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MYTHOPOETIC RECONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED AND ECOLOGICAL SPACES IN THE FICTION OF SARAH JOSEPH

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Abstract

This paper examines the mythopoetic reconstruction of gendered and ecological spaces in Sarah Joseph's major fictional works, including Gift in Green, Aalahayude Penmakkal, Othappu, Mattathi, and selected short stories. Drawing on ecofeminist, postcolonial feminist, and spatial-critical frameworks, the study investigates how Joseph transforms landscapes lagoons, garbage dumps, slums, convents, forests into sites of feminist resistance, ecological memory, and spiritual contestation against patriarchal and developmentalist paradigms. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that Joseph's mythopoesis operates as a dual strategy: first, by critically reworking Christian and epic myths that have historically legitimated gendered and environmental violence; and second, by constructing syncretic eco-spiritual narratives grounded in the embodied knowledge and spatial practices of marginalised communities in Kerala. The analysis reveals how Joseph's reconstructed spaces function as "counter-sites" where women's relationships with water, waste, domesticity, and sacred geography challenge both the masculinist logic of mastery over nature and the spatial architectures through which patriarchy regulates female mobility, desire, and subjectivity. Drawing on Vandana Shiva's critique of maldevelopment and Val Plumwood's analysis of dualistic thinking, the study situates Joseph's fiction within broader ecofeminist debates about the structural connections between oppression of women, exploitation of nature, and marginalisation of Third World communities under capitalist modernity. The paper further examines how ecological memory functions in Joseph's narratives as a political resource, preserving subaltern knowledges of environmental change while documenting the gradual violence of urbanisation, pollution, and land acquisition. By attending to Joseph's ecofeminist stylistics her use of colloquial registers, sensory detail, child narrators, and non-linear temporalities the analysis shows how linguistic and formal choices themselves participate in the mythopoetic reconstruction of space. The findings underscore Joseph's significant contribution to Indian ecofeminist literature, demonstrating how her work provides both a searing critique of contemporary socio-environmental crises in Kerala and a mythopoetic vision of more just and sustainable ecological futures rooted in feminist solidarities and indigenous spiritualities.

Keywords: Sarah Joseph, Mythopoesis, Ecofeminism, Gendered Spaces, Ecological Memory, Feminist Ecology, Spatial Politics, Sacred Geography, Environmental Degradation

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Joseph has emerged as one of the most compelling feminist and eco-conscious voices in contemporary Malayalam literature, creating a body of fiction that interweaves questions of gender, caste, religion and environment with an acute awareness of Kerala's changing cultural

ecology. Her novels and short stories repeatedly return to the lives of marginalised communities Christian subalterns in urban margins, island dwellers threatened by development, women confined within domestic and ecclesiastical spaces and map their struggles onto landscapes of water, waste, forest and sacred topographies. In works such as *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, *Mattathi*, *Othappu* and *Gift in Green*, as well as in selected short stories, Joseph does not merely "represent" settings; she mythopoetically reconstructs gendered and ecological spaces so that they become sites of memory, resistance, trauma and fragile hope. Critics have noted that she writes as both feminist and environmentalist, "coining the issues of inequalities and development-paradox" in a narrative idiom that remains rooted in local histories yet resonates with global ecofeminist concerns (Krishna 2).

The term mythopoesis, in its most basic literary sense, refers to the imaginative creation or reconfiguration of mythic patterns and symbolic narratives in order to interpret or transform reality. Ecofeminist criticism has shown how mythopoesis can be mobilised by women writers to contest androcentric cosmologies that legitimise the exploitation of both women and nature. Vandana Shiva argues that the dominant paradigm of "maldevelopment" rests on a set of myths about progress, mastery and scarcity that systematically marginalise women, forests and traditional ecologies, and calls for "an ecological path of harmony, sustainability and diversity" as a counter-myth of survival (Shiva 38). Val Plumwood, in a complementary philosophical register, identifies the "mastery of nature" as a deeply gendered logic that separates mind from body, culture from nature, and male from female, and she calls for a "non-reductionist basis for recognising continuity and reclaiming the ground of overlap between nature, the body, and the human" (Plumwood 123). Sarah Joseph's mythopoetic practice engages precisely these issues: she constructs narrative worlds in which rivers, backwaters, slums and convents are not neutral backdrops but dense symbolic fields through which alternative, ecofeminist meanings of community, spirituality and embodiment are articulated.

Within Indian feminist literature, the question of space has long been central to debates about gender and power. Studies of "feminist geographies" in Indian fiction underline how domestic, religious and public spaces function as architectures of control, regulating women's mobility, visibility and speech, and argue that "the politics of space is intertwined with the politics of gender" (Anand 4). Recent work on gender-space politics in Kerala has highlighted how kitchens, verandas and pilgrimage sites become spatialised mechanisms through which patriarchy naturalises female confinement and exclusion, as in the debates around women's entry to Sabarimala. Ecofeminist readings extend this spatial critique to forests, rivers and agricultural fields, demonstrating that environmental degradation is inseparable from the gendered division of labour and from the spatial marginalisation of women who depend most directly on local ecologies for sustenance. It is within this broad field of feminist ecology and spatial criticism that Sarah Joseph's fiction must be located, for her narratives insistently link the fate of women's bodies to the fate of the environments they inhabit.

The theoretical framework informing the present paper draws on ecofeminism, postcolonial feminism and feminist spatial criticism. Ecofeminism, as articulated by Shiva, Plumwood and others, posits structural connections between the oppression of women, the exploitation of

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nature and the marginalisation of "Third World" communities under capitalist-patriarchal development. Postcolonial feminism, meanwhile, alerts us to the historical specificities of caste, religion and class in shaping women's ecological experiences in contexts like Kerala, where the legacies of colonial plantation economies intersect with contemporary neoliberal projects. Feminist spatial theory, as applied to Indian women's writing, emphasises how domestic interiors, village margins, island ecologies and urban wastelands serve both as instruments of discipline and as potential sites of subversive re-occupation. When brought together, these perspectives enable a reading of Joseph's fiction in which space lagoon, garbage dump, convent, homestead, fish market, riverbank becomes the primary medium through which mythopoetic reconstruction of gender and ecology is carried out.

Myth and ecology occupy a particularly charged place in Joseph's work. In *Gift in Green*, she frames the island of Aathi through the mythic figure of "water-life," an almost sacramental relationship between humans and water that is threatened by capitalist "desacralization of nature" (Ravindran 343). In *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, the abject space of Kokkanchira a dumping ground for human and animal corpses acquires a paradoxical sacred aura through the child narrator's prayers and narratives, turning a garbage landscape into what Niyathi Krishna calls "a chronicle of subaltern survival and ecological memory" (Krishna 5). *Othappu* and *Mattathi*, in different ways, dramatise how convents, Christian homesteads and urban slums operate as gendered spaces of surveillance, even as women's bodies and desires carve out mythic counter-spaces within them. Selected short stories such as "Vanadurga" and *The Vigil* rework forest and epic landscapes into scenes of ecofeminist contestation, where goddesses, animals and human women together expose the violence of militarised and patriarchal appropriation of land.

Against this background, the objective of the present paper is to analyse how Sarah Joseph mythopoetically reconstructs gendered and ecological spaces in her fiction and to examine how these reconstructed spaces become sites of feminist and ecological resistance, memory and spirituality. Focusing on *Gift in Green*, *Othappu*, *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, *Mattathi* and selected short stories, the paper explores ecofeminism, mythopoesis, feminist ecology, gendered landscapes, ecological memory and spatial politics in Kerala society. It argues that Joseph transforms landscapes of water, waste, domesticity and sacred geography into what may be called "counter-places" that contest patriarchal control of space and environmental degradation, while articulating a cultural ecology grounded in female subjectivity and marginalised community experience. The scope of the paper is thus both textual and contextual: it undertakes close readings of key passages in these texts and situates them within wider debates on ecofeminist ethics, spatial justice and mythic symbolism in Indian feminist writing.

ANALYSIS

In *Gift in Green*, Joseph offers perhaps her most sustained mythopoetic reconstruction of an ecological space, fashioning the island of Aathi into a sacred geography defined by its intimate relationship with water. The novel's opening evocation of Aathi as a lagoon "lying cool and serene in the womb of an inviolate purity" establishes water not merely as setting but as a maternal presence that shelters and sustains a vulnerable community (Joseph 350). Critics have

described *Gift in Green* as a "powerful eco-spiritual novel" that "critiques nature's desacralization and advocates for ecological restoration" through the metaphor of water-life (Joseph 19; Ravindran 343). The women of Aathi Shailaja, Kunjimathu, Gitanjali serve as guardians of this watery sacred geography: they regulate the sale of land, resist the pollution of backwaters and mobilise agricultural practices as acts of ritual care. When Kumaran and his associates arrive, bearing the developmentalist myth of progress, they simultaneously commodify land and profane water, turning Aathi's lagoon into a site of ecological trauma. The ensuing struggle, in which Kunjimathu stands waist-deep in contaminated water and refuses to move, dramatizes an ecofeminist ethics of embodied resistance in which "the bond between nature and women of Aathi is clearly revealed" (Menon 201). Through such scenes Joseph mythopoetically constructs Aathi as a threshold space where a local, indigenous eco-spirituality confronts the abstract, masculinist rationality of capital.

The mythic dimension of this reconstruction becomes more explicit when Joseph weaves the biblical story of Hagar and the water covenant into the narrative. As one critic notes, "through the narration of Hagar's water covenant Sarah Joseph conveys the value and purity of water that has been polluted," aligning Aathi's crisis with older narratives of divine care and human betrayal (Desai 75). The story of the desert spring becomes a template for understanding Aathi's wells and backwaters, suggesting that water is not a resource but a covenantal partner whose violation has ethical and spiritual consequences. In this way, Joseph's mythopoesis fuses Christian and indigenous motifs, producing a syncretic sacred geography in which water is at once biblical sign, ecological reality and feminist symbol of renewal. Ecofeminist readings underscore that in Gift in Green "marginalized communities, like Aathi's, can lead the way towards a more sustainable and sacred future" because their water-life embodies an alternative political ecology that challenges anthropocentric and androcentric paradigms (Ravindran 19). The intimate association of women with water here must be read carefully: Joseph avoids romanticising "woman-as-nature" by showing how these women strategise, argue and act collectively, turning their embodied labour into political agency.

If Aathi represents a threatened sacred geography of water, Kokkanchira in *Aalahayude Penmakkal* embodies an abject ecological margin whose mythopoetic reconstruction is entrusted to a child narrator. Niyathi R. Krishna describes *Aalahayude Penmakkal* as a novel that "coins the issues of inequalities and development-paradox," situating the story in a place that "was once a garbage of dead bodies" and remains marked by caste and class exclusion. Kokkanchira is a space of accumulated waste: carcasses, sewage, discarded bodies, and unwanted people converge in a landscape that official urban planning treats as expendable. Yet through Annie's eyes this wasteland becomes a chronotope of subaltern memory and ecological suffering, where each lane, ditch and culvert is saturated with stories of women's labour, loss and endurance. The mythic figure of "Aalaha" and the phrase "daughters of God the Father" overlay a Christological idiom onto this space, ironically invoking a Father whose care is conspicuously absent from institutional structures but reappears in the solidarity of Kokkanchira's women (Joseph 12). Joseph's language, as Krishna notes, deliberately adopts the "colloquial language and culture" of Thrissur's working-class communities, creating an

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"ecofeminist stylistics" that refuses both literary Sanskritisation and pure environmental pastoral (Krishna 7). The result is a mythopoetic reconstruction of a garbage landscape as a counter-archive of those whom development has rendered disposable.

The ecofeminist dimension of Kokkanchira becomes evident when we consider how women's bodies are mapped onto this degraded terrain. An ecofeminist reading foregrounds the "direct proportionality" between "oppression of women and oppression of nature" under capitalist-patriarchal regimes (Krishna 3). The women of Kokkanchira widows, sex workers, scavengers are confined to polluted spaces, bear the brunt of disease and hunger, and are blamed for the very squalor produced by state neglect and upper-caste abandonment. Annie's descriptions of overflowing canals, rotting carcasses and foul air are paralleled by her observations of women's exhausted bodies, scarred by domestic violence and exploitative labour. Yet Joseph's mythopoesis refuses to leave them in pure abjection: the Amara pandhal, a broad-bean enclosure painstakingly tended by the community, functions as a fragile ecological sacred space, a small green canopy in the midst of waste. When the road roller of "development" crushes it, the destruction reads as both environmental and spiritual desecration, and the memory of that loss becomes, in Annie's narration, a form of ecological testimony that challenges official narratives of progress.

In *Mattathi*, Joseph continues her exploration of subaltern ecologies and gendered spaces, this time focusing on a young woman, Luci, whose life is bound up with the fish markets, back lanes and tenements of an urban slum. Critics have read the novel as a significant instance of *écriture féminine* in Malayalam, pointing to Joseph's emphasis on "the smells, textures and rhythms" of the fish market as a way of inscribing the female body into a degraded but sensuous environment (Varghese 179). Here gendered space is not the pristine lagoon of Aathi but a damp, crowded, olfactory landscape of fish guts, salt, sweat and stagnant water, in which women's bodies are at once exploited and oddly powerful. The sea and its fish become more than economic resources; they are mythic presences that haunt Luci's dreams and memories, suggesting a submerged alternative subjectivity tied to tidal rhythms rather than to the rigid temporality of wage labour. Joseph's mythopoesis reconstructs the slum as a liminal ecological space where the boundaries between human and non-human, clean and unclean, sacred and profane are constantly renegotiated, and where Luci's body becomes a site of contested inscriptions of class, gender and ecological belonging.

In *Othappu*, the focus shifts to explicitly religious spaces the convent, the Syrian Christian homestead, the parish church and their surrounding landscapes, yet the ecological dimension is never absent. Niyathi Krishna's broader study of women, environment and empowerment in Joseph's novels argues that environment "has a very vital impact on the empowerment/disempowerment of female characters and vice versa," particularly in *Othappu*, where Margalitha's departure from the convent is also a departure from enclosed, controlled space into more open, if precarious, landscapes (Krishna 10). The convent is a rigorously policed gendered space, architecturally designed to regulate women's movements and desires in the name of chastity and spiritual discipline. Yet Joseph's narrative invests its courtyards, corridors and gardens with a mythic unease: nocturnal walks, glimpses of moonlight through

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grills and the feel of earth under bare feet all suggest a latent ecological spirituality that exceeds institutional boundaries (Joseph 47). When Margalitha steps beyond the convent's threshold and later traverses hills, fields and rivers with Karikkan and Naanu, the novel reconstructs Kerala's rural landscape as a space where new forms of female subjectivity, desire and spiritual quest can be imagined, even as patriarchal surveillance extends into these open spaces through gossip, ostracism and violence.

Shorter narratives such as *The Vigil* and selected stories offer sharp, concentrated instances of Joseph's mythopoetic reconstruction of forest and epic spaces. In *The Vigil*, a retelling of the Ramayana episode of Angada's embassy, critics have highlighted the ecofeminist elements in Joseph's depiction of war-torn landscapes, where "the healing power of nature" confronts "patriarchal structures that exploit both women and the environment" (Sukumaran 2). The forest is no longer a mere backdrop for heroic action; it is a sentient space bearing scars of violence, and Angada's vigil becomes a meditation on the ethics of occupation and destruction. Similarly, an ecofeminist reading of selected stories such as "Vanadurga" notes that Joseph "equates the destruction of Nature with the destruction of Women," using the figure of a forest goddess whose desecrated shrine mirrors the violated bodies of village women (Augustine 5). In these works, mythic forests and deities are reconstructed as ecofeminist spaces that indict both militarised masculinity and instrumental attitudes toward land.

Across these texts, Joseph's narrative strategies enact a mythopoetic reconstruction of space by layering historical memory, ecological detail and symbolic resonance. In Aathi, Kokkanchira, the slum and the convent, she offers what may be called ecological palimpsests: landscapes in which past and present, sacred and profane, human and non-human inscriptions overlap. Ecofeminist stylistics, as Krishna and others note, involve not only thematic concern with women and nature but also linguistic choices colloquial registers, sensory richness, non-linear temporalities that resist the abstraction of master narratives (Krishna 7; Ravindran 19). Joseph's long, sinuous sentences and her preference for child or marginal narrators create a narrative rhythm attuned to the slow processes of environmental change and the lingering afterlives of trauma. In doing so, she transforms degraded ecologies and disciplined interiors into mythic counter-spaces where the stories of women, rivers, fish, garbage and trees intersect in unexpected ways.

DISCUSSION

The broader ecofeminist implications of Joseph's mythopoetic reconstruction of gendered and ecological spaces can be clarified by situating her work in relation to feminist ecological discourse and to other Indian ecofeminist writers. Ecofeminist theory has repeatedly emphasised that environmental crisis is not merely a scientific or economic problem but a crisis of culture, rooted in dualistic myths that separate culture from nature and male from female, legitimising domination. Vandana Shiva's critique of "maldevelopment" shows how large-scale projects dams, monocultures, industrial agriculture rely on a "logic of mastery and control" that erases local knowledges and feminised forms of labour (Shiva 42). In *Gift in Green* and *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, Joseph stages precisely this confrontation: the island and the garbage dump are targeted for transformation by agents of progress who refuse to recognise their

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existing ecologies and cultures. Kumaran's plans for Aathi, like municipal and corporate interventions in Kokkanchira, are underwritten by myths of modernity that view water, land and labour as infinitely manipulable resources. Against this, Joseph constructs what one critic calls an "eco-spiritual approach, recognising the Earth's inherent value," in which women of Aathi act as "courageous guardians of nature and water" (Nair 19). Her mythopoesis thus functions as resistance: by telling alternative stories about these spaces stories in which rivers remember, garbage speaks and slums have their own temporalities she undermines the ideological naturalness of developmentalism.

At the same time, Joseph's work participates in and extends a specifically feminist ecology that foregrounds the spatial politics of gender. Feminist studies of domestic space in Indian fiction argue that "the domestic space is a political space through which women's agency in terms of mobility, utterance, desire, and identity is controlled," and that patriarchy sustains itself through the "geographies of homes" that confine women to kitchens and back rooms (Anand 3–4). In *Othappu* and *Mattathi*, Joseph demonstrates how convents, homesteads and slum dwellings are designed and inhabited in ways that restrict women's access to public discourse and to non-domestic landscapes. Yet her mythopoetic reconstruction of these spaces opens cracks in their architecture of control: Margalitha's nightly walks in the convent courtyard, Luci's intimate knowledge of the sea and fish market, Rebekka's refusal to perform the role of the silent wife all signal small but significant re-occupations of space. As one critic of Indian feminist geographies notes, "feminist agency in these narratives emerges through negotiating visibility, refusing moral capture, and reclaiming the right to occupy space without being continuously watched" (Anand 12). Joseph's spatial politics thus aligns with an ecofeminist insistence that reclaiming land and water is inseparable from reclaiming bodily and domestic space.

Mythopoesis in Joseph's fiction operates not only by inventing new myths but also by critically reworking inherited ones, particularly Christian and epic narratives. Ecofeminist readings of *Gift in Green* highlight Joseph's use of Hagar's water covenant to connect biblical motifs of survival and care with contemporary struggles for clean water, thereby "engaging with indigenous spiritualities and activism" in a syncretic ecological theology (Desai 19). In *Othappu*, by contrast, she interrogates Christian myths of virginity, obedience and sacrificial motherhood by placing Margalitha's and Rebekka's bodies in landscapes where these ideals become untenable: rural roads where gossip travels faster than any automobile, fields where pregnant bodies labour, and riverbanks where illicit encounters and baptisms blur. In *The Vigil* and other myth-based stories, Joseph rewrites Ramayana episodes from the perspective of marginal figures and damaged environments, foregrounding what one critic calls "the scars of war on both earth and bodies" (Sukumaran 4). In each case, mythopoesis serves a double function: it exposes how canonical myths have been used to legitimate gendered and ecological violence, and it offers alternative narratives in which forests, rivers and slums become allies rather than adversaries of women.

Joseph's work can productively be compared with that of other Indian ecofeminist writers such as Anita Nair, whose novels also explore "the social, political, economic, and psychological invasions faced by women and the environment in India" (Krishna 2014, 103). Niyathi

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Krishna's comparative study concludes that in both Joseph and Nair "environment has a very vital impact on the empowerment/disempowerment of female characters," though Joseph tends to focus more explicitly on Christian and Dalit communities in Kerala, while Nair's settings are more varied (Krishna 2016, 15). Both, however, engage in mythopoesis: Nair through reworkings of folklore and urban legends, Joseph through biblical, epic and local myths. What distinguishes Joseph is the density with which she binds mythic symbolism to specific ecologies lagoon, garbage dump, forest vigil so that the very space becomes the primary bearer of mythic meaning. As another critic observes, "through Aathi's women and the metaphor of water-life, Joseph presents a vision of resistance against nature's exploitation, engaging with indigenous spiritualities and activism" (Nair 20). In this sense, Joseph's reconstructed spaces are not merely settings but actors in the ecofeminist drama.

Joseph's work also contributes significantly to what might be termed ecological memory in Indian literature. Ecofeminist criticism of her novels emphasises that they not only depict environmental destruction but also preserve "the chronological history" of places like Kokkanchira and Aathi, thus documenting the gradual transformations wrought by urbanisation, pollution and land acquisition (Krishna 7). Memory is here inseparable from space: Annie's recollections of Kokkanchira's past, Aathi's story-nights about water, and older women's tales of how forests and fields once looked all function as archives of ecological knowledge and loss. This aligns with Plumwood's call for a "non-reductionist" understanding of nature as a "creative other" with its own temporalities and histories (Plumwood 124). By embedding such memories within mythopoetic narratives, Joseph ensures that environmental trauma is neither naturalised nor forgotten; instead, it becomes part of the cultural memory of marginalised communities, available as a resource for future resistance.

Finally, Joseph's reconstruction of gendered and ecological spaces has clear socio-political implications for contemporary Kerala. Articles on gender-space politics in Kerala media and cinema have shown how domestic and religious spaces continue to be used to police women's bodies, for instance in debates about women's entry to Sabarimala. Joseph's fiction anticipates and deepens these debates by demonstrating how spatial exclusion operates across class and caste: from the elite convent that polices nuns' movements to the polluted village of Chakkamkandam in Gift in Green where Shailaja discovers that women are confined to contaminated kitchens and courtyards. Her insistence on the agency of Aathi's women and Kokkanchira's daughters suggests that any meaningful environmental politics in Kerala must attend to the voices and spatial practices of those whom development consistently marginalises. In this way, her mythopoetic reconstruction of space offers not only literary innovation but also a critical vocabulary for thinking about ecological justice and gender equality in the region.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Sarah Joseph's fiction undertakes a sustained mythopoetic reconstruction of gendered and ecological spaces, transforming lagoons, garbage dumps, slums, convents and forests into sites of feminist and ecological resistance, memory and spirituality. In *Gift in Green*, the island of Aathi, with its metaphor of water-life, becomes a sacred geography where women's embodied guardianship of water contests developmentalist

projects that seek to desacralize and commodify nature. In *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, the abject ecology of Kokkanchira is reimagined through a child's narration as an archive of subaltern survival, in which garbage, prayer and broad-bean vines together tell stories of ecological degradation and gendered endurance. *Mattathi* and *Othappu* extend this reconstruction to slums and religious institutions, showing how domestic and ecclesiastical spaces function as architectures of control while simultaneously harbouring the potential for feminist re-occupation and eco-spiritual quest. Shorter works such as *The Vigil* and "Vanadurga" relocate the ecofeminist struggle to mythic forests and epic battlefields, where Joseph rewrites canonical narratives to highlight the intertwined wounds of land and female bodies.

Mythopoesis in Joseph's fiction thus emerges as a mode of resistance that challenges both patriarchal control of space and the ideological naturalisation of environmental degradation. By reworking Christian and epic myths, mobilising indigenous eco-spiritual vocabularies and foregrounding the voices of marginalised women and communities, she constructs what may be called a feminist ecological counter-archive for contemporary Kerala. Her reconstructed spaces Aathi's lagoon, Kokkanchira's dump, the convent courtyard, the fish market, the forest vigil are not utopian refuges but contested, often wounded places where new forms of subjectivity and solidarity are tentatively forged. In demonstrating that the politics of space is inseparable from the politics of gender and ecology, Joseph's work significantly enriches Indian ecofeminist literature, providing both a searing critique of contemporary socio-environmental crises and a mythopoetic vision of more just and sustainable ways of inhabiting the world.

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