



VOICE OF THE GROVE: SUGATHAKUMARI'S POETRY AS ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

This article argues that Sugathakumari's poetry functions as a form of environmental praxis. Through close readings of key poems — notably *Marathinu Stuth* (Ode to a Tree), *Rathrimazha* (Night Rain), and *Ambalamani*— and situating these texts within the history of the Save Silent Valley movement and the poet's institutional activism (Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi; Abhaya), the paper demonstrates how lyric language produced moral imagination, public testimony, and mobilising discourse in Kerala's environmental politics. Combining close reading with contextual archival and secondary sources, the article shows how Sugathakumari's verse migrated from page to protest and how her embodied ethics of care linked human vulnerability with ecological stewardship.

Keywords: Sugathakumari; Malayalam poetry; eco-poetics; Silent Valley; ecofeminism; environmental activism; Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi; Abhaya

Introduction

Sugathakumari (1934–2020) occupies a singular place in modern Malayalam letters: a poet widely read for her lyric intensity and, simultaneously, a public intellectual and activist whose voice helped shape environmental politics in Kerala. This paper treats poetry as social practice and reads her major environmental poems alongside the history of the Silent Valley movement to argue that her poetry materially contributed to conservationist discourse and mobilisation. The analysis combines formal close reading with archival and journalistic sources to situate poetic strategies in concrete political contexts.

Historical Context: Silent Valley and Institutional Activism

The Save Silent Valley movement (late 1970s–early 1980s) opposing a hydroelectric project that threatened a stretch of the Western Ghats is the clearest instance where Sugathakumari's poetry intersected with mass environmental activism. Her poem *Marathinu Stuth* (Ode to a Tree) was widely used in campaign meetings and became emblematic of how lyric speech could become protest rhetoric. Sugathakumari also founded and ran institutions such as the Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi (for nature protection) and Abhaya (a refuge for destitute women and the mentally ill), linking ecological care with social welfare and illustrating how poetic ethics translated into institutional practice.

Poetic Strategies: Address, Witnessing, and Lament

Key poetic strategies include apostrophic address to nonhuman figures, an ethic of witnessing that transforms private grief into public testimony, and a rhetoric of lament that functions as moral

mobilisation. These strategies made Sugathakumari's poetry effective in both intimate lyric spaces and public protest arenas.

Close Readings

1. *Marathinu Stuth*(Ode to a Tree)

Formally simple and rhetorically direct, *Marathinu Stuth* stages the tree as a moral mirror. Its enumeration of the tree's gifts undercuts utilitarian arguments for ecological destruction; by making the tree's intrinsic value visible through praise, the poem became an anthem within the Silent Valley campaign.

2. *Rathrimazha*(Night Rain)

Rathrimaz hauses nocturnal and meteorological imagery to connect personal memory with ecological memory. The poem's rhythm and cadence evoke rain, while its mnemonic impulse links human histories of care and loss with changing environmental patterns. This entwining of personal and ecological mourning made the poem resonant in public readings and literary translations.

3. *Ambalamani*(Temple Bell)

Ambalamani collapses sacred and natural registers, treating temples, bells, and natural sites as co-inhabited moral spaces. By sacralising elements of the natural world, Sugathakumari broadens moral concern beyond human communities and reframes environmental arguments as matters of conscience and culture.

Ecofeminist Dimensions

Sugathakumari's poetry often aligns the suffering of women with the suffering of the earth. Her foundation of Abhaya makes this alignment institutionally visible. Read through an ecofeminist lens, her tenderness and mourning are political resources: they destabilise hierarchies that allow both women's marginalisation and environmental degradation.

From Page to Protest: Material Effects of Poetic Speech

Sugathakumari's poems were read at rallies, reprinted in campaign pamphlets, and invoked by conservation organisations. The poem's role in the Silent Valley movement shows that literary rhetoric, combined with institutional credibility (awards, public standing), can influence environmental policymaking and public opinion.

Legacy and Limitations

Sugathakumari's corpus and activism leave a complex legacy. While her moral authority and institutional work produced durable effects, some critics characterized aspects of conservation movements as anti-development. Additionally, critics have debated whether lyric affect sometimes obscures structural economic analysis. Nevertheless, her poetry's endurance in public memory and the continuing work of organisations she helped found testify to her lasting impact.

Conclusion

Sugathakumari demonstrates that poetry can perform environmental stewardship: attentive lyricism, rhetorical address, and public testimony together cultivate moral sensibilities that enable collective ecological action. Her blending of verse and activism provides a model for studies in eco-poetics and environmental humanities.

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