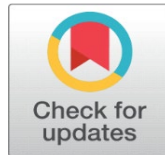
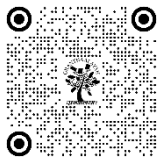


HARMONY AND REVERENCE: NATURE IN MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO

Basheer V.P. 

¹ Assistant Professor of English, Kunnamangalam Government Arts and Science College, Calicut, Kerala, India



Corresponding Author

Basheer V.P.,
basheervp.veluthaparambath@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5350](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5350)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

“Harmony and Reverence: Nature in My Neighbors Totoro” explores the profound relationship between humans and the natural world as depicted in Hayao Miyazaki’s beloved 1988 animated film *My Neighbors Totoro*. Set in rural post-war Japan, the film portrays two young sisters, Satsuki and Mei, who discover forest spirits, including the iconic Totoro, during their family’s transition to countryside life. This study examines how Miyazaki uses vivid landscapes, traditional Japanese Shinto beliefs, and subtle storytelling to emphasize environmental harmony and spiritual reverence for nature. Unlike films that present nature as a backdrop or an adversary, *My Neighbors Totoro* positions nature as an active, nurturing presence that heals, guides, and connects human lives. The absence of a conventional antagonist allows the narrative to focus on emotional growth, innocence, and ecological awareness. Through a lens of ecocriticism, this paper highlights how the film’s representation of non-human characters—such as the Camphor Tree, Totoro, and the Catbus—symbolizes the sacred interdependence between people and their environment. By analyzing the film’s visual style, sound design, and thematic depth, this abstract argues that *My Neighbour Totoro* is not just a children’s fantasy but a quiet environmental parable promoting coexistence, care, and a return to natural rhythms.

Keywords: Hayao Miyazaki, *My Neighbour Totoro*, Nature, Environmental Harmony, Shinto Beliefs, Ecocriticism, Japanese Animation, Spirituality, Rural Japan, Forest Spirits, Children’s Cinema

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the study will explore how Miyazaki’s *My Neighbour Totoro* fosters ecological appreciation through its storytelling and how the film subtly encourages its audience to embrace and care for the natural world. While it may not carry the urgent environmental warning of *Princess Mononoke*, *My Neighbour Totoro* beautifully represents Shinto beliefs and captures the wonder of childhood. By examining how Miyazaki blends fantasy with reality, this analysis will highlight how the film offers something just as valuable: a reason to love nature in the first place.

Studio Ghibli’s *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) is a story set in rural Japan during the 1950s and follows two sisters, Satsuki and Mei, who move to the countryside with their father while their mother recovers from an illness. They discover Totoro, a friendly forest spirit who introduces them to the wonders of nature. The story is told through the eyes of the younger sister. Mei’s perspective captures childhood innocence and imagination. Their adventures with Totoro and other spirits lead to moments of wonder, discovery, joy, and the unseen magic in nature.

The film embodies childhood wonder, nostalgia, and the deep bond between humans and nature. Unlike Princess Mononoke, which explores environmental destruction, My Neighbor Totoro takes a softer approach. It focuses on love and appreciation for nature, making it feel alive, magical, and comforting, encouraging the audience to care for it

Rather than relying on traditional conflict, the film finds meaning in small moments, watching raindrops fall, running through fields, planting seeds, and waiting for trees to grow. These details highlight the joy of being immersed in nature, contrasting with modern life, which often pulls people away from it. Instead of pushing an environmental message, the film allows the audience to experience nature's beauty through a child's eyes, making them instinctively want to protect it.

The film's imagery reflects traditional Shinto beliefs, where nature is sacred and filled with spiritual meaning. The presence of Torii gates, Jizo statues, and twilight (tasogare) enhances this connection. The peaceful rural setting reinforces the harmony between humans and nature. The giant camphor tree, where the girls meet Totoro, feels alive, like a guardian watching over them. Unlike Western ecological narratives that often depict nature as something to be used or feared, My Neighbour Totoro presents it as a source of warmth, wisdom, and wonder. There is no looming threat of pollution or urbanization; instead, the film portrays a world where the bond between humans and nature remains unbroken.

The children's immersion in nature, running through fields, napping under trees, and growing vegetables with neighbours, reflects a time when people had a more personal relationship with the natural world. Through Totoro, Miyazaki invites us to remember childhood, when the world felt vast, full of wonder, and deeply connected to nature.

While light-hearted and comforting, My Neighbour Totoro carries a powerful message. Without preaching or warning of consequences, it makes us fall in love with nature. It shows a world where humans and the environment exist in harmony, where trees are not obstacles but sacred beings to be cared for. In doing so, My Neighbour Totoro reminds us why nature is worth protecting, not out of fear but out of love and appreciation.

My Neighbour Totoro presents a vision of life where humans and nature exist in harmony, deeply rooted in Shinto beliefs and the traditions of rural Japan. The film does not depict nature as something separate from humanity or as a resource to be used, but rather as a living entity that is interconnected with people's daily lives. Through its storytelling, My Neighbour Totoro conveys an animistic worldview, where the land, its creatures, and its spirits exist in balance with human life. This ecological harmony is expressed through the character interactions, the presence of Shinto-inspired spiritual beings, and the way rural traditions shape daily life in the village.

One of the most remarkable aspects of My Neighbour Totoro is how it frames nature as an essential part of human existence rather than a distant or hostile force. Satsuki and Mei, the film's young protagonists, interact with the natural world in a way that is neither fearful nor overly idealized. It is simply part of their everyday reality. Their move to the countryside is not depicted as a loss of modern comforts but as a return to something more meaningful. From the moment they arrive, they express excitement and curiosity about their new environment. Rather than seeing the old house and surrounding landscape as something foreign or unsettling, they eagerly embrace the experience, treating the natural world as a source of adventure rather than danger.

Their first encounter with the soot sprites (susuwatari) in their home further highlights this instinctive connection to the unseen world of nature. These tiny, shadowy creatures, inspired by Japanese folklore, do not serve as a threat but rather as a whimsical reminder that nature is filled with unseen forces. Unlike in Western fairy tales, where the unknown often represents something to be conquered or eliminated, My Neighbour Totoro presents mystery as something to be accepted and coexisted with. This acceptance of nature's hidden spirits reflects traditional Shinto animism, which teaches that every element of the natural world is filled with spiritual energy.

At the heart of the film's ecological vision is Totoro himself, a being who embodies the spirit of the forest. Totoro is not a conventional deity or guardian, nor does he serve as a traditional mentor figure to the girls. He does not speak, guide, or instruct them in any direct way. Instead, his presence is one of quiet support, mirroring the natural world's role in human life. He is neither entirely benevolent nor omnipotent. He simply exists, much like a sacred tree or a flowing river, offering shelter and companionship without demanding anything in return.

Mei's first meeting with Totoro under the giant camphor tree is an especially significant moment. In Shinto tradition, large trees are often believed to house protective spirits, and the camphor tree in the film serves as a sacred focal point for the story. The presence of shimenawa (a rope made of rice straw or hemp, used to mark sacred spaces) and yorishiro (objects that attract or house spirits) around the tree and the abandoned shrine further emphasizes its spiritual

significance; it is honoured as a sacred home for divine beings. Mei, being a child, immediately recognizes Totoro as something wonderful rather than something to be feared. Her instinctive trust and curiosity suggest an inherent human ability to connect with nature, one that modern life often suppresses. Later, when Satsuki also encounters Totoro, it happens at a moment of vulnerability, reinforcing the idea that nature provides comfort and reassurance in times of emotional distress.

The umbrella scene at the bus stop is one of the film's most memorable examples of this subtle yet profound relationship. Satsuki, waiting for her father in the rain, is joined by Totoro, who seems to be experiencing rain for the first time. His delight in the sensation of raindrops hitting the umbrella reflects a fundamental aspect of the film's environmental philosophy. Nature itself is a source of wonder, and even its smallest elements should be cherished. When Satsuki offers him the umbrella, it is a simple yet powerful gesture of kindness, illustrating that the relationship between humans and nature should be based on mutual care rather than exploitation.

This interconnectedness is further explored through the growing seeds scene, where Totoro and the girls engage in a ritual-like dance to help the seeds they planted sprout. This moment is both magical and deeply ecological, symbolizing the idea that human effort, when aligned with nature's rhythms, leads to growth and renewal. The sequence can be seen as a Shinto-inspired offering of energy and gratitude to the land, reinforcing the belief that humans should nurture nature just as nature nurtures them.

2. LIVING IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

The film's setting plays a crucial role in shaping its ecological message. The rural village where the girls move is not merely beautiful scenery but an essential element of the narrative, illustrating a way of life that is deeply intertwined with nature. Unlike urban environments, where green spaces are restricted to parks or carefully controlled gardens, the countryside in *My Neighbour Totoro* breathes with life. It is an open, ever-present force that influences the daily lives of its inhabitants. The people who live there do not seek to conquer or reshape the land to fit their needs; instead, they embrace its natural rhythms, adapting to the environment with patience and reverence. Traditions passed down through generations guide their interactions with nature, fostering a deep respect for the land and all it sustains.

One of the clearest examples of this harmony can be seen in the villagers' approach to farming. The rice fields in the film are not depicted as industrialized, mechanized spaces, nor are they romanticized as idyllic landscapes free from labour. Instead, they are shown as carefully tended ecosystems that require patience, dedication, and an understanding of the land's needs. Farming, in this context, is not a mere occupation but a way of life, one that demands respect for natural cycles rather than the pursuit of rapid convenience. The absence of modern agricultural machinery is striking, serving as a quiet but powerful statement about sustainability. Rather than exploiting the land, the villagers work with it, preserving its balance and ensuring its continued fertility.

This deep-rooted connection to the land extends beyond agricultural practices and into the very structure of the community. When Mei goes missing, the entire village unites in the search for her, embodying a sense of collective responsibility that mirrors the interdependence found in nature. Just as every element in an ecosystem plays a role in maintaining harmony, every person in the village contributes to the well-being of others. This communal bond reinforces the film's broader environmental message: no being exists in isolation, and survival depends on mutual care and cooperation. The villagers' actions serve as a reminder that humanity flourishes not by dominating nature but by existing in respectful collaboration with it.

Beyond human relationships, the presence of Shinto traditions in the film further underscores the idea that nature is not merely a resource but a sacred presence worthy of respect and love. Small roadside shrines, though never directly addressed in the narrative, subtly highlight the spiritual connection between people and the natural world. In many Western stories, spirituality and the environment are often treated as separate realms, but *My Neighbour Totoro* blends this boundary. The land itself is one with spirit, and respecting nature is not a duty but an intrinsic part of life. The towering camphor tree, which serves as Totoro's home, is not just a physical landmark but a symbol of the deep-rooted connection between humanity and the natural world. It represents stability, history, and the unseen forces that nurture and protect life.

The film's depiction of childhood wonder further enhances this ecological theme. Satsuki and Mei do not see nature as something external or distant; they interact with it directly, exploring the forests, running through fields, and embracing the joy of discovering the world around them. Their unfiltered curiosity and admiration for the land reflect

an innate understanding of nature's importance, an understanding that often fades in adulthood, replaced by detachment, practicality, and the unwillingness to see the magic in everyday life. Through their eyes, the audience is reminded of the simple yet profound beauty of the natural world and the necessity of preserving it not just for practical reasons but for the sake of future generations who deserve to experience that same wonder.

By the end of the film, the ecological message is clear: true harmony with nature comes not from control but from coexistence. The village with its deep respect for natural rhythms stands in contrast to the rapid industrialization that has reshaped much of the modern world. Through quiet moments, like a breeze rustling through the trees, the patient work of tending a rice field, and the gentle reverence shown to an ancient tree, the film gently urges its audience to reconsider their relationship with the environment. It is not a grand or forceful call to action, but rather a quiet, persistent whisper: respect the land, honor its rhythms, and live in harmony with the world around you.

3. CHILDHOOD IN TUNE WITH NATURE

At the heart of *My Neighbour Totoro* is the idea that children instinctively connect with nature in a way that adults do not. Satsuki and Mei's experiences in the countryside depict a world where nature is not something to be controlled or feared but something to be explored, respected, and loved. Their ability to see and interact with Totoro and the smaller forest spirits suggests that children possess a purity and openness that allow them to engage with the natural world on a deeper level.

This idea reflects a broader pastoral ecocritical perspective, which idealizes the countryside as a space of innocence, simplicity, and harmony between humans and nature. Unlike industrialized settings, where technology and human ambition often dominate the environment, the rural landscape of *Totoro* is portrayed as a nurturing and almost sacred space. The film expresses this through the children's unfiltered appreciation of their surroundings. The sensation of wind rushing through the trees, the sight of fireflies at night, and the rhythmic sound of rain falling on their umbrellas all emphasize a sensory and emotional connection to the environment that is often lost in adulthood.

The film suggests that perceiving nature as alive and sentient is a defining characteristic of childhood. The adults in *My Neighbour Totoro* tend to engage with nature in a more functional way. They farm, build houses, and make a living from the land, but they do not see the forest spirits or acknowledge their presence. In contrast, Satsuki and Mei interact with nature in a way that blurs the boundary between the human and non-human worlds.

A key moment that illustrates this connection is Mei's discovery of Totoro beneath the camphor tree. Unlike an adult, who might approach the unknown with hesitation or scepticism, Mei embraces Totoro with childlike excitement. She climbs onto his chest, laughs, and even falls asleep on his belly, as if she has always belonged in his world. This interaction suggests that nature, when approached with curiosity and trust rather than fear or dominance, becomes a source of comfort and wonder.

Similarly, when Satsuki meets Totoro at the bus stop, she does not question his existence. She simply accepts him as part of the world around her. She stands beside him in the rain and offers him an umbrella, an act that is both polite and symbolic of human kindness toward nature. Totoro, in turn, expresses his joy by shaking the raindrops from the trees, creating a moment of innocent playfulness that highlights the reciprocal relationship between children and the environment.

These interactions reinforce a central theme of the film. Nature, when approached with openness and respect, reveals itself in beautiful and magical ways. This aligns with Shinto beliefs, where spirits, or kami, exist within all things, including trees, rivers, and animals. The idea that only children can see these spirits reflects the belief that purity of heart allows one to recognize the sacredness of nature.

Beyond being a space of adventure and discovery, the countryside in *My Neighbour Totoro* serves as a place of healing for Satsuki and Mei. Their move to the village is not just a physical relocation but an emotional transition that helps them cope with their mother's illness and the uncertainties in their family's life. Nature, in this sense, is not just a background but an active, nurturing force that supports them during this difficult time.

Mei's initial excitement about her new home is closely tied to her fascination with the outdoors. She chases small creatures, collects acorns, and explores hidden pathways, fully immersing herself in her surroundings. These simple experiences ground her in the present moment, allowing her to find joy even in the midst of emotional hardship. Satsuki, though more mature, also turns to nature for comfort. When she becomes overwhelmed with worry, her run through the

rice fields in search of Mei highlights the landscape's role as both a witness to her emotions and a source of emotional release.

Totoro and the Cat bus further symbolize this connection between children and nature as a source of healing. Totoro, as a guardian spirit, does not speak, but his presence alone provides comfort. The Cat bus, with its whimsical and organic design, serves as a bridge between human emotions and the natural world, literally carrying Satsuki to her lost sister. These fantastical elements reinforce the idea that when children fully embrace nature, it offers them guidance and emotional support. In a world often dominated by logic and structure, their existence reminds us of the quiet, unseen forces in nature that nurture and protect. Through them, the film suggests that nature is not just a passive backdrop but an active, benevolent presence in our lives.

4. ADULTHOOD: LOSING TOUCH WITH NATURE

The film subtly contrasts the children's intuitive connection to nature with the perspectives of adults, who are often preoccupied with responsibilities and practical concerns. While children like Mei and Satsuki naturally interact with their surroundings, treating the forests, fields, and creatures as part of their world, most adults in the film view nature in a more practical and functional way. They appreciate its beauty and understand its importance, but they no longer engage with it in the same imaginative or spiritual manner.

Their father, Tatsuo, is an exception. He acknowledges the possibility of spirits and encourages his daughters' curiosity and imagination, fostering their sense of wonder rather than dismissing it. Unlike many adults, he does not see their experiences as mere fantasy but rather as a valid way of understanding the world. His open-mindedness allows Satsuki and Mei to fully embrace the magic of their environment, reinforcing the idea that belief in nature's spirit is not exclusive to childhood but can be carried into adulthood.

However, other adults in the village, while kind and supportive, do not share the same sense of wonder about the environment. They respect nature and live in harmony with it, but they do not engage with it on the same spiritual or emotional level as the children do. This contrast reflects a common theme in Miyazaki's films. As people grow older, they often lose the ability to see the magic in nature. The creatures Mei and Satsuki encounter, Totoro, the small forest spirits, and the Cat bus, are visible only to them, reinforcing the idea that the purest connection with nature is often found in childhood.

This theme ties into the film's ecocritical message, emphasizing that a deep connection to nature is something that should be preserved beyond childhood. While *My Neighbour Totoro* does not depict environmental destruction or direct conflict, it subtly warns that neglecting this connection could lead to a gradual loss of appreciation for the natural world. If people grow up without a sense of wonder and respect for nature, they may become indifferent to its well-being. Miyazaki suggests that protecting the environment is not just about taking action against destruction but also about maintaining a fundamental appreciation and reverence for the natural world.

Beyond the world of the film, this loss of connection with nature is a significant issue in modern society. With increasing urbanization and technological advancements, many adults have become detached from the natural world. Time spent outdoors has diminished, and interactions with nature are often limited to brief moments rather than meaningful engagement. In contrast to the past, when people lived in closer harmony with their surroundings, modern life often encourages a mindset where nature is seen as a backdrop rather than an integral part of daily existence. This shift has resulted in a growing disconnect, where many individuals no longer experience the rejuvenating effects of nature or recognize its intrinsic value beyond its practical uses.

This disconnection is further reflected in the way nature is often perceived in contemporary society. While many people acknowledge environmental concerns, their relationship with nature remains distant. Work, technology, and urban life dominate daily routines, leaving little room for moments of quiet reflection or spiritual engagement with the natural world. The ability to find joy in small natural wonders, such as the rustling of leaves or the sound of rain, is something that many adults overlook. The film suggests that this loss is not inevitable but rather a consequence of shifting priorities and perspectives as people age.

Satsuki and Mei's experiences serve as a reminder that protecting nature begins with valuing and respecting it. Their relationship with Totoro and the other spirits symbolizes a harmonious existence between humans and the environment. Through their journey, the film encourages viewers to rekindle their own connection with nature, to see it not just as a resource but as something alive, full of wonder, and worthy of care. By showing how easily adults can lose this

perspective, *My Neighbour Totoro* gently urges its audience to hold onto the sense of curiosity and reverence that comes naturally to children. In doing so, it presents a hopeful vision, one where growing up does not have to mean losing sight of the magic in the world around us.

Ultimately, the film advocates for a balance between adulthood and childlike wonder, showing that appreciation for nature should not be something left behind with youth. Instead, it should be nurtured and carried forward, allowing individuals to maintain a deep and meaningful bond with the environment. By recognizing the importance of this connection, both in the film and in real life, people can cultivate a greater awareness of nature's significance and work towards preserving it for future generations.

My Neighbour Totoro presents a world where humans and nature exist in harmony, guided by a quiet yet profound ecological awareness. Through its pastoral setting, the film celebrates the beauty of rural life, where nature is not just background scenery but a living presence that nurtures and heals. The gentle spirits of the forest, especially Totoro, symbolize a deeper connection to the land, reminding viewers of the sacredness embedded in the natural world. Rather than focusing on environmental crises or conflicts, *My Neighbour Totoro* offers a peaceful vision where nature becomes a source of comfort and joy, reinforcing the idea that environmental consciousness can begin with simple acts of appreciation.

A key aspect of the film's ecocritical message is its portrayal of childhood as a state of openness to nature. Satsuki and Mei's instinctive bond with their surroundings suggests that a deep appreciation for the environment is something that should be cultivated from an early age. Their ability to see and interact with the forest spirits reflects the idea that nature reveals itself to those who approach it with curiosity, respect, and kindness. This notion aligns with Shinto beliefs, where elements of nature such as trees, rivers, and wind are filled with spiritual significance. The camphor tree near their home stands as a quiet guardian, its towering presence embodying a wisdom that exists beyond human understanding. In this way, the film encourages its audience to see nature not as something to be used but as something with its own life, history, and spirit.

Beyond its spiritual and philosophical themes, *My Neighbour Totoro* also highlights the healing power of nature. The family's move to the countryside is driven by their mother's illness, and while modern medicine plays a role in her recovery, the peaceful and nurturing environment of rural life provides emotional and psychological healing for the children. Nature, in this context, is not just a setting but an active force that supports well-being. This perspective reinforces the idea that human health and happiness are deeply connected to the natural world and that preserving nature is not just an ethical responsibility but an essential part of sustaining life itself.

Rather than delivering an urgent call to action like many environmental narratives, *My Neighbour Totoro* takes a different approach. It invites its audience to observe, appreciate, and cherish nature in its simplest forms. Whether it is the rustling of leaves, the feeling of rain, or the comfort of lying in the grass, the film suggests that these small moments shape an ecological consciousness. It reminds viewers that nature is not something distant or separate but something woven into everyday life.

Ultimately, *My Neighbour Totoro* offers a quiet yet lasting environmental message. Protecting nature does not always require grand gestures or battles against destruction. Sometimes, it is as simple as acknowledging its presence, respecting its rhythms, and learning to coexist with it, just as Satsuki and Mei do. Through its gentle storytelling and nostalgic warmth, the film encourages its audience to see nature as an essential part of life, one that deserves our love, care, and protection. In this quiet reverence, in the silent companionship between humans and the natural world, the film's true ecological message takes root.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- "Earth First!" Wikipedia, 10 Nov. 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earth_First!. Accessed 26 Feb. 2025.
- "Ecocriticism." Climate Literacy, Smith College, <https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/ecocriticism/>. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.
- "Ecocriticism." Obo, www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0014.xml. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.
- Environmentalism in Manga and Anime. www.mit.edu/~rei/manga-environmental.html. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm. "The ecocriticism reader: landmarks in literary ecology." University of Georgia Press eBooks, ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA27557683. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.
- Hirai, and Naofusa. "Shinto Beliefs, Gods, Origins, Symbols, Rituals, and Facts." Encyclopedia Britannica, 26 July 1999, www.britannica.com/topic/Shinto. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
- Koons, Eric. "Environmental Issues in Japan and Solutions." Energy Tracker Asia, 4 Apr. 2024, energytracker.asia/environmental-issues-in-japan-and-solutions. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.
- Miyazaki, Hayao, director. My Neighbor Totoro. Studio Ghibli, 1988.
- Miyazaki, Hayao, director. Princess Mononoke. Studio Ghibli, 1997.
- "Radical Environmentalism." Wikipedia, 27 Dec. 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical_environmentalism. Accessed 26 Feb. 2025