



Research article

## Orality and Indigenous Environmentalism in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green*

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### Abstract

In recent times, the growing recognition of the significance of indigenous storytelling extends beyond its role as a cultural repository, encompassing its potential as a wellspring of ecological and ethical insights. In this era of rapid change and globalization, understanding and appreciating the role of indigenous storytelling becomes all the more essential. It serves as a crucial reminder that, beyond the visible diversity of languages, customs, rituals, and traditions, there exists a profound shared heritage woven through narratives that have sustained these communities for ages. This study examines indices of indigenous environmental protection in Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* (2011). The central focus of this study lies in the portrayal of storytelling nights within the narrative, arguing that storytelling not only serves as a vital instrument for cultural preservation but also manifests as an expression of environmental consciousness. Thus, this study, through a close reading of Sarah Joseph's text unravels the transformative influence of cultural performances within indigenous communities, elucidating their role in nurturing ecological awareness and fostering sustainable practices.

**Keywords:** oral tradition, ecosystem people, indigenous storytelling, environmental ethics, resilience.



[Climate Action, Life on Land](#)

### Introduction

Contemporary literature has reflected a heightened awareness of environmental issues, mirroring society's growing concern for the well-being of the planet. Authors across the globe, such as Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* (2009), Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Vandana Shiva in *Making Peace with the Earth* (2012), Ian McEwan in *Solar* (2010), and Anuradha Roy in *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) etc. continue to explore themes such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and human impact on ecosystems. These narratives often explore the repercussions of environmental negligence, prompting readers to reflect on their role in sustainability. This literary trend aligns with a broader societal shift towards environmental

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awareness or eco-consciousness, using literature as a medium to encourage readers to actively engage with and address urgent environmental changes. Numerous literary works also delve into the intricate relationships between indigenous communities and the natural world and illuminate the complexities of indigenous experiences, addressing issues of environmental stewardship and the enduring struggle of indigenous communities to preserve cultural heritage amid contemporary challenges. For instance, in the Brazilian context, the recognition of the significance of local and Indigenous populations and their knowledge in governance, development programs, and global environmental assessments has evolved diversely across the globe. This evolution spans from the emergence of bioprospecting initiatives in the 1990s with questionable outcomes (Hayden, 2003) to the worldwide surge in conservation efforts (Zimmerer, 2006; West et al., 2006), the proliferation of climate change mitigation strategies like REDD+ projects (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012), and the integration of local and indigenous knowledge into international assessments (Sutherland et al., 2014; Thaman et al., 2013) (Kohler & Brondizio, 2017, p. 1-2). Simultaneously, a parallel can be drawn between Brazil's experience and similar global trends, highlighting the universal relevance of recognizing and incorporating the insights of local and Indigenous communities in environmental governance and sustainable development efforts.

This paper will examine Sarah Joseph's translated novel, *Gift in Green* (2011), where oral tradition, particularly storytelling, emerges as a powerful vehicle through which the indigenous community of the fictional location Aathi in India, grapples with modern-day changes in the environment. Examining Joseph's novel as a singular text enables an in-depth exploration, offering nuanced insights into the profound relationship between indigenous storytelling and eco-consciousness. The storytelling in Aathi serves as a lens through which the indigenous community navigate through challenges posed by ecological shifts. Fikret Berkes (2008) in *Sacred Ecology* defines Traditional Ecological Knowledge as "a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with the environment" (p. 7). The increased interest in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in recent years is attributed, in part, to the recognition that TEK plays a crucial role in contributing to the conservation of biodiversity (Gadgil et al., 1993), preservation of rare species (Colding, 1998), establishment and management of protected areas (Johannes, 1998), understanding ecological processes (Alcorn, 1989), and promoting sustainable resource use (Schmink et al., 1992; Berkes, 1999) (Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2000, p. 1251). As the narrative unfolds, the 'storytelling nights' in Aathi become a means of articulating the community's observations, experiences, and responses to environmental changes. Furthermore, this study will draw upon the conceptual frameworks of 'omnivores' and 'ecosystem people' proposed by Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, with a specific focus on their relevance to indigenous communities. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the environmental perspectives within the narrative chosen for analysis, particularly about the experiences and practices of indigenous people.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the symbiotic relationship between indigenous storytelling and environmental awareness. While there exists a rich body of literature exploring such intersection, this study deliberately centers on Sarah Joseph's novel, *Gift in Green* (2011), as a representative and illustrative case. Using Joseph's novel as a focal point adds depth to the

discussion, leveraging the richness of its storytelling traditions. Despite Aathi being fictional, the narrative provides a gateway to explore and connect with real-world cultural practices across various regions. The aim of this study is also to demonstrate that, through discussion and inquiry into the impact of development on the environment, storytelling tradition possesses the potential to cultivate critical thinking within indigenous communities. This tradition serves as a forum for discussion, allowing individuals to express concerns and, in the process, transmit a legacy of environmental stewardship to subsequent generations. In conjunction with this, the application of Gadgil and Guha's concepts in the analysis of the narrative is vital in fulfilling the paper's aim of providing an understanding of the environmental perspectives embedded in the text.

### **Locating Indigenous Storytelling**

Indigenous storytelling is a profound and rich tradition that transcends generations, weaving intricate narratives that connect communities with their cultural roots. Through the art of storytelling, indigenous communities celebrate their heritage, preserving unique identities and fostering a sense of unity that resonates across time and space. "Indigenous stories are as diverse as the location and IPs [Indigenous Peoples] they emanate from; yet, they share several commonalities that have given rise to the use of indigenous storytelling as a distinct term" (Archibald, 2008, as cited in Fernandez-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017, p. 3). Indigenous narratives comprise intricately woven details about human sustenance, intricately encoded and interwoven with compelling elements to secure their conveyance, captivating both the emotional and intellectual facets of the audience (MacDonald, 1998, and Archibald, 2008, as cited in Fernandez-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2017, p. 2). Around the world, a multitude of indigenous communities have fostered diverse storytelling traditions, each characterized by its linguistic, geographical, and cultural specificity. These stories include myths, legends, folk tales, and historical records, creating a dynamic narrative that reflects the complex socio-ecological dynamics of different regions.

Indigenous storytelling is marked by distinctive traits that showcase the cultural richness and traditional wisdom of native communities. They often revolve around a deep connection between indigenous groups and their natural surroundings, where flora, fauna, and other natural elements carry symbolic significance, reflecting a profound link to the environment. Indigenous storytelling also imparts moral values and practical insights essential for communal living, promoting ethical conduct related to respect, cooperation, and balance. According to Lamazares and Cabeza (2018), storytelling among Indigenous Peoples serves various purposes, such as entertaining, passing down a repertoire of culturally built knowledge, maintaining a sense of community, and instilling moral values (as cited in Nabokov, 2006; Lawrence & Paige, 2016). Anthony Nanson in *Storytelling and Ecology: Empathy, Enchantment, and Emergence in the Use of Oral Narratives* (2021), explores the intricate dynamics of storytelling by delineating three fundamental components that come into play when a narrative unfolds. Firstly, there is the narrative itself encapsulating a distinctive sequence of events that forms the core of the storytelling experience. Secondly, the storyteller employs an array of communicative tools, including words, voice modulation, movement, and body language, to convey the tale with depth and resonance. Lastly, the narrative's vitality extends beyond the storyteller, embracing the interplay between narrator, the engaged audience, and the ambient physical environment. This multifaceted interaction illustrates the holistic nature of

storytelling, where the narrative is not only a product of the storyteller's expression but also a shared experience shaped by the reciprocal dynamics among storyteller, listeners, and the surrounding context (Nanson, 2021, p. 49). Nanson even likens storytelling to a conversation, where although one person predominantly takes on the role of the speaker, an ongoing dialogue of non-verbal communication also persists. This interactive dynamic extends beyond verbal exchanges, providing listeners with opportunities to contribute, share their own stories, and even transform the storyteller into a listener. He mentions how this fluidity in the roles of speaker and listener reflects a sense of community, particularly evident in indigenous storytelling sessions (Nanson, 2021, p. 50). This reciprocal and interactive nature of storytelling, where the roles of speaker and listener fluidly interchange, is notably exemplified in the chosen text for analysis in this study.

### **Storytelling, Ecology, and Indigenous Community in Joseph's *Gift in Green***

Penned by a social activist, *Gift in Green* was published in Malayalam in 2011 with the title *Aathi* and was concurrently translated into English by Rev. Dr. Valson Thampu. Sarah Joseph seamlessly blends tradition and innovation in *Gift in Green*. In the fabric of the novel, storytelling surpasses the limitations of simple critique and reveals itself as an essential element intricately woven into the narrative. Joseph's accomplishment lies in revealing the timeless values of an ancient narrative style within the framework of this modern novel. The author herself underscores the traditional elements of her work explicitly stating in the "The Making of Aathi" section at the book's conclusion that *Gift in Green* primarily revolves around stories and storytellers. These stories draw inspiration from diverse sources such as the Bible, the holy Quran, Zen and Sufi traditions, the Puranas, folk narratives, historical events, and anecdotes associated with the life of St. Francis of Assisi. The author also notes that these narratives undergo a process of reconstruction and reinterpretation within the distinctive context of Aathi (Joseph, 2011). The author strategically integrates a diverse array of stories drawn from religious, cultural, and historical traditions that serve as a potent method to surpass cultural boundaries, fostering a universal connection while emphasizing the enduring and transformative essence of storytelling. Through such a narrative collage, the author also encourages readers to delve into the interwoven threads of diverse cultural stories.

Set in a fictional location, *Gift in Green* portrays the struggles of an indigenous community as they try to grapple with the harsh realities of 'development', witnessing the encroachment of their lands, destruction of forests, and disruption of their water-based livelihoods. Joseph skillfully navigates the complexities of this plight, shedding light on the broader issues faced by indigenous populations in the face of relentless development. The novel prompts the readers to reflect on the human and environmental costs of progress. In the heart of this captivating novel lies a rich tapestry of oral tradition, where storytelling nights emerge as the lifeblood of the community. As the novel unfolds, the significance of storytelling nights becomes increasingly apparent. They are not mere interludes but integral to the survival of the community. The storyline of the novel is intricately crafted with a dual focus, vividly portraying the daily life and struggles encountered by the residents of Aathi, authentically capturing the essence of their existence. The central theme revolves around Aathi's cyclical journey of decline, death, and resilient regeneration (Joseph,

2011). The periodic interruption of the plot by storytelling nights introduces a diverse range of narratives, each contributing to a collective reflection on the profound realities and destiny of the community. Joseph, thus, employs storytelling nights as a narrative tool to delve into the various challenges faced by the community, nurturing a communal identity and underscoring the shared destiny of Aathi's people. This storytelling device not only adds cultural depth to the narrative, exploring the challenges faced by the community, but also serves as a lens through which contemporary issues are examined by the indigenous community residing in Aathi.

In Sarah Joseph's novel, the imaginary realm of Aathi becomes a mesmerizing setting for enchanting storytelling nights. While Aathi itself is a product of creative ingenuity, its storytelling traditions echo real-life scenarios across diverse cultures worldwide. The kaleidoscope of global storytelling traditions is reminiscent of India's rich cultural tapestry, encompassing ancient epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as regional folk tales passed down through generations. Drawing parallels with the annual Kumbh Mela in India, Aathi's communal gatherings align with the global phenomenon of storytelling festivals and communal events that emphasize the importance of shared narratives in fostering unity and spiritual connection. Beyond India, the oral storytelling traditions of cultures like the Irish Seanchai, the African Griots, and the Japanese Rakugo performers all contribute to the global heritage of verbal storytelling, mirroring the essence of Joseph's fictional tales. By linking the storytelling nights in Aathi to these varied real-life situations across cultures, the narrative gains depth, universality, and authenticity, establishing a bridge between the imaginative realms of literature and the rich cultural diversity found across the world.

R.F Dasmann's ecological classification (1989) categorizes urban dwellers with a higher economic status as biosphere people (BP), drawing a clear distinction from the economically weaker rural population identified as ecosystem people (EP). The indigenous community of Aathi comprises what Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha have called an "ecosystem people". According to them, ecosystem people are "such people [who] depend on the natural environments of their locality to meet most of their material needs" (Gadgil and Guha, 1995, p. 3). The inhabitants of Aathi have established a distinctive and sustainable lifestyle deeply grounded in their harmonious connection with nature. Embracing self-sufficiency, they rely on the diverse resources provided by their surroundings, fostering a symbiotic connection with the environment. From the fertile soil yielding abundant crops to the rich biodiversity offering sustenance and materials, the inhabitants of Aathi have honed a model of self-sufficiency that not only meets their basic needs but also exemplifies a profound respect for the intricate balance of the natural world. This intrinsic reliance on the gifts of nature not only sustains their daily existence but also shapes a cultural ethos where the reciprocity between humanity and the environment becomes a guiding principle of their communal identity. To quote from the text,

Even if you fished only till noon, you could make enough to feed a whole family. Fish or mussels: enough to meet one's daily needs. Add to this two Pokkali harvests from the paddy fields every year that anyone could reap. It was quite sufficient to live free from want (Joseph, 2011, p. 21).

These lines underscore the intricate nexus between the residents of Aathi and their environment providing a glimpse of their self-sufficiency. The indigenous community of Aathi, as portrayed by

the author, epitomizes the concept of indigeneity and embodies the intrinsic connection between indigenous communities and their environment. This portrayal aligns with the broader characteristics often associated with indigenous communities worldwide, where a deep understanding of and reliance on the local ecosystem forms the foundation of their unique ways of life and beliefs.

However, the arrival of Kumaran, who had left Aathi thirty-six years ago and returned with ambitions for development, precipitates a profound upheaval in the community's established way of life. His reappearance disrupts the established equilibrium, introducing a wave of change that challenges the community's traditional self-sufficiency. In the midst of the transformative tide ushered by Kumaran, the cherished tradition of storytelling nights perseveres as an enduring cultural anchor in Aathi. Characters such as Dinakaran, Kunjimathu, Markose and Shailaja, embodying the resilience of oral traditions become torchbearers of the community's rich narratives.

Cultural internalization comes into play in the narrative. This refers to the process by which individuals acquire and incorporate cultural beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes into their understanding and identity. It involves the deep integration of cultural elements into an individual's thoughts, feelings, and way of life, often to the extent that these cultural aspects become an inherent part of their self-concept and worldview. Berkes et al. (2000) discuss various social mechanisms behind traditional practices and write, "A third category of social mechanisms concerns mechanisms for cultural internalization, which include rituals, ceremonies, and other traditions. Rituals help people remember the rules and appropriately interpret signals from ecosystem change" (p. 1258). In Aathi, storytelling transcends a mere narrative; it becomes a sacred ritual, weaving the community's cultural fabric and preserving ancestral wisdom through the rhythmic cadence of shared tales. Within the narrative framework of *Gift in Green*, seven distinct storytelling nights are portrayed, each characterized by the introduction of a different storyteller, whose identity remains veiled until the appointed moment. Upon the arrival of the storyteller during the designated storytelling nights, the narrative delineates a ritualistic adherence to the customs of Aathi. Describing this ceremonial process, the text states,

Putting down their bundles, the Storytellers who came year after year would take a dip in the cool water of Aathi. Emerging from the water, they would clad themselves in white. The Karnavar of Aathi would then lead the Storyteller by the hand into the boat and make him sit on the prow. The ceremonial boat would lie anchored on the ferry bank that stretched like the neck of a bottle into the courtyard of Thampuran's shrine. Even as the Storyteller took his appointed place on the prow of the boat, the Introducer would arrive from the east, rowing his boat. In faithful compliance with the traditions of Aathi, the Introducer – wearing a headgear and mask, a torch blazing in his hand – would step into the water (Joseph, 2011, p. 15).

The storyteller's profound reverence to Thampuran underscores a symbolic gesture emblematic of the cultural ethos ingrained in the community. This cultural ethos revolves around a profound reverence for tradition, authority, and community values. Thampuran, presumably a significant figure, symbolizes the collective wisdom and heritage of the community. This reverence signifies

a cultural ethos rooted in honoring ancestral figures, acknowledging the importance of shared narratives, and upholding a sense of communal identity.

Moreover, the storyteller's immersion in the waters of Aathi symbolizes not only a physical act but a ceremonial affirmation of connection to the land and its elemental essence. This act signifies a profound acknowledgment of the water life intrinsic to Aathi, referring to the essential and inseparable relationship between the indigenous community of Aathi and the water elements surrounding their land. The entry into the water also serves as a metaphorical gesture, aligning the storyteller with the fluid narratives of Aathi's existence, reflecting the continuous movement and change in their collective history. Thus, beyond its ceremonial significance, this ritual becomes a symbolic bridge, connecting the storyteller with the lifeblood of Aathi and reinforcing the intricate bond between the indigenous community and its aqueous environment.

As expounded by the author, *Gift in Green* emerges as a narrative mosaic intricately woven from a diverse array of storytelling sources. The inaugural narrative unfolds as the compelling story of Hagar, a tale drawn from the Bible. The symbolic significance of Hagar's narrative, marked by her protective role and veneration for water, poignantly mirrors the innate bond between the people of Aathi and their deep respect for water life. Hagar, renowned for her protective nature, becomes a metaphorical guardian like the generations of Aathi residents who have consistently protected and held in high esteem the water life surrounding their community. Her tale resonates as an allegory for the custodianship exercised by the inhabitants of Aathi over the aquatic environment, highlighting a shared commitment to preserving the delicate balance between humanity and nature. In the alchemy of Aathi, water is not merely a physical resource but a sacred entity intertwined with the fabric of their identity. The symbolic gesture of the storyteller immersing in Aathi's waters at the start of the storytelling session mirrors Hagar's reverence, strengthening the conviction that water serves not only as a sustenance source but also as a spiritual channel connecting the community to its deep-seated roots. In this context, 'deep-seated roots' refer metaphorically to the profound and enduring cultural, spiritual, and historical connections that the community shares with its traditions and the sacred space of Aathi. This immersion, therefore, signifies a spiritual link that ties the community to its rich traditions, emphasizing a connection that runs through generations and underscores the enduring nature of their cultural identity.

The appropriation of a biblical story, such as Hagar's tale, by the author serves as a deliberate narrative choice to convey universal themes and resonate with a broader audience. While acknowledging the presence of indigenous stories in Aathi's culture, the inclusion of a familiar biblical narrative establishes connections with readers more acquainted with such widely recognized tales. This blending of biblical and indigenous narratives serves as a strategic storytelling approach, fostering accessibility and universality in conveying the novel's themes.

In a different storytelling session, the storyteller unravels a tale of a serene mountain valley, where a community thrives by tending to cows and embracing the simplicity of life. The children, affectionately called 'govindas', plays an integral role in the daily rhythm, contributing to the livelihood by caring for the cows and engaging in the age-old tradition of milking. Amidst this idyllic setting, the storyteller recounts a pivotal moment when the community's faith is challenged. The annual puja for Lord Indra, the rain god, becomes a point of contention as a wise *govinda* challenges the conventional belief. Instead of venerating an unseen deity, he urges the villagers

to acknowledge the mountains, the tangible forces that trap clouds and bestow rain upon their fertile lands. In Hagar's story, there's an implicit lesson about responsible resource management and the consequences of neglecting the environment. Similarly, in the mountain valley tale, the *govinda* challenges the traditional belief in a rain god and redirects the community's reverence towards the mountains, attributing the source of rain to a tangible, natural phenomenon. The *govinda's* plea for the villagers to acknowledge the truth that is evident in their surroundings echoes the broader theme of environmental awareness. Similarly, Hagar's narrative may serve as a metaphor for the resilience required in the face of environmental challenges.

In the story, the act of the *govinda* hitting the mountain and scooping it up to shield the villagers from the deluge can be interpreted as a symbol of human agency and the potential for positive intervention in the environment. This aligns with the concept of environmental stewardship, where communities actively participate in preserving and nurturing their surroundings. Just as the villagers, post the intervention of the *govinda*, continued to worship the mountain that ultimately provided for their needs, Hagar's story may represent a cyclical relationship between humanity and the environment, highlighting the reciprocal nature of care and sustenance.

In both narratives, there is an underlying message about the interdependence of communities and the natural world, emphasizing the need for a harmonious relationship with the environment. The mountain valley story, akin to Hagar's tale, underscores the idea that acknowledging and respecting the truth of our connection to the environment is essential for the well-being and sustainability of communities.

Following each storytelling session, an intriguing interlude ensues as the inhabitants of Aathi grapple with a pivotal question: "How are we to apply the essence of this story to our lives?" (Joseph, 2011, p. 17). This enquiry becomes a catalyst for communal introspection, prompting residents to seek answers and engage in thoughtful discussions that transcend the boundaries of storytelling. Adrienne S. Chan (2021) in the article *Storytelling, Culture, and Indigenous Methodology* examines the function of Indigenous storytelling and writes, "Stories can evoke different memories, ideas, and emotions. They would be told by elders to convey a lesson, so listeners can make sense of the story and use it in their own lives. The significance of a story is rooted in its origins, as it was told by the ancestors. [To] learn anything from it, we must be ready to listen, [and] attend to our feelings, thoughts, and responses" (p. 177-178). Chapin (1991) asserts that in regions where traditions endure, there is no perceived necessity to actively conserve knowledge; individuals naturally engage in cultural practices (Chapin, 1991, as cited in Berkes, 2000, p. 1258). Thus, this ritualistic exchange and contemplation after each tale contribute to the novel's thematic depth, fostering a dynamic discourse on the practical application of timeless wisdom in the context of Aathi's evolving landscape.

Hagar's story, with its emblematic emphasis on environmental stewardship and reverence for water life stands in stark contrast to the ideals of Kumaran who "...despised water. The thing had no form or shape" (Joseph, 2011, p. 21). In Kumaran's words, "In a pot, it resembles a pot. Trapped in a pond, it tamely takes on the shape of the pond. What is this water you're talking about? Does it have any identity? Will it ever be something in itself? The thought of it makes me sick!" (Joseph, 2011, p. 21). Kumaran's vision for Aathi was anchored in progress, aspiring to cultivate development through the construction of roads and bridges. His ambition aimed to transcend the



geographical confines of Aathi, bridging connectivity and facilitating a transformation that challenged the community's traditional way of life. It is interesting to note that Kumaran's strategic approach to development unveils a layered progression, notably initiated with a symbolic gesture toward Thampuran's shrine rather than an immediate focus on infrastructure like bridges and roads. Kumaran's choice to commence with the renovation of the shrine establishes a narrative precedence, guiding the community toward an acceptance of change through the lens of their deeply cherished traditions.

The contrasting perspectives on water between Hagar's story and Kumaran's vision illustrate a dichotomy between tradition and modernity within the community of Aathi. Hagar's tale symbolizes environmental stewardship and reverence for water life, embodying a deep connection to natural elements. On the other hand, Kumaran, with his disdain for water, epitomizes a modernist outlook that dismisses the value of nature. His idea of progress, focusing on building things, moves away from the community's traditional life close to nature.

Amidst the winds of change sweeping through Aathi, however, the sacred tradition of storytelling continues and the people, attuned to the shifting environmental dynamics, gather after each session for thoughtful discussions. In another poignant storytelling session, a ventriloquist's voice fills the air as he engages in an animated conversation with his monkey, the discourse subtly shifting towards a bridge being built in Aathi aimed at boosting tourism. The audience, unaware of the purpose behind their ongoing bridge construction, begins to draw parallels between the ventriloquist's words and their current circumstances.

The ventriloquist's story, centered around a carpenter and his son building a bridge for a ruler, serves as a powerful metaphor for the contemporary scenario in Aathi. The incomplete narrative leaves the audience in suspense, mirroring the uncertainty and lack of clarity surrounding the real purpose of the bridge being constructed in their town. This narrative device encourages the audience to reflect on their situation, prompting questions about the motivations behind the bridge construction in Aathi. Is it genuinely for the benefit of the community, or are there ulterior motives at play?

After the session, the character Thankechi emerges as a vocal advocate for nature, expressing her concern for the environment. Her impassioned voice resonates through the gathered community as she articulates the profound changes she observes. In Thankechi's words,

I am afraid to look into the water now. Can't see through to the bottom at all. The very feel of it has changed. I have given up searching among the roots and hollows of the mangrove trees. Where have all the prawns gone? The roots are crushed by the concrete piles driven among them. Gag your mouth and nose for a few minutes and see for yourself. Wouldn't you die? The little mangrove trees have started dying from their roots up. The prawns and *karimeen* have gone elsewhere, looking for safe places to breed. Bridges should not be built where they breed. That will be the end of fishing (Joseph, 2011, p. 142).

With conviction, Thankechi asserts a powerful ethos, contending that the construction of bridges should be a thoughtful endeavour, avoiding areas teeming with life. Her advocacy against building bridges in areas rich with life in Aathi reflects a profound inclination towards environmental ethics.

Her expression not only highlights the ecological repercussions but also serves as a powerful narrative teaching the community, and readers alike, the ethical imperative of harmonizing human development with the preservation of the intricate web of life in nature. "In general, environmental ethics is a systematic account of the moral relations between human beings and their natural environment. Environmental ethics assumes that ethical norms can and do govern human behavior toward the natural world" (Desjardins, 2013, p. 17). Joseph R. Desjardins, in *Environmental Ethics: An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy* (2013), divides environmental ethics into three divisions, namely, anthropocentric ethics which is human-centric and "holds that only human beings have moral value" (p. 17), non-anthropocentric ethics "[that] grants moral standing to such natural objects as animals and plants" (p. 17), and holistic ethics "shifting from a focus on individual things – for example, spotted owls or redwood trees – to a focus on collections or 'wholes' such as species, populations, or ecosystems" (p. 17). In Aathi, the community's response, exemplified by Thankechi's impassioned stance aligns with the holistic ethics described by Desjardins. Thankechi's concern transcends the immediate impact on individual elements like mangrove trees and aquatic life, reflecting an understanding that encompasses the interconnectedness of species, populations, and ecosystems. The deliberate ambiguity in the ventriloquist's story encourages the audience to consider the potential consequences and implications of the ongoing bridge construction in Aathi. It sparks a collective awareness among the listeners, urging them to critically examine the decisions made by those in power and the impact on their lives.

So, it becomes evident that the discussions that ensue after each narrative serve as a forum, where the inhabitants of Aathi deal with pressing environmental concerns, portraying a community cognizant of the delicate balance between human activities and the natural world. The discussions within the indigenous community of Aathi, as they grapple with environmental challenges, resonate with Lela Brown's idea (2013) where she states, "On the surface, sitting around listening to stories may not seem like a remedy for global ecological crisis. However, in indigenous cultures all around the world, stories help people gain [a] complex understanding of Nature. Traditional stories also help indigenous people remember the ways that their lives are linked to even large-scale-long-term ecological cycles" (Brown, 2013, para. 1).

While Thankechi is driven by holistic ethics, characters like Kumaran, Ambu, and Prakashan align with anthropocentric ethics, reflecting a human-centric perspective that places paramount importance solely on human needs and development. Their viewpoints throughout the novel, akin to Desjardins' anthropocentric division, underscore a belief system where moral value is predominantly attributed to human beings, potentially influencing their decisions that prioritize progress over the broader natural environment in Aathi. To quote from the text,

Poor Thankechi knew nothing about the scheme to build a massive paradise on earth by landfilling and levelling four hundred acres of backwater that included Ganesh Subramaniyam's three hundred acres...The water that bred fish for the local people and the roots of the mangrove trees among which the prawns spawned were non-issues in comparison. Life, big and bold, was in the offing. Little lives had to give way, lest they got crushed under the tyres of trucks and tipper lorries (Joseph, 2011, p. 142).

The callous dismissal of “little lives” in favour of grand development encapsulates a stark contrast between conflicting ethical values among the characters of the novel and the potential of ecological consequences of prioritizing human-centric progress.

As Kumaran’s promises of economic prosperity and modern flats unfold, the reality reveals a stark contrast. Despite the initial utopian vision, the benefits disproportionately favour the affluent, with Kumaran and associated companies being the primary beneficiaries. In the environmental context, Gadgil and Guha label such individuals as ‘omnivores’, who monopolize the gains of economic development at the expense of the wider population, including the ecosystem people (Gadgil and Guha, 1995, p. 4).

Pollution too becomes a central theme, causing a devastating typhoid epidemic in Aathi, highlighting the profound impact of modernization on the traditional ways of life and the environment. The once-pristine water, vital for life and storytelling traditions, succumbs to pollution, symbolized by a disturbing black and gluey substance, severing the intimate connection between cultural practices and the environment. In this context, Sarah Joseph writes,

But all this belonged to the distant past that had vanished without a trace. Now the same grass lay coagulated in thick, pitchy sludge. Unable to sit or even stand on it, the people were sorely distressed... The water itself lay black and gluey and on its surface lingered malodorous bubbles. Markose felt nauseated at the thought of stepping into that water. Contrary to custom, the Storyteller had had his bath in a lotus pond somewhere else before coming here (Joseph, 2011, p. 236).

The storyteller’s choice to seek purifying waters elsewhere becomes a poignant symbol of the community’s collective realization – a visceral acknowledgement of the degradation wrought upon their once-sacred water bodies. This drastic transformation not only robs Aathi of its pristine natural beauty but also severs the intimate connection between the community’s cultural practices and the environment.

Despite the shifting landscape of Aathi, the indigenous community resiliently persists in hosting storytelling nights, reflecting their unwavering determination to preserve cultural heritage and reinforcing a sense of identity despite the challenges brought about by societal changes. Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes (2013) express the idea that for indigenous people, stories serve as powerful tools. These narratives are not only a way to illustrate and make sense of the violence caused by colonial history but also a means of actively resisting it. They write, “Stories become mediums for Indigenous people to both analogize colonial violence and resist it in real ways. A kind of embodied reciprocity exists between a people and their stories” (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. v). In the context of Aathi, the fact that people actively participate in discussions to discern how the stories’ essence can be applied in their lives underscores the pragmatic and functional nature of indigenous storytelling. It extends beyond mere entertainment or a storehouse of cultural legacy, functioning as a dynamic tradition vital for guiding and enlightening the community’s behaviours. Moreover, the characters’ voiced concerns regarding the changing landscape of Aathi with the arrival of Kumaran and his development plans illustrate the relevance of storytelling in addressing contemporary issues. The stories are not just tales; they are a way for the community to respond and resist the impact of colonial violence on their lives and culture. It signifies a profound and active engagement with their history, using storytelling as a form of resilience and resistance. “The

responses of the listeners influence the telling of the story, which emerges from coordinated efforts of [the] teller and audience. Such cooperative interaction partly explains the dynamic nature of indigenous stories, continually adapting to new sociocultural scenarios (Eder, 2008, and Fernandez-Llamazares et. al., 2017, as cited in Fernandez-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2018, p. 3). Thus, the stories act as a medium through which the community grapples with the challenges posed by external forces and developmental changes. The concerns raised indicate a heightened environmental consciousness and a deep-rooted connection between the narratives and the evolving landscape of Aathi. The storytelling nights, therefore, function as a form of communal introspection and a means of preserving the collective memory of Aathi. By discussing and questioning the impact of development on their environment, the characters demonstrate the storytelling tradition's capacity to foster critical thinking, articulate concerns, and pass on a legacy of environmental stewardship to future generations.

Sarah Joseph's novel *Gift in Green* serves as a vivid exemplar, unravelling the layers of indigenous storytelling to reveal its capacity to nurture eco-consciousness. This focused analysis of the text has allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how a single narrative can encapsulate and exemplify the transformative potential of indigenous storytelling in fostering ecological awareness. In essence, indigenous storytelling is not a static or isolated practice; it is an integral part of the community's response to change, a mechanism for reflection, and a wellspring of resilience amid changing circumstances. It showcases the adaptability of traditional storytelling in addressing contemporary challenges and highlights its enduring role as a conduit for cultural continuity and environmental awareness.

In Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* the narrative seamlessly weaves together storytelling and reality, driven by a profound ecological purpose. This intricate tapestry explores the deep connections between human experiences and the environment, with storytelling serving as a potent vehicle for conveying ecological wisdom and addressing urgent environmental concerns. The storytelling in *Gift in Green* functions as a bridge between the imaginary world of fiction and the concrete challenges posed by the environment. Through vivid narratives, Joseph breathes life into the characters' experiences, highlighting the ecological motives that underscore their struggles and underscoring the symbiotic relationship between human actions and the natural world.

An evident and deliberate effort is made to embed ecological consciousness into the storytelling, transforming it into a conduit for raising awareness about environmental issues. The characters, their challenges, and the unfolding events are metaphorical representations of the broader ecological struggles faced by the community, seamlessly blending storytelling with heightened environmental awareness. The ecological motive threaded through the storytelling goes beyond the narrative's confines, prompting readers to contemplate their connection with the environment. Through the characters' experiences, the novel encourages readers to reflect on the repercussions of human actions on the natural world and consider sustainable practices. The novel intertwines ecological consciousness into its storytelling, using characters, and events as metaphors for broader environmental struggles. This approach not only raises awareness about ecological issues but also aligns with the importance of integrating indigenous storytelling into mainstream education, emphasizing values related to nature. In her article, Maria Hofman (2022) emphasizes the importance of merging different knowledge systems to benefit from mutual learning. She suggests adopting the indigenous culture of storytelling, performed by indigenous

people, into local traditions and mainstream education. Hofman also advocates for transformative learning, which “means learning that makes a difference in the individual’s behavior, in the learner’s actions in the future, and in attitude and personality, which is the kind of learning urgently needed for a turn towards a sustainable future” (Hofman, 2022, p. 10).

The novel, thus, stands as a testament to the potency of storytelling as a tool for ecological advocacy. It demonstrates how narratives can transcend the boundaries of fiction, serving as a dynamic force that engages with real-world environmental issues. Through the seamless integration of storytelling and reality, Sarah Joseph crafts a narrative that not only captivates readers but also motivates them to adopt a more conscious and sustainable relationship with the environment. This text underscores the potential of storytelling not just to entertain but to inspire positive action and change in readers’ attitudes towards ecological issues.

## **Conclusion**

Sarah Joseph's *Gift in Green* provides a captivating perspective for examining the profound influence of narratives on cultural identity and unity. The choice to feature this fictional work prominently, despite Aathi's fictitious nature, is rooted in its unique capacity to bridge the realms of imagination and reality, resonating with a diverse spectrum of global storytelling traditions. This study has demonstrated that the intersection of storytelling and ecology transcends geographical constraints, shedding light on the potential of indigenous performances to harness ecological power and imagination.

Joseph's text is an investigation into how traditional performances, particularly those rooted in the cultures of the global south, can move beyond anthropocentric practices and empower non-human entities. By intertwining the strands of cultural storytelling with ecological awareness, these performances emerge as powerful tools for devising practical solutions to the climate crisis in the global south. The incorporation of Aathi's storytelling nights provides avenues for re-envisioning humanity's connection with nature, fostering a more profound understanding of environmental interconnectedness. Consequently, Joseph's work transcends its literary realm, catalyzing envisioning and enacting positive change. It underscores the broader potential of traditional performances to contribute to a sustainable and harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world.

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