



Uprooting Primordial Values: Analysing The Neocolonial Influence In Sarah Joseph's *Gift In Green*

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ABSTRACT

The paper titled "Uprooting Primordial Values: Analysing the Neocolonial Influence in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*" explores the neocolonial attitudes in contemporary society. Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* can be read as a postcolonial ecocritical text that reveals the practices of neocolonialism in our modern society. This paper examines how neocolonialism disrupts the indigenous, eco-spiritual traditions in the mythical village of Aathi. The setting of this fictional work is Aathi, which lies cool and serene, in the womb of an inviolate purity. This utopian island community is threatened by consumerism and development. The work is a powerful commentary on how greed and materialistic definitions of success alienate people from nature and true happiness. *Gift in Green* assumes particular significance in the context of the rising stridency of a global culture. Globalisation often acts as a form of cultural imperialism, leading to the marginalisation of traditional knowledge, practices and values. Culture is a concept that encompasses the customs and behaviour of a group or society. The serene landscape of Aathi also encompasses unique culture and tradition of storytelling nights. The arrival of Kumaran, a metaphor for human greed, disrupts this unique culture. The loss of primordial values often erodes indigenous cultural identity and heritage, resulting in younger generations losing connection to their cultural roots. The study also focuses on the major character in this fictional work, Kumaran and his profit making motives. Kumaran eventually becomes a symbol of greed. Kumaran demonstrates how neo-colonialism can be witnessed from within by acting as an internal coloniser, a person who rejects the ideals of his community in favor of the alluring prospects of western style advancement. The study also explores the intertwined impacts of neocolonialism and globalisation on Aathi with a focus on socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions. The paper critiques the effects of neocolonialism, globalisation and development, calling attention to the voices and histories often left out of dominant narratives.

Keywords: Development, Globalisation, Indigenous values, Neocolonialism, Postcolonialism.

Postcolonial literature critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation. Colonialism emerges as the byproduct of industrial modernity and its capitalist modes of production. It is viewed as a process of cultural domination through representation, discourse, and documentation. The economic dominance and exploitation of resources are the prime focus of colonialism. Thus colonialism is a policy and practice of exerting power in extending control over weaker people or areas. The present day society is acquainted with a new form of colonialism namely - neocolonialism.

Neocolonialism is a concept popularised by Kwame Nkrumah, which highlights how economic dominance and control by elites can perpetuate subjugation over downtrodden. The term neocolonialism first appears after the Second World War to refer to the continuing dependence of former colonies on their colonial masters. It is a

form of indirect control. Neocolonialism takes the form of globalisation, cultural imperialism, economic imperialism and contingent assistance to influence or control a specific territory or a region. The advanced forms of neocolonialism includes globalisation, resource extraction for corporate markets, digital control, cultural influence and economic assistance. The study explores the neocolonial attitudes in contemporary society.

Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* discusses the impacts of neocolonialism, globalisation, consumerism and unsustainable development projects. The setting of this fictional work is Aathi, which lies cool and serene, in the womb of an inviolate purity. In Sarah Joseph's interview with Valson Thampu, who translated her Malayalam novel to English, she speaks about how she modelled the land of Aathi. She says that, "I recall my experiences while visiting an exceptionally beautiful island called Valanthakkadu in Ernakulam district of Kerala. About fifty families that subsist on fishing, picking mussels and farming Pokkali rice compromise the inhabitants of Valanthakkadu" (Joseph 370). This fictional work is also considered to be an allegory about the destruction of serene village life of Aathi in the context of neocolonial aspects of development and progress.

The fictional work tells the story of Aathi, a pristine island that remains untouched by the outside world, preserving its natural purity and primitive beauty. Kumaran, who abandoned Aathi in pursuit of a more promising future, returns years later with ambitions to transform it into a modern haven. Kumaran becomes the symbol of human greed as the story unfolds. Kumaran even abandoned his lover, Kunjimathu in search of a luxurious life. The hybrid nature of the colonized-subaltern who evolves himself into an affluent businessman and comes to resemble the colonizer is revealed through the character of Kumaran. Kumaran can be viewed as a neo-coloniser, using his external knowledge and capital to exploit his own people, showing how neo-colonialism can operate from within. He is a business tycoon who views Aathi as the means of profit making space. The narrative depicts the people of Aathi succumbing to Kumaran's dreams. Eventually, they lost their wealth, culture, customs, and traditions for what they perceived as their betterment. But it leads to cultural assimilation.

Cultural assimilation is the process where a minority group adopts the values, behaviors, and norms of a dominant culture. It often leads to the gradual loss of their indigenous cultural identity, customs and traditions. The assimilation process involves accepting the traits and customs of the dominant culture while simultaneously rejecting their indigenous culture. Aathi in, *Gift in Green* has many unique traditions and rituals in its culture. The storynights of Aathi are the most important among them. Aathi is a land of stories and storytellers. The storytellers were nomads who came to Aathi to tell stories. They come year after year and tell stories which are related to the people of Aathi in some way or other. The storynights in Aathi are not a mere form of entertainment but a significant cultural practice that serves as a medium for indigenous knowledge, environmental consciousness, and community resistance against destructive modern development. The story nights help the inhabitants of this serene island to maintain their traditional ways of life when facing external threats.

The night story telling gatherings in Aathi depicts the importance of cultural preservation. The story nights act as a tool for preserving the unique eco-friendly culture of Aathi. They function as a form of community healing and resistance, where the villagers share, debate, and reinforce their indigenous identity. The story nights help to transfer the traditional wisdom, culture, and a deep respect for the environment to the future generation. Noor Muhammad and Markose are considered to be the main narrators of the story nights. The slogan 'Jalam Saakshi' by the inhabitants of Aathi during the story telling session depicts the importance of their water-life. Aathi has the seven-night tradition of storytelling sessions over seven nights, during which tales of their ancestors, Thampuran, their deity and the sacredness of the river and mangrove forest are recounted. The people of Aathi believed the words of the story teller as their Thampuran's voice. "The storyteller identified the dates for our daughters' weddings. He showed us where to dig wells. He prescribed where the rafters for our houses were to be fixed. He named our children. We received him as Thampuran's voice" (16).

The arrival of Kumaran and his development projects in Aathi leads to the decline of storynights. The number of people who attended the storynights began to decrease gradually after Kumaran's entry. The Thampuran's courtyard would reverberate with festive laughter and enjoyment in their good old days. The entire life in Aathi has changed similarly to their storynights. The author depicts: "Like the Aathi sky choked by clouds, the mind of every person was submerged in sadness. Thampuran's courtyard, where they could have gathered as a people, had vanished. So also his shrine, which had been to them so reassuring to decorate" (182). Even as Aathi faces degradation, these storytelling sessions act as a bridge of memory, ensuring that the ecological consciousness of the people is not completely erased. The decline of storynights in Aathi is an example of cultural assimilation.

Kumaran, the business tycoon, represents the invasion of corporate power structures seeking profit at the expense of indigenous culture and environment. Kumaran proclaims himself as the champion of development and decides to build a bridge to connect Aathi to the land, replacing existing water routes. "It is not to help Aathi but to open the floodgates of its ruin that this bridge is being built. It is only a matter of time before Aathi gets buried under Kumaran's paradise" (152). The profit making motives of Kumaran disrupt the natural and environmental treasures in Aathi. The traditional ways of life in Aathi are deeply tied to water and nature. The construction of the bridge negatively impacts the livelihood of women in Meenwari. "But once the construction of the bridge began, the fish grew fewer by the day. The thunderous dredging devastated fish and spawn alike.

The clamour and the clutter, day and night! The menacing glare of powerful lights. No fish could stand or survive it" (149). Kumaran gradually evolves into a colonizer who extracts resources for his personal gain. The ruin of Aathi starts with a skewed notion of development inscribed into the minds of the villagers which is often part of the strategic process of land acquisition by neocolonial agencies. The imposition of unsustainable practices like using chemical fertilizers and pesticides destroys biodiversity and contaminates water. It reflects how global corporate power ravages primordial ecosystems. The people of Aathi who live in close communion to nature are against the use of chemicals and fertilizers. The people of Aathi engaged in a ceremony called kaappu-kalakku. It is a traditional method of harvesting system, in which they harvest the prawns and fish from the fields before preparing them for paddy cultivation. The female protagonist Kunjimathu vehemently opposes the idea of Komban Joy of mixing poison into the water to bring out the fish easily. She says, "There is a way of making prawn farms that has come down to us from our elders over the ages. The new way that involves spraying pesticides, mixing quicklime, spreading various potions and powders is not acceptable to us" (177). The traditional practice of kaappu-kalakku maintains ecological balance which is replaced by the destructive, profit-oriented method like using poison for fishing.

Kwame Nkrumah, former President of Ghana, in his book, *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, illustrates the impact of neocolonialism. "The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment, under neo-colonialism, increases, rather than decreases, the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world" (8). The gap between rich and poor people is evident in Aathi after the entry of Kumaran. Mimicry of the colonizer's language, mannerism and mode of dressing is an important trait of a postcolonial protagonist. All these features can be witnessed in Kumaran. The young minds are often easily attracted towards wealth and luxurious life. Likewise some youngsters in Aathi also become the followers of multimillionaire Kumaran. "An admiring cluster of young people pressed close to him so fervently that multimillionaire Kumaran's voice choked with emotion and the voltage of his excitement almost burned his body when he set foot on his homeland" (49).

Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, identifies and defines a new kind of violence that forms the hallmark of neo-colonial legacies: "By slow violence, I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (4). The unsustainable development projects prioritize immediate economic gains over long term ecological, social and environmental health. *Gift in Green* discusses the pathetic plight of the residents in Chakkam Kadam due to pollution. The people living there are vulnerable to several epidemics. "Human excrement dumped on the roadside or in the stagnant waters of the canals stays undegraded and breeds disease-causing bacteria and microbes and has already become a major health hazard for the people in the city" (93). The people of Chakkam Kadam once survived because of the Chakkam Kadam Kayal and it was their only source of livelihood. "Today everyone hesitates even to touch what slimes in place of that water. It is doubtful if there are any fish. Even if there are, who will eat them?" (95). The Thampuran, who is the deity of Aathi, becomes the sole solace and guardian of this pristine island. The inhabitants of Aathi revere him as they consider him as their creator. Thampuran's shrine is a simple, dark and humble structure. The moment Kumaran sees the Thampuran after thirty six years, he decides to change him from his simple and humble shrine to a golden cage. He wants the shrine to get renovated. "Kumaran said, see that the work begins tomorrow. The roof must be of beaten gold, the walls panelled with gold, the steps gold veneered, the lamp hut of burnished gold. If more gold is required, I shall take care of it" (52). Kumaran appointed a priest and he carries his Gods in his bag. The priest considers Thampuran as an evil spirit. This enraged the people of Aathi. The Thampuran is the light of life for them. All these events signifies the erosion of culture and tradition of Aathi as a result of modernisation and development.

The fictional work serves as a critique of how modern, capitalistic development acts as a new form of colonialism, disregarding indigenous culture and ecological sustainability in favor of profit. Globalisation often acts as a form of cultural imperialism, leading to the marginalisation of traditional knowledge, practices and values. Amory Lovins, an American writer and Physicist in his book, *Reinventing Fire: Bold Business Solutions for the New Energy Era* depicts: "Fire made us human, fossil fuels made us modern, but now we need a new fire that makes us safe, secure, healthy and durable". The present increasing disruption of the global environment is the product of dynamic technology and science. Modern society must rethink and refeel nature and should reestablish communication with nature.

Murray Bookchin in his work *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* states that, the increase of hierarchy, domination and exploitation of each other is part and parcel of our domination of nature. Bookchin is one of the most powerful critics of contemporary society. He sees through the hypocrisy, self-deception and destruction involved in capitalism, Marxism and colonialism. Capitalism is ruthless in expansionist policies. It requires more forests, minerals, animals and people to produce more products. Many of them may be unnecessary but capitalists' main concern is to keep the economy in constant growth. Exploitative and misleading corporations degrade indigenous resources. All these instances appear in the selected fictional work. The study clearly demonstrates how neocolonialism disrupts the indigenous, eco-spiritual traditions in the mythical village of Aathi. *Gift in Green* positions Aathi as a victim of development and globalisation, equating these forces with neocolonialism that threatens the environment and indigenous culture.

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