

IMAGINING A UTOPIAN ISLAND:

Reading Sarah Joseph's *Aathi* (2011)

[Received February 19th 2024; accepted February 28th 2024 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.218]

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ABSTRACT: This article reads the novel *Aathi* ('The gift in green'), written in 2011 by the Malayalam author Sarah Joseph, within the frameworks of Blue Humanities and Island Studies. Keralam's cultural geography is inherently entwined with its coastal and aquatic environment, necessitating an examination of this South Indian coastal state through a hydrological lens, especially in light of anthropogenic environmental instabilities. This study intends to analyse how the centrality of water in this text impacts its narrative and themes by positing the imaginary island of the text as a utopian aquapelago. As an early feminist writer in Kerala, Sarah Joseph incorporates ecofeminist sensibilities in the text, allowing for a re-exploration of discourses around women and the environment from an aquatic perspective. By examining *Aathi* as a South Asian literary work, this article also aims to deepen the understanding of the region's environmental, cultural, and social milieu, emphasising the need for multiple voices and perspectives in dealing with water-related issues.

KEYWORDS: Aquapelago, Keralam, Imaginary Island, Utopian Island, Anthropocene

Introduction

In South Asian literature, water and its diverse manifestations assume paramount significance. The tangible presence of the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea, as experienced in the daily lives of the denizens of the Indian subcontinent on land and islands, have manifested itself through multifaceted expressions within both fictional and non-fictional narratives within the subcontinent. Nevertheless, this facet is rarely subjected to scrutiny beyond the metaphorical representation of water and wetness in human lives. In this context, a water-centric discourse is ever significant in the reading of South Asian water narratives and narratives from people who live close to the water. This article is an attempt to re-read a fictional water narrative from the southern Indian state of Keralam within the intricate interfaces of Blue Humanities and certain concepts in Island studies. Keralam, nestled in the southwestern region of India, is characterised by a geography that intertwines seamlessly with its oceanic proximity and riverine topology. Bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west, the state experiences a profound influence from maritime currents, shaping its climate and fostering a lush coastal environment. This close relationship with the ocean is

complemented by the region's intricate networks of myriads of rivers and their branches, which flow through verdant valleys and low-lying plains. However, Kerala's geographical features also expose it to the full force of the Southwest Monsoon, which brings heavy rainfall to the region for several months each year. These monsoons that sweep across the state play a crucial role in sustaining its ecosystems and agricultural livelihoods, replenishing its rivers and wetlands and ensuring the fertility of its soils. Yet, these intense rainfalls can also pose significant challenges, triggering floods and landslides that disrupt daily life and infrastructure. The state's unique geography, with its proximity to both the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, exacerbates the impact of these monsoons, making the state particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events. Thus, Kerala's cultural geography is inherently entwined with its narratives of coastal and aquatic environments of islands, backwaters and wetlands making the lives of the inhabitants of this state essentially intertwined with water in various forms necessitating an examination of this South Indian coastal state through a hydrological lens, especially in light of anthropogenic environmental instabilities. However, it is paradoxical that one cannot find many water narratives in Malayalam literature, especially from the people who live in close proximity to the sea, backwaters, and wetlands. This absence may indicate the marginalisation of communities dwelling in these aquatic environments. While there are numerous narratives depicting the monsoon season, they predominantly evoke dominant nostalgic memories of rain and associated activities. Moreover, the ecological writings originating from the state tend to be predominantly land-centric, even when addressing waterbodies and waterscapes.



Figure 1 - Location of Kerala in India (Filpro, 2019)

Sarah Joseph's *Aathi*, simultaneously published in English as *Gift in Green* (2011), is written in the wake of such an environmental and ecological consciousness in the state's political and cultural milieu. Joseph stands as one of the pioneering women writers in Kerala who purposefully positioned herself within the realm of Malayalam feminist literature. Her literary works exhibit a pronounced acumen in confronting the prevailing societal issues of her era, primarily underscored in her writings on the environment. Joseph's writings often reflect her environmental and feminist activism. *Aathi* stands out as one of the earliest Malayalam fictional works to be overtly hailed as an environmental text, marking the author's immersion into ecofeminist discourses. Joseph's concerns about feminist ecology have undergone much scrutiny, and *Aathi* has also been under the same radar. Joseph in *Aathi* brilliantly portrays the creation and depletion of an imaginary island in the face of the Anthropocene. Joseph situates this island in an imaginary and vague geographical space, facilitating its larger symbolism as a representative of every eyot, wetland and island within Kerala. The geographic location of this imaginary island could be anywhere along the coastline, as it embodies a backwater-like environment surrounded by mangroves, a characteristic commonly found in wetlands and small islands near the region's coast. Embedded within the Malayalam literary culture of interpreting water-based narratives through a land-centric lens, *Aathi* has similarly been studied predominantly from terrestrial perspectives, analysing how the narrative facilitates a certain ecological viewpoint in terms of nature/land being destroyed in the face of development. Ecocritical and ecofeminist literature in Malayalam majorly revolves around such concerns, which is reflected in Joseph's inadequacy in dealing with specific marginalisations associated with people living near waterscapes. This article attempts to re-read *Aathi*, looking at its islandscape from a majorly hydrological lens through the larger frameworks of Island Studies and Hydro/Blue Humanities.

The interdisciplinary field of Hydro/Blue Humanities has emerged to investigate the intricate interplay between water and human society, incorporating insights from disciplines like environmental studies, social sciences, and the humanities. Hydro/blue-humanities explores how water shapes our collective identity, influences our history, and impacts our present and future trajectories. Within this discipline, water bodies are not treated merely as metaphorical presences in the lives of humans; rather, they are considered as a subject in itself that has the power to shape and affect material life. Hester Blum (2010), a pioneer of oceanic literary studies, advocates a turn from the metaphorical treatment of water to focus more on its material and social being, particularly the ocean, shifting the lens to the point of view of the people whose lives are inextricably connected to the water bodies. (p. 671) Scholars in the field of Blue Humanities depart from terra-centric viewpoints when examining life and literature, immersing themselves in the exploration of how both human and non-human entities interact with and are influenced by water. Steve Mentz, the pioneer of Blue Humanities, in his work *Shipwreck Modernity* (2015), talks about wet narratives as opposed to dry, land-centric narratives. The former is characterised by disorder, disorientation and rupture which leads us to the dynamic and flowing nature of this discourse. Mentz, in his major work *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2023), presents the idea of planetary water to include various forms of wetness into the realm of Blue Humanities, including ice, bog, marsh, snow, clouds etc. This emphasises the discourse's role in facilitating thinking about the environment in multiple forms. It is also important to see how the much-pondered sublimity of the past ocean becomes very much an ecological concern in the Blue Humanities. Mentz also elaborates on the concept of wet ontological thinking by which thinking about water's being becomes an activity that contains the watery spaces inside and outside of human bodies "to cultivate an awareness of the constant proximity of bodies and different kinds of moisture" (2023, p. 45). Taking from such ways of

thinking about water, this study intends to analyse how the centrality of water in the text *Aathi* impacts its narrative and themes by examining the dynamic relationship between humans and water. It tries to situate the text within the rupture of land-centric reading, specifically looking at this water narrative as an actant in the Anthropocene. This discussion is extended by positioning the text as a water narrative through identifying the space of the fictional Aathi as an aquapelago. The concept of aquapelago has recently burgeoned under the purview of Island Studies. Philip Hayward describes the concept as follows:

A social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging. (2012, p. 5)

The foundation of this concept gets its form through an oppositional stance from the idea of archipelagos, the latter being terracentric. In Island Studies, the archipelago refers to a collection of island groups intricately connected to each other. The aquapelago differs from this is through the academic shift in a gaze towards water from the land. Joshua Nash, in his article 'Introduction: The Space of Aquapelago', explicates the nature of this concept as "the study of some of the ways islands might be thought of in terms of their near neighbouring islands and aquatic spaces." (2016, p. 2) Fundamentally this concept allows us to look at the land, which is intricately connected with water, through a primarily hydrological lens.

The Literary Imagination of an Aquapelago

Joseph presents the space of Aathi, which is a freshwater island, as an environmentally ideal space, almost taking the form of an aquatic utopia. Aathi, as envisioned by the author and as implied by its title, represents a genesis rooted in water, a fundamental essence from which all origins derive. Therefore, life in this eyot is inextricable from the water that surrounds it. The cultural geography of this aquapelago is determined by the water-oriented occupations, entertainment and livelihood of the people living around it. The text doesn't follow a linear narrative style; rather, the chapters are juxtapositions of Aathi before development led by the antagonist Kumaran and during this developmental process. Joseph advances the text's narrative by employing a metanarrative that revolves around the ritual of storytelling in Aathi. The book begins with the story of an abandoned and wandering Hagar in the desert, finding the source of water for generations. Through this story, Joseph draws a parallel between the biblical tale and the origins of Aathi around water, denoting how Aathi served as an oasis for an expelled and marginalised populace. Joseph's construction of various characters within the narrative is inextricably linked with the space of Aathi. The character of Noormuhammad, the inaugural storyteller within the narrative, seamlessly interweaves with the essence of Aathi, akin to an indispensable component of its aqueous landscapes, alongside his unnamed female lover who is equally entwined within the watery tapestry of Aathi. The emotional and physical intimacy they share is through the waters of Aathi while looking for *thettamparal* (an aquatic plant that has healing properties) and cleaning the water. Through the wanderings of Noormuhammad in search of this girl, Joseph describes the constitution of the place of Aathi as follows, "innumerable canals, water drains, ponds, water springs, wells, paddy fields brimming with water, and slushy marshes crisscrossed the place - the network of Aathi's nerves." (Joseph, 2011, p. 33) The text can also be said to assume the narrative technique of magical realism as the primary characteristics of this aquatic space are utopian in nature. Joseph, through the various characters, elaborates the history of this eyot. This history and this space's present rightly posit it within

the definitions of an ideal aquapelago. Hayward elaborates on the concept of the aquapelago as follows:

It provides a framework for understanding the continuum of land and sea resources and human activity and the connections between 'cultural landscapes' created by agriculture and habitation and the sea-surface 'scapes' and underwater 'scapes' created by aquaculture, fisheries and other human interactions. (2012, p. 5)

Aathi has a historical legacy deeply intertwined with the cultivation of Pokkali rice and traditional shrimp farming, practices upon which the local populace has long depended. In addition to these livelihoods, the people rely on a diverse range of fish, aquatic organisms, and aquatic plants for their daily sustenance. The history of Pokkali rice which thrives in salty marsh, being brought to Aathi by Kaaliappan (the ancestral head of the village), is a local legend and underscores the resistance of the once marginalised people of Aathi. Being enveloped by water, the terrain itself assumes the fluidity inherent to its aquatic surroundings, imbuing the lives of the inhabitants with a sense of dynamism and mobility. This mobility within an aquapelago distinctively diverges from that experienced on dry land, aligning itself with the particular rhythmic cadence of the water. An illustrative instance of this lifestyle pattern is embodied in the portrayal of the characters of Kunjmathu, the female protagonist and her female companions. These three unmarried women base their lives solely on the aquapelagic space of Aathi for livelihood and leisure. Joseph describes an instance where they await their ritual submersion in the water during high tide on a full moon as follows:

Until now, from high tide to low tide and back, life had been wound on a key of predictability. For every high there was a low; all her life she had lived with that article of faith. It had never betrayed her. (2011, p. 194)

Furthermore, Kunjmathu's sexual desires and encounters possess a similarly fluid quality akin to water and are intimately intertwined with her profound familiarity with the underwater realm:

But how could she stay on the ground? This thing erupted from depths unfathomable, and would not be bridled. It surfaced, uprooting and bearing with it all that came in the way: pearl formations, seaweed and vegetation, whales, killer sharks and corals. Many had said in the past that waves rolled and reared within Kunjmathu's head. But was that all? Didn't the choppy waves rise and run amok all over her body, from head to toe? Didn't the depths of her churn and surface as though she were an ocean in heat? Her veins, alleys for the moonlight; her stomach its mansion; and her womb its very manger. (2011, p. 192)

Hayward adeptly talks about this mobile and flowy nature of aquapelagos giving it a new facet:

Aquapelagos are assemblages that come into being and wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop in these contexts. In this sense, aquapelagos are performed. (2012, p. 6)

Aathi becomes a performed entity through its built history around water, its resilience against the modernisation of the coastal land and through its remodelling of itself according to the changing environments. Additionally, even though being an islandscape Aathi is rarely referred to as an island rather, it is called a *thuruth*, roughly translating to an eyot, signalling the shift in its essence from an archipelago to an aquapelago.

Belonging in Aquapelagic Aathi

Hayfield and Nielson, in their article 'Belonging in an aquapelago: Island mobilities and emotions', vastly talk about how aquapelagos are characterised by the collective feeling of belonging in an island as follows:

Embodied belonging through occupations like fishing and water-bound jobs. Eating locally grown products, for some, was a way of nurturing their sense of embodied belonging, but besides taste, other senses, especially seeing and hearing, figured in expressions of belonging. (2022, p. 202)

Aquapelagos, as performed entities, establish a profound emotional bond within the minds of the people who actively participate in shaping and upholding these spaces. The embodied relationship the people of Aathi have with this eyot is manifested throughout the text especially in the characters of the women. Shailaja, a woman who was born and brought up in Aathi, has an umbilical connection with the space, which primarily takes the form of her perception of waters other than Aathi's. Working as an aide in a private hospital, Shailaja initially confronts the distressing sight of biomedical waste being discharged into the river, as recounted by Joseph as follows:

Laden with the stench, the wind was heavy. Besides placentas and murdered fetuses, Shailaja saw, emerging from innumerable cracks and crevices, severed limbs, swabs oozing with pus, blood clots, decomposed phlegm, chemical agents, plastic bottles and bags, garbage. A terrible thirst afflicted Shailaja. Her throat was dry, her lips parched. She sweated profusely. (2011, p. 75)

Witnessing this contamination profoundly affects Shailaja, evoking an intense thirst within her, thereby underscoring the emotional and physiological impact of this incident on her. Then she moves to Chakkamkandam, another island after her marriage, to merely return later, witnessing the horror of the polluted waters of that space with human excrement. The evening of the marriage itself, a distressed Shailaja wailed:

'Ayyooh!' Shailaja let out a scream, unawares... She sniffed, and her apprehensions being proved right, ran to the bed, jumped onto it, and began to wail aloud, avoiding even toe contact with the floor. (Joseph, 2011, p. 82)

She completely avoided any physical contact with the waters of Chakkamkandam during the four days she lived there and cried for the touch of Aathi's ideal waters. The character of Kunjimathu testifies to aquapelagic belonging through her constant interventions to reclaim Aathi starting from her act of buying the land forsaken by the antagonist Kumaran to her unyielding struggle to protect the precious ecospot called Greenbangle filled with the perepat plant. The characters of Dinakaran, Markose and Ponmani, representing the virulent youth who spearhead the movement to preserve Aathi's identity from being

destroyed by the terra-centric developmental forces initiated by Kumaran, assume this responsibility through their sense of collective belonging on the island. Notably, none of these characters are described as having conventional occupations, thus distancing themselves from market-driven and terrestrial livelihoods. The aquapelago is depicted as fulfilling their daily necessities. Hayfield and Nielson further elaborate the idea of belonging in an aquapelago by talking about the aspect of out-migration. They state:

Nevertheless, the fact of these places being characterised by out-migration remains an important palimpsest for those who choose to stay—this is evident as respondents continuously position their place of belonging in contrast to elsewhere. (2022, p. 194)

In the case of Aathi, the antagonistic figure Kumaran was the first person to migrate out of Aathi in search of new ways of life and to accumulate material wealth. Following his path, many young men migrated out of Aathi for a dry life in the terrain. For the people who chose to stay in Aathi, a life out of the aquapelago was unthinkable in places where water did not find its way naturally.

The Aquapelago in the Anthropocene

The text *Aathi* is fundamentally a story of anthropogenic intervention in an ideal aquapelagic space. Sarah Joseph narrates the slow conversion of a utopia into a dystopia through human interference. As nature is presented as the ideal in this narrative, Kumaran, the one who initiates an apparent modernity in his once-abandoned homeland, becomes the natural antagonist. The youth who support Kumaran in the pursuit of employment and improved prospects also assume the roles of antagonists within the context of Aathi. Joseph, while delineating the space of Aathi, articulates a myriad of ecological concerns through recurring motifs such as diminishing mangroves, green crabs, blue conches, and wetlands. The entire narrative revolves around the progressive transformation of Aathi's pristine waters into a contaminated drainage. The return of Shailaja to Chakkamkandam towards the conclusion as Aathi had turned more polluted than the former island, along with the disappearance of Noormuhammad's unnamed lover within the marshy man-made death point, which was created as a consequence of the bridge construction at the place called Meenwari, signify the culmination of the end of Aathi's existence as it once was—a utopian aquapelago. Joseph facilitates the visualisation of Aathi's modernised future through the technique of magical realism via the recurring character of the magician who constantly accompanies the development troupe from the land along with Kumaran. He, with his magical wand, strews sweets all over the marsh for the children of Aathi to collect, and when the children try to retrieve it, they keep sinking in the marsh. Then the magician asks, "The marsh! The marsh is the problem, isn't it?" (Joseph, 2011, p. 101). Rahul V. and Nagendra Kumar, in their article 'Magic(al), Environment and Malayalam Literature' delineates this scene in Aathi within an ecological framework. They say:

Joseph's Gift in Green is ultimately a cautionary tale. The magician and his magic are symbolic representations of the techniques used by corporations to foreground the lack and then manipulate the people...The capitalist force that Kumaran becomes is the agent of hyperconsumption and mass production attempting to oust the existing practice of subsistence farming and minimal trade in Aathi. (2022, p. 167)

The constant juxtapositions of the past of Aathi and the Aathi that is coming to form via Kumaran's interventions serve as a canvas to think about water and the environment in the Anthropocene. When Kumaran initiated the so-called development in this aquapelagic space, the first thing he commenced was the construction of a bridge which connected Aathi with the land replacing all the waterways they already had. The bridge here acts as a metaphor for terra-centric developments, which often threaten the lives of waterbodies and people who live around them. Kumaran, as an outsider, views Aathi as a place with obscure beliefs and lives hindered by the very marsh and waters that define the space. His vehemence to build bridges and roads and to fill the wetlands robs Aathi of its aquapelagic existence. Aathi was formed by a group of people who came together to escape their marginal existence, and they did that by creating their own systems of production and consumption around water. The development initiated by Kumaran results in them retracting to their former marginality, and the identity of the people also starts to quiver and transform, pushing them into living in a constant state of struggle for survival.

Conclusion

There have already been significant studies about utopian islands in the field of Island Studies. The term utopia itself was a Western formulation denoting an imaginary island where everything is ideal. Scholars have already stated how the vision of islands as utopic stems from rigorously colonial discourses. In their article 'Rethinking utopian and dystopian imagination in island literature and culture', Su, Xiao & Zhu relate how during the age of European colonialism, the concept of the utopian island was used to justify the colonisation of non-Western lands. Islands were seen as empty spaces waiting to be filled with European settlers and their 'superior' culture and they harp on the importance of the decolonial turn in Island Studies for challenging the dominance of Western utopian visions. By creating alternative visions of island utopias that are rooted in their own cultures and histories, non-Western scholars and writers are contributing to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of utopian thought. (Su, Xiao & Zhu, 2022, pp. 4-8) Bill Ashcroft similarly studies Caribbean literature and locates the colonial idea of utopian islands projected onto the Caribbean as a space of subversion. He talks about the coloniality of utopian islands and how archipelagic thinking aids in removing the Western aspirations of ideal remoteness from the Caribbean islands, resulting in postcolonial transformation of the imaginary colonial utopian island. (Ashcroft, 2015) Sarah Joseph's treatment of Aathi as a utopian island is achieved by pitching the space as an ideal aquapelago where the sense of community, belonging and sufficiency reigns. Thinking with the existing formulations of utopian islands, Joseph presents Aathi as an untouched indigenous land with utopian qualities attributed to the space by the local people themselves. The antagonist Kumaran here acts as the colonial force who tries to impose his idea of utopia onto the space of Aathi. Kumaran's utopia becomes similar to the colonial imaginations of utopian islands in seeing Aathi as an isolated space which should be connected to the land for it to become ideal and sustainable. But using the framework of aquapelagic thinking to look at the space of Aathi will thus deconstruct this colonial utopia and aid in seeing through the neocolonial tendencies in development in the Global South.

It is also important to see that Joseph's furnishing of Aathi as an eyot is rather fantastical where the waters are never a bother to the people's lived experience till external human intervention occurs. The original waterscape of Aathi, as described by Joseph through one of the characters, is as follows:

It is only when you step into the paddy field that you realise what 'soft and yielding' truly means. Water, tears and earth - every stone, speck, and fibre taken from it - melted, merged and become one, lay fermenting fertility. (2011, p. 164)

This quote hints at how Joseph's concerns while writing the book were an amalgamation of thoughts around land and water, specifically stemming from her ecofeminist involvement. *Aathi*, authored by a writer whose environmental works typically focus on land, exhibits signs of a challenging shift in perspective. The motif of Kumaran constructing a bridge, linking the ideal aquapelago to the land permanently, indicates an interface where the narrative endeavours to articulate the changes and challenges of a shift from terra-centric to water-centric perspectives while writing about coasts and islands in a Malayalam literary scenario. The apparent ambiguity in Joseph's narration of the water/landscapes of Aathi also highlights the absence of explicit articulations of water-centric environmental issues in Malayalam literary texts and limited representations of wetlands and islandscapes devoid of land as their primary concern. This is where the concept of aquapelago becomes particularly significant, as it offers a framework through which island narratives can be examined at the intersections of Hydro Humanities and Island Studies. This approach holds the potential to promote deeper and more pertinent environmental reflections in South Asia.

Joseph wrote *Aathi* against the backdrop of various escalating environmental concerns spurred by development projects in Kerala. Chakkamkandam, a location referenced in the novel as a wasteland, is an actual place situated in the Thrissur district of Kerala. This coastal backwater village, located on the outskirts of Guruvayur (a renowned pilgrimage centre in Kerala), gained attention in the news due to its deteriorating environmental conditions caused by the continuous discharge of untreated sewage from hotels and homestays into its waterways. Joseph's engagement with this real-life event is vividly reflected in her depiction of the waterscapes of the fictional Aathi, which transitions from pristine to polluted by the narrative's conclusion. The surreal and ambiguous ending of the work points to the impending nature of addressing these environmental issues. In the ecological discourse of Kerala at that time, one of the pressing issues being the scarcity of water, Joseph created an imaginary space with a plenitude of water. As this space was an idyllic island, it clearly marked its disconnectedness to the outside world and an insular culture which was connected to nature and natural ways of living. Joseph's position as the author of this work also indicates a lack of lived experience in island and wetland environments which is evident in the way she romanticises the place, its people and their lives. In an interview with the translator of the work, Valson Thampu, she says, "Aathi is at once a utopia and a chunk of harsh reality. Aathi-like people-groups and its way of life survive everywhere. So, it cannot be a utopia." (Joseph, 2011, p. 371) This formulation, wherein indigenous and coastal communities are depicted as naturally coexisting with nature without significant emphasis on their material conditions, may suggest a form of environmental essentialism.

Despite Joseph's consistent advocacy for marginalised groups through her works, she inadvertently romanticises the living conditions of island inhabitants in this work. *Aathi*, meaning origin in Malayalam, attributes a certain virginity and mythic purity to the islandscape. The inhabitants of this aquatic milieu are depicted as living in a state of organic harmony, removed from the terrestrial realm's harshness and solidity. While Joseph adeptly constructs a fictional aquapelago as a microcosm representing Kerala's small islandscapes, she falls short in examining the tangible living conditions of individuals residing in and around water bodies. Furthermore, the portrayal of female characters such as Kunjimathu and Shailaja as primary actors in responding to negative developments in their eyot (women

coming together to protect the mangrove forest, Greenbangle) mimics environmental movements in India like Chipko and the later discussions that followed them underscoring the organic connection between women and environment. Shalini M (2022), in her article 'Ecofeminism and Its Impasses: Women Writing Nature in Malayalam Literature', clearly explains this tendency with regard to various stages of ecofeminist writings in Malayalam (p. 143). When Joseph's narrative fails to articulate the reasons behind these actions by the women characters and presupposes a natural and ideological connection between the women and the waters and ecology of Aathi, it again facilitates this ecofeminist discourse which end up essentialising gender and nature. These aspects definitely show the limitations of imaginative fiction in portraying real-life issues. However, *Aathi* opens a thorough discussion around how to talk about water, wetness and island lives as opposed to a land-centric environmental discourse in Kerala. It also prompts considerations of how development initiatives concerning water and water-dependent communities should prioritise a water-centric approach rather than emphasising their connection to the land. The study of this text also lays bare the absence of, and the necessity for, voices from the waterside, coasts, and islands within the Malayalam literary context to advance practical and experiential narratives.

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