

Stories that a Tree would Tell: Folktales as Phyto-Narratives

Dr. Sangeetha Verma

Associate Professor of English, N.S.S College Ottapalam, Palakkad, Kerala, India.
svarmanssotp@gmail.com

 <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613503>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on August 5, 2026

Abstract: The intricate tapestry of human interactions with the natural world has long been woven into the fabric of folk tales, literature, and art, coalescing in the critical theories of Environmental Humanities. With plants as the subject of study, narratives that represent phyto-life in art and literature fall within the ambit of Critical Plant Studies in the Humanities today. This exploration highlights the evolution of such narratives from a geocentric perspective to understand the cultural roots of symbiosis with nature. In examining select folk tales from *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About* by Margaret Read MacDonald, this paper seeks to illuminate the phyto-stories that trees tell, advocating for a deeper ecological awareness. Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing discourse that challenges anthropocentric perspectives and honours the vital interdependencies between animal/human beings and the ecosystems that cradle their stories.

Keywords: Arboreal, Cultural Narratives, Folklore, Ecological Awareness, Phyto-biographies

Introduction

In the long history of human civilisations, we are at a point where we either really care about the natural world or are bent on destroying it. It's like a mutually antagonistic pull in two differing directions. On one hand, we have this deep connection to the earth and all its wonders; on the other, we have been instrumental in bringing about huge environmental crises that threaten our very existence. Our relationship with nature is more fragile than ever. The intricate tapestry of human interactions with the natural world has long been woven into the fabric of folk tales, literature, and art, coalescing in the critical theories of Environmental Humanities.

Methodology

With plants as the subject of study, narratives that represent phyto-life in art and literature fall within the ambit of Critical Plant Studies in the Humanities today. The word "phyto" has its etymological origin in the Greek *phyton*, which literally means 'plant', but also extends its lexicon to mean "to bring forth", "to be", "to exist", "to grow". Considering the importance of plants in today's climate crisis, Critical Plant Studies is an expanding area of study where research is an ongoing process that includes agents from multiple disciplines, like scientists, biologists, environmentalists, litterateurs, and policymakers. The paper seeks to explore the matrix of culture/nature dualism, where folktales are critically situated to discuss how anthropocentric cultures have mediated their supremacy over plants/trees at the cost of the planet's survival. The critical paradigms of ecocritical theories, critical plant studies, and Anthropocene theory are used to argue for a reading of folk tales as phyto-narratives.

Literature Review

Viewing plants as responsive, communicative organisms unsettles the human-nature divide and supports more relational, care-based environmental ethics. The vegetal world is communal since they share a common root ground. They can communicate with each other, recall memories, and even experience their surroundings through senses like taste, smell, touch, and, surprisingly, hearing and sight. This new understanding has given us a fresh perspective on the world we share with plants. This has been proved by scientists like Erasmus Darwin as early as 1796 in his work *The Laws of Organic Life*, where he writes about vegetable animation.

But even with these discoveries, we have actually become more disconnected from nature than ever before. And what's worse, this separation is happening faster than we can rebuild our relationship with the natural world. We're losing touch with the world around us, and it's happening at a pace that's hard to keep up with. Eco-ethics, or ecological ethics, was a relatively new coinage of the last century by the ecologist Otto Kilne, which shaped human conduct towards the environment. This concept of an ethical approach towards Earth and all its forms and species had already been a part of ecocritical study from 1949 with the publication of Aldo Leopold's work, *The Sand County Almanack*.

Our lives are closely tied to the natural world and its rhythms. The earth shapes us, and at the same time, our actions have an impact on its balance. This is what is

known as 'planetary' -thinking of the earth as a whole, rather than just as separate countries or regions. It's about being aware of how we fit into the bigger picture, including the world of animals, plants, and other living things. Our thoughts, feelings, and existence are all connected to the natural world. We need to remember this connection when we think about our place on the planet. By doing so, we can better understand how our actions affect the earth and its delicate balance. An ethical way of thinking can help us have a positive impact on the world around us. For instance, when we look at the natural world, we can see how everything is interconnected. The changing seasons, for example, affect our daily lives. At the same time, our actions - like the way we use resources - can influence the earth's balance. Ultimately, thinking of the earth as a whole, rather than just as separate parts, can help us create a better future for ourselves and for the planet. It's a mindset that encourages us to think about the long-term effects of our actions and to work towards a more sustainable world.

The interconnectedness of life emerges through intricate patterns of relationships whose dynamics unfold across individual experiences, diverse species, landscapes, and the passage of time. The 'interface' or, simplistically, an 'ecological engagement', is the site of embodied connectivities between and amongst various species and their eco-spaces. Environmental humanities have attempted to study the entanglements of multispecies with their planetary landscape in myriad ways. A growing body of research on plant-animal-human engagements with various Eco-spaces has preoccupied scholars, academicians, and grassroots activists in the last two decades. Scholarly studies have dealt at length with these entangled relationships of living beings with their environs, of being responsible to and for others, both nurturing and being nurtured in the skein of life. Val Plumwood, in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* have tasked scholars to realign the human within their environment and, secondly, to resituate non-humans within cultural and ethical domains. A wide range of interdisciplinary approaches using insights from anthropology, science, geography, philosophy, feminist studies, photography, media studies, and numerous other areas have facilitated conversations in new and hitherto unexplored ways.

Folk Tales as Archival Memory

Folk tales are undoubtedly the earliest myths of humanity, which fall under the matrix of nature-culture dualism. A study of folk art and literature reveals the truth of how plant and planet, animal and human have coevolved from earliest times. But later myths have sung a different story, that of domination and destruction, of man's hubris and nature's devastation. With the dawn of Semitic religions and the rise of Father Gods, the disconnect between man, made in God's own image, and nature was complete. The story of Noah's Ark reveals that plants weren't really considered important. Noah saved all the animals and birds, but he didn't think about saving the plants. Again, Adam and Eve were forbidden the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, where the Tree itself had no say. The Tree was silenced; its knowledge may bring death to man. In early folk traditions, before the advent of Christianity, tree worship was common among various societies. Perhaps the command and the admonition of the Father-God were a politico-cultural necessity.

Trees have been around for a really long time, and each one has its own story to tell. They are all unique, with their own way of interacting with the world. From the tiny insects that live in the soil under their roots, to the birds that make their homes in the branches, and the squirrels, monkeys, and snakes that call them home, trees are like a big community. For many indigenous communities, trees are super important and play a big role in their cultures and traditions. They are seen as wise and knowledgeable, holding secrets of the natural world and offering guidance to those who need it. Throughout history, trees have been a source of inspiration and comfort for people. They provide us with food, shelter, medicine, and warmth. Trees shape the destiny of Middle-earth - like the Ents in J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, or they grant religious ecstasy like the Bodhi tree where the Buddha was enlightened. They shape our experiences, influence our stories, and help keep the world around us healthy.

Folk tales are more than just simple stories for children - they hold a lot of wisdom about taking care of the earth. But often, we see them as old-fashioned or just for children. But folk tales are a part of everyday life, and they can be found wherever people live. They have the power to teach us about the importance of taking care of the earth and building strong communities. As Mary Porselvi calls them, folk tales are "Gaia care narratives" - stories about taking care of the earth. They have a lot to teach us about living in harmony with nature and building strong, resilient communities. We can learn a lot from folk tales about how to take care of the earth and be strong as a community. By embracing these stories, we can gain a deeper understanding of the world around us and our place in it.

The way of thinking against nature and the earth, where we invisibilise plants, has led to an ecological crisis. Richard Powers' work, *The Overstory*, talks about the significance of trees and plants in our world. He shows us that our connection to the earth is deeply rooted in our relationship with these living beings. Now we know that plants communicate and remember. They taste, smell, touch, and even hear and see. We, the species that figured this out, have learned so much about who we share the world with. We've begun to understand the profound ties between trees and people. But our separation has grown faster than our connection. (451) Plants are more than just a background to our lives. They are no longer just a modest scenery in our stories; they are active presences, thinking in green, remembering in silence, and quietly re-shaping the conditions that make our own lives possible.

Folk tales as phyto-narratives

This paper explores select stories included in the trope of the "Forest lands" from the work, *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*, by Margaret Read MacDonald, where animals/people and trees interact in ways that help us see things from a different perspective. Before Environmental Humanities evolved as a cornerstone of ecocritical reading, there were mere phyto-graphic descriptions of the vegetal world. But today, a nuanced life story of human-plant relations with singular narrative value has developed. These stories help us develop a sense of responsibility towards the earth and a more democratic way of living with nature. The stories chosen for this paper feature trees and

animals as main characters, showing how all living things are connected and need to live together in ways that are good for everyone. By using symbols and talking about relationships between species, these stories challenge the idea that humans are more important than nature. This way of thinking is all about living together sustainably. They feature trees as protagonists/storytellers/narrators and show how they are connected to the people and animals around them. Phyto-biographies are an interdisciplinary practice that traces the life, movements, and cultural entanglements of plant communities, drawing together phyto-graphic description, ecological history, and human narratives to render plants as historical actors rather than passive background.

A Tale of Rupture

"Beast and Tree" is a fable by James Dillet Freeman which depicts the importance of the reciprocal relationship between the beast and the tree. The tree lived in perfect harmony with the little creatures that lived on the soil, its branches, and its roots. Then the beast came and started taking away all the nourishment from the tree. And the tree suffered. One day it was dying, and the beast too lost its one source of survival. It ran to replenish the tree with water.

Bring mud.

Bring water.

Leaves to mulch the roots.

No munching now.

Just saving, graceful acts. (53-58)

If you will take.

You also must give back. (61-62)

True power lies in balance, reciprocity, and the recognition that life depends on mutual care.

Universal Laws of Nature

In yet another folktale, "Mikku and the Trees", the indigenous perspectives on plant reciprocity are justified. Mikku went into the forest to gather firewood. Since he was lazy, he decided to cut down a tree rather than spend time and effort gathering dried twigs from the forest floor. Mikku's three encounters with the Birch, Cherry, and Maple trees reinforce the theme of interdependence. Each tree justifies its survival by listing its ecological and cultural uses, convincing Mikku to spare all the trees of the forest. As he realises the various contributions of trees, a woodland guardian spirit springs up and gifts Mikku with a magic wand, saying that he should be able to use the wand as long as he pays heed to the laws of nature. Mikku's initial respect earns him the wand, but his greed and laziness lead to its misuse. He demands that the sun should shine in the midst of winter, leading to his fall. "Since that day the trees have never spoken to another human being. Though they say that if you walk through the woods and listen, you can hear them whispering high up in the treetops" (27). The woodland spirit's gift symbolises conditional harmony with nature, which Mikku violates by demanding unnatural changes. The trees in the story are sentient, vocal, and capable of

negotiation, challenging the Western anthropocentric view of plants as passive resources. Michael Marder observes that “Plant communities are tangles of stories about interactions among plants; the collaborations and collisions of plants with bacteria, fungi, and animals” (196).

Vegetal Justice

“Spider and the Palm-Nut Tree” is a Dan folktale that narrates how the spider began to spin its web. The tale begins with a village council that called on the forest folks to stop tapping palm trees, as many of the trees were dying. The palm trees give them oil, firewood, roofs, and sweet palm sap. To restore the balance of nature, the palm trees needed to be preserved. The spider who went to the Council was not impressed and decided to continue tapping the palm tree for its nectarine sap. Early next morning, the spider identified the trees and prepared everything, including covering its tracks so the forest dwellers would not suspect it. The palm trees decided to teach the spider a lesson. They decided to prevent the spider from tapping their sap by growing sharp thorns or growing so tall that the spider would not be able to climb down. The spider was stuck and begged for mercy. The palm tree then relented and gave the spider its palm thread, so that it would be able to climb down. The spider promised never to harm the palm tree ever again. To this day, the spider employs the palm tree thread to weave its web. Val Plumwood, an Ecofeminist Philosopher, says, “A weakened sense of the reality of our embeddedness in nature is seen in the cultural phenomenon of ecological denial which refuses to admit the reality and seriousness of the ecological crisis” (99). The anthropomorphic nature of our narratives situates nature as inert and exploitable, whereas many autochthonous communities have folklore that depicts nature as an agential, responsive force.

Conclusion

Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “The Anthropocene are saying something quite the contrary. They argue that because humans constitute a particular kind of species, they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of a geologic force” (37). But ecological abuse has a way of retracing its steps back to its source. The ‘master narrative’ of human dominance is subverted in folktales where nature retaliates against exploitation. Trees operate on geological time—their revenge, like climate change, is slow but inevitable. In all these folktales, the trees/plants are participants, witnesses, and judges. Folktales across cultures encode deep ecological wisdom, portraying trees not as passive resources but as sentient, agential beings capable of communication, justice, and reciprocity. Through the lens of Plant Humanities—a field bridging botany, philosophy, and cultural studies—we can decode these narratives to challenge anthropocentrism and advocate for ethical arboreal relationships. Folktales remind us that human survival is rooted in arboreal kinship, which fosters sustainable practices. Folktales often cast trees as judges or teachers, rewarding care and punishing exploitation. Trees negotiate with humans, withdrawing their gifts when greed disrupts balance in “Mikku and the Trees”. The plant’s quiet resilience humbles the animal, showcasing vegetal power in “Beast and Tree” and “The Spider and the Palm-Nut Tree”.

To heed their lessons, we must listen to the whispers of leaves, restore what we have broken, and relearn reciprocity—before the trees fall silent for good.

Works Cited

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2021

Darwin, Erasmus. *Zoonomia, Vol. I Or, the Laws of Organic Life*, Section XIII, "Of vegetable animation." 1796. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15707/15707-h/15707-h.htm>.

Marder, Michael (2023) "A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell," *Narrative Culture*: Vol. 10: 2. <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/narrative/vol10/iss2/3> (189-205)

MacDonald, Margaret Read. *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About*. USA, 1999.

Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London, 2002

Porselvi, P.Mary Vidya. *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice*. London, 2023.