being a feminist and environmentalist, coins the issues of inequalities and development-paradox in her first novel *Aalahayude Penmakkal* (Daughters of God- the father), published in 1999, which grabbed prestigious awards like Kendra Sahitya Akademi award, Kerala Sahitya Academy award and Vayalar award. The novel roams around *Kokkanchira*, a place which was once a garbage of dead bodies and inhabited by lower strata of the society. The struggles of the marginalized people belonging there, especially women, who are victims of urbanization and displacement, is narrated in the novel through the eyes of Annie, an eight years old girl who symbolically never grows up and represents three consecutive generations. The novel is followed by *Maattathi* and *Othappu*, by narrating the lives of three women, development of three villages where they are belonging to, in three time periods 1940's, 1980's and 1990's respectively, forming a trilogy.

The ecofeminist stylistics in *Aalahayude Penmakkal* marked the beginning of a new style in writing. Sarah Joseph intentionally focused on representing the colloquial language and culture of Trissur district in Kerala during 1940's and the chronological history of *Kokkanchira* as well as Kerala is unveiled with the ongoing of the story. The names of characters are abrupt and raw as the place where they belong to. *Kokkanchira*, which is an adaptation of *Kuriachira* where Sarah Joseph is born, literally means 'the place of wild animals'. The street where Annie resides is called 'Kodichi angaadi' which means the 'Street of bitch'.

According to Annie, people belonging to this place are not even considered as humans by the outside world. They have named the place and they have decided the quality of life of people belonging there. Her teachers are reluctant to touch her and other students from Kokkanchira because of the history of Kokkanchira as a residing place of Gundas, prostitutes, latrine cleaners, scavengers and other marginalized group of society. Agony and humiliation of Annie's innocent mind due to this invisible apartheid prevailing against her 'group', narrates the mainstream contempt on marginalized beings.

Ecofeminist stylistics can be defined as a new style of literary expression where the imageries and symbols are essentially ecofeminist in text and interpretation. Right from the characters to the plot and environment they belong to, a continuum of women-nature links are visible in this novel. Similar to eco-critical approach, an ecofeminist approach could be devised as a method in reading the novel. When the story is basically the struggle of certain women for the survival of their family, the survival of the place where they belong to, is already in threat. Incidentally, the novel engages their struggles for an environment which is theirs and this indicates the possibility of feminine struggles for the entire world. When the novel ends, their house is about to fall down in the heavy rain fall and storm, and Annie's old grandmother gets up from her bed to recite the prayer of Aalaha to control the wind. This brings the rays of hope to the ecofeminist struggles for a better world.

Sarah Joseph coins characters with nature. In the novel, the most important imagery is that of *Amara pandhal* (broad-bean trellis) which is brought up by Annie and her grandmother. Annie imagines that a divine world exists at its top which will wash away the pangs and difficulties of her fellow beings. In this novel, the broad bean trellis is a symbol of poor houses in Kokkanchira; economically poor people depend on broad bean curry with rice soup as their main meal, as they cannot afford vegetables from market. So for Annie, it is an enclosure of hope. When Annie comes back from school humiliated and insulted by her teachers, she expresses her anger and depression by attacking the broad bean trellis. The difficult times in her life, especially worse phases in her uncle's tuberculosis, are denoted by the drying up of broad bean trellis. When hopes spring up, like the marriage of Chiyyamma, the trellis flourishes. The happenings in Annie's life is close to that of the trellis. With the advent of time, when urbanization and development start ruining the life of local inhabitants and they are threatened of displacement and migration, a road roller destroys a part of the trellis. It depicts how urbanization and development have degraded their lives and the ways the lower class people are always kept out of the central social structure so as to keep the interests of the privileged class.

It also portrays how women are always marginalized in multiple layers. The novel title itself refers to the 'daughters of God'. Annie's family consists of her mother, grandmother, five aunts and one uncle who is bed-ridden with tuberculosis. Her father left them when she was born. Her mother comes from a better family, but she chose the poverty of her husband's house and lives there taking care of her in-laws. Annie's grandmother recites a mysterious prayer to destroy evils; but she herself leads a very tribulated life. The only earning member of the family

is Kunjila, Annie's elder aunt, who works as a mid-wife. Here also, the family faces problems. One is that, she should be available for the job at any time; whether it is mid night or dawn. Strangers will be coming to take her to the pregnant woman's house, so the family is worried about her security. But out of poverty and no other income, they cannot afford her leaving the job. The second is, her assisting a compounder of hospital and his compassion towards her. Kunjila, widowed at the age of 14, develops an attachment towards the compounder, but his wife has issues with him helping her. It ends up when the compounder commits suicide out of family problems and Kunjila reduces her sphere of life to a corner of the house. Out of the 5 aunts, Annie's twin aunts Chinnamma and Chiyyamma used to work for a button company and stitch clothes. Chiyyamma gets married and her husband refuses her to visit her parent home because the family couldn't pay the whole dowry. Chinnamma, who refused to marry, becomes pregnant and undergoes abortion, at last joins the Pentecostal missionary to get out of her guilt and depression. One of the aunts' is married to Annie's maternal uncle, who physically and mentally abuses her all the time as a punishment to her brother who had left his wife, ie Annie's mother. She elopes taking her child and this shakes the family. Another aunt is married to a priest, to a well-off family, but they are also reluctant to visit Annie's house. All these incidents are narrated through Annie, with her childish innocence and curiosity to know about the world. Annie is eight years old throughout the story, but other characters around Annie grow up. The author intentionally made it like that as a strong tool to narrate the story with a child-like innocence. The craft of Sarah Joseph makes it natural for a reader to relate or understand. In a way, Annie is a mind. It is the story telling of a culture and a place with historical elements. Therefore, the central character has to be honest and innocent like a child so that all the incidents she sees could be narrated accordingly. This reminds us of the Bible quotes like '*Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*' (Matthew 18:3) and '*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*' (Matthew 19:14). Child dares to tell the truth as he/she is not afraid. If Annie grows up, she may hide so many things. The novel was written in an imagery perspective, so Annie's growth could create a dilemma of what to say and what not to say.

Another unique element of the novel is the prayer of Aalaha which is believed to have power to exterminate evil. Annie's grandmother possesses the mythical and mysterious prayer and being the inheritress, Annie hopes that she could alter the pathetic condition of her people with its power. In the end, Annie inherits the pain and pangs of her family and class, along with the prayer. The prayer was another image of hope but the moment Annie receives it from her grandmother, she receives tuberculosis from her uncle too.

I would say that the novel is narrated in a feminist perspective with subaltern identity in the socio-economic contexts of an under-developed village in post independent India. Firstly, because Annie has not undergone gendering or socialization to be feminine, as she is only eight years old and too innocent to be controlled to behave according to the society. So she does not learn to disable herself as a female. Secondly, as she represents a subaltern group, development

taking place at the cost of their lives and the exploitation and exclusion by and from the mainstream society are visible even in a child's life. Development and urbanization are not meant for the marginalized class or to address their needs, but they have to be kept as 'have-nots' so as to keep the interests of the 'haves'. This invasion upon life and growth of marginalized people predates recorded history, but even after the civilization of human beings, witnessing of two world wars, legitimizing legal equality to all and providing special attention to subaltern groups, the gap between haves and have-nots are widening day by day. The only solution lies in our socialization process. Same like gender equality and gender justice, class equality too could be achieved only through changing our perpetuated perception.

Urbanization changes the customs and practices of a place also. In the novel, there are two characters namely karutha kunjaaram and velutha kunjaaram who have informal chit funds for local people. Towards the end of the novel, new private banks and chits in large scale are being established in Kokkanchira. When people come to take lots for chit funds in Kunjaaram's house, they chit chat, gossip and make noise in a very free manner. But inside these banks, it is written to 'maintain silence'. Banking became formal and unfriendly along with establishment of 'Blade interest rate'. New schools and hospitals have been built with high capitation fees and expenses, destructing old schools where the poor children of Kokkanchira studied. Thus, development groups changed the out style of Kokkanchira by the local inhibitors. This social, political, cultural and economic invasions resulted in changing a place from its natural habitat to an artificial environment. 'Why a 'women's struggle' is essential here?' is the basic question that ecofeminism addresses by stating that oppression of women and nature are directly proportional. Whether it is patriarchy or capitalism, they share the common mainstream masculine practices that are biased and unjust. Therefore, an ecofeminist alternative could make our world a better place to live and grow. Through literature and other disciplines, it has to be propagated and perpetuated; not to form a biased society, but to equalize man and woman and make their relationship and interactions more just and fair. Sarah Joseph's ecofeminist intervention through her novel is very relevant here and has to be researched further to gift new areas in literature.

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