

## The concept of oikos and ecological identity in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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### Abstract

Oikopoetics or eco-poetics is poetics of the oikos which to the Greek meant "habitat comprising the spirits, humans and humans peculiar to it. A typical oikos could be regarded as a nexus in which the sacred, the humans natural and the cultural phenomena stood in relationship. There are three basic types of oikos-Integrative, Hierarchic and Anarchic Oikos. The primitive Indian Society strongly followed the integrative oikos this research paper aims at explaining the concept of oikos by analyzing the various oikos involved in the novel *Gift in Green* by Sarah Joseph. It is a place based novel set in Aathi, a self-sufficient place which lives in true harmony with nature. The novel sketches how the harmony had been ruptured through the disruptive involvement of materialism. The slow shift from Integrative Oikos to Anarchic Oikos is discussed at length with special reference to the predatory paradigm – shift from agriculture to agri-business concept that has spoiled our land and water. The relevance of Ecological Identity comes in the novel as the characters empathize with the environment they inhabit. Ecological identities seem to emerge, in part at least, from direct experiences in nature that reframe individuals experiences of themselves in light of a connection to a natural world that is exogenous to culture or society.

**Keywords:** integrative oikos Hierarchic oikos, anarchic oikos, ecological identity

### Introduction

Sara Joseph, an eminent writer in Malayalam has written the novel *Aathi* or *Gift in Green*. It is an unconventional novel with water as its main theme and tells about the relationship between a people and the land they inhabit. Sara Joseph is the author of several novels, short stories, essays and plays and has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award. Rev. Dr. Valson, Thampu, an educationalist, author and religious thinker and reformer has translated this novel into English concurrently.

In her own words Ms. Joseph says about her novel: "*Gift in Green* is about water, and by extension, about Nature. At one level, the novel deals with the socio political aspects of human rights about water, At another, it is an attempt to explore man's spiritual connection with water". (Interview given to The Hindu)

The novel *Gift in Green* is the result of her investigations into the conceptual, philosophical, historical and organic significance of water in the Universe. All religious texts say water is fundamental to life and so consider it as pure and sacred. We consider water as sacred but we don't treat it as such. Aathi treats Nature and its occupants, including humans, with an inviolable sense of equality.

The novel is set in Aathi, a fictitious place, a lagoon which lies cool and serene, in the womb of an inviolate purity. "The mangrove forest that the people of Aathi affectionately called the Green Bangle encircles Aathi, an enchanting world in itself, its waters cool and serene" (Joseph, 25). Sitting in that rare world of impregnable silence, immune to the noise of

men and machines, one could listen intently to the subtle voices of the cosmos and enjoy their variety and the soothing sweetness of their harmony. One could listen to the blossoming of flowers, watch the moss dance, the glow worms emerge from their hideouts and read the trails of tiny worms. Such was the blissful atmosphere of Aathi. For generations the people of Aathi had deemed the land of Thampuram.

Aathi was a self-sufficient place where they cultivated rice and every household had a cow, a buffalo, hens and ducks. They slept on the mat they had woven. The water had provided them with fish, mussels and prawns which was sufficient to meet one's needs. Such a primeval purity could be seen in the early life of the people of Aathi which exemplifies an integrative oikos.

### Different types of oikos

Oikopoetics or eco-poetics is poetics of the oikos which to the Greek meant "habitat comprising the spirits, humans and humans peculiar to it. A typical oikos could be regarded as a nexus in which the sacred, the humans natural and the cultural phenomena stood in relationship. Historically speaking, three basic types of oikos have discernibly shaped all poetry. (Selvamony, 340)

There are three basic types of oikos-Integrative, Hierarchic and Anarchic Oikos. The primitive Indian Society strongly followed the integrative oikos. The spirits, people and nature are all bound together quite intricately by duties, obligations and rights but as civilization progressed Hierarchic Oikos came into existence. The modern society views nature as

something to be exploited. Everything has become profit-oriented and an Anarchic oikos slowly held its way. There are three basic types of oikos-Integrative, Hierarchic and Anarchic Oikos.

### **Integrative Oikos**

The first type of oikos integrates the sacred, nature, culture, and the humans in a complex kinship, even as family of kith and kin, the spirits, people, and nature are all bound together quite intricately by duties, obligations and rights. The power relations served by the members of this familial oikos is both horizontal and vertical; both love and authority are normative. Black Elk, the chieftain of an American Indian tribe summed up this intricate bonding thus “the two-legged and the four-legged lived like kith and kin”. (Oikopoetics with special reference to Tamil poetry)

### **Hierarchical Oikos**

If kinship relationship ramifies both horizontally and vertically, political relationship is configured only vertically in hierarchical manner in the hierarchical or political oikos. The members stand in a hierarchical relationship with the sacred at the top, the humans in the middle and nature at the bottom by attributing supremacy to the sacred, the distance between the humans and the sacred was affected confining to the later to a special space deemed holy. The human world was also imagined as a hierarchically ordered one, with the superior ruler, and the inferior ruled. Like the sacred and the human, nature was also hierarchized if in the integrated oikos different types of lands were all regarded as equally important and unique, in the hierarchic oikos. They were all reduced to two basic types-wetland and dry land and even animals were ranged in a hierarchic order-the domestic and the wild.

### **Anarchic Oikos**

The hierarchic oikos began to rupture when the supremacy of the sacred became dubitable with the increased emphasis on rational systems (like logic and science) and materialistic ideologies in lieu of (non-materialists) religious doctrines. Rational Scrutiny was Necessary to determine the utilitarian value of the members of the oikos. In theistic societies, the sacred was considered useful for certain purposes and for that reason acknowledged and involved in ceremonies and customary practices nature, on the other hand was more tangibly useful with investment, it paid off considerable returns. Humans were also looked upon as resources and assets. In short, the new oikos was anarchic in spirit but economic in practice.

The “oikos” in a work of Literature, namely, a poem, play or novel, revolves around the chief character or the protagonist and there is no one single oikos in a work. Various oikoses can be drawn around the protagonist like concentric circles. If, for example, the chief character is a man, the hero of the story under study, then the first oikos that would merit consideration could be that of the hero himself, his family, his dwelling, the spirits of his ancestors and the deity he worships. The next oikos could be the particular community where he lives. If the protagonist is considered a representative of his family, then he is a unit of that oikos (community) which includes their street, their lands, their ancestors and their deity. The concept of the oikos is unique in the way it allows for the

study of the protagonist, in all his/ her facets, and from all angles. Though shades of anthropology can be detected, this approach to the study of oikos, this ecocritical stance is entirely literary. This stance examines literature from the oikic angle. This approach outlines the oikos which houses the harmonious relationship of the human and the non-human; it is something that integrated specific space and time, nature-cultural elements and human action (Selvamony 314).

The novel explains the concept of oikos and the transition from one particular oikos to another. The slow shift from integrative oikos to anarchic oikos has been discussed with examples. The predatory paradigm –shift from agriculture to agri-business concept that has spoiled our land and water is another topic which is narrated with the major characters like *Dinakaran*, *Kunjumathu Kumaran* etc.

The transition from an Integrative oikos into an Anarchic slowly crept into the lives of the people of Aathi with the entry of Kumaran, an entrepreneur who had abandoned Aathi long back despising the Water-life.

“The people of Aathi had developed a liking for the strange and unfamiliar bustle that Kumaran’s arrival had introduced to Aathi”. (49) The transition has embarked with the disruption of the temple of Thampuram, the village deity. There is a myth related with the deity of Thampuram. He had come floating on the waters, wrapped in an old mat-where he had died and was buried. Later the people of Aathi Desam elevated him to a God. Using the myth of Thampuram, the novelist has explored the idea of ‘man as God’s creator’, where the Hierarchical Oikos comes in. But when Kumaran renovated the shrine into a temple of gold and announced to the people that “it is your duty to guard against the thieves, they felt as though an assurance they had lived with for generations was began to crumble” (52)

“In Aathi anyone could leave anything anywhere, no matter how precious, and sleep with their doors open. The women of Aathi, too, had bits and pieces of gold ornaments. But no door in Aathi had locks or bolts. Safe as in a mother’s womb, guarded by the warm sentinel of encircling waters, Aathi had stood secure for ages”(52) It was upon their age long serenity that Kumaran blew the strong tidal waves of darkness in the name of civilization. The novel alludes to environmental issues, including the pollution of Chakkukandam Lake in Guruvayoor, Kerala and the disadvantages of the Athirappally hydro project.

### **Ecological Identity**

Eudora Welty once observed “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place”(Bradbury 8). The main characters like *Dinakaran*, *Ponmani*, *Kunjimathu*, *Shylaja*, *Markose* etc. live in harmony with nature that their identities are moulded by the ‘life-place’ they occupy. The relevance of Ecological Identity comes here as the characters empathize with the environment they inhabit. Ecological identities seem to emerge, in part at least, from direct experiences in nature that reframe individuals’ experiences of themselves in light of a connection to a natural world that is exogenous to culture or society. Identity centred on a particular place can be acquired through the development of shared values, beliefs and interests of the people. These are built over time through collective experiences. A ‘sense of place’ and the development of an

ecological identity can be a strong motivator for further volunteering. This attachment to place, manifesting itself as caring and identifying closely with a particular location, was certainly an important motivator for many of the characters in the novel

‘Sense of place’ is not just experienced by people becoming attached to their biophysical surroundings, but also extends to emotional attachments to social communities, again built through familiarity and spending time in one place (Buell, 1999). For people who have lived in one place all of their lives, history includes both lived experiences, and experiences held in memories and books, translated and interpreted over time. This sense of place can be very strong such that it leads to the building of local knowledge around an area. identity can be built through memories, story-telling, local knowledge (ecological literacy), sharing values, reflection, and imagination. According to Williams & Sutherland, (2000), environmental care groups allow individuals to re-imagine themselves in the landscape, and create a vision of the future, with a prevailing view of the landscape at the centre of the vision. Imagination is formed partly by our belief systems, ‘...which guide, create, and pull us along with our culture, into the future’ (Milbrath, 1989.)

The term ‘space’ is more comprehensive than setting. “Space in literary works is not an extrinsic aspect but an intrinsic one. it is not a mere setting for the action of a personae but the world where the personae have their being. For this reason space become an ontological determinant shaping up the nature of the personae. (Selvaony “Place and Ecocriticism 189).

Aristotle defined space as “the container of all objects” whereas Immanuel Kant defined it as a “priori form of intuition of external phenomena”. In fact space is always seen as complementing time. To all expect Kant, space is measurable and markable reality. But Kant regards it as a mental category through which physical objects are perceived. A profound sense of oneself in relationship to natural and social ecosystems is necessary grounding for the difficult work of environmental advocacy.

In the case of *Gift n Green*, ecology stands as a strong medium of communication between the space and the identity. The characters are ready to sacrifice their lives to restore the ecology. *Dinakaran* became a martyr for the noble cause.

They are content with their lot and they had a definite purpose in their life. Biosphere perception is a practice that you can practice everywhere. In the time and space between our busy tasks we can take a few moments to reconsider where we are, have a look around and notice the sky, the landscape and other life forms. In just a few moments we can travel a considerable conceptual distance through the biosphere.

*Dinakaran* was the wisest man in Aathi. When Kumaran came with behemoth project of filling the land and making Aathi into a high- tech city, *Dinakaran* along with Kunjimathu, Ponmani and Shylaja protested against it. They sought the help of Adv Grace Chali to file petitions against the filling up of land. But Kumaran had securely gagged the mouths of those who should have asked questions. About seventy five percent of Ganesh subramaniyam’s property had been landfilled and levelled already.

Hunger and destitution stalked the place. No fish. No oysters. Their livelihood had dried up. Fisherman had no option but to become daily –wage workers to earn a livelihood. Coconuts fetched next to nothing. Farming the paddy fields had resulted in huge losses. “On the whole,a sense of desolation pervaded Aathi”(174)

Adding fuel to the agony of the poor people Kumaran had forged counterfeit title deeds for their properties. The supporters of Kumaran has spread poison in the paddy fields to ‘irradicate’ the prawns and fish. In short the earth and water were polluted, filling the minds of the poor people with anxiety, melancholy and eventides of gloom on the other hand Kumaran was trying to bury all the environmental problems under the earth using his money power. He offered ‘earth work’ to the people and a flat in the town for selling him the title deed. For many it was a tempting offer that they succumbed to it. In spite of the protest, he built up a bridge and turned Aathi into a dumpyard of garbage.it resulted in the spread of epidemics, taking the lives of many children of Aathi. Kumaran subsided the fury of the agitators by giving them compensation and he asks a rhetorical question “Is there anything in the world that money cannot buy or compensate?” (273)

Thus the very foundation of Aathi had become shaky with the arrival of Kumaran, the personification of predatory progress. we can see the life of Aathi is shifting from primeval purity to anxiety from self contentment to starvation from attachment to abandonment, from light to darkness, from integrity to anarchy and subsequently from life to death.

But a new ray of hope emerged on their lives with the sowing of the seeds by the women of Aathi under the leadership of Kunjimathu. “the waters of Aathi are not inclined to dry up and vanish just because Kumaran wants it to happen”.(332)

They worked with one mind, one voice and one will till they saw waves of green swaying in the paddy fields. They decided to mark a new beginning in Aathi as they started their life initially. “they had no food, no clothes, no shelter. But one thing they had: water. It lay full and brimming, like the miracle of miracles. Water: the unending, ever renewing fountain-spring of life.”(44) “They felt themselves to be one with the trees, the birds, the water and the land” (44) History was repeated when *Dinakaran* came bobbing on the waves, wrapped in a mat. He was received in the lap of his mother. The mother’s lap: from time immemorial, the final resting place for the burden of eery sacrifice and the refuge of every innocent person broken and bruised by the depravity of man”(347)

### Conclusion

In Sarah Joseph’s *Gift in Green*, she presents before us a historical picture of traditional society (Aathi) with all its strengths and weaknesses. However, it is the protagonist. *Dinakaran*, who holds together the different strands of the plot and sustains the later to the very end. The author presents Dinkaran as an embodiment of the values of Aathi. a man who, better than most, symbolizes his society.

Man’s umbilical relation with Mother Nature and water is effectively enunciated at the end of the novel when the people of Aathi points out a relevant question to *Dinakaran* “dinakara, how are we to apply this story gainfully to our

lives?

The question was answered by”

The whisper of the seeds sprouting in the dark,

The aroma of the pokkali fields,

And the fingerlings playing in the waters of Aathi”. (348)

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