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ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM VS. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: AN EXPLORATION  
THROUGH SARAH JOSEPH'S "GIFT IN GREEN"

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ABSTRACT

Environmental degradation and pollution are the most grievous problems today. Low-income communities are mostly affected by the related consequences of dumping toxic waste. This paper analyses the ways in which the wealthy create environmental racism and the marginalized work for environmental justice through the most acclaimed work of Sarah Joseph. *Gift in Green* portrays the gradual degradation of Aathi because of the invasion of Kumaran, actually the son of the same soil. The very developmental structures become the reason for the destruction of the lush greenery and the waterbeds brimming over. This work brings out the issues connected to the use and disastrous effects of endosulfan in the novel; and parallel scenes in some of the boarder states of Kerala taking evidences from the related news reports.

**Key Words:** environmental racism, environmental justice, endosulfan, toxicants, pollution, degradation, health hazards.

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Developmental policies are laured by today's power mongering politicians and multimillionaire corporate. The unholy agreement signed by them bearing a cunning smile of the wily fox of the traditional fables, before the flashing lights of the cameras is a negotiation of ultimately personal interests and agendas. The poor and marginalized are crippled and maimed forever. They face the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards as a result of reckless developmental activities done on their heart. Massey in her work done for the Global Development and Environment Institute rightly testifies that "low-income communities and minority ethnic groups often bear the most severe consequences of environmental degradation and pollution". She further confesses that "Toxic waste dumps may often be located in poorer communities, and toxic wastes may be shipped to low-income nations where regulations governing toxics are weak or nonexistent" (<<http://ase.tufts.edu/gdae>>). It seems as though environmental protection is the privilege of only the rich and its degradation is the fate of the poor.

When the wealthy express themselves through environmental racism, the under privileged communities gather themselves for environmental justice. There is an increase in the body of scientific literatures which break up with the conventional ecocritical literatures, which portray the pristine beauty of nature and instead, present the toxic chemical exposures and its resultant chronic illnesses to highlight the issue of environmental racism. The popular novels and stories of this kind are Ana Castillo's *So Far from God*,

Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition and Other Stories of Iraq*, Mo Yan's *Iron Child*, Rigoberta Menchú's *Death of Her Little Brother in the Finca*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather*. These become the advocates of environmental ethics and social justice.

Sarah Joseph, an eminent feminist and environmental thinker, writer and activist from Kerala, originally a Malayalam writer; pictures through one of her most acclaimed, translated novel *Gift in Green*, the gradual degradation of Aathi, the pristine village because of the invasion of the novae elite Kumaran. The impalpable issues which disturb Kumaran are:

Should the son of a fisherman be only a fisherman? The offspring of a farmer nothing but a farmer? Immersed in water day after day, all year round, what can one hope to gain in life? What more than a few grains of paddy, some fish, a few oysters? Can one hope to build a decent house? Or move from a reed mat to a cot? Or dream of having decent clothes to wear? Or, even of using street lights rather than a palm-leaf torch at night? (Joseph 19)

Though the above mentioned arguments apparently look reasonable but hidden beneath them are possibilities for unpredictable catastrophes. The innocent nature-friendly villagers face the consequences of his unruly encroachments by way of heaps of garbage in their crystal clear water sources and the resultant epidemics which grab the lives of many poor innocent inhabitants of Aathi and their daily sustenance for living. The novel represents in Kumaran a true story of the contemporary reality of Kerala where people go out of state and country in search of green pastures: more economy, more comfort; and come back wealthier to topple down the balanced ecosystem of its landscape at the cost of the poor and the marginalized. The natural environment of Kerala is fabulous with "innumerable canals, water drains, ponds, water springs, wells, paddy fields brimming with water, and slushy marshes" (Joseph 33). Their greedy, foxy eyes are on these natural resources.

A number of characters who appear at the beginning of the novel, the new tent dwellers by the side of the river, with their sly smile, magic charm and sweet cart try to attract children, paving a way to get into the village. They entice them with telescope and toy pistols. They are Kumaran's men. The men at the tent illustrated as "man in dark glasses" (Joseph 1), another one "wearing a white topi" (5) begin their plunder first of all by shooting down the water fowls. They allure the people with the promise to "rescue them from the mud and marsh of Aathi" (43). Ambu, Prakashan, Chandran and several other young men were attracted by their promises and were ready to give up their little plots of land. Thus begins their heartless encroachments.

The people of Aathi are soon left without their land and water. The capitalist corporate who is fed by the sweat of the poor peasant and fisherman is empowered even to draw line on the land and waters preventing the people of the land from their daily arena of work. Shankaran who has an uncanny knack of catching prawns is given the order, "You are not allowed to fish here" (Joseph 47). The wisdom of the old of Aathi recognizes that "We've lost forever the way we lived, cultivating rice and catching fish" (156). They ask with alarm: "Has it come to this, buying fish with money?" (159) They are literally uprooted from their tradition, culture and familiar habitat.

The surrounding places of Aathi are also rapidly in decay. The novel gives a pre-warning as, "Woe unto those who live in Guruvayoor!" feeling nauseated at the repulsive sights of the holy water being contaminated with human waste. People try their might to bring the issue to the notice of the district authorities. They prepare a petition with the guidance of Parinju Mash, a local school teacher. The lengthy letter inserted with newspaper cutting, report of the Pollution Control Board on the same issue and medical report of some of the occupants of the place predicts the probable health hazards likely to occur. The journalist's report is an alarming one:

The septic tank facilities in at least 90 per cent of the hotels in Guruvayoor are insufficient and substandard. The actual number of people using them exceeds the norm by three to four times. It should surprise no one, then, that these septic tanks collapse. The excrement, as a result, flows through the drains and falls into Valiyathodu or the big canal. This canal, which runs for two

kilometers through Guruvayoor Municipality and, thereafter, for another two kilometers through Thykkadu Panchayat, finally reaches Chakkam Kadam Kayal. All along the four-kilometer route, people live chock-a-block on the banks. Their suffering is hard to describe. People from elsewhere, unable to endure the stink, avoid going there. What flows along the canal is no longer water but a pitchy, gluey liquid. In this way, Chakkam Kadam Kayal has been poisoned to death over the last forty years. . . . (Joseph 94-95)

The text also narrates the atrocities of sand mafia along the Kadappuram beach which caused the poor even to lose the little cent of land they owned. They respond by keeping watch over their land at night headed by the women of the village.

According to ethical standards, development aims at the betterment of the people around the place. Rightly here Kumaran promises a prosperous future and a new look to Aathi, marked by bridges, a golden temple, big houses, broad roads, schools, hospitals and markets. Paradoxically, the bridge and the broad road that he begins to construct destroying the marshy land, filling with mud becomes a means for his transportation of garbage from his business sights and the neighbouring towns to the green bangle woods which encircles Aathi. The author records the situation as "little lives had to give way, lest they got crushed under the tyres of trucks and tipper lorries" (Joseph 142). More over Meenvari, the lake had become the "toilet of the bridge workers" (146).

Shailaja, who works at the hospital, sees the alarming sight of placenta, severed umbilical cords, and body of unborn babies, sanitary napkins, blood-soaked rags and cotton packs being emptied into the stream which flows behind the hospital. She grieves over the earth because "everyone chokes her with dirt and garbage" but the earth in return "gives flowers, fruits, nuts, rice and wheat." She trembles at the thought that she is doomed to live the rest of her life "polluted and polluting" (Joseph 76).

The golden temple erected by Kumaran becomes a source of steady income for him; and the tourists who come there smuggle wild animals and birds and leave all kinds of thrash into the water. The warning of the villagers that, "Shooting a bird in these water enclosures is a crime" is spoken in the deaf ears of the tourists (Joseph 165). The trouble does not end with shooting and killing of the water fowls alone, the people further notice that many dead birds and prawns float on the water. They are astonished to find that the waters of Aathi have been poisoned with high toxicants. The people shouted with anxiety, "Nanch in the water . . . nanch in Kunjimathu's Pokkali paddy fields" (Joseph 167). It is the foul play by the people who have taken Kunjimathu's plot of land on work contract to get even the last bit of fish from the farm. Even then the villagers realize that putting toxicants prepared from herbs are not a rare practice. Their reasoning and arguments are recorded as:

Putting nanch into water was not uncommon. Contractors resorted to it in order to get every last fish from the farm, leaving not even a fingerling for the people. Perhaps Komban Joy mixed 'bhakko' oil cake in the water. It was made out of some lethal, poisonous seed and was known to knock the fish unconscious. Heaps of blinded fish would then drift to the ridge. They could be gathered effortlessly. There were those who used quicklime instead of bhakko. That too, rendered the fish unconscious. There were others who, in their murderous greed, used kerosene. They soaked bricks in kerosene and threw them into the paddy fields. As kerosene from the bottom rose gradually to the surface of the water, the fish choked for breath and rose to the top, where they drifted before piling up near the ridge. . . . (Joseph 168)

During their discussions of different probabilities Markose reveals his terrifying doubt that it is endosulfan which has caused all these water fowls and fish to die and float on the water. The author sketches in her novel a contemporary reality of Kerala with regard to the use of endosulfan in the boarder districts like Kasargod and Palakkad. Eventhough the state pollution control board has announced a ban on endosulfan, it is obtained from the boarder states by the corporate landholders. Endosulfan is carcinogen, neurotoxin and genotoxin which damages DNA. The Stockholm Convention, a global treaty to protect human health and environment from such chemical compounds, has declared endosulfan as a persistent organic pollutant.

The various studies and researches conducted in the affected boarder districts reports a very shocking statistics. The detailed study of 550 families in Muthalamada in Palakkad district in Kerala reveals that members of 174 families had serious health problems. The joined study of the Calicut University Teacher Education Centre, the nonprofit Environment Protection Group and WPSI state as reported in the fortnightly *Down to Earth* that, "many children are found suffering from birth deformities, cancer, cerebral palsy, mental disorders, skin diseases, vision loss; many women were found infertile" (<<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/state-of-endosulfan-2400#>>).

The people of Aathi are well aware that, "If endosulfan has been used, it's not safe to eat the fish. Those who eat it will die of some incurable disease" (Joseph 169). They have no idea as to how Kunjimathu's five-acre paddy field which is poisoned to death can be farmed again. It is again the sly plan of Kumaran to make Komban Joy to take Kunjimathu's land for lease-farming; poison it and gradually obtain it for himself. Kunjimathu with the courage of a woman retorts Kumaran with her sharp words.

The notice which is prepared by the fishermen of Varapuzha against contractors and monopolists is an enlightening and conscientizing one. The notice is read as:

Friends, Over the last two or three years, the owners of our prawn farms have been putting poisonous substances of various kinds into our paddy fields. Ever since this covetous practice – the true nature of which is masked under the euphemism 'eradication' - has been started by greedy profiteers, fishermen have been reduced to lives of poverty and destitution. The massacre of fish having now become a routine practice, many varieties of fish have become extinct. We demand that those who take our paddy fields on lease should refrain from the despicable practice of killing every fish and sinking every fisherman into grinding poverty under the guise of 'eradication'. (Joseph 176-177)

After taking the land for lease Komban Joy delegate of Kumaran, dumps on the prawn farm DDT. As an aftermath yellow butterflies falls dead on the ridges of the paddy fields, in courtyards, and in front of Thampuran's shrine like withered flowers. Next the tragedy befalls on the green frogs. The children of the village are saddened at the sight. They sit by the dead butterflies, stroke their delicate wings and try to blow and revive them.

This reminds about the report of *The Hindu* of 22 April 2011, that the spraying of endosulfan in the cashew plantations of the State-owned Plantation Corporation of Kerala caused a disaster on the biodiversity of the area as per the study by Dr. V. S. Vijayan of Salim Ali Foundation. It further gives a detailed account of the loss of various species which disappeared due to spraying of endosulfan as:

. . . a large number of wildlife, including, Nilgiri langur, tiger, jackal, wild boar, jungle cat, mouse deer, mongoose, squirrels, flying fox, black aped hare, sparrow, parakeets, crows, frogs, honey bees, snails were present in the Enmakaje Panchayat. . . .

Death of fishes, frogs, and snakes were noted in the very first year of the spray itself. Abnormalities and deformities were recorded in cattle. Animals such as jackal, porcupine, wild boar, civet cats, and bats, which were once common in the area, completely disappeared during the spray.

Dead snakes, squirrels, hares, peacocks, crows were found in the cashew plantations and adjacent areas during the period of spray. However, there are signs of their return during the last two to three years; that is, five to six years after stopping the aerial spray.

Honey bees which were abundant and were a source of income for most farmers, became almost completely absent during the period of spray. Butterflies abundant prior to the spray disappeared during the spray. . . . (<[http://www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com>)>)

The moment when people realize that Komban Joy has used endosulfan in Kunjimathu's prawn field, they press him to return their title deeds and the related documents of the land. To their great alarm the documents no more show that the land belongs to Kunjimathu and have become invalid. Komban Joy makes a few more shocking revelations under the furious pressure of the local people that, "properties belonging to several of them measuring thirty, forty, fifty cents had been registered in the name of others" (Joseph 179).

Even advocate Grace Charlie is in dilemma as how to tell the truth to the poor people whose land has been abducted treacherously.

People of Aathi now have no other choice than to raise their voice and bond themselves for environmental justice. A few tellable characters who are in the forefront for organizing and protesting include Markose, Noor Muhammed, Dinakaran, Kunjimathu, Devaki, Shailaja, Karthiayani and many more. The slim, pale girl who was often found along the river beds looking intently at the water is the first silent protestor against strange intrusions and the thrash which turned the crystal clear waters of Aathi stinky. Kunjimathu is resolute in her decisions. She declares that, "I shall live working on my land and water. I'd rather die here, right now, than accept anything less", with regard to acceptance of money from Kumaran in exchange of her land (Joseph 203). Kunjimathu goes on a strike by squatting and sitting on the water as one with a mental turbulence, at the sight of the degradation before her eyes. She is a fiery character as opposed to the lone, silent girl clearing the thrashes in the crystal clear waters of Aathi. Her fury is all the more doubled because Kumaran was her teenage fiancé who left her out of his greed for more wealth. She is joined by many others to stop the truckers entering Aathi. Shailaja, another powerful female character organizes the people to strike against the intruders. She begins to make torches using strips of old rags. She pledges to keep vigil during the night not letting anyone to earth-fill the water bodies. She threatens to set herself fire if the policemen touch any of the villagers who have gathered to protest against land filling. The women lay on the road shoulder to shoulder, blocking the earth loaded trucks and tippers. They lack capital, organization and political power to resist the introduction of dangerous and hazardous technologies. They receive legal advice from advocate Grace Chali who voluntarily takes up their issue. Dinakaran supports her and all the women characters with his youthful vigour. Soon environmentalists and social activists like Parinju Chakramakkal, Jayan Munakkakadavu, Chakkamkandam Chandramohan and many more others from the neighbouring towns and villages join them.

Desire is the root cause of all evil, warns the famous saying of Buddha. So is the desire of Kumaran brings in the entire catastrophe which is a threat to the life of the people and the environment. The common man's wisdom, truth and integrity enable them to stand for the land, and its justice. They profess that "the land is the warmth of our heart! We know the land with our hearts, not with our heads. It is not in us to cheat the land we have known in the marrow of our bones"; in fury against the thoughtless plunder of the land and its resources (Joseph 205). The commoner is well aware that "the earth and water are their granaries" and not Kumaran or his promises of a great future (Joseph 244). These bold declarations have a resonance of the Chief Seattle's speech for a meeting invoked by Governor Isaac Ingalls Stevens to discuss the sale of native land to the white settlers. He asserts, often with a bit of sarcasm that he doesn't understand the logic about buy or sell the warmth of the land, freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water; as we do not own them. With a great sigh at the contaminated white man's city he warns them that, "Contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste" (Chief Seattle 136). The same can be retold in a prophetic tone to today's development crazy modern generation; contaminate the air, water, soil and one day you will die of suffocation.

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