



Between Orality and Literature: The Transformative Power of Storytelling in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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Abstract: Oral storytelling has always been an integral part of any culture. Storytelling tradition precedes written literature. Stories are more than a medium of entertainment; they serve to unite communities and inculcate values, transmit knowledge, and survival strategies across generations. Oral storytelling tradition in India traces back to the era of Vedic period. The Vedas too incorporated mythological tales, hymns and mythological discourses. The epics were also narrated orally before they were scripted. Storytelling has the extraordinary ability to take the listener to a world of thoughts, fantasies, myths, and stories by igniting his imagination through spoken language. Orality describes the manner in which people verbally communicate with one another. The foundation of oral tradition and verballity is communality, solidarity, and a focus on the sacred. Literary texts have also evolved from this oral tradition. The impact of orality is also apparent on many Indian narratives. Sarah Joseph is a Malayalam writer and social activist. She has infused the tradition of storytelling in her novel *Gift in Green*. Some of these stories are rooted in the indigenous soil and some of them are derived from myths and legends. The present paper proposes to analyse these stories from an epistemological and stylistic perspective and evaluate their contribution to the society.

Keywords: Orality, Oral storytelling, Storytelling Session, Communality

Orality refers to the verbal expression. It refers to the reliance on the spoken word rather than the written word. It encompasses stories, myths, poetry, songs, anecdotes, debates, and speeches to communicate human expression. Walter Ong held the opinion that orality is participatory as it is made of parataxis in comparison to literature. As he states, "Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight" (Ong, 188-212). Ong, in his studies, mentions that human beings always had a spoken language but not necessarily a written language. Out of tens of thousands of spoken languages, only 106 languages have adequate writing systems to produce literature (Yeganeh Hamid). Yeganeh Hamid further asserts that orality is associated with values such as high-context communication, poly-chronic time, public space proxemics, collectivism, hierarchical social structure, subjugation, past-orientation, religiousness/traditionalism and survival cultural dimensions (Yeganeh Hamid)

Oral storytelling tradition evolved in the absence of written sources in the form of gossips. As Gossips were the means of sharing experiences in human society. Yuval Noah Harari states that "our language evolved as

a way of gossiping.” Oral tradition represents a vital and multifunctional means of verbal communication that supports diverse activities in diverse cultures. Through the process of narrating, experiences are structured, identities are formed, social contexts are shaped, and desires and futures are imagined. (Maria Crisitina Gatti). While Herksovit held this opinion as

The oral stories when recited gives it certain values that the written story can never achieve— just as certain features of the written story are necessarily absent in the oral tale. These nuances can only be recorded by a phonograph— pauses in speech, interjections, intonation, stress or by the motion picture— gesture, facial expression and the like. (Herksovit, 276)

Oral storytelling has been a legitimate source of amusement and a way to release from daily stress. Folktales that are also transmitted from one generation to another through storytelling method have a variety of social purposes in addition to being entertaining. This is supported by William Bascom, who identified four functions of folklore as amusement, education, validation of culture, and maintenance of social order. Laurie Honko in his work “ The Folklore Process” from tradition and cultural identity emphasises that that folklores are not static but dynamic. Oral traditions adapt with each telling to a new context and maintain cultural continuity.

While Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Storyteller: Reflection on the work of Nicolai Lescov”, recounts the significance of story-telling as

For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of re-telling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradle (Benjamin)

Storytelling has been an intrinsic part of human civilization. As is mentioned above, the art of storytelling that predates the written form of literature performed a pivotal role in preserving history, maintaining cultural solidarity and inculcating values across generations. In West Africa it flourished in the form of griots, in aboriginal Australia in the form of the Dreamtime stories, in Ireland in the form of Seanchai etc. Chinua Achebe rightly wrote,

The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we own the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. (Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*)

In Indian context, storytelling tradition has its root in Vedas. Vedas were orally created. Indian narrative tradition has many texts, like the Buddhist Jatakas, the Panchatantra (the fifth century), and the *Kathasaritasagara* (the eleventh century), owe their origin to oral traditions. *The Ramayana* and *The Mahābhārata* are the best examples that speak about the power of orality and oral traditions (Joshi, 68). Many of the writers of Indian origin have time to time, incorporated these stories into their literary works. As Raja Rao induces Harikatha in his novel *Kanthapura*. R. K Narayana used Mohini Bhasmasur Myth in his novel *The Man Eater of Malgudi*. As far as storytelling sessions are concerned, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Vikrama Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*, Amitabh Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* are some of the literary works where stories are narrated. Storytelling is an art that transmits wisdom from one generation to another. Sarah Joseph’s *Gift in Green* presents this tradition where not only the content but the custom of storytelling leaves an impact on the listeners.

Sarah Joseph is a renowned Indian novelist and short-story writer in Malayalam. Born in 1946 in Thrissur, Kerala, she is celebrated for her feminist concerns and activism. Some of her notable works include Aalahayude Penmakal (*Daughters of God the Father*), which won several prestigious awards, and *Othappu* (translated as *The Scent of the Other Side*). She is also a prominent social activist and the founder of the women's group Manushi, which addresses various women's issues. Sarah Joseph's contributions to literature and social causes have made her a significant figure in Kerala's cultural landscape. The novel *Gift in Green* was written by Sarah Joseph in 2011 in Malayalam. It was translated by Reverend Valson Thampy. Since the novel is set in Kerala. The natural and cultural landscape of Kerala is exhibited in this novel. Sarah Joseph has imbued the tradition of story-telling along with the main plot of the novel that is centred around the

environmental degradation by the capitalist forces. Like other states Kerala too fosters oral story telling tradition. Kerala has been the land of story-telling particularly prevalent in tribes. The famous storytelling tradition is Kathakali that is a story- based dance performance. Another form of oral story telling is Harikatha, Kathakalakshepam and Katha Prasangam, Chakkyar Koothu. Though none of these traditions are explicitly visible in the novel but some of the features of the custom resemble Chakkyar Koothu. Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* set up in a primordial village of Kerala incorporates the oral storytelling tradition. It is a ritual that is performed to offer tribute to the village deity Thampuran. Sarah Joseph in the introduction of the novel admits about the sources of these stories interwoven into the fabric of the novel.

Gift in Green is, above all, a book of stories and story-tellers. These stories have come down to us from an assortment of sources: the Bible, the holy Quran, Zen and Sufi traditions, the Puranas, folk narratives, historical events and those attributed to the life of St. Francis of Assisi. These stories have been recreated and reinterpreted within the alchemy of Aathi. (Joseph, Acknowledgement)

The novel features storytelling nights where the community gathers to share stories. These sessions are not just for entertainment but serve as a means to preserve cultural heritage and impart environmental consciousness and other ethical values .

The story of Thampuran as narrated by the people of Aathi itself is a story from a person Thampuran whose body was found bobbing down the backwaters to his canonization to God. Thampuran was found bobbing on the waves of the backwaters and was found by one of the ancestors of Aathi on Patthamudyam. The appearance of Thampuran on this day brought prosperity to Aathi as the natives believe.

There are seven stories narrated by the natives and the outsiders in the entire novel. It is designated as a tradition of storytelling to honour the deity of the land Thampuran. Sarah Joseph has also highlighted the interconnection between nature and man. As the ancient people have led their lives in harmony with nature, the people of Aathi, every year, pay their homage to the land and their shrine of Father Thampuran, the deity and the founder of the village, by celebrating a festival for seven nights. Each of the seven nights, a storyteller who comes from the outside of the village, eulogises the tradition and the glory of the village. The people of Aathi adhere to this tradition as they gather on the appointed night to listen to the stories.

The custom of storytelling evenings thus continued to take shape. People turned up with stories sprouting from the traditions of their islands. Their stories grew and burgeoned like grains in the Pokkali paddy fields, rooted in the primeval soil and nourished by the water and the warmth of life. Sailing from place to place, narrating stories here, there and everywhere, they arrived like birds of passage, their feet soiled with the red earth, their clothes reddened too, and their hair dusty. Their lips flowered crimson with stories and their eyes glowed with gladness (*Gift in Green*, 16)

The custom follows with the ritual of the introducer diving into the deep water and then wearing headgear a mask and carrying a torch . The storyteller is led by the Karnavar of Aathi to the prow of a ceremonial boat . The introducer would come from the west and after taking a dip into the water he would say *Jalam Sakshi* (Water bear witness)

The first story narrated by Noor Mohammad is inspired by the Hebrew *Bible* (Genesis 16 and 21) though the reference to Hagar can be found in the religious texts of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Noor Mohammad's story revolves around Hagar, who was the concubine of Abraham. Abraham deserted her along with an infant on the desert. Thirsty Hagar kept on yelling, but was not shown any mercy. The narrator imbues the story with some verses. Seeing her son drifting into death, she broke into tears. The appearance of the bird in search of an oasis rekindled hope. Realising the importance of water, she instructed the people to quench their thirst but not to waste. Noor Mohammad's story inspires the sustainability of the resources and reminds people about their role in the conservation of the environment. The task of the storyteller is completed by answering the queries of the listeners, as it was part of the tradition to ask for the implication of the story in the real life and the discussion on the story would go till daybreak.

The second story was narrated by an outsider, Geetanjali who had come to Aathi to heal her ailing daughter, Kayal . Since the tradition of storytelling privileged men to be the storytellers so introducing a woman as a storyteller was not acceptable to the elders, but the intervention of youth like Dinakaran and Markose made them flexible in their attitude and they let Geetanjali narrate her story. The source of her story is the

Duryodhana-Bheema story from the Mahabharata, though Sarah Joseph accredits the play Brihanlala . Geetanjali's story starts with the rivalry between two children who take the help of a multitasking woman to decide who runs faster. When these children grew up, they encountered each other on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Gitanjali, through her story, critiques the mettle of Bheema, who was full of remorse by the end of this war, as he breached the code of honour. Vidur was the wisest of all. At the end of the war, he met Bhima, and both embraced each other. It was the mind that is most powerful, and this faculty of mind makes human beings distinguished. Wars are futile as they portend the end of human civilization. That is the reason that Vidur sought for primitive life and renounced worldly possessions. The story narrated by Geetanjali brings a different perspective on the *Mahabharata*, where the celebrated hero suffers from the bolt of his own conscience.

The third story is narrated by a ventriloquist, Chembraraman whose story is narrated in the form of dialogues between the puppet monkey and the ventriloquist. While contemplating on the transformation of Aathi the ventriloquist tells them the tale of the old carpenter and leaves the story incomplete. As other stories reach to some conclusion this story as the Ventriloquist, leaves with an open ending

‘One should not insist that every story, like a cow, be led to and pegged in some shed of narratorial specificity. My story is like a cow set free to graze. Let it find its place of rest under the shade of some tree and chew the cud!’ (*Gift in Green*,130)

The story reflected the predicament of Aathi. as Aathi's natural resources were recklessly depleted by capitalist invasion. It was Thankechi who ventured to decode the relatability of the carpenters' story to the deteriorating condition of Aathi as the construction of the bridge has endangered the lives of many creatures, and as she concluded, “Bridges should not be built where they breed. That will be the end of fishing”(*Gift in Green*,132)

An unknown storyteller narrated the fourth story. The story is about social injustice. The Villuvandi episode is related to prominent social reformer and political activist Mahatma Ayyankali, whose relentless efforts transformed the lives of the Dalits in South India. The storyteller's story of Villuvandi documents the clash between the high caste Pillai and the low caste Pulaya and the resilience of Pulayas against the injustice and oppression by the high caste. People should stand for themselves. This story also inculcates a sense of solidarity among the people to combat adverse circumstances.

The fifth story was narrated by a school teacher who had come back from imprisonment for striking a child to death. The guilt-conscious school teacher keeps chanting ‘Govinda’ ‘Govinda’, and when he narrates the story, he delves into the mythology once again. The story of Govardhan from the Krishna legend is narrated here by the Storyteller, who instead of taking the ceremonial bath in the polluted water had already had his bath in some lotus pond. The repetition of Govinda can be associated with the story here. Instead of emphasising the divinity or the mythological significance, the narrator relates the story to the village where people would do animal husbandry and women would sell milk. The young children whom he refers as Govinda would take their cattle to the mountain and would lose their way. He further incorporates the Govardhan Puja in the story but here the focus lies on the worship of nature as Nature ensures survival. Govinda, a black-complexioned boy, explains the significance of nature over Lord Indra and convincingly argues that it is mountains that cause rain, not God. People follow him and offer things to the Mountain. The wrath of Lord Indra brings devastation on that village, but Govinda provides shelter to everyone by lifting the mountain on his finger. So here, if it is seen that the story told by him resonates with the oneness of human beings with the earth. Thus, the perspective of a mythological tale is made eco-centric by the narrator.

The sixth and the seventh stories are narrated by Dinakaran himself. Dinakaran was not readily accepted as story storyteller. People opposed him and charged against him for trivialising the customary practice of storytelling in fashion, but Markose could only understand the agitated mood and despair of Dinakaran. He sat on the prow and declared that he would tell two stories. The first story narrated by him was inspired by stories like those of *Panchatantra*. Dinakaran's empathy for the children who had recovered from the fatal disease made him address the story to them. The story he narrated had animals as characters. The story serves as an allegory. It indicates to the present state of Aathi, the shrewd plans of Kumaran and people entrapped by his alluring dreams to transform Aathi into an urban city. His story was devised for the children but it

conveyed people the treacherous plan of Kumaran and their impact on Aathi. The title of the story is Story of Past while the seventh story he narrates presents a dystopic picture. If Hagars's words are not obeyed, there can be deadly consequences. The water, since the beginning of the novel stands as a symbol that recurs in the entire novel. Even the customary practice of storytelling also starts with Jalam sakshi (Water bears witness). Dinakaran's story had Mukhtar as a protagonist who belonged to the lineage of Hagar. In the wake of first world water war, she would wander from place to place in search of water. As the armies had encroached the water resources. They would not let the people access even a drop of water. She would decide to migrate with other women, but the situation is similar everywhere.

The third story that Dinakaran narrated that night is titled The Story of the Present. In search of the storyteller for the sixth night, he comes across the spirit of Thampuran embodied as a storyteller who declined to tell the story. He also declares this to be the end of storytelling nights. There is an attempt to blend faith with the condition of Aathi. The words here show the wrath of Thampuran, who was revered as a God in Aathi. According to that man, as Dinakaran narrates that only sacrifice is needed in Aathi.

In this way, Sarah Joseph's novel *Gift in Green* revitalizes the oral storytelling tradition by integrating it into the main plot. The tradition of telling stories helps the locals connect and raise awareness of the issues they face. There are seven storytelling nights, as was mentioned above. A ritual opens each session. The stories told by the several narrators highlight the interdependence of humans and nature. Traditions have been altered. The story told by Noor Mohammad is a unique combination of prose and verse. He incorporates verses to make his story more poignant and appealing. The enthusiastic people of the community are the ones who encourage inclusivity. The invitation to have Gitanjali deliver the story was not accepted by everyone. A woman was eventually accepted to tell the stories despite the elder members' opposition. An additional variant can be noted here in the narrative technique. In the next story, the ventriloquist engages an animated monkey in dialogue to narrate a story instead of following a linear format. Interestingly, he leaves the story open-ended, which further perplexes the audience. Yet a woman makes an effort to interpret it by judiciously connecting it to Aathi's condition. This encourages audience participation as well. Instead of being passive, these viewers pay close attention to the story and occasionally offer comments. The residents question the storyteller how they should apply the story to their own lives after the conclusion of the tale. So, the lessons that are contained in the story are passed down and used in their daily lives. Many stories center on the relationship between humans and nature as well as the sustainability of natural resources, however the Villuvandi story strayed from these themes and concentrated on social injustice instead. The story is based on an occurrence that happened in the life of Ayankalli, a notable social reformer who spoke out against caste inequality. Thus, its goal is to raise awareness of people's rights and strategies for combating social injustice. Based on the account of Lord Krishna, who is repeatedly referred to as one of the shepherd boys, Govinda, rather than Lord, the story of Govinda is told by a teacher who is filled with guilt. The fact that Dinakaran told stories was unexpected. His tales captured both the past and present. Dinakaran's storytelling role was unexpected. His tales were a reflection of the past, present, and future. Dinakaran, an activist for preventing environmental deterioration in Aathi, chooses to relate the tale. His tales are reflections of the past told in an allegoric fashion. The future story is a dystopian one in which the planet is smoldering in the first water world war, while the present story contains a magical realism element where Dinakaran confesses to meeting Thampuran.

Conclusion

The oral stories in *Gift in Green* highlight the community's deep connection with nature and their struggles against environmental degradation. Storytelling sessions bring the community together, creating a sense of unity and shared purpose. The communal listening to these stories fosters a collective identity and shared resolve among the villagers. The novel uses symbolic stories to convey broader themes. For instance, the tale of Thampuran, a local saint, is used to symbolize the community's spiritual and ecological wisdom. The storytelling tradition in the novel also serves as a form of resistance against the forces of modernisation that threaten the village's ecological balance. Sarah Joseph's use of oral storytelling in *Gift in Green* underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge and environmental stewardship. The oral storytelling tradition

embedded in the novel not only provides a unique dimension to the narrative structure but also bridges the gap between orality and literature, shaping the modern consciousness.

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