

**Changing Rural Graphics and Feminist Readings in a Third World Locale: The case of
“Aathi”**

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Introduction

The paper is an attempt to map feminist articulation of concerns around changing ecology of the rural landscapes and the dynamics of its human relations in the so-called underdeveloped/developing economies. It undertakes an examination of Aathi – a Malayalam novel written by Sara Joseph – that enters into the discursive domains of underdevelopment, pollution, urbanization and so on and so forth. The world undoubtedly is passing through an era where discussions of radically altering the local landscapes and compromising the ecological balance and greenery for enhancing a corporate sector led development are rampant and widely heard. Such discussions remain in parallel to discourses of lack of sufficient facilities and infrastructure, lack of sufficient employment opportunities and health care systems, lack of business opportunities etc. An invariable outcome of this complicated terrain is that it immediately places any rural landscape amidst the conceptual canvass of ‘Glocal’ where global discourses of corporatization and development are coincided with its local variants. The resistances to the hegemonic narratives thus equally emerge from the subtle lines of distinction between local and global as also the present and past, or rather memories of past.

Aathi is in the mode of cultural resistance which rearticulates the local landscapes with the help of narrative depiction of its beauty and the dynamics with which the local relations – both among humans and between humans and the surrounding environment – are organized. It

depicts the contrast that exists in the humans' desire for material progress against the picturesque background of a village in the south Indian state of Kerala. The novel deliberately avoids the overtones of nostalgia and even that of despair to considerable extent which are, to a larger degree, hallmark features of narratives of this *genre*. It instead portrays energies of resistance, rather than allowing or pushing the reader to switch to a resistance mode by any deliberate attempt, as built into the local existences which gets reflected through the forty six stories that the story writers inside the novel narrate. Produced by a feminist author the novel simultaneously attempts to rearticulate the feminine side of this oppression-resistance model without actually or explicitly invoking female bodies or subjectivities per se whereas resistance as such in the novel is predominantly materialized through Kunjimathu – a lady in the village of Aathi. Before entering into the novel in detail I shall attempt briefly to portray the emergence of women's writings and how feminist concerns have overwhelmingly been spreading to larger areas of social concern over the past several decades. This shall enable me to approach the novel not only from the culturally specific backdrops of the region but also from certain larger perspectives of feminism and the trends involved in it.

Women's writing to the argumentative feminist

The dynamic links that exist between text and context have always been at the centre of studies in literature. Whereas a text may or may not be an unproblematic representation of a context it is almost beyond any challenge that the context has always a critical role in the production of a text. Literature is also part of an evolutionary process entangled within the time and space. The transition and transformations of thoughts and their creative manifestations need to be evaluated against the changing configurations of a culture, embedded within specific histories. It is precisely then that we experience the dynamic presence of authors who illuminate

their surroundings through their insightful interventions. Here, the individual subjectivity becomes a clear construction of the social surroundings inviting the reading critique to engage with this relationship in its depths. It is not merely a in the deployment of the syntax of language but rather in an articulation of the creative energy that the existential issues confronting a social-cultural-economic-political context, is effectively depicted.

The argumentative feminist, or rather the modern forms of feminism, has become a prominent presence in literature beyond its conventional haven within the social and political spheres. Feminism has also a global basis as its working unit. It has helped to foreground certain questions confronting women, enabling them to make a claim to an equal space in society. This has definitely invited furious reaction from both the political and religious blocks. Despite the fact that feminism, and feminists, have more or less dealt with, and still continue to deal with, such hostile confrontations in their contextual specificities, the situation of women continues to be concerning in several parts of the globe. Her mobility is literally chained in the materiality of such contexts. Women were equally sidelined, if not completely kept out of the “normal” social and cultural contexts, in both the East and the West for centuries. Her entry into the public sphere was blocked by several factors those were contextually determined at the same time containing certain amount of commonality. This commonality emerged from the sheer fact that they were primarily founded upon certain essential theories that not only differentiated the male from the female beyond the biological features of both those bodies but also inherently rooted in the specific patriarchal genealogies of those theoretical pursuits. The struggle against this situation where women’s existence is primarily understood in her role of providing sexual and other services to the men is also centuries old by now. However this has not been equally effective in all the cultural contexts.

In the context of India this has a different genealogy altogether where women were often exalted and idolized in the various forms of divinity; this included her being depicted as an embodiment of the *shakthi*, the universal force or energy against the evil existence, and motherhood where she is seen as the origin of the whole universe. However beneath such superficial constructions the tormenting of female bodies and its sexual and social exploitation was, and still is, part and parcel of the several units of this heterogeneous culture. This has remained a fact during all phases and transitions in history from the feudal to the industrial to the capitalist and to the post capitalist, postmodern eras. Definitely there are changes with the more egalitarian thoughts dawning upon the cultural geographies within the overwhelming Indian context especially from the beginning of the 20th century. There is a wide level recognition, at least in principle, that women are equal to men. A number women's organizations function in the various parts of the country to make sure that gender justice is implemented. The factors that led to the inauguration of this trend in the Indian conditions were both local and global. On the one hand the traditional practices consistently impeded, sometimes completely blocking, women's participation in the social and cultural affairs. The caste and gender combinations were to be resisted in order to overcome the centuries' long frustrations that accompanied female existence in these cultural units. On the other hand the inspiration to unite and organize women under the umbrella of their feminine identity came from experiences in the other parts of the globe – this even included the leftist movements in the US and similar movements in the UK and other parts of the Europe where labour organisations became strong to unite and fight against the hegemonic forces of capitalism. Such movements in those locales, marked in the intellectual world commonly as West, have had immense impacts upon the way subjectivities were commonly imagined inviting to a process of rethinking about questions of gender.

This has also left deep impressions in the world of literature and has eventually resulted in the constitution of women's writing a separate field altogether that simultaneously negotiated with the changing world. The depictions of a life world in a radically unconventional fashion by a group of writers came to be known as Bloomsbury group under the leadership of Virginia Woolf was critical in this context. This is definitely not to discount the fact that women's writing has a long history that transgresses such temporal confinements and goes much beyond the 20th or even 19th century happenings. However women's writing in the form and content the way we see it today has a specific history and genealogy that blends both local and other factors that goes much beyond the local. The changes in the realms of science and technology, primarily in the form of the emergence of print media, has had a definitive impact in this whole scenario by making information about events happening in contexts that are physically and culturally much beyond the vicinities of the local.

Coming back to the point here, with the dawn of 20th century women's writing has started assuming the role of being the creative manifestation or the creative side of women's liberation movements. The argument that the structures of a society that unleash gender oppression are more to be clearly and genuinely stated in a subjective language has formed the basis of this movement. The distance from the individual experiences to the social structures that, until then, had an objective existence, was contested and mitigated, if not totally problematized, by women writers whose writings primarily attempted to work as revelations or reflections of the subjugated status of women in the society. This trend was extremely relevant and challenging with respect to two contexts: One, that even when women were writing, their writings consciously or unconsciously adopted the parameters of literary articulation that were constructed in a male dominated world. In the absence of a conscious disposition informing

creative expressions, it was not uncommon to see that women authors unintentionally fell into the trap of reproducing the patriarchal hegemonies that underlined the production of literature until then. Two, the absence of powerful interventions from the feminine section has invited males to occupy that space. That is to say that this had resulted, this was especially during periods of reformation in both East and West, in men writing for women whether or not under the pseudonyms of women. This was conceived as a major challenge by several women authors during the period as such a situation was literally leading to understandings where the gravity of oppression was being caricatured and its brutality utterly compromised.

The male writing about women has commonly been understood as resulting in her representation as a commodity and as an object without any subjective emotions or feelings attached to its bodily existence. Although this has severe exceptions, this has remained a predominant trend in almost all the contexts across the world. This has necessitated, if not triggering, an equally powerful response. The response to the patriarchal depictions of feminine presence in the society in terms of the male sexual extravaganza and/or her needing male protection has taken the form of a radical manifestation of her subjectivity and her subjective/experiential world. Although such responses have been, sometimes, ambivalent they have often assumed different and diverging forms to take on the multi-faceted oppression. Their language also varied considerably from the very beginning. From adopting, as I said, a radical position articulated in the language of rights to attempting to find an own space in the society through a rather creative depiction of women's subjective world, women's writing manifested a wide range. As time passed by, it is often presumed, the radical spirits are by now normalized and a bit cooled off.

However this is a contentious observation to make, so to say, as women's writings from the very beginning were conceived a radical intervention even at times when they were consciously keeping away from deploying the language of rights. This was not as much because those writings addressed, or rather struggled, to find or create a space for women in what was until then remained a male dominated sphere as it was about structuring a world or understandings of a world from a perspective that was commonly perceived as diametrically opposite. This continues to remain so even today as the structures of gender oppression continues to have a strong presence in the contemporary social spaces. As the social and cultural configurations transform with each decade passing by and with every scientific and technological interventions made, this becomes more complex. In the 21st century, the violence inflicted on the female body has considerably transitioned from direct and physical to a more indirect, invisible, cultural and psychic forms. This is not to say that physical violence no longer has any relevance or that they do not exist. But rather to articulate how complex things have become with new structures of violence having come into existence in parallel with what exists already. The situation has also been exasperated with additional elements being incorporated into the already prevailing patriarchal structures. This includes not only cultural, technological elements but also such, commonly perceived as nonpartisan, factors as environmental and ecological.

Women's writing in the context of Keralam

Thus women's writing in the contemporary periods also has to address a larger environment with multiple and complex factors that has a critical role in determining the subjugated role of women in society. Simultaneously this has also resulted in an expansion of the focus of feminist writing to areas that are much beyond the immediate concerns of conventional women's writing. This has also resulted in the creation of a space where feminist authors are no

longer considered as merely writing to protect or reflect upon the interests of the women. They are understood as having a major stake in the larger social, cultural and political geographies of the society. One such prominent feature appearing in feminist literature in the last few decades is changing environment as a result of industrialisation. This has especially remained the case in the context of India and similar other locales within the so called Third world. By now we all are familiar with the movements related with eco-feminism and its political impact in the larger Indian context. Inspired by this and other similar movements women authors have taken up the cause of environment as not only closely associated with gender concerns but also as a space for them to claim a crucial stake in challenges against the larger patterns of social development.

This has a special significance in the case of Keralam, a small South Indian state that, speaking from cultural, political and historical perspectives, have a major presence in the larger Indian context. Primarily known for its achievements in social development, for the major presence of leftism in its political sphere, and also for the historical relations that the region had with foreign powers including the Arabs and, later, with the European powers, its region is also well-known for its beautiful landscapes, greenery and long monsoons which sometimes lasts upto 8 months a year. Although much ahead of other Indian states in terms of literacy, healthcare and other indices of social development Keralam as a region still remains backward in terms of industrialization. However the enormous size of foreign remittance from Malayalis working abroad, mainly in the middle east and other locations including the western Europe and US, have radically altered the regions social and cultural landscapes. The foreign remittance, primarily deployed to construct buildings, shopping malls, flats and so on has a crucial role in designing the social transformations of the state. This has increased by many times, the employment possibilities of this state even inviting migrants, who arrive in huge numbers, from mainly North

and North eastern parts of India. However these trends have also coupled with the demographic pressures that the region as a whole experience with its population density which is one of the highest in the whole country. Thus there is a major conversion of paddy fields, agricultural lands, mountain regions and so on into urban areas used for erecting apartments, malls, for building roads and other forms of construction. Although these are moments that more or less all regions across the Third world experience, in a state that is as tiny as Keralam, the impacts of such transformations are felt with much and much more intensity.

In a nutshell, this has remained the larger background against which concerns about the changing environment have been articulated. Feminist literature, or rather women authors, have remained in the forefront of such articulations where anxieties about the beauty of the nature that is lost and the dynamism of tradition that is misplaced are foregrounded with the sharpness of a cutting edge tool. The feminist literature has already has a prominent place in the larger literary field of Malayalam. Although Malayalam literature has seen women authors writing poems as early as in 19th century beginning most of the early writings were confined to expressions of their royal location within the palaces where those authors were located. Women's writing moved beyond the royal confines and mythological boundaries from 1930s onwards with the emergence of such authors as Lalithambika Antharjanam and, later in the 40s, K. Saraswathiyamma. In spite of there being major ups and downs in the historical trajectories of women's writing in Malayalam, it has witnessed some of the most powerful interventions and some of the major women writers in this area have emerged from the Malayalam literary region. This also includes Madhavikkutty, known as Kamala Das in locations outside Keralam. Sara Joseph, the author who is the subject here, is one among the latest in the list of women authors in Malayalam who

are known for their ideological dispositions and the brilliant caricaturing of the gender biased structures.

Riddles Raised by Aathi

“Aathi” is a highly significant novel in the contemporary milieu; a novel that invites keen attention of the readers on environmental issues. “Aathi” puts forth an ecological perspective of wailing life conditions that are beyond modernist interpretations.

The protagonist of the novel is water that carries the secret of life. The introduction deals with the idea of man creating God. The “thampuran” of Aathi land, the “kottil”, all throw light on this theme. In “Aathi”, there is the sight of the treasure of resources made ready by Nature for all living creatures. But, what does man give in return? This is the question raised by the writer. The novel depicts in a moving fashion how modernism and industrialization pollute natural resources; thereby how man loses his or her very existence. The novel gives the impression of watching a film where Aathi, a small village, becomes the stage of multiple riddles.

Through the story of Hagar in The Bible, the story reveals how the ownership of water is maintained. The mother’s intense desire to save her son’s life results in the search of water throughout the desert; its solution is given by Nature. The mother wishes to float along with her son in the water which is needed for survival. She immerses in water as a sort of emancipation from all hitherto miseries. Aathi is the abyss to conceal all the impurities of the mind and the body. The author herself views Aathi as armour; a shelter to escape from the disasters; it is also the entity that the modern distressed man lacks.

The characters in Aathi are as holy as Nature depicted in it; especially the woman-characters. They accept change, however, foresee the destruction in future. Shailaja, recognizing

the lack of safety in the work at city and in husband's home, takes refuge in Aathi. But, characters including her become stupefied by noticing the toxin that is being prepared by time for Aathi. That detection led them to a return. Kunjimaathu, Dinakaran, Ponmani, Shailaja, all have endeavoured to preserve the sanctity of Aathi.

The land of Aathi waits for nights laden with chronicles, and tells how these chronicles could be altered for the betterment of life. Characters like Noormuhamed arrive to Aathi along with migrating birds. Their evenings, replete with narratives, move Aathi towards a new light. In Aathi, the story takes place in a ritualistic fashion. The narrator wears a traditional skirt of tender coconut leaves and turban; with paintings on the face and juggling a ball in the hands, he stands in the midst of water, and vows in the presence of water. The people who gather around to listen to his words are made to recapitulate his promise. Soon after, the narrative commences. Men who sit on boat and describe the tale are regarded as "Thampuran" by the inhabitants of Aathi. There is specialty in the tales for it takes various shapes and moods in the course of time. The narrators, right from Noormohamed to Gitanjali, pass from the doubt -Can women narrate the story? –to the focus on what is being said by them. Also, they concentrate on how life is benefited by these narrations.

The great temples where people visit for "moksha" are being covered with waste. Fatal diseases emanate from there. This is the result of man's senseless actions. The current status of Guruvayoor town is unveiled by the by the novelist. The condition of the people of Chakramkandatthil is same as that of Kuttanadu, i.e. though surrounded by water, miles have to be passed through to collect drinking water. The author reminds us of the fact that the growing settlement around temples will wipe out the purity of the villages. The state of temples that have commercialized devotion is not different from this.

Through the forty six chapters, Sarah Joseph is able to enliven the thought of the readers, and to evoke in them the necessity of conserving regarding the originality of villages. Kumaran, who leaves his indigenous job and moves to city, makes lose the holiness of the village under the illusion that modernism and industrialization are meant for “development.” Also, it awards Aathi with a population who receive diseases out of its failure to take care of Nature adequately. The sight of Aathi, whose situation changes from a haven to a diseased centre, is central to the novel.

Aathi had been a land of no caste system or falsehood. The rule was that once the raconteurs arrive, story has to be told fully, irrespective of any difficulty. Through Noormohamed, Gitanjali, Maashu and Dhinakaran, many tales speak this by accentuating the pragmatic life of Aathi.

The chapters also have their own specialties. The entitled “Shirt”, revealing the family background of Dhinakaran, denotes people who have become slaves to consumerism. It also persuades us to think about, and regulate our desire to become models. Dhinakaran’s thought that “the dirt made by us should be washed clean by ourselves” is applicable to us also.

In the chapter “Vellatthinu Theliyathirikanavilla”, the harmony between water and human mind is explained. Here, through the story of Buddha, the novelist unveils multiple facts. The girl in Aathi who herself takes up the collection of refuse is parallel to Anandan who cleansed himself when gathered water for Buddha. The picture is that when there is nothing to do, the mind becomes clear. Through the story of Noormohamed, the novelist shares with the reader the idea that the value of water is same as of life itself.

Aathi lies within the cycle of lukewarm water-bodies which is very similar to the foetus kept inside the protective layer of womb. The doors of the houses in Aathi have neither locks nor

safety bolts. The concept of door- less houses was totally new to those outside Aathi. For the people in Aathi, the image of a house with many rooms was beyond their imagination. They had nothing as very “personal”, hence, the city was alien to them. Though having many facilities, Kunjikalli’s life in flat is agitated. The uneasiness in apartments is made clear here.

Kunjikalli and Unnimon realise the hollowness of urban life. They move to Aathi and share their experience. They try to understand, in the light of their experience, the innocent people who are deceived by advertisements and gaudy appearances. It is Kunjimaathu who alone recognizes the real nature of Kumaran.

“Kayal” is a testament to the point that Aathi forgives and forgets all. Gitanjali reaches Aathi as a last resort to save her daughter. The waste contributed by the city to her inner and outer selves is taken up by the land and becomes a sanctuary. “Orukuppikallu Oru Poovankozhi” pinpoints how manmade God and religion are distant from himself. “Thampuran”, a reflection of the people in Aathi, has been worshipped with all the human weaknesses. The so-called sophisticated people have separated God from people, and assigned special places for them. Here is an authentic expression of contemporary realities.

The people, especially of the elder generation, who have been guided by the pragmatic wisdom imparted by the chronicles of the evenings, are not attracted towards the showy assets and scenes of the city. A few of the new generation also foresee the impending dangers. They endeavoured to preserve Aathi with its all beauty. Dinakran sacrificed his own life for the land in his struggle for virtue. He vanishes from Aathi with his exhortation for fellow people to learn his life and implement those ideals in their lives. His aim was the betterment of Aathi. He gives the message that life should have environmental goodness. The author sums up the novel by putting

forward a vivid picture of colonization in the guise of “development”, how these affect our surroundings and ourselves, and what precautions we have to take for saving ourselves.

We can find two modes of ecological perspective in the novel. One is of those who are in power and the other is that of the rural folk upon whom the power is exercised. The first spoils the pristine quality of the countryside. The second is about how to preserve this genuineness and how to regain the village. The novelist very clearly portrays the resistance of Kunjimaathu to the mechanical Kumaran who had left village for the sake of development. Shailaja and Kunjimaathu exemplify women, the creators of new generations, who act for the betterment of the village through resistance. Through the reflection on the full-length mirror, Unnimon grasps the realisation that we are so different from the mental pictures of ourselves. The picture of Unnimon, who realizes his reality and returning to his village with his mother from city, is highly eligible for contemplation. “The man with black specs was in the tent”; instead of permanent houses, building temporary houses, and throwing them away after use; those flexible houses are able to fix everywhere. This subverts the concept of house. The tent raised at the opening of the novel is an image. The implication of their house has thus been shattered. The mirror conceals the reality of the face; face is the mirror of the mind. Hence, the man appears with black specs for hiding the emotional variations in his eyes. He, having no form and name, is a personification of the modern man. For his selfish ends, he hides his wild nature and there onwards, we can find the sight of his destruction of the purity of the village. Kumaran evinces that the person in Aathi himself spoils the sacredness of the hamlet.

Kumaran, rejecting the traditional orders of work and migrating to the city, returns village with the urban culture. He pretends to have affection for Kunjimaathu and exploits her. Later, he defiles the holiness of Aathi. The picture of exploiting the innocence and curiosity of

children, and thus attempting to pollute the sanctity of the generations, is visible. In the chapter “Manthrikam”, the magician appeases people through conjuring tricks; the sight of exhibiting various models and reshaping Aathi according to them. Through this, he is able to inculcate in the minds of the youth the notion of revealing the comforts and facilities of the city, and that our village should also be urbanized.

We can find in the novel a fresh perspective of ancient tales in the premises of contemporaneity. It urges to view incidents from the Mahabharatha, the Bible, Buddha-tales, and folklore with an added significance. The work is the most apt example for a novel that enables ecological reading and consciousness. The novel puts forth the view that a woman is both Nature and “Shakthi”. Kunjimaathu is a powerful embodiment of resistance. Overall, it is beyond question that “Aathi” holds, for ever, a unique position in the history of the novel in Malayalam literature.

Conclusion

It is only when women approach current affairs from her own subjective perspectives that their literature gather strength enough to foreground the biased existence of social structures. In a sense Sara’s writings remind us of what Elaine Showalter has mentioned about women’s writings. According to Showalter only when we understand and observe women as authors as well as readers that this process of powerfully articulating gender and the myriad structures around it becomes meaningful. In the absence of such observation being made and incorporated by women authors they inevitably become consumers of a literary world that was engineered to cater to the tastes and pleasures of a male only inhabited world. Thus a language incorporating feminine experience of inhabiting this world becomes a fundamental requirement. According to

Schowalter three factors become important in the context of women's writing, the feminine, the feminist and feminine subjectivist. Of these feminine is a trend to match up to the creative instincts of the male. The danger of this remains in the fact that it inevitably results in the borrowing of the same patriarchal frameworks. This also results in female authors competing with their male counterparts to present woman and her world in a stereotype language of patriarchy. The women being sketched here is the one predominantly cultivated in the male imaginations. The feminist mode of writing, on the other hand, attempts to render visibility to the difficulties and struggles that women face and undertake. Resisting, protesting and even revolting against the patriarchal structures is the hallmark of this *genre* of writing. The third mode, that is the subjectivist approach, ensures that the representation of the world is done from a strictly women's perspective. In this respect she is invited to reinvent her own self. What she called as gynocritics, considered a major mode of feminist literary criticism, is thus summed up in the following lines:

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (1985, 131)

Of these Sara Joseph belongs to the second category, that is the feminist. She not only consistently engages herself in a fiery fight against the male hegemony and patriarchal ideologies, but she also takes a clear position in the resistance against larger oppressive elements. What gets reflected in this novel is the author's adamant stand that declares harmony in

unambiguous terms with the political ideology of the lower class and caste divisions. She simultaneously declares her disagreement with the soft feminine love and woman's traditional role of being dependent of man. She is also not willing to yield herself into the glorified status of motherhood that, as she rightly recognizes, is the effective chain put in place to regulate her mobility within a social space. Sara believes that the individual frustrations and the social inequalities are products of the powerful elements of society who can retain their positions only through a reproduction of such inequalities. She foregrounds, what she conceives as "the" practical measure, that only by fully incorporating women's liberation movements is the larger goal of human liberation as such is possible.

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