



ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY: A PANCHABHUTA ANALYSIS OF SARAH JOSEPH'S *GIFT IN GREEN*

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Abstract: Through ecocriticism, eco-literature became more popular in the late 20th century. Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" One of the most important eco-critical novels is *Gift in Green* (Aathi) by Sarah Joseph, a translator of which is by Valson Thampu. Set amidst the ecologically vibrant village of Aathi, the story reveals nature as a sacred space interlaced with cultural memory, spirituality, and ecological awareness through its five elemental forces: air, water, earth, fire and space.

The five elements of air, water, earth, fire, and space have been interpreted in the novel as provided by nature: air signifies freedom, environmental balance and oral tradition transmission; water represents continuity, purification for a troubled lifestyle and resistance to ecological exploitation; earth embodies fertility and sustenance or growth supporting the village agricultural life; fire reconciling both sacred ritualistic implications but also reflecting human greed destruction to elements while space captures spirituality and collective existence. By depicting such elemental ecologies, Joseph reflects sustainability as a lived cultural ethos of balance, interconnectedness and reverence for nature. This paper discusses *Gift in Green* from the perspective of a five elemental ecologies and addresses the author's promotion of an earth-friendly worldview based on indigenous ecological knowledge.

Index Terms - Eco-literature, Ecocriticism, Five Elements, indigenous, Eco-oral traditions, abiotic, Sustainable ecology.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has become an age of ecological reckoning. From climate disasters to species extinction, the rapid degradation of the planet's ecosystems has forced humanity to re-evaluate its relationship with the environment. Within this context, literary studies have increasingly turned toward ecocriticism, an approach that explores how literature reflects and shapes environmental awareness. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founding voices in the field, defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (*The Ecocriticism Reader* xix). This theoretical lens moves beyond symbolic interpretations of nature and instead interrogates the ideological, ethical, and material ways in which texts engage with the environment.

In India, the ecological imagination is deeply interwoven with Indigenous cosmologies, oral traditions, and regional mythologies. Indian literature, particularly in regional languages, provides a fertile ground for ecocritical exploration because it represents ecological consciousness not as an abstract concept but as a lived, cultural value experience. Sarah Joseph, a pioneering Malayalam writer and activist, stands out

for her synthesis of environmental ethics, feminism, and spiritual ecology. Her novel *Gift in Green* (translated by Valson Thampu, 2011) portrays the fictional village of Aathi, where human life, landscape, and myth coexist as both a narrative and an environmental testimony. Through its poetic language, polyphonic narration, and deep engagement in Kerala's cultural geography, Joseph presents a vivid depiction of ecological balance and its collapse under industrial intrusion.

This paper investigates how Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* transforms the Pancha Bhootas - the five elements of nature: Earth (Boomi), Water (Neer), Fire (Agni), Air (Kaatru), and Space (Akasha) into a narrative structure and ethical framework that critiques modernity's ecological violence. Through close analysis of the novel's elemental imagery, cultural symbolism, and narrative method, this study demonstrates that Joseph's vision extends beyond environmental preservation to advocate for ecological justice, cultural memory, and spiritual renewal and contributes to the growing corpus of eco-literary scholarship that bridges local environmental ethics with global ecocritical discourse.

Indigenous Eco-Philosophy of the Five Elements

This study integrates indigenous ecological philosophy and the doctrine of Pancha Bhoota or the five-elemental cosmology of ancient Indian thought, and how *Gift in Green* elevates anthropocentric boundaries to articulate a holistic vision of life rooted in balance, reciprocity, and care. Indian ecological philosophy, rooted in both Vedic cosmology and folk traditions, offers a worldview where nature is not an external object, but a living presence imbued with spirit. *Prakriti* (Nature) and *Purusha* (Consciousness) signify a dynamic interdependence between material and spiritual realities. Similarly, the concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* "the world is one family" articulates an ethics of inclusivity that extends beyond the human species. In Tamil, Siddha and Sangam traditions, the five elements of nature known as Aimbootham are considered the building blocks of the universe. They exist in harmonic balance within nature, the human body and the cosmos.

Sarah Joseph's portrayal of the fictional island *Aathi* draws heavily from this indigenous sensibility. *Aathi's* ecology is animated by spiritual presence: its river is a goddess, its soil sacred, its air a bearer of ancestral memory. Such a worldview challenges Western binaries of culture and nature, replacing them with a relational ontology grounded in reverence and kinship.

1. The Doctrine of Five Elements in Nature (Pancha Bhootas)

This study lies in the ancient Indian cosmological doctrine of the Pancha Bhootas or Aimboothangangal: Earth (Boomi), Water (Neer), Fire (*Agni*), Air (Kaatru), and Space (Aagayam). This cosmological framework, articulated in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* and later developed in Ayurvedic and yogic traditions, posits that all matter and life are composed of these five fundamental elements. Harmony among them ensures health and prosperity; imbalance leads to decay and suffering.

The doctrine of five ecological elements in nature provides both a metaphysical and ecological lens through which human-nature relationships can be understood. It acknowledges that the degradation of terrestrial ecosystems and depletion of the lithospheric balance, aquatic contamination through industrial effluent and waste, thermal disequilibrium, ozone depletion, and disruption of the acoustic and luminous equilibrium of space will collectively disturb cosmic order. In *Gift in Green*, Sarah Joseph revives this elemental philosophy not as abstract symbolism but as lived ecological experience. Each element becomes a narrative agent, reflecting the community's moral and environmental consciousness.

1.1. Earth (Boomi): The Ground of Being and Memory

Earth in *Gift in Green* functions as the foundation of identity and continuity. The soil of Aathi is described with reverence, embodying both the fertility of nature and the ancestral spirit of the people who inhabit this land. Joseph writes about land as a living entity, an archive of memory, myth, and sustenance.

The narrative emphasizes that the earth of Aathi is not merely a physical space but a moral geography. Joseph describes the paddy fields as "the green veins of Aathi, carrying life through every household" (Joseph, *Gift in Green* 42). When characters like Kunjimathu and Ponmani nurture the land, they engage in a sacred act of renewal, reaffirming their symbiotic relationship with the ecosystem. The arrival of exploitative forces like developers who wish to transform the land into profit marks the onset of ecological and ethical decline.

In traditional Kerala belief systems, *Bhoomi Devi* (Mother Earth) is both a goddess and a moral barometer. The violation of her body through pollution, deforestation, or overuse is equated with sacrilege. In Joseph's *Gift in Green*, this violation manifests as the commodification of land, where ancestral spaces are sold, and sacred groves are erased for short-term gain. This degradation reflects "ecopsychology", which centralises its idea that the human psyche and the earth are interconnected to each other, and that disequilibrium between these would create a crisis in the human psyche and ecology.

Earth represents fertility, rootedness, and endurance. Its degradation through land encroachment and deforestation in Aathi mirrors the moral corruption of its inhabitants. It becomes a silent witness to human greed but also a potential agent of healing. The regeneration of the soil in Aathi toward the novel's end suggests that restoration is possible through humility, memory, and reconnection.

1.2. Water (Neer): The River of Life and Purity

If Earth is the body of Aathi, water is the soul of Aathi. The river, known as the lifeline of the village, sustains not only its agriculture but also its collective spirituality. Joseph's prose flows with aqueous imagery; the river murmurs like a mother's lullaby, its currents carrying ancestral voices and dreams. The opening chapters repeatedly describe Aathi as a land "woven together by the threads of rivers" (Joseph 15), highlighting how water structures both geography and culture. Rituals, festivals, and daily practices are intimately tied to water, reflecting its sacred role in sustaining life.

However, Joseph juxtaposes this sacredness with the ecological violence of pollution. When industrial projects begin, the once-pristine rivers are poisoned with chemical waste. "The water that once mirrored the moon now carried a film of grease and the stench of decay" (Joseph 147). Water in *Gift in Green* symbolises purity, transformation, and continuity. The villagers' ritualistic bathing in the river signifies cleansing of the body and the spirit, an acknowledgement of dependence and gratitude. However, as modernity encroaches, the once-pristine river becomes contaminated literally and symbolically. Industrial waste, consumer greed, and indifference turn the sacred flow into a polluted mirror of moral decay.

The degradation of water parallels the feminine violation central to ecofeminist discourse. Just as patriarchal systems exploit women's bodies, capitalist systems exploit rivers as mere resources. The character Ponmani's grief over the dying river echoes Vandana Shiva's idea of "ecological feminism," where the destruction of the environment is inseparable from the silencing of women's voices.

Joseph also invests water with healing power. Even in its polluted state, the river retains a sacred potential. When the community eventually recognises its dependence on this life source, the act of restoring the river becomes a metaphor for moral renewal. Water symbolises purity, continuity, and renewal. The river that nourishes Aathi transforms from sacred to desecrated, marking the loss of ecological sanctity. The river's revival, however partial, stands as a quiet assertion of hope, an insistence that the flow of life, though obstructed, can never be fully dammed.

1.3. Fire (Agni): The Dual Force of Destruction and Transformation

Fire in *Gift in Green* is a double-edged force, both creative and destructive, purifying and annihilating. It embodies passion, energy, and change, but when untethered from wisdom, it becomes an agent of ruin. Joseph notes how "the flames that rose from ritual fires carried not smoke but prayers into the sky" (Joseph 64). Fire connects the Anthropos and cosmic spheres, strengthening its sacred role in maintaining ecological and cultural balance. In contrast, fire also appears as an agent of destruction when controlled by industrial forces. Waste burning, smelting, and accidental blazes caused by machinery symbolise the violent misuse of fire. Joseph describes the destruction of a sacred grove through fire: "What once smelt of sandalwood and jasmine now reeked of ash and plastic" (Joseph 173). By presenting fire as both sacred and destructive, Joseph critiques human greed and its capacity to pervert elemental forces. The novel warns that when fire is divorced from ritual and responsibility, it becomes an ecological menace.

Aathi's ecosystem is one of the most symbolic episodes in the novel, which was destroyed by fire. What begins as a natural element of life's cycle becomes a destructive blaze when fuelled by human negligence and greed. The burning forest stands as a metaphor for spiritual desolation, consuming not only trees and wildlife but also the moral fabric of the community. The ashes of Aathi's burnt forests later serve as fertile ground for regeneration, suggesting that even ruin can become the seed of renewal. Fire signifies both destruction and purification. The flames that consume the forest in the novel embody the dual nature of transformation, potentially cleansing yet devastating when uncontrolled.

1.4. Air (Kaatru): The Spirit of Freedom and Vitality

Air represents breath, mobility, and the unseen currents that connect all life. In *Gift in Green*, air is both literal and symbolic. The Pristine fragrant winds of Aathi signify the community's moral vitality, while the polluted air of modernisation mirrors its decline. Air in Aathi carries the fragrance of forests, paddy fields, and rain. Joseph recites "The wind in Aathi was like a lullaby, carrying the scent of earth after rain" (Joseph 33). Air here symbolises freedom, comfort, and connection. Factories and waste release toxic fumes that suffocate both the land and its people. "The breeze that once refreshed now choked, carrying the stench of chemicals" (Joseph 192). The transformation of air from nurturing to suffocating mirrors the community's decline.

Air also operates as a metaphor for freedom and dignity. When the villagers lose their clean air, they also lose their ability to live freely and healthily. The character ponmani said, “Even our breath is no longer ours” (Joseph 201). The novel contrasts the freshness of Aathi’s natural air laden with the scent of rain, soil, and vegetation with the suffocating atmosphere of industrial landscapes. This shift reflects the intrusion of materialism, and the loss of what David Abram calls the “sensuous connection” between humans and the more-than-human world.

The air pollution is not only physical but psychological. Antagonist’s greed and selfishness grow; the collective atmosphere thickens with tension and alienation. Joseph subtly employs air as a metaphor for moral suffocation. The inability to breathe freely within a society choked by exploitation. Characters like Ponmani and Kunjimathu, who maintain their communion with nature, are portrayed as being in tune with the elemental rhythm of air. At the end, the return of wind and rain after long stagnation symbolises purification and rebirth, a moment when nature reclaims its rhythm and humanity regains its breath.

1.5. Space (Aagam): Consciousness, Connection, and Transcendence

The fifth element, space or Aagam/*Akasha*, occupies a unique philosophical position—it is both the container and the connector of all other elements. In *Gift in Green*, space is associated with memory, silence, and consciousness. It represents the unseen dimension that binds the people of Aathi to their land, their ancestors, and the cosmos.

Joseph writes, “In the stories told by the elders, the skies above Aathi were filled not just with stars but with voices of those who had lived before” (Joseph 89). Here, space is not emptiness but fullness, a dimension of memory and continuity. The encroachment of modernity disrupts this space. With the loss of land and water, cultural rituals and stories are also losing their grounding. The elders worry that “when the land goes silent, the stories too will fade into air” (Joseph 220). Space becomes a metaphor for cultural erasure, where ecological destruction leads to the disappearance of memory and identity.

The erosion of this spatial consciousness, when people forget their belonging to the wider web of life, marks the deepest form of ecological crisis. Joseph portrays modernity not merely as a physical invasion but as a spiritual contraction, a shrinking of inner and outer space. The villagers’ obsession with material progress narrows their sense of reality, closing off the expansive awareness that once guided their community.

Joseph also envisions space as a realm of renewal. The moments of stillness and reflection in the novel—characters pausing by the river, listening to wind or rain—represent reconnection with Aagam, the spacious awareness in which all life unfolds. In these moments, the reader is invited to experience what the Upanishads describe as *chidakasha*, the inner sky of consciousness that mirrors the outer universe. Space becomes the invisible thread linking all beings, the moral and metaphysical ground upon which ecological restoration depends.

2. Interconnect of five elements: The Ecology of Balance

Across these five elements, Sarah Joseph constructs a vision of ecological interdependence that resists reductionist thinking. The corruption of one element disturbs the entire system; polluted water poisons the soil; poisoned soil disrupts the air; corrupted air stifles consciousness. The health of Aathi’s ecosystem thus becomes a moral allegory for human integrity.

The novel’s resolution, where hope arises through remembrance and collective action, emphasises that ecological restoration requires inner transformation. The five elements, once desecrated, can be healed only through humility, compassion, and spiritual awakening. Joseph’s elemental vision thus becomes both ecological and ethical, a reminder that human salvation is inseparable from the salvation of the Earth. The novel’s ecological vision is not confined to nature worship or environmental lamentation; rather, it articulates a complex ethical response to globalisation, patriarchy, and spiritual alienation. Through multiple critical lenses ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and eco-psychology. Joseph’s text reveals how environmental degradation mirrors social and psychological decay, and how recovery requires both ecological and moral regeneration.

Conclusion

Sarah Joseph’s *Gift in Green* stands as one of the most profound eco-literary works in contemporary Indian fiction, merging mythology, feminism, and indigenous environmental ethics into a single powerful narrative. Through the five elements of nature Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space it constructs not merely an ecological allegory but a living cosmology, where every natural entity embodies consciousness and moral value.

The novel reminds us that ecological degradation is never only physical, but it is spiritual, cultural, and psychological. The desecration of Aathi’s River, the burning of its forests, and the corruption of its soil parallel the decay of human empathy and communal harmony. In contrast, the acts of care, remembrance,

and resistance undertaken by the women of Aathi illuminate pathways to healing. These gestures affirm that the recovery of the Earth begins with the recovery of compassion.

Joseph's elemental vision is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical traditions, where the Pancha Bhootas symbolise balance and interconnectedness. Her approach is strikingly contemporary, engaging with global debates on ecofeminism, postcolonial environmentalism, and the ethics of sustainability. By drawing from Kerala's Indigenous culture while addressing universal ecological anxieties, *Gift in Green* becomes both local and global, an ecofeminist epic of resistance and renewal.

Joseph envisions what may be called an "ecological dharma"—a moral order that recognizes the sacred reciprocity between human and non-human life. *Gift in Green* transcends environmental activism to offer a spiritual ecology, where literature becomes a form of healing. The restoration of Aathi at the novel's end, though partial, represents the enduring possibility of regeneration a belief that Earth, like the human spirit, can heal if given love, remembrance, and respect. Sarah Joseph's message is timeless and urgent: when humanity listens again to the voice of the river, the song of the soil, and the whisper of the wind, the Earth will once more become a "gift" not to be owned or consumed, but to be cherished and shared.

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