

Original Article

The Politics of Seeds and the Aesthetics of Resistance: A Study of the Short Story Gandhitharu

SMITHA PULIKKAL

Guest Teacher in Malayalam, Kalladi Higher Secondary School, Kumaramputhur, Palakkad, Kerala State, India.

ABSTRACT: *This article examines Rajesh Monji's short story Gandhitharu through the theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism, Gandhian environmental ethics, political ecology, memory studies, and posthumanism. Centered on the symbolic relationship between the seed and the tree, the story presents nature not merely as the background of human existence but as a living presence endowed with memory, agency, and historical continuity. The seed passed down from Ammunniamma to Jayaseelan Mash and later generations symbolizes ecological memory, indigenous knowledge and collective responsibility. Trusteeship, non-violence, Gram Swaraj and simplicity are re-read through eco-systems to counter mainstream consumerism and exploitative modes of development using new technologies. The story also critiques institutional environmental education and symbolic ecological activism by articulating lived responsibility versus ritualized forms of eco-practice. Also, the anthropomorphic first-person narrative of the tree subverts human-centred literary forms and highlights both non-human agency as well as ecological subjectivity. Gandhitharu, this study argues, will convert the issue of local environmental degradation from an ecological problem to a cultural and political question which is shaped by development, memory and power. The narrative contextualizes the story as a seminal eco-political work in modern Malayalam literature embodying environmental justice and cultural memory for ethics of coexistence.*

KEYWORDS: *Ecocriticism, Gandhian Environmental Ethics, Political Ecology, Cultural Memory, Posthumanism, Seed Politics, Contemporary Malayalam Literature.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented intensification of environmental crises. For the past decades, anthropogenic factors such as climate change and biodiversity loss or exploitation of nonrenewable resources, together with ecological degradation, complete deforestation leading to desertification, and unsustainable models of so-called development [by industrialisation for example], have radically changed humans' relationships with nature. This view has led to conceptualizing environmental issues not simply in terms of science but as also defined by social forces and cultural, political or economic processes. As a result, literary studies also starts to go beyond representing nature as merely a passive background for the workings of humanity and seeks to represent it instead as an active agent with memory, sentience and historical significance.

In this intellectual climate, ecocriticism has risen as one of the most powerful approaches in contemporary literary studies. Ecocriticism, which is trained on increasingly anthropocene modes of reading texts, asks how the intertwining dependence(s) between humans and more-than-human worlds are imagined in literary texts. Concurrently, complementary theoretical angles including political ecology, memory studies, Gandhian environmental ethics and posthumanism have extended the compass of ecological literary criticism in underlining how elemental questions around the environment will always be intertwined with cultural power constructs; ethical vis-à-vis moral dilemmas; as well as historical contexts.

Gandhitharu by Rajesh Monji has a unique position among contemporary Malayalam short fiction because it offers such varied ecological issues with a unified narrative form. The narrative is linked to a school project on the environment and explores biodiversity, rural ecological memory, Gandhian virtue ethics and children's citizen engagement with environmental education policy-making through the mesh of symbols from seed-to-tree-to-jackfruit-and-child. An important aspect of how this story, by contrasting the tree experience from linear narrative practice, is in allowing a non-human to have an active narration and claim authority over memory, history, and storytelling.

The focus of this article is Gandhitharu, the same through ecological criticism,[i] Gandhi environmental ethics [ii], political ecology,[iii] memory studies[iv] and post-humanism.[v]. It claims that the story transforms both seed and tree into potent cultural and political icons whereby ecological memory, an ethics of responsibility towards nature, as well as resistance to hegemonic destructive paradigms of development are expressed. In that sense, Gandhitharu becomes an important eco-political text in contemporary Malayalam, embedding environmental justice within cultural continuity and narrative innovation.

[i] Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study of literature and the physical environment. It interrogates the anthropocentric view of human exceptionalism, considering how humans respond to and interact with their nonhuman world while focusing on ecological themes in literature. Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryll Glotfelty as the “study of the relationship between literature and physical environment.” This strategy urges readers to reconsider literature both as a mirror of people-group yet additionally in the same spot that lets one hear and perceive the voice, control and ecological significance of land.

[ii] Mahatma Gandhi never built a systematic theory on the environment as we know it today, but his writings and worldviews contained many ecological principles: moderation in consumption, self-sufficiency/semi-autarky [stop], living around villages and more or less an ethical stance towards nature. Although born in the social and moral reform context, later environmental thinkers have reworked Gandhian ideas as an important theoretical tool for sustainable development (Vallipuram 1999; Mohan et al. In this regard, Gandhian thought still provides a counter-model that rejects consumerism and pleads for an equilibrium between humankind and nature.

Political ecology is the study of how political and economic power affects the environment, or put another way, it examines unevenly distributed environmental change across different social groups. Instead of comprehending nature dilemmas in a technical or neutral context, it links social inequality, resource access and capitalism to ecological challenges.

[iv] Memory Studies is the interdisciplinary field that explores collective and individual memories as they shape identities, heritages and histories. It examines how memory interacts with social structures to shape the way events have been remembered and understood in different societies. Understanding the politics of memory changes, and why this field matters for international relations. Memory Studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws on history, sociology and psychology as well as political science to help us understand how memory shapes contemporary global challenges.

[v] Post-humanism challenges the tradition of human-centricity, or centralizing humans as the sole centre for all knowledge and experience. This paper analyses a network of relations involving not only humans within the technology-science regime but also non-human beings and nature, indicating that anthropocentrism is increasingly being challenged.

2. MEMORY, SEED, TREE: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF NATURE

Nature is not just a setting that human life develops around; nature itself becomes an active participant in this narrative as memory, history and continuation of cultures take residence within it, which you can see exactly in Gandhitharu, which seems to document all throughout its journey. This is where the mundane symbols stand out: Chakkappazham[i], seed, tree - and become cultural signs via which ecological consciousness, intergenerational knowledge exchange and a collective attitude bear expression. This story could be told to show a relation of nature as exploitable or something that must exist in isolation, but instead is described here with agency and within somewhere like a living archive, one from which human identity collects on its edges social memory formed by us.

Jayaseelan Mash's narrative starts from his childhood, the memory of the Chakkappazham. That memory goes well beyond a wistfulness for the taste of a fruit. It evokes an ecological entirety, where native trees formed constitutive elements of home gardens and interrelated cultural logics with rural life. The memory in this case then is wielded not just as an individual monument but a mnemonic of vanishing ecological practice. The decline of native trees is the gradual extinction of culture and local food traditions that evoke the generations-old bonding between humankind and nature. Hence, a single memory becomes the environmental collective memory of society.

Ammunni Ammayi brings more intelligibility to this ecological memory. The seed she saved is a far greater thing than just the life of one more plant. Indigenous ecological knowledge gained through generations of lived experience is embodied in it. This seed, unlike seeds from the market or science institutions, is active because it has been preserved embedded within a culture which was in constant contribution to nature. Hence its preservation, if you will, becomes a memory-guardian as much as it is an act of biodiversity.

This inheritance of memory is channelled into collective action, by the hands of Jayaseelan Mash. He also goes through an environmental project, where children can share seeds with him and the other members of the community instead of making it his private property; This is how the transfer of the seed becomes a transference of ecological ethics from one generation to another. The tale proposes that the value of environmental conservation flows from what happens when private memory is turned into collective duty and individual experience becomes social action.

In this context, the seed emerges as a potent political symbol. A natural resource, in postmodern development, has increasingly become an element, a means and object established as a commodity represented by ownership and market price. But Gandhitharu provides a different alternative. Seed sharing is not proprietorship but rather stewardship. The seed becomes an ecological commons, a collective asset that safely holds biodiversity and cultural memory for future generations. Thus, an act

of planting seed does not just represent the physical growth of a tree; it is a rooting ecological relational value system that underpins cooperation and coexistence. [ii]

The tree brings the symbolism of the seed to its fullest expression. The tree is not just an organism, but also a cultural memory interlinked between the past, present and future. It is born of the past with Ammunni Ammayi's memory, raised by Jayaseelan Mash and his tremendous environmental vision that has been handed down to future generations in a manner true of ecology-everything lives. In its preservation of inherited memory and in pointed branches offered toward renewed ecological landscapes. Thus, the tree serves as a witness to fading ecological culture but also symbolizes hope and renewal.

We are also linked to the survival of culture through these inextricable symbols intertwined with each other and a common purpose. The loss of native trees indicates not only ecological instability, but also the gradual disappearance of local knowledge and food habits or seed preservation systems, as well as rural cultural life. As indigenous species vanish, their associated memories and language also disappear along with lived experiences. Environmental diminishment, therefore, is inextricable from cultural loss.

Because of this, Gandhitharu explains conservation as a moral and cultural obligation over the scientific imperative. The act of preserving a seed is an act of safeguarding history, memory and ecological wisdom. Taking care of a tree is helping to maintain that tradition in which the natural world and humans coexist with one another. Through its reification of the seed and tree into symbols of remembrance, accountability, and continuity, it turns environmental conservation on its head; from a practice aimed at preventing harm to nature in an ever-increasing industrial habitat to one based upon cultural regeneration. Instead of an external object to protect, nature becomes a living presence through which society reconstructs its past, present and future.

The fruit known as Chakkappazham in the story is scientifically categorized under *Annona reticulata*. [i] Locally, It has other regional names such as Aathachakka and Sainampazham or Aanamunthiri. The articles discuss the jackfruit, but for consistency with what it is called in these stories throughout this work they simply refer to the evidence as jack.

[ii] In environmental studies, seeds are not only seen as symbols of biological propagation but also physical embodiments of cultural knowledge and communities' historical memory. Environmentalists like Vandana Shiva and Cheruvayal Raman tie the preservation of seed to areas such as biodiversity, indigenous knowledge systems, and traditional agricultural practices. From this perspective, seed preservation is not only ecological but also to protect part of a culture and intergenerational transmission.

3. GANDHIAN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND CRITIQUE OF DEVELOPMENT

One of the defining features of *Gandhitharu* is its reinterpretation of environmental conservation through the ethical principles of Gandhian thought. The story moves beyond treating ecology as a scientific concern and instead presents it as a moral, cultural, and political responsibility. The title itself symbolizes this vision by bringing together Gandhi as an ethical ideal and the tree as a symbol of regeneration, coexistence, and continuity.

This ecological philosophy is grounded primarily in Gandhi's concept of trusteeship. According to this principle, human beings are custodians rather than owners of nature. Natural resources exist not for private exploitation but for the welfare of present and future generations. *Jayaseelan Mash* embodies this ideal by sharing the seeds entrusted to him instead of claiming ownership over them. The exchange of seeds thus represents the sharing of ecological responsibility rather than the transfer of property.

The story similarly extends the meaning of Gandhian non-violence. Violence is directed not only against human beings but also against nature itself. By placing environmental destruction alongside attacks on Gandhian values, the narrative suggests that both arise from the same culture of domination and intolerance. Against this destructive logic, the recurring images of seeds and trees symbolize renewal, coexistence, and the continuity of life.

The Gandhian ideal of Grama Swaraj also shapes the narrative through the character of *Ammunni Ammayi*. The ecological knowledge embodied in the preserved seed originates not in scientific laboratories but in generations of lived rural experience. Rather than opposing scientific knowledge and indigenous wisdom, the story presents them as complementary forms of environmental understanding. Sustainable conservation therefore depends upon preserving both biodiversity and local ecological traditions.

A parallel critique is directed toward consumerism and dominant models of development. Urbanization, commercial agriculture, and market-driven economic practices reduce nature to economic value while eroding its ecological and cultural significance. The disappearance of native trees becomes a symbol of this imbalance. Against such developmental logic, *Gandhitharu* proposes an ecological ethic founded upon restraint, simplicity, and coexistence instead of unlimited consumption and exploitation.

The story further develops this Gandhian vision through environmental education. *Jayaseelan Mash's* "Birthday Tree Project" transforms conservation from classroom instruction into lived experience by linking the birth of a child with the planting of a tree. This experiential model reflects Gandhi's understanding of education as the cultivation of ethical responsibility rather than the mere transmission of information. Nature becomes part of everyday life instead of remaining an external object of study.

At the same time, the narrative critically examines the limitations of institutional environmentalism. Tree-planting campaigns, commemorative programmes, and environmental celebrations often remain symbolic unless they challenge the structural causes of ecological degradation. Environmental awareness cannot be reduced to rituals or public performances; it requires lasting changes in values, lifestyles, and human relationships with nature. Jayaseelan Mash's initiative differs precisely because it offers not merely a sapling but a continuing moral responsibility.

Through these interconnected ideas, *Gandhitharu* reinterprets Gandhian philosophy as a contemporary ecological framework. Trusteeship, non-violence, local knowledge, simplicity, and experiential education together constitute an alternative vision of development rooted in ecological justice and intergenerational responsibility. The story ultimately argues that genuine progress cannot be measured solely through economic growth but through humanity's ability to sustain the ecological and ethical foundations of life.

4. FROM ANTHROPOCENTRISM TO THE VOICE OF NATURE

One of the most distinctive aesthetic features of *Gandhitharu* is its radical shift in narrative perspective. In the opening sections, the story unfolds through human experience. Characters such as *Jayaseelan Mash*, *Ammunni Ammayi*, and *Sabira Banu* guide the reader into the ecological world of the narrative. However, at a crucial moment, this anthropocentric framework is disrupted when the tree itself begins to narrate its own life. This transition is not merely a stylistic innovation but a profound redefinition of narrative authority. Instead of allowing humans to speak on behalf of nature, the story grants nature its own voice, memory, and history.

This narrative strategy closely aligns with contemporary post-humanist thought, which challenges the modern assumption that humans occupy the privileged centre of existence. Post-humanism emphasizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human life and recognizes agency beyond the human subject. The tree in *Gandhitharu* embodies this perspective. It is no longer represented as a passive object within human discourse but as a living subject capable of remembering, witnessing, and narrating. By relocating narrative authority to a non-human being, the story dismantles the hierarchical relationship between humans and nature and proposes a more inclusive ecological imagination.

The first-person narration of the tree also foregrounds the concept of ecological subjectivity. The story questions the traditional belief that memory, experience, and meaning belong exclusively to human beings. The temporal experience of the tree extends far beyond the limits of individual human life. Beginning with *Ammunni Ammayi's* preserved seed, continuing through *Jayaseelan Mash's* environmental initiative, and reaching future generations, the narrative constructs a long ecological temporality in which memory survives through living processes rather than individual consciousness. The tree therefore becomes not merely the narrator of its own life but the custodian of ecological continuity, connecting generations through cycles of growth, regeneration, and renewal.

This expanded ecological perspective also deepens the political dimension of the story. Read through the framework of political ecology, *Gandhitharu* demonstrates that environmental degradation cannot be understood solely as a natural crisis. The disappearance of native trees, the erosion of biodiversity, and the decline of rural ecological culture are presented as consequences of development policies, market-oriented economic systems, changing land-use practices, and consumerist values. Environmental destruction thus emerges as a political outcome shaped by power relations rather than an inevitable process of modernization.

Consequently, the narrative questions dominant models of development that equate progress with economic growth while overlooking ecological and cultural costs. The disappearance of indigenous species, the decline of seed preservation traditions, and the erosion of local ecological knowledge expose the limitations of development founded upon exploitation. Against this model, *Gandhitharu* proposes an alternative ecological ethic based on coexistence, care, and intergenerational responsibility. Sharing seeds, planting trees, and nurturing them become acts of restoring relationships with nature rather than merely conserving biological resources.

Ultimately, the voice of the tree functions as both an aesthetic innovation and an ethical intervention. By recognizing nature as a speaking subject with its own history and memory, the story challenges anthropocentric literary traditions and reimagines environmental responsibility as a shared relationship between human and non-human life. In this way, *Gandhitharu* expands the boundaries of ecological storytelling and proposes a vision of coexistence grounded in equality, reciprocity, and environmental justice.

5. CONCLUSION

Gandhitharu reimagines environmental conservation as an ethical, cultural, and political practice rather than a purely scientific concern. Through the interconnected symbols of the seed and the tree, the story links ecological memory, biodiversity, Gandhian ethics, and collective responsibility into a coherent narrative of resistance. Its innovative first-person narration by the tree challenges anthropocentric literary conventions and foregrounds the agency of non-human life, while its critique of development exposes the cultural and political dimensions of environmental degradation. Read through ecocriticism, Gandhian environmental ethics, political ecology, memory studies, and posthumanism, Gandhitharu emerges as a significant eco-political text in contemporary Malayalam literature, demonstrating that the protection of nature ultimately depends upon preserving the values of coexistence, cultural continuity, and intergenerational responsibility.

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