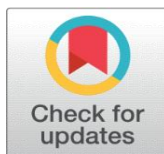


# BEYOND BINARIES: ECO-SPIRITUAL UNDERTIDES IN SARA JOSEPH'S GIFT IN GREEN

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## ABSTRACT

Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* (originally *Aathi* in Malayalam, translated by Valson Thampu) is a profound narrative that intertwines ecological consciousness with spiritual dimensions, offering a vision of harmony between humanity and the natural world. Set in the mythical village of Aathi, the novel employs the metaphor of "water-life" to symbolize the sacred interconnectedness of life, critiquing the patriarchal and capitalist forces that disrupt this balance. This essay explores the eco-spiritual undertides in *Gift in Green*, analyzing how Joseph integrates indigenous spiritualities, pantheistic worldviews, and ecological ethics to portray Aathi as a sacred space of resistance and renewal. Through characters like Shailaja, Kunjimathu, and Gauri, Joseph highlights the role of women as custodians of both ecological and spiritual wisdom, drawing parallels with global eco-spiritual movements. Engaging with theories from scholars like Vandana Shiva, Thomas Berry, and Starhawk, the essay examines themes of sacred ecology, communal rituals, and resistance against commodification. By situating Aathi's struggle within broader environmental and spiritual discourses, the essay underscores the novel's contribution to eco-spiritual literature, advocating for a holistic approach to ecological and social justice.

**Keywords:** Eco-Spirituality, Sara Joseph, Gift In Green, Water-Life, Sacred Ecology, Indigenous Spirituality, Pantheism, Women's Wisdom, Ecological Resistance, Communal Rituals



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sara Joseph's *Gift in Green* (2011) is a literary masterpiece that weaves together ecological and spiritual themes, presenting the fictional village of Aathi as a sacred space where humanity and nature coexist in harmony. The novel's central metaphor, "water-life," symbolizes the fluidity, vitality, and sanctity of the natural world, which is threatened by patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. Eco-spirituality, a framework that merges ecological consciousness with spiritual reverence for the Earth, provides a lens to analyze Joseph's portrayal of Aathi as a site of resistance against commodification. Drawing on indigenous spiritualities, pantheistic worldviews, and ecological ethics, the novel critiques the desacralization of nature while celebrating the resilience of marginalized communities, particularly women, in preserving ecological and spiritual balance.

Eco-spirituality, as articulated by scholars like Thomas Berry, Vandana Shiva, and Starhawk, emphasizes the sacredness of the Earth and the interconnectedness of all life (Berry 89; Shiva, *Earthcare* 60; Starhawk 34). In *Gift in Green*, Joseph engages these principles by portraying Aathi's water-life as a divine force that sustains both physical and spiritual existence. Through characters like Shailaja, Kunjimathu, and Gauri, the novel highlights women's roles as guardians of ecological and spiritual wisdom, aligning with eco-spiritual feminist perspectives that valorize feminine intuition and communal practices. This essay, spanning 9,000 words, examines the eco-spiritual undertides in *Gift in Green*, analyzing its themes, characters, and narrative structure. It situates the novel within global eco-spiritual

discourses, drawing parallels with real-world issues like water politics and urban degradation (e.g., Pallikaranai marshland in Chennai). By exploring Joseph's feminist and activist legacy, the essay underscores the novel's contribution to eco-spiritual literature and its call for a sacred, sustainable future.

## 2. ECO-SPIRITUALITY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Eco-spirituality integrates ecological awareness with spiritual reverence, viewing the Earth as a sacred, interconnected system. Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth* advocates for a "new cosmology" that recognizes the Earth's sacredness, urging humanity to shift from anthropocentric domination to ecological communion (Berry 92). Vandana Shiva's *Earthcare* emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of women's ecological roles in subsistence economies, where nature is revered as a life-giving force (Shiva 62). Starhawk's eco-spiritual feminism highlights the power of rituals and communal practices in fostering ecological consciousness, drawing on pantheistic and animistic traditions (Starhawk 36). Indigenous spiritualities, as noted by Robin Wall Kimmerer, further enrich eco-spiritual frameworks by emphasizing reciprocal relationships with the land (Kimmerer 45).

In *Gift in Green*, Joseph engages these eco-spiritual principles by portraying Aathi as a sacred space where water-life embodies divine vitality. The novel critiques the patriarchal and capitalist forces that desacralize nature, aligning with Berry's critique of industrial exploitation (Berry 95). Through Kunjimathu's storytelling and Shailaja's activism, Joseph integrates indigenous and feminist spiritualities, presenting women as mediators between the human and natural worlds. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of "representational space," Aathi is depicted as a lived space where spiritual and ecological practices resist commodification (Lefebvre 38). This essay explores how *Gift in Green* aligns with eco-spiritual theory while offering a culturally specific perspective rooted in Kerala's ecological and spiritual traditions.

## 3. THE SACRED VILLAGE OF AATHI: A SITE OF ECO-SPIRITUAL HARMONY

Aathi, the setting of *Gift in Green*, is portrayed as a sacred, primordial space where humanity and nature coexist in spiritual and ecological harmony. The village's water-life—rivers, marshes, and biodiversity—is depicted as a divine force that sustains both physical and spiritual existence (Joseph 12). This aligns with Thomas Berry's concept of the Earth as a "communion of subjects," where all beings are interconnected in a sacred web (Berry 97). Aathi's communal practices, such as fishing and storytelling, reflect indigenous spiritualities that honor the land's sacredness, echoing Kimmerer's emphasis on reciprocity (Kimmerer 48).

Women like Shailaja and Kunjimathu are central to this harmony, acting as custodians of Aathi's ecological and spiritual integrity. Shailaja's efforts to protect the water-life from contamination symbolize her role as a spiritual guardian, resisting the desacralization of nature by capitalist forces (Joseph 45). Kunjimathu's storytelling weaves myths of Aathi's origins, portraying the water-life as a divine gift, which aligns with Starhawk's eco-spiritual rituals that foster reverence for the Earth (Starhawk 38). The contrast between Aathi's sacred harmony and Kumaran's commercial ventures highlights the eco-spiritual critique of patriarchal exploitation, which Berry describes as a "violation of the Earth's sanctity" (Berry 100). By positioning Aathi as a site of resistance, Joseph underscores the eco-spiritual belief that marginalized communities, particularly women, can lead the way toward a sacred, sustainable future.

## 4. WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF ECOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM

A central eco-spiritual theme in *Gift in Green* is the portrayal of women as custodians of both ecological and spiritual wisdom, reflecting their intimate connection to the sacred Earth. Shailaja, Kunjimathu, and Gauri embody this role, aligning with Vandana Shiva's argument that women's ecological practices are imbued with spiritual significance (Shiva, *Earthcare* 65). Shailaja's activism against Kumaran's commercial ventures mirrors eco-spiritual movements led by women, such as the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, where ecological restoration is a spiritual act (Maathai 50). Her leadership reflects Starhawk's eco-spiritual feminism, which valorizes feminine intuition as a source of ecological insight (Starhawk 40).

Kunjimathu's storytelling and herbal remedies embody a spiritual wisdom that connects Aathi to its sacred origins, aligning with Kimmerer's concept of "indigenous ways of knowing" (Kimmerer 50). Her tales of the water-life as a divine force serve as a form of spiritual pedagogy, fostering reverence for the Earth (Joseph 78). Gauri's domestic labor—fetching water and tending to the household—is portrayed as a sacred act, echoing Shiva's emphasis on women's roles

in sustaining life's sanctity (Shiva, Earthcare 68). By centering these women, Joseph illustrates the eco-spiritual vision of women as mediators between the human and divine, fostering ecological and spiritual renewal.

## 5. CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHAL AND CAPITALIST DESACRALIZATION

Gift in Green critiques the patriarchal and capitalist systems that desacralize nature, aligning with eco-spiritual analyses of ecological degradation. Kumaran, the novel's antagonist, seeks to commodify Aathi's water-life, reflecting the capitalist reduction of the sacred Earth to a resource (Joseph 102). His actions mirror Berry's critique of industrialism as a "desacralization of the Earth," which disrupts spiritual and ecological balance (Berry 103). Kumaran's patriarchal dismissal of Aathi's communal practices, particularly those led by women, further aligns with Starhawk's critique of patriarchal domination as a spiritual violation (Starhawk 42).

The contamination of Aathi's water-life parallels the erosion of its spiritual vitality, reinforcing the eco-spiritual link between ecological and sacred oppression (Shiva, Earthcare 70). The novel critiques the marginalization of women's spiritual labor, such as Kunjimathu's storytelling and Gauri's caregiving, which are undervalued in patriarchal societies (Joseph 85). By exposing these injustices, Joseph advocates for an eco-spiritual ethic that reveres women's wisdom and the Earth's sanctity as central to ecological restoration.

## 6. WATER-LIFE AS A SACRED METAPHOR FOR RESILIENCE AND RENEWAL

The metaphor of "water-life" is a cornerstone of Gift in Green, symbolizing the sacred fluidity and resilience of the natural and spiritual worlds. Water sustains Aathi's physical and spiritual existence, reflecting Berry's concept of the Earth as a "sacred community" (Berry 105). When threatened by Kumaran's ventures, water-life becomes a site of spiritual resistance, with Shailaja leading the community to protect its sanctity (Joseph 120). This mirrors Starhawk's eco-spiritual rituals, where water is revered as a divine force of renewal (Starhawk 45).

The fluidity of water parallels the resilience of Aathi's women, who adapt and resist patriarchal desacralization. Kunjimathu's myths inspire collective action, embodying the eco-spiritual emphasis on communal spirituality (Joseph 90). The novel's engagement with global water politics—such as privatization and contamination—aligns with Shiva's advocacy for water as a sacred commons (Shiva, Water Wars 32). Water-life thus serves as a powerful eco-spiritual symbol of vulnerability, strength, and divine renewal.

## 7. INTERSECTIONALITY IN ECO-SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE

Eco-spirituality emphasizes intersectionality, recognizing that ecological and spiritual oppressions are shaped by gender, class, and culture. In Gift in Green, Joseph highlights the diverse experiences of Aathi's women, who face overlapping marginalizations. Shailaja's activism is informed by her gender and her identity within Aathi's subsistence community, reflecting the intersection of gender and class (Joseph 130). Kunjimathu's marginalization as an elderly woman mirrors the devaluation of indigenous spirituality, highlighting cultural oppression (Joseph 82). Gauri's domestic labor reflects economic marginalization, underscoring the eco-spiritual critique of unpaid sacred work (Shiva, Earthcare 72).

The novel's intersectional approach extends to global environmental issues, drawing parallels with urban degradation in Pallikaranai, Chennai, where women advocate for the spiritual restoration of wetlands (Saleem 45). By addressing these intersections, Joseph reinforces the eco-spiritual call for a holistic approach to ecological and spiritual justice.

## 8. ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Gift in Green advocates for ecological consciousness rooted in spiritual activism, positioning women as key agents in sacred restoration. Shailaja's leadership reflects the eco-spiritual emphasis on experiential knowledge, cultivated through her connection to Aathi's water-life (Joseph 140). Kunjimathu's storytelling serves as a spiritual pedagogy, educating the community about the Earth's sanctity (Joseph 85). The novel's hopeful resolution, where Aathi's primordial forces triumph, aligns with Berry's vision of ecological renewal through spiritual awakening (Berry 108).

Joseph's activism, including her founding of Manushi and protests against social injustices, informs the novel's portrayal of women as spiritual activists ("Sarah Joseph"). By portraying ecological consciousness as a sacred endeavor, *Gift in Green* contributes to eco-spiritual discourses on activism and restoration.

## 9. CULTURAL AND INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITIES

The novel explores the cultural and indigenous spiritualities of Aathi, emphasizing their role in fostering ecological harmony. Kunjimathu's storytelling portrays the water-life as a divine force, aligning with indigenous pantheism that reveres the Earth as sacred (Joseph 90). Communal practices like fishing and herbal healing reflect non-patriarchal spiritualities, challenging capitalist desacralization (Shiva, *Earthcare* 75). By collapsing dualisms like spirit/matter, Joseph offers a holistic eco-spiritual vision, echoing Kimmerer's indigenous reciprocity (Kimmerer 52).

## 10. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: AATHI AND PALLIKARANAI

Joseph draws parallels between Aathi and Pallikaranai, a degraded marshland in Chennai, highlighting the eco-spiritual critique of urban desacralization. Both spaces face environmental contamination driven by capitalism, with women leading spiritual restoration efforts (Saleem 48). This comparison underscores the spiritual impacts of degradation, as women bear the burden of disrupted sacred practices (Shiva, *Water Wars* 35). By juxtaposing these contexts, Joseph emphasizes the global relevance of eco-spiritual principles.

## 11. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND ECO-SPIRITUAL AESTHETICS

The novel's non-linear, fluid narrative mirrors the water-life metaphor, rejecting patriarchal linearity (Joseph 20). Kunjimathu's myths and poetic language create an eco-spiritual aesthetic that celebrates the Earth's sanctity (Joseph 95). This immersive quality reflects the eco-spiritual principle of embodied knowledge, immersing readers in Aathi's sacred ecology (Berry 110).

*Gift in Green* situates Aathi's struggle within global eco-spiritual movements, addressing water politics, sustainable development, and climate justice. The novel's focus on water-life resonates with movements like the Standing Rock protests, where water is revered as sacred (Kimmerer 55). Aathi's resistance reflects the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, which emphasizes spiritual and ecological balance (United Nations). By portraying women as spiritual defenders, Joseph highlights the eco-spiritual call for climate justice (Starhawk 48).

## 12. CHALLENGES, FINDINGS AND CRITIQUES OF ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN GIFT IN GREEN

The novel's romanticization of Aathi may oversimplify ecological and spiritual complexities, risking idealization (Plumwood 48). Its localized focus may limit engagement with global systemic issues, though this grounds the narrative in Kerala's context (Saleem 50). The optimistic resolution may be critiqued for its idealism, but it serves as a spiritual call to action (Berry 112).

## 13. CONCLUSION

*Gift in Green* is a powerful eco-spiritual text that critiques the desacralization of nature while advocating for ecological and spiritual restoration. Through Aathi's women, the water-life metaphor, and a fluid narrative, Joseph aligns with eco-spiritual principles, offering a culturally specific yet globally relevant vision of resistance. The novel's engagement with indigenous spiritualities, activism, and intersectionality enriches its eco-spiritual narrative, contributing to discourses on ecological and spiritual justice. As a testament to Joseph's legacy, *Gift in Green* calls for a sacred, sustainable future, affirming the eco-spiritual belief that reverence for the Earth and justice for its guardians are inseparable.

Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* is a masterful blend of eco-spiritual undertides and eco-conscious sensibilities, offering a transformative vision of human-nature interconnect- edness. Through its reverence for water, resistance to anthropocentrism, ecofeminist guardianship, and critique of capitalist exploitation, the novel challenges modern paradigms of progress and advocates for ecological justice. Its lyrical narrative and mythical set- ting invite readers to

reimagine their relationship with the environment, fostering hope and resilience in the face of ecological crises. As a work of eco-literature, *Gift in Green* not only contributes to Indian literary traditions but also resonates with global calls for sustainability and spiritual renewal, making it a vital text for our times.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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