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The Ecology of Exile: Forced Migration and the Loss of Place in Sarah Joseph's *Budhini*

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Abstract:

Sarah Joseph's Budhini explores the life of a young woman from the Santal tribe, forced to abandon her ancestral home due to the construction of a dam—a demonstration of ecological exploitation. The novel vividly portrays not only Budhini's struggle to reconcile with her displacement but the entire community as they grapple with the disintegration of their deep-rooted ties to the land. By employing insights from place studies, this paper highlights the disruption of place attachment and the resulting identity loss, faced by the community, there by critiquing anthropocentric development. The narrative ultimately emphasises the interconnectedness of socio-ecological well-being, cultural integrity, and individual identity in the face of involuntary (forced) migration.This research paper explores the dynamics of displacement as portrayed in Sarah Joseph's Budhini, examining how the uprootedness from one's place disrupts identity, cultural continuity, and ecological harmony.

Keywords: involuntary (forced) migration,anthropocene,identity,place studies.

Introduction

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement of UN,(1988) defines internally displaced persons (IDPs) as individuals or groups of persons who have been forced to abandon their homes or places of habitual residence, as a result of conflict, violence, violations of human

rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an international borders. Internal displacement serves as a significant global challenge. Many of these displaced persons are unable to return to stable living conditions. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) globally reached a staggering 75.9 million by the end of 2023. These figures highlight the gravity of this humanitarian crisis, which often receives less attention compared to its profound social and human costs.A 2017 study estimated that dam construction alone displaced an estimated 80 million people worldwide. Sarah Joseph's novel *Budhini*, offers valuable insights into the human dimensions of displacement by capturing the experiences of displaced communities, the hardships they endure, and the broader societal implications of these forced migrations.

Sarah Joseph (born 1946) is a distinguished contemporary women writer from Kerala, India, known for her valuable contributions to Malayalam literature. Starting her literary journey with poetry, she has authored six novels and several short stories, becoming a prominent figure in the *Écriture Féminine* movement in Malayalam, which fostered a collective voice for women writers and critics. As a feminist, activist, and founder of *Manushi*, an organization dedicated for women's empowerment.She focuses on marginalized and misrepresented women integrating gender theories and environmental concerns into her works.

Her debut novel, *Aalahayude Penmakkal* (1999), earned the coveted Central Sahitya Akademi Award. This was followed by *Maattathi* (2003) and *Othappu* (2005), forming a celebrated trilogy. In 2011, she released *Aathi* along with its English translation, *Gift in Green*. Her novel *Oorukaaval*, translated as *The Vigil*, reimagines the story of Angada from the *Ramayana*.Budhini was released in Malayalam in 2019, and in 2021 her daughter Sangeetha Sreenivasan translated it into English.

The novel *Budhini* set in post-independent India, presents a powerful narrative that throws light on the displacement of Santal Community. The Santals, lived along the banks of the Damodar River, had thrived in harmony with their environment for generations.The word 'Santal' meant the tranquil soul.The

villages had farms near the river besides that they engaged in communal farming.The santal considered rivers, forests, animals, birds, and every facet of the natural environment as sacred and integral to their identity and well-being. There were fish in the river ,best stalks,roots and fruits in the forest. As the dam was rising there was nothing left for them.

The novel Budhini explores how these communities were uprooted from their natural habitats, homes, and cultural roots in the name of serving the "greater good of the nation" - the construction of a dam.Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* calls it "administered invisibility," where displacement is normalized under the guise of development, effectively silencing dissenters.(Nixon p.151) As part of his plan for rapid industrialization and economic expansion, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, started a number of large-scale dam projects. These projects brought about pertinent social, environmental, and economic changes in addition to providing irrigation, electricity, and water resources for industries and agriculture. Additionally, they frequently result in a range of environmental, social, and economic effects on nearby communities.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment. By examining how nature is portrayed in literary works, it aims to raise awareness on ecocentric concepts and thereby foster a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.(Barry,239,254) Ecocriticism is closely linked to the concept of place attachment.

The novel Budhini highlights the themes of involuntary displacement, loss of social and cultural identity, and environmental degradation due to dam construction.Several works written in the past four decades speak of the untold misery of the uprooted marginalised communities.

Arundhati Roy's The Greater Common Good (1999) underscores the large-scale impact of the dam projects on communities. Mahasweta Devi’s in her short stories, such as Draupadi (1978) and Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha (1989), brings out the struggles of marginalized indigenous communities. Kesava Reddy’s

Dweepa (2013) brings to the fore how the floodwaters of the Linganmakki Dam submerged numerous villages, sweeping away a way of life that had sustained the people of the land for generations.

The narrative unfolds through the perspective of Rupi Murmu, a young journalist and a distant relative of Budhini, offering a touching exploration of the human cost of development.At the insistence of her Dadu (grandfather), Jagdip Murmu,Rupi decides to search for Budhini whom a significant newspaper report had claimed died in June,2012.The article also stated that her last days were lived in poverty and infirmity dying a death deprived of justice.Through Rupi's investigation, the reader is transported to the Santhal hamlet of Karbona, where Budhini was born and raised. Rupi had earlier researched on 'The Other Side of the Great Indian Temples' .Her research was both appreciated and disliked.

Jagdip Murmu's village, Bharatpur, was one of the hundred villages submerged due to the construction of the Damodar dam. *It is not the Damodar but the dam that drowned these villages.* (Pg. 12) He recounted the vibrant folk traditions, the dazzling beauty of the forests, mountains, rivers, and vast fields, and admired the ecosystem where people lived in harmony with the spirits of their ancestors, the Bongas.The dam submerged not only physical land but also the cultural and social fabric of the villages, turning unique, vibrant communities into indistinct memories.

This sentiment was echoed by the hundreds of faces she encountered during her research. Now, they live in slums, leading lives that feel alien to them—filled with depression and anger. The construction of the dam displaced hundreds of thousands, yet their suffering remains unacknowledged. Thayer Scudder's concept of "developmental refugees"(as referenced in Nixon p.152) aptly describes these displaced communities.Unlike the victims of partition, their names are absent from official records, and their lives and deaths remain the responsibility of no one. This aligns closely with Nixon's concept of 'spatial amnesia' where the communities are not only physically displaced but also forgotten from the collective consciousness of the nation.(Nixon,151)

According to Relph ,the identity of a place is characterized by its "persistent

sameness and unity, which allows that [place] to be differentiated from others." Relph further explains this enduring identity through three interconnected components: (1) the place's physical setting, (2) the activities, situations, and events that occur there, and (3) the individual and collective meanings shaped by people's experiences and intentions in relation to that place.(1976, p. 45, as cited in Seamon, 2012)

This concept is particularly relevant to *Budhini*, where industrialization and displacement disrupt the essence of place. Such disruption not only erases physical surroundings but also dismantles cultural and emotional foundations, severing the deep ties individuals have with their environment. This fracture in connection leads to a profound sense of placelessness, alienation, and loss, as the identity tied to the land is irrevocably transformed.

On December 6, 1959 Budhini Mejhan, a young Santal girl's life got irrevocably altered. On this fateful day, the 15-year-old Budhini was selected to garland and apply a tika on the forehead of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during the inauguration of a dam.This ceremonial gesture was misinterpreted by her Santal community as an act of matrimony, leading to her ostracization for allegedly "marrying" a diku (outsider).This misjudgment forever changes the peaceful life of Budhini into a life of vagabond and untold hardship.

The novel follows Rupi Murmu, as she embarks on a quest to uncover Budhini's story and trace her current whereabouts. Through Rupi's journey, the narrative examines forced migration within the Anthropocene, exploring the loss of identity and the disconnection from one's roots, while engaging critically with concepts central to place studies.

Fifteen-year-old Budhini was fearless and spirited. She often allowed the calves to suckle from their mothers, much to the chagrin of Kheer Bhaiya, who would complain to her parents in frustration. However, the neighbors stood by Budhini, aware of Kheer Bhaiya's cruelty in beating the buffaloes. Budhini boldly pointed out his unfairness in not allowing the buffaloes to graze freely along the riverbank, unlike her goats, which were well-fed and thriving.

Her defiance extended to cultural practices as well—she supported her reformist uncle in opposing the ritualistic

sacrifice of roosters and other animals. A skilled *tiriao* player, Budhini was also celebrated as a "storehouse of stories," brimming with tales that showcased her vibrant imagination and deep connection to her community. (22)This was the vibrant and fearless life Budhini led before she became associated with the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC).

Budhini's days at the Damodar Valley Corporation mirrored the plight of countless children reduced to pounding stones with hammers. On her very first day, her hands were raw with blisters, and by twilight, her palms were covered in large, painful bubbles. As the abscesses ruptured, they oozed a mixture of fluid and blood, staining the hammer's handle. The relentless grinding of stone dust between her palms and the hammer's grip tore into her flesh, causing unbearable pain. Though her wounds eventually healed, they left behind hardened calluses—permanent reminders of her toil.

Row upon row of laborers, including Budhini and other children, sat hunched, hammering stones into gravel-sized chunks. The contractor, always vigilant, forbade them from lifting their heads, and even when they did, there was nothing to see but endless piles of crushed stones towering toward the sky. The ceaseless boom of rocks reverberated in their ears, haunting them long after they returned home.

Budhini's identity as a farmer's daughter, was reduced to a mere daily wage laborer. There were probably countless families who had similar fate. Rupi's search for Budhini leads her to Somnath Hembrom, his story brings to the foray the plight of farmers displaced by modernisation.His parents were once proud landowners, cultivating five acres of land along the riverbank.The river's erosion claimed portions of their fields every year. Despite these losses, they were determined to make the most of what remained. *We will work on the leftover land. What else can we do?*

As the land continued to submerge, they resorted to shared farming—a desperate attempt to sustain their livelihood. Yet, even this was not successful. Eventually, the family's land was completely submerged, and their identity as landowners was lost forever. His parents and sister were reduced to working as daily wage laborers, toiling on someone else's farm.

The impact on the family was heart wrenching. Somnath and his younger sister were sent to an orphanage, where survival forced them to change their faith. Somnath's plight resonates with the countless farmers who, having lost their land and the only skills to farming, found themselves incapable of switching to other professions.

According to Heidegger (1976, as referenced in Seamon, 2000) in Phenomenology, Place, Environment, and Architecture: A Review (2000), people are deeply connected and immersed in the world.It further states that this can be explained by the term Dasein,which means *being-in-the-world* which states that people and the world are always together.This concept when applied to Budhini underpins the profound impact of displacement, as seen in *Budhini*.

Jagdip Murmu,Somnath, Budhini and the countless untold stories of the santal community dislocated due to modernisation not only proves the loss of their motherland but loss of a way of living,loss of cultural ,historical, socio-economic connections to their land.That which defined their existence giving them identity.The loss of place strips these voiceless victims of development of their identity.Adjucating Heidegger's statement of loss of place not merely physical but existential, as it erodes the cultural, emotional, and historical connections that define their *Dasein*.

In the Anthropocene—a phrase used by Crutzen and Stoermer to refer to an epoch in which humans dominate Earth's bio-geophysical processes—projects such as dam construction have irreparably altered the lives of marginalized groups. (LeCain,5) The government, claiming to be working for the 'better good,' first stole the villagers' forests and then their fields, leaving them impoverished and contributing to rising starvation deaths.The concept of transforming inhabitants into "virtual uninhabitants," as articulated by Rob Nixon, has a strong resonance with Budhini's narrative. The displacement induced by dam building in Budhini's hamlet exhibits the same dynamics of erasure and dehumanization found in examples like the Western Shoshone and Guatemala's Chixoy Dam.(Nixon,154)

Suvir Datta of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) seeks to ease locals' anxieties by promising flood prevention and free power. These guarantees, however,

failed to account for the significant loss of identity and place that the communities experienced. This realistic representation of rural India emphasizes the tremendous power imbalance between impoverished groups and strong organizations, highlighting the cost of "development."

Rupi Murmu was born and raised in Delhi; her father's frequent transfers disrupt a sense of belonging to a place. Despite this, the grandfather acts as a custodian of their culture by narrating folklores and insisting the modern girls speak Santali at home. Salni, the daughter-in-law, longs for her village, where she lived until the age of twelve. Her past trauma of being uprooted due to famine, which eventually led her to a convent, her connection to the stories told by her sosur (father in law) reflects a longing for the past and the cultural ties lost by circumstances.

Jagdip Murmu,Budhini,Rupi,Somnath and the entire Santal community's loss of identity is further strengthened by the loss of their cultural heritage and their deep rooted connection to their ancestral lands. There is a need for equitable development policies that prioritize the well-being of all individuals, regardless of their social or economic status. Relph (1976, p. 43, as referenced in Cheshmehzangi) argues that places are only distinct by the presence of certain 'intentions, attitudes, purposes, and experience.' As a result, places can be distinguished from their surroundings while remaining within them.He further argues that (ibid, p. 47 as referenced in Cheshmehzangi) ‘meanings of places may be rooted in the physical settings, objects and activities, but they are not a property of them—rather they are a property of human intentioned and experiences.' Furthermore, Heidegger (1969) adds to this statement by declaring that ‘everywhere, wherever and however we are related to being of every kind, identity makes its claim upon us’. (Cheshmehzang, p5) Therefore, it can be said that the essence of a place is not solely determined by its physical attributes, but also by the intentions and experiences of individuals within that space. This highlights the importance of human perception and

interaction in shaping the meaning and identity of a place.

Conclusion:

Sarah Joseph's Budhini has served as a commentary on state-run development projects that target certain groups of people while ignoring marginalized sections of the society and their natural habitat. By depicting Budhini and her Santhal tribe's forced migration, the story highlights the significant cultural and socio-ecological disruptions produced by such programs. The study employing place studies and themes such as Rob Nixon's slow violence and Thayer Scudder's developmental refugees shows how uprooting splits identity, erases cultural memory, and exacerbates ecological deterioration.Madan Mohan states "It is very important for policy makers to understand these problems, assess their implications and formulate policy guidelines" .(Mohan,2)

Budhini's story is a microcosm of larger patterns in the Anthropocene, in which communities that coexist with the environment face the weight of exploitative development. Displacement and forced migration, especially during the Anthropocene, have an immense effect on people, their communities, and their environments.The relocation induced by construction projects marginalizes the disadvantaged groups. For individuals, it can lead to identity fractures, severance of cultural ties, and alienation, whereas for communities, it may weaken collective memory, traditions, and social cohesion.Addressing these difficulties necessitates inclusive policies that value cultural identities, ecological wisdom, and the need to preserve the inextricable link between people and place.

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