
**Sara Joseph's *Budhini*:
Women, Nature, and Resilience
in Post-Independent India's
Transformative Landscape**

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Abstract

Sara Joseph's *Budhini* is a literary tapestry that intricately weaves together the lives of its characters against the backdrop of post-independent India. The paper aims to dissect the thematic richness of the novel, delving into the profound exploration of women, nature, and resilience within the socio-cultural and environmental shifts of the time. The paper aims to: (i) analyse the interconnected lives of female characters, emphasising the symbolism of dams and their impact on tribal women, and (ii) to explore Sara Joseph's narrative technique in portraying the nuanced ways women experience and respond to ecological changes.

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Introduction

Sarah Joseph stands out as one of the most distinguished contemporary female writers in Kerala, India. With six novels and numerous short stories to her credit, her literary journey commenced with poetry. She is credited with contributing to the 'Ecriture Feminine' stream in Malayalam Literature, synonymous with 'Women's writing.' The movement provided a platform for women writers and critics to converge and establish a community, and Sarah Joseph is recognized as a pivotal figure in this literary evolution in Kerala. Beyond her role as a feminist, activist, and Malayalam Professor, she is the founder of Manushi, an organization advocating for thinking women. Sarah Joseph skillfully integrates Gender Theories into her creative writing, with a specific focus on the plight of marginalised, deprived, misinterpreted, and misused women, as well as environmental concerns. In 1999, Sarah Joseph published her debut novel, *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, which earned prestigious awards such as the Central Sahitya Akademy award, Kerala Sahitya Academy award, and Vayalar Award. Following this success, she released *Maattathi* in 2003 and *Othappu* in 2005, forming a compelling trilogy. In 2011, she concurrently wrote and published her fifth novel, *Aathi*, and its English translation, *Gift in Green*. *The Vigil* is the translation of her novel *Oorukaaval*, revolving around the character Angada from the Ramayana.

In *Budhini*, Sara Joseph intricately intertwines the intricate tapestry of women, nature, and the far-reaching consequences of post-independent India's developmental policies. The novel serves as a poignant commentary on the symbiotic relationship between women and their natural surroundings, particularly within the context of dam construction, emblematic of India's progress. The exploration gains special resonance when delving into the lives of women from tribal or Adivasi communities, whose existence becomes inseparable from the ecological shifts brought about by the development strategies. Joseph's narrative places the construction of dams at the forefront, offering a lens through which the novel dissects the complex relationships between women and nature. The dams, heralded as symbols of progress,

emerge as focal points for understanding the transformative impact of developmental interventions. For women in tribal or Adivasi contexts, the effects are amplified, their lives intricately entwined with the unfolding ecological changes. Joseph adeptly employs her literary canvas to explore the symbolic interconnection between women and nature. The narrative skillfully peels back layers, revealing nuanced ways in which women experience and respond to the ecological metamorphoses in their environment. This underscores the vital link between their well-being and the overall health of the surrounding ecology. *Budhini* thus stands as a powerful commentary on the intricate connections between human well-being and the environmental vitality that sustains it.

Ecofeminism plays a vital role in revealing the exploitations and invasions on ecology and resources in developing countries, particularly in the name of globalisation and development. This perspective also allows for a nuanced analysis of gender issues by examining our relationships with nature, other living beings, and various gender identities. The first victims of environmental devastations are often the marginalised, and the interconnectedness of these issues becomes essential to analyse. Vandana Shiva's seminal work, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, serves as a critique of Western development ideologies, labeling them as 'maldevelopment' due to their detrimental effects on women and nature in third-world countries. The book underscores the patriarchal nature of Western development concepts, which often prioritise progress without due consideration for the well-being of all human beings and other marginalised entities within society. In the book *Ecofeminism*, Shiva and Maria Mies critique existing theories and practices while proposing practical and ideological ecofeminist perspectives rooted in sustainability for everyday life.

Ecofeminism, a philosophical and political theory, merges concerns for ecology and feminism, attributing both to the dominance of males in society. It recognises the detrimental impact of patriarchal and paternalistic/capitalistic values, resulting in the exploitation of nature for self-serving interests. This exploitation has created a harmful

divide between the environment and culture. Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, aims to unravel the interconnections between women and nature, advocating for gender equality, a reevaluation of non-patriarchal structures, and a worldview that values organic processes, holistic connections, intuition, and collaboration. In the context of Indian literature, numerous writers focus on gender categories to illustrate how social norms unjustly dominate women and nature. Their works strive to highlight the consequences of these gender-based norms, emphasizing the need for a restructuring that promotes equality and respects the organic and collaborative aspects of the world.

The plot revolves around the life of Budhini Mehjan, a woman from a tribal community, whose experiences mirror the profound consequences of India's developmental policies, particularly the construction of dams. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of the Paanchet dam's construction, a symbolic representation of progress for post-independent India. However, this progress comes at a cost, as it brings about significant ecological changes, impacting the lives of tribal communities, especially the *Saanthaali* people. Budhini's life becomes intertwined with the unfolding ecological shifts, and her symbolic act during the dam's inauguration leads to her societal condemnation and exile.

Nehru famously referred to dams as 'temples of India,' aiming to mitigate the impact of natural disasters. However, the tribals, including the Saanthaali people of Kaarbona village, resisted the dam project due to their instinctual knowledge of nature. The Saanthaali community preferred living in harmony with the natural rhythm, relying on the earth for their livelihood. Despite their initial resistance, they eventually had to succumb to economic pressures and accept jobs in the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). The central character, Budhini, becomes an employee of the Damodar Valley Corporation. Her pivotal moment arrives during the inauguration of the dam when Prime Minister Nehru personally adorns her with the garland meant for himself. This symbolic act leads to a tragic turn in Budhini's life.

The village elders, misinterpreting the garlanding, declare her to be the wife of Nehru. As a consequence of this misunderstanding and her marriage to a non-Saanthaal, a Diku, she faces exile from her community and village.

The novel takes a closer look at the diasporic journey of Indian aborigines, focusing on multiculturalism, identity crises, and the internal displacement experienced by characters like Jagdeep Murmu and his family. The clash between traditional beliefs and modernisation is a recurring theme, portraying the struggles faced by those caught between the old and the new. Budhini's story unfolds as a poignant exploration of the universal quest for identity. Despite societal condemnation and exile, she emerges as a resilient figure, symbolising the strength needed to navigate the complexities of a changing world. The narrative also introduces other characters like Roopi Murmu, who straddles between *Saanthaali* traditions and the evolving Indian system, adding depth to the exploration of diasporic experiences.

Throughout the novel, Sara Joseph skillfully blends themes of exile, alienation, and loss with a profound commentary on the enduring human spirit. The characters, including Budhini, Roopi Murmu, and Jagdeep, become embodiments of resilience, showcasing their ability to maintain cultural roots despite the challenges posed by a transforming landscape.

In the post-Independence era, India underwent a substantial wave of developmental initiatives geared towards industrialisation and urbanisation. The construction of towering buildings, factories, and various infrastructural projects was heralded as a sign of progress. However, the accelerated pace of development often occurred without adequate consideration for its environmental consequences, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of such endeavors.

A prominent element of India's developmental strategy, particularly championed by its inaugural Prime Minister, was the extensive construction of dams, glorified as 'temples.' The Sardar Sarovar dam, designed to regulate the Narmada River's flow, serves as a prime example of this approach. While dams are conceived to

mitigate flood risks, it is imperative to recognise that they do not offer foolproof solutions. The natural ebb and flow of rivers, especially during the monsoon season, may pose unforeseen challenges.

Amidst these developmental pursuits, a crucial issue arises regarding the neglect of the welfare of marginalised communities, specifically the tribal or Adivasi populations. These communities perceive rivers, forests, animals, birds, and every facet of the natural environment as integral to their identity and soul. Unfortunately, in the relentless pursuit of development, they find themselves compelled to make sacrifices, relinquishing elements that hold profound cultural significance.

The repercussions of these developmental strategies manifest in the prevalent conditions of dislocation and displacement experienced by tribal people across India. In this unjust scenario, these communities, without any fault of their own, are forced to bid farewell to their ancestral lands within an unreasonably brief timeframe. The overarching control wielded by authorities over the entire land leaves the tribal population with minimal options but to seek refuge in unfamiliar territories, metamorphosing into 'others' within their own homeland.

Budhini Mehjan, hailing from a tribal community, embodies the rich cultural heritage and traditions deeply rooted in her identity. Her character serves as a microcosm of the intricate interplay between gender and tribal identity, unraveling the unique challenges faced by women within this specific cultural context. While navigating the challenges of traditional gender roles and societal expectations, Budhini's character exhibits resilience and moments of empowerment. The analysis sheds light on instances where she defies the constraints placed upon her, showcasing her agency and determination. These moments become pivotal in understanding the nuanced portrayal of female empowerment within the tribal narrative. Budhini's identity is not solely defined by her gender; rather, it is a complex intersection of various factors, including her tribal roots, cultural beliefs, and personal aspirations.

Nature in *Budhini* is not merely a backdrop but a transformative force, orchestrating ecological metamorphoses that directly impact the characters. The construction of dams, emblematic of India's developmental progress, alters the natural landscape, disrupting ecosystems and reshaping the protagonists' relationship with their surroundings. This dynamic interaction between human activities and the environment becomes a central theme, highlighting the consequences of unchecked development.

This narrative underscores the urgent need to reassess development strategies, advocating for a more sustainable and inclusive approach that respects the intricate relationship between communities and their natural surroundings. It calls for a paradigm shift that prioritises the holistic well-being of all citizens, particularly those historically intertwined with the land, ensuring a more equitable and just trajectory for the nation's future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Budhini* emerges as a powerful narrative that intricately links the lives of women, the transformations in nature, and the resilience exhibited in the face of a changing India. Sara Joseph's adept storytelling not only illuminates the interconnectedness of these themes but also serves as a lens through which ecofeminism critiques the exploitative nature of developmental policies. The thematic exploration unravels the symbiotic relationship between women and their natural surroundings, with dams serving as symbolic focal points for understanding the transformative impact of developmental interventions. Ecofeminism enriches the analysis by shedding light on the exploitations on ecology and resources, emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender issues with nature. Characters embody resilience amidst societal and environmental shifts. Environmental consequences, especially the impact of dam construction, underscore the urgent need for a reassessment of development strategies. The clash between progress and sustainability highlights the necessity for a paradigm shift towards more inclusive and holistic approaches, ensuring the well-being of citizens historically intertwined with the land. In

conclusion, *Budhini* offers a profound commentary on the enduring human spirit amidst socio-cultural and environmental shifts, making it a significant contribution to the literature that resonates with broader themes of societal and environmental transformation. The novel calls for a reevaluation of our relationship with nature, advocating for a more sustainable and equitable trajectory for the nation's future.

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