



A COVENANTAL WELLSPRING OF LIFE: WATER SYMBOLISM IN SARAH JOSEPH'S *GIFT IN GREEN*

VINCY J DASAN

Research Scholar, Auxilium College, Vellore



VINCY J DASAN

ABSTRACT

This article explores through the water symbols used plentifully in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*. The novel has at its background the story of water-covenant between the inhabitants of Aathi, a village of pristine beauty and the Water. It is testified in the story that, under the earth was buried the clear water body that had sustained Aathi, and its people, for centuries. The signatories of this magna carta includes the fish, the frogs, the crabs, the oysters, the birds, the butterflies, the reptiles, the grass, the bushes and the mangrove forest. The people of Aathi found the divine presence in the numerous waterbeds with which the village is adorned. Faced with degradation and pollution of this miracle of life, they experience the absence of God and the fury of nature. This divine fury is highlighted in order to conscientize the people of the hazardous consequences of burying the water beds in order to build cities. It also explores the therapeutic effects of water in healing psychopathologies. The article points out that the self cleansing nature of water is symbolized as a reflection into the inner cleansing of one's own soul. The negative energy that emerges out to the cosmos by way of human anger, hate, vengeance, jealousy and greed is pointed in the study. The article concludes stating a great truth that the water-human connectedness exceeds the level of symbolism and that right from the umbilical cord of our existence until our final breath we are sustained by this miracle of life. This study inspires us to be responsible users of natural resources in order to preserve life in our planet.

Key Words: water symbolism, water covenant, water beds, capitalism, environmental degradation.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

The water that lashes upon can bring about destruction as in the recent drastic and traumatic flood in the metropolitan city of Chennai, and the water that gushes forth can be a sign of a covenant with its creator, the fountain of life and the source of energy as in the Biblical story of Hagar. The story of Hagar well interwoven into Sarah Joseph's 'Gift in Green', figure as an icon of the water covenant from the historical past to the present. Sarah describes this historic point as:

Incredulously she stood and watched the bird drinking water ravenously, dipping again and again into the pool around the spring and juddering its wings in joyful celebration. In a flash, Hagar ran back screaming, scooped up her son, flew to the spring, and immersed him in the water. Trembling, she poured a palm-full into his mouth and immersed him in the pool again and again. The flow of water continued undiminished, the source spouting more

and more fresh water. Hagar soaked herself in the stream until in her breast she knew the miracle of water turning into milk (Joseph 13-14).

Hagar takes to heart this contract with God, because it is sealed with her own struggles in the wilderness of her life, both literally and metaphorically with her new born son. She declares: "I shall be the caretaker of this water, guard it and mother it for the sake of my child and for the sake of the children yet to be born" (Joseph 14). In an era of capitalism and environmental degradation in the name of development, can the modern Hagars stand upright guarding the covenantal gift of water, for generations to come is a query of concern and anguish.

"Gift in Green", authored by Sarah Joseph, an eminent environmental-feminist activist and writer in Malayalam, and simultaneously translated by Vason Thampu, has at its background the story of a water covenant between the inhabitants of Aathi and the Water. It is testified in the story that, under the earth was buried the clear water body that had sustained Aathi, an entire people, for centuries. The signatories of this magna carta includes the fish, the frogs, the crabs, the oysters, the birds, the butterflies, the reptiles, the grass, the bushes and the mangrove forest. This statement of agreement reads thus: "You will give us water and livelihood. We shall work with you and take care of you" (Joseph 201).

A series of water metaphors occur throughout the novel. Anupama Raju in her review of the book in "The Hindu" news paper confirms that the over-riding metaphor in the novel is water. She continues to say that, "It flows gently at times like a river, at times overpowering like a roaring ocean. Much of the time, it is a wild stream twisting and turning, taking readers through an unpredictable course."

The people of Aathi found the divine presence in the numerous waterbeds with which the village is adorned. In the prologue to the story it is stated that, "The glory of God moved over the waters" (Joseph 1). On the contrary, faced with degradation and pollution of this miracle of life, they realize the absence of God. In the face of pollution

of water by the trash thrown from the hospital, Shailaja, one of the powerful female characters in the novel, realizes that, "God had already withdrawn his fingers, which once moved over the water" (Joseph 75). Seeing the lake behind the hospital is being filled with garbage from the hospital she was shocked with the realization that "her belief that the resources for human survival rested in water" is being shattered (Joseph 75).

In the episode, "Where Sweet Carts Overturn", where the magician with the magic wand who stand for the bourgeois of development, tries to attract the children with his magic and sweet carts, asks the children gathered around him whether they need a marsh or a play ground. Attracted by the sweets which would otherwise turn down they respond that they need playground though in their heart they believed that:

No human hand was allowed to touch that water, for the goddess of rice and fish dwelt in it. For the delicate water-goddess to survive, the ceiling of the marsh had to remain wet. The water mansion would collapse if the marsh were to go dry. If and when that happened, the goddess would go in search of a wet marsh through the deep, underground water paths: a journey full of hardships. Her anger, more destructive than fire, would rise in proportion to the difficulties she faced. Droughts would devastate the places she abandoned. Human beings would be able, at best, to hop about on the barren, burning earth, unable to stand still even for a moment. Thirst would kill the children; all the fish would have perished. The birds would fly away and the trees, desiccated with thirst, appear to have been scorched by wildfire. The marsh would exhale poisonous gases. People would be left with no choice but to flee (Joseph 102-103).

This clearly shows how when the natural existence of water is disturbed it can raise its fury against the intruder. Here water is also given a divine attribute which is an Indian custom, by referring to it as a goddess. This divine fury is highlighted in order to conscientize the people of the hazardous

consequences of burying the water beds in order to build cities.

The storytellers who were led mysteriously to the land of Aathi, yielded to the tradition of immersing themselves in the cool waters before the storytelling ceremony. The introducer would step into the water and would proclaim, "Jalam Saakshi!", and the people would echo in unison, "Jalam Saakshi!" which means, 'water is the witness' (Joseph 15). Usually people take promises keeping God as the witness; here the ceremonial act of storytelling evenings which has much connection with the people's connectedness to the water-life of the village begins pronouncing water as the witness.

Another symbolic figure of water is the mysterious girl found standing on the bank of the lagoon, looking intently at the water. It is Noor Muhammad, the first story teller who has much affinity with water, who observes her. She appears in the course of the story many times, witnessing with a forlorn look the degradation of the waters of Aathi, and at the same time clearing and cleaning the waters like "The Solitary Reaper" of William Wordsworth. From "Thettamparal" and "Meenwari" she was collecting empty cement bags which the bridge workers had thrown carelessly into the water, all through the night in her small boat (Joseph 146). Here the girl and her activities, point to the self cleansing nature of the water itself.

In the story of Budha, adapted in the novel the self cleansing nature of water is symbolized as a reflection into the inner cleansing of one's own soul. Ananda, the disciple of Budha who was upset with Budha for sending him a second time and to wait until the lake clears itself confesses to his master, "But as I sat still, waiting for the water in the stream to clear, I felt my anger and resentment subside down to the bottom of the stream. My mind became clean once again, pure and serene" (Joseph 37).

The mysterious girl mentioned above who comes visible only to Noor Muhammed at different instances teaches him great lessons on water, which are greatly relevant to life. She explains to Muhammed that the faces and bodies of babies glow because the water that flows through their bodies is pure, for the mind of a sucking baby is

pure. Muhammed adds his own reflection while sharing about his interactions with the girl to Markose, "When it begins, life is like pure water, and as we grow up we keep dumping dirt into it: anger, hate, vengeance, jealousy, greed.....then how can our faces shine?" (Joseph 149). It is commented in the story that, "we pollute the earth not with our hands alone but also with our hearts, nothing less than the cosmic flood would suffice: a flood mighty enough to sweep away the garbage of covetousness, corruption, treachery and oppression from deep within" (Joseph 229). That is why the Holy Bible aptly says, "there is nothing outside a person that going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

In another instance, a small girl is presented, who in her mental turbulence was able to scream only "poh.....poh....." which in the source language means 'go away'. Her name is 'Kayal', which means 'back water' (Joseph 55). Here the name of a body of water is given to the character in the story to denote the connectedness between water and her state of being. Her mother, Gitanjali confirms that she has come to Aathi seeking remedy for her daughter's ailments. Here, in the case of this girl water functions as a remedy for her psychological depression. She was advised to "know the water" and stay close to the water for her improvement (Joseph 57). Markose who accommodates Gitanjali and her little daughter was touched by Gitanjali's expression "know the water", and was reminded of Dinakaran, one of the main characters who used to say, "We need to understand the water, Markose. Not "know" in the usual sense of the term. We must know the water as the lotus know it: rooted in the sludge below, growing its stem in the water, unfurling its leaves on the surface of the water, and offering its wet and watery face to the sun"(Joseph 61). The kind of knowledge and understanding of which Dinakaran and Gitanjali speak of water is beyond the comprehension of humans and the man-made machines, which Kumaran, the villainous son of Aathi employs to build the bridge in Aathi. For, "what would the earth movers know of the river bed's inscrutable mysteries?" (Joseph 143)

There is an in-depth meaning in what water said to Shailaja who sat squatting without touching its black glueyness filled with stench which flooded and reached her kitchen door:

Who is it; tell me that continually abides with you, washing and keeping you clean inside and outside? Ask your own heart. Ask your veins and arteries. Ask your lungs . . . ask your womb!

You know only too well that I am not dirty in myself. On the contrary, I bear the dirt away as no sweeper or scavenger can . . .

Am I not the flow of life itself? If I were to stop flowing, life itself would come to a halt . . . (Joseph 208-209)

These quotes reveal to a certain extent the mystery of water, which flows through the veins and arteries of the human body and of every living and non-living thing, its miraculous involvement in the physical and emotional functions and of the inner recesses of a human mind and soul.

As the story concludes its veteran hero Dinakaran, who has a heart to heart bond with every character and events in the story was found floating on the water, a bloody murder committed probably by the intruders of Aathi, headed by Kumaran. The author narrates the scene as, "In the lap of his mother, he lay. The mother's lap: from time immemorial, the final resting place for the burden of every sacrifice and the refuge of every innocent person broken and bruised by the depravity of man" (Joseph 347). Shinie Antony in her review on 'Gift in Green' comments that "nature is a mother's lap", more exclusively it can be said in Dinakaran's case that water is the mother's lap.

The story is full of symbolism of water. Using the motif of water throughout the novel, the author wants to highlight the great realities of life. The water which is the essence of our very being and of the whole cosmos should be considered precious in modern man's mad pursuit for material progress. The question remains echoing and re-echoing in our ears, as the popular Malayalam poet Balachandran Inchakaadu in his poem 'Earth Song' sung with anguish whether the earth is habitable for the coming generation. Will the future generation be lead into a situation in which Coleridge said in his

Rime of the Ancient Mariner, "water, water everywhere; nor any drop to drink"? As we traverse in depth into novel the realization dawn to us that, the water-human connectedness exceeds the level of symbolism and it is a naked truth that right from the umbilical cord of our existence until our final breath we are sustained by this miracle of water, the spring of life. And this realization should lead us to safeguard and preserve nature and its resources for the future generation.

Works Cited

Joseph, Sarah. *Gift in Green*. Trans. Valson Thampu. India: Harper Collins, 2011. Print.

Antony, Shinie. *Ecologically Speaking*, CAS English Department, 10 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2014. <
<https://casenglishdepartment.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/a-night-never-to-be-lost-sara-joseph/>>

Raju, Anupama. *More than Propaganda*, The Hindu, 10 Dec. 2015. Web. 3 Dec. 2011
<http://www.thehindu.com/books/morethan-propaganda/article2680990.ece>>.