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GIFT IN GREEN: THE MEETING POINT OF FACT AND FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Sarah Joseph is one among the most renowned female writers in Malayalam literature. Aathi is her fifth novel in Malayalam. Gift in Green is the English translation of the novel by Valsan Thampu. Aathi and its translation were produced simultaneously in 2011. The novel depicts the writer's sensitiveness to the anthropogenic activities against nature. In the novel, contemporary reality is carefully and consciously woven into the texture of fiction. Gift in Green is the story of Aathi deshams and its founders. The stories of Aathi deshams and its people are narrated without compromising the monstrosity of contemporary realities.

Introduction

Representations of natural and social environment are as old as recorded literature. Nature is always a fascination for writers. Aathi is one among the eco-critical works which follows an unconventional narrative style. It depicts the woes and worries of a group of people inhabiting a fictional place called 'Aathi'. The novel can be regarded as an allegorical tale issued like a warning against the cruelties of man towards nature. Sarah Joseph is successful as a social activist in raising her voice against rising environmental issues. She is to be praised for her success as an artist in her art of telling a story to stimulate and inspire action through her poetic language. The metaphorical language that she uses to paint the picture of the idyllic Aathi, the introduction of a few characters who are the lovers of nature and their life in pre-modern Aathi contribute to the fictional elements of the novel. Aathi and life in Aathi after modernization reflects contemporary world.

Meeting of fact and fiction

'Aathi' is a fictional place where a number of characters meet and mingle. It is a serene island with plenty of water, mangrove forests that abounded with fish, birds and butterflies. It is an eco-system where exist a mutual and an inseparable relation between Aathi and the organisms living in Aathi. Aathi was a land unseen and untouched by human hand. It was found and enlivened by the sweat of its people. They believed that the land carries the aroma of the sweat of their ancestors. The novel unmasks several characters. On the surface level, it is a tragic love story of Kumaran and Kunjmathu. Dinakaran, a strong and young activist, Ponmani, Markose and Noor Muhammad, a story-teller and nature lover are also prominent characters. The story of Shilaja who is married to Chandramohan, and a short episode in the life of Kayal, a schoolgirl who lost her way are heart-rending.

Aathi's earlier inhabitants were a group of people migrated from their land. They were untouchables.

Finally they reached Aathi to find “the unending, ever-renewing fountain spring of life” (44). Slowly they built the foundations of their water-life. Water quenched their thirst. There were enough water resources for their needs but not for their greed. People like Dinakaran, Ponmani, Markose, Noor Muhammad, Kunjimathu and Shilaja behold the tradition and values of Aathi. They loved Aathi and its possessions. Dinakaran is an ideal man, and a strong follower of Aathi's culture. He leads the protest when Aathi's silence was broken and its values eroded. The fiction carries at all levels the message of nature conservation. Kunjimathu, the heroine of the novel, who is cheated and abandoned by her lover Kumaran, is a metaphor for the earth plundered and conquered by Man. Kumaran is not only the hero of the novel, but also a metaphor for the greed of humanity. He left Aathi, because he hated the 'water- life' of Aathi.

The educated Kumaran goes in search of a job outside Aathi and becomes a rich businessman. He is a representative of man with 'civilizing mission'. His mission was to extend a helping hand to rescue the youngsters of Aathi from its 'mud and marsh'. Kumaran became the owner of Aathi. Kumaran came with different developmental initiatives to destroy the serenity of Aathi. His goal was to connect Aathi with the world outside. He planned to establish a hospital, school, bridge and a dam by checking the flow of water. Trucks, tippers, JCBs and worm-like homosapiens began to climb the hill of Aathi. Modernization under the leadership of Kumaran transformed Aathi, the earthly paradise into a barren land. The writer uses several images to support this transformation.

Paddy fields, parched. Trees, dry and withered. The earth, cracked. Wells, dried up. Cattle, tormented by thirst. Birds, perishing. Children howling in hunger. Desert storms raging with a vengeance. The burning sand it brought along, covering the land. Red-hot rocks. Thorny bushes. Scorching heat. Freezing cold (196).

The magician who entertains the people in the novel represents the modern world. He introduces a world which was shocking to the innocent people of Aathi. He presented a picture of modernized Aathi with huge buildings, broad roads, hotels, cinema halls, parks and glittering shopping malls, light and noise.

Development and nature conservation are often debated. This is not the only problem raised in Gift in Green. The story of Shilaja is introduced to showcase the pollution of a place called Chakkam Kandam. Shilaja gave importance to the age old culture of Aathi than marital bliss. She escaped from Chakkam Kandam because of its contaminated water. Hotels in Chakkam Kandam release human waste into the canals. This waste “stays undegraded and breeds disease causing bacteria and microbes and has already become a health hazard for the people in the city” (93). Chakkam Kandam was transformed into a dirty land by anthropogenic activities. The writer throws several questions before humanity. Even the theertham distributed in the well-known temple Guruvayoor is contaminated. Shilaja was working in a hospital where she witnessed the wastes being deposited into the water bodies. The novelist attaches documents like reports of Assembly committees and Kerala State Pollution Control Board and some letters written by various people. The novel plays a documentary role by reproducing the documents as such. The novelist performs the role of a social activist by revealing environmental degradation in different parts of Kerala.

The novel never sheds its literariness anywhere. From the beginning, the writer beautifully narrated the story of Aathi desham with slices of reality drawn from her society, in a poetic language. The images and metaphors add to her brilliant style. The Prologue itself illustrates her power of expression:

Darkness sat
brooding over the
abyss.
The earth was
formless and void,
Not a soul or fowl
was upon it.

Then, one day, the
boats set forth.
Many boarded,
flaming torches in
hand.

...The glory of God
moved over the
waters (1).

The narration is as musical as a lyrical composition. The novel is not a mere documentary of facts. Reality hides between the lines like a beautiful poem with an underlying message. "Fiction means signified without a referent", literary fiction denotes texts which contain a minimum of fiction but may also include specific elements from the real world"(Farner).The novel has didactic purposes: to invite us to the fictitious, yet idyllic world of Aathi and to take action against environmental degradation.

Conclusion

A fiction is a deliberately fabricated narrative. According to Abrams, fiction is "invented instead of being an account of events that actually happened" (94). *Gift in Green* is not completely an invented story. It reminds the readers of man's brutality towards nature in the name of progress. Sarah Joseph is narrating a few episodes in the life of the people of Aathi, including the tragic fate of Kunjimathu, Shilaja and Kayal. The writer does not forget to shock the readers by unveiling the monstrosity of contemporary reality. *Gift in Green* is essentially a meeting point of fact and fiction. For Henry James a novel is "in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression" (Hoffman 13). Therefore *Gift in Green* is a valuable artistic creation. Sarah Joseph believes: "the current model of development sees nature as a cow to be milked forever but to be cared for, never. I have written *Gift in Green* to portray a way of life that predates this dogma and to sketch the dangers immanent in it" (213).

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