



Indigenous Knowledge Systems In Malayalam Novel Scenarios: A Cultural And Literary Perspective

Dr. Bincy Dominic

Assistant Professor,

St. Peter's College, Kolenchery, Kerala, India

Abstract: Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are context-specific, embodied epistemologies transmitted orally through communal practices. This paper examines the representation of IKS in three Malayalam novels—*Nellu* (P. Valsala), *Khasakkinte Itihasam* (O. V. Vijayan), and *Aathi (Gift in Green)* (Sara Joseph)—to highlight how these narratives foreground ecological wisdom, gendered epistemologies, and resistance to environmental degradation. Through literary analysis of narrative structure, character development, and symbolism, it is shown how these novels retrieve vernacular knowledge, critique hierarchical worldviews, and advocate epistemic diversity. As repositories of Kerala's indigenous worldviews, they assert cultural sustainability and foreground ecologically just futures.

Index Terms - Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Malayalam Literature, Ecofeminism, Sacred Resistance, Agrarian Ontology, Decolonial Epistemology

I. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are not static cultural residues or relics of the past; rather, they represent dynamic, embodied epistemologies grounded in the interconnected relationships among land, community, and ecology. In the Kerala context, such knowledge traditions are expressed through agricultural practices, ritual observances, oral narratives, and a holistic worldview that dissolves the binary between the sacred and the secular (Berkas, 1999, p. 43; Sillitoe, 1998, p. 10). These systems, transmitted orally and experientially across generations, resist abstraction and commodification, offering instead a deeply relational form of knowledge embedded in ecological life-worlds.

The Malayalam novel, as a modern literary form, functions not only as a medium for portraying rural life but also as a critical site for the recovery and articulation of marginalized epistemologies. Through its thematic depth and narrative structures, Malayalam fiction revisits knowledge systems endangered by colonial incursion, capitalist expansion, and caste-based hierarchies (Nair, nd., p. 122; Shiva, 1988, p. 78). In doing so, the novel becomes a space of resistance—revitalizing oral memory, land-based practices, and cosmological traditions.

In contrast to Western paradigms that objectify nature and separate the knower from the known, indigenous epistemologies emphasize embodied experience, ritual knowledge, and cosmological harmony across spiritual and material realms (Santos, 2014, p. 21; Smith, 1999, p. 33). Malayalam literature provides fertile ground for expressing these perspectives, not only thematically but also through symbolic motifs, cyclical temporality, and the ethical transformation of characters.

This study examines three Malayalam novels—*Nellu* by P. Valsala, *Khasakkinte Itihasam* by O.V. Vijayan, and *Gift in Green* by Sara Joseph—represent indigenous knowledge within their respective narrative landscapes. Each novel positions its protagonists within ecological and cultural environments that profoundly shape their consciousness and moral agency. These texts interrogate the conflict between Indigenous knowledge systems and hegemonic global discourses, thereby aligning with what Santos (2014) terms the “epistemology of the South”—a neocolonial framework that foregrounds plurality, ecological interdependence, and social justice. By challenging the authority of Enlightenment rationality, these narratives re-center indigenous ontologies rooted in Kerala’s cultural soil.

2. Methodology

Indigenous knowledge in Kerala emerges from intimate relationships among land, community, and ecology. Passed down without formal texts, IKS resists commoditization and abstraction. The Malayalam novel serves as a critical medium for reclaiming marginalized epistemologies disrupted by colonialism, capitalism, and caste hierarchies.

3. Literary Analysis

Malayalam fiction serves as a fertile literary terrain for exploring agrarian ontology and Indigenous Knowledge Systems embedded within Kerala’s socio-ecological life-worlds. Through symbolic structures, ecological metaphors, and character-driven epistemic resistance, the selected novels interrogate dominant narratives of development, modernity, and knowledge production.

In *Gift in Green*, Sara Joseph (2011) constructs the fictional island of Aathi not merely as a physical locale but as a richly layered epistemic and ethical landscape. The community’s resistance to externally imposed infrastructural development—especially the symbolic intrusion of a bridge—highlights a deeper clash between indigenous ecological ethics and the extractive logics of capitalist modernization. Women characters such as Ponmani and Karthiyayani embody relational and reciprocal ways of knowing, enacted through practices like fishing, farming, seed preservation, and spiritual engagement with nature. Their refusal to commodify the land represents an ontological stance that weaves ecology, memory, and spirituality into a cohesive worldview. Joseph’s narrative aligns with Vandana Shiva’s (1988) ecofeminist argument that sustainable futures must draw from the wisdom of historically marginalized communities. Similarly, P. Valsala’s *Nellu* (1972) functions as a literary ethnography of the tribal communities of Wayanad, particularly the Kurichya peoples, foregrounding their intimate relationship with land, ritual, and ecological cycles. The novel portrays agricultural practices such as *nellukuthippattu* (threshing songs), local farming, and oral storytelling as dynamic, performative modes of knowledge transmission. These embodied and sensory practices form a living epistemic archive, encoding environmental knowledge through rhythm, memory, and ritual. Women are central to this system, portrayed as key custodians through their roles in seed preservation, herbal medicine, and ritual labor. Valsala critically interrogates the homogenizing effects of state-imposed agrarian reforms, which fragment traditional knowledge flows and supplant reciprocal, community-based agricultural relationships with extractive and monocultural regimes of production.

Vijayan’s *Khasakkinte Itihasam* (1969) presents a more radical literary intervention. Set in the liminal space of Khasak, the novel discards Enlightenment rationality and linear narrative in favor of an epistemology grounded in myth, oral memory, and ecological embeddedness. Knowledge in Khasak is not institutional or abstract but lived, storied, and cyclical. One character’s assertion that “it is in the river, in the wind, in the trees... Khasak is where the stories sleep” (Vijayan, 1969, p. 19) Encapsulates a cosmology in which nature is both archive and narrator.

Characters such as Appukkili and Syed Thangal embody subaltern episteme rooted in mysticism, astrology, and healing—form of knowing often dismissed by modern science. Vijayan legitimizes these practices as valid knowledge systems grounded in lived experience, aligning with Santos’s (2014) notion of “epistemologies of the South.” The protagonist, Ravi, a modern rationalist, experiences epistemic disorientation as he confronts the plurality of knowledge systems in Khasak. His existential crisis reflects the violence of epistemic domination, echoing Spivak’s (1988) concept of “epistemic violence.” The novel’s cyclical narrative structure and mythic-symbolic motifs—particularly the serpent cult—underscore a sacred ecology where fertility, rebirth, and continuity are central. These elements resist

secular-materialist worldviews, offering instead an indigenous cosmology of regenerative life cycles and spiritual-material unity.

Collectively, these three novels assert indigenous knowledge as vital, ethical, and resistant to hegemonic forms of modernity. They offer literary expressions of sacred resistance, reaffirming the epistemological validity of oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and ecological interdependence. In doing so, Malayalam fiction becomes a site of decolonial recovery and an archive of agrarian ontologies deeply rooted in Kerala's cultural and ecological soil.

4. Agrarian Ontology in Malayalam Fiction

Agriculture, as portrayed in *Nellu*, *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, and *Aathi*, transcends its conventional role as economic activity and emerges instead as a moral, spiritual, and cosmological relationship with the land. These Malayalam novels reimaging agrarian life not as an act of production alone, but as a culturally situated practice governed by ethical reciprocity, ancestral memory, and ecological balance.

In *Nellu*, P. Valsala foregrounds the Kurichya tribal community's agricultural lifeways as deeply enmeshed with ritual, gender roles, and sacred cosmology. The selection and sowing of seeds are guided by lunar cycles and oral prophecies, while harvest rituals function as communal affirmations of gratitude and continuity. The land, in this vision, is neither inert nor commodified—it is animate, capable of reward and reproach. A character's declaration.

"Isn't farming our virtue and our sin? If the seeds do not sprout, the land itself will curse us" (Valsala 112)

Underscores the moral weight assigned to agricultural acts. Seeds are not transactional commodities but sacred promises:

"The seed must be good. Tomorrow's earth depends on it" (Valsala 115).

This spiritualized understanding of agriculture extends to the very conception of land. The Kurichya speak of land not as property, but as kin:

"The relationship with land is like a blood tie" (Valsala 118).

Such metaphors mark an agrarian ontology in which cultivation is labor and prayer, practice and remembrance. The novel critiques the intrusion of colonial land policies and modern agronomy, which attempt to sever this ethical bond and impose extractive logic on indigenous territories.

O.V. Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Itihasam* also treats agriculture as more than subsistence—it becomes a portal to metaphysical inquiry and collective identity. In the village of Khasak, farming is entangled with oral cosmology, animistic beliefs, and spiritual rituals. Agricultural time follows a cyclical rhythm rooted in myth and memory rather than industrial schedules. Through Ravi's alienated encounter with this world, the novel contrasts rationalist conceptions of knowledge with those derived from land-based experience. The soil, weather, and seeds of Khasak "speak" through dreams, omens, and myths, emphasizing the sentience of the landscape.

The snake cult, a central symbol in the novel, further illustrates this worldview. Revered as protectors of fertility and the soil's vitality, serpents signify the sacred dimension of agrarian life. By elevating such symbols, the novel refuses to separate agricultural labor from spiritual engagement, challenging modern epistemologies that reduce farming to technical input-output processes.

In *Aathi*, Sara Joseph rearticulates this vision within a distinct ecofeminist frame. The island community lives in a biodiverse harmony shaped by seasonal rhythms of fishing, farming, and mangrove ecology. The female protagonists—Ponmani, Kunjootty, Shailaja, and Karthiyayani—embody a feminized ethic of care, stewardship, and resistance. Their intimate connection to the land and water is neither metaphorical nor merely symbolic; it manifests through daily practices, ethical decisions, and political refusals.

The women's opposition to land sales and infrastructure projects, such as the proposed bridge, signifies more than local protest. It is a spiritual and ecological act, rooted in their understanding of land as a living entity with whom they share kinship. In Joseph's narrative, agriculture is not alienated labor but a practice of belonging. The island's mangroves—called the "green bracelet"—serve as both a protective force and sacred geography, sustaining life while shaping cultural identity.

All three texts converge on a shared understanding of agriculture as a relational ontology—an embedded way of life informed by oral traditions, ecological cycles, and ethical reciprocity. Rather than presenting land as a passive resource, these novels articulate agrarian worldviews where cultivation is a moral covenant, an act of remembrance, and a mode of resistance against colonial and capitalist logic.

4. Sacred Resistance in *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, *Nellu*, and *Gift in Green*

The concept of sacred resistance—defined as resistance grounded in spiritual, cultural, and ecological continuity—finds nuanced literary expression in *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, *Nellu*, and *Gift in Green*. Rather than resorting to overt political confrontation, the communities depicted in these novels respond to the encroachments of colonial modernity and developmentalism by reaffirming indigenous worldviews, rituals, and land-based knowledge systems. This form of resistance challenges the dominant discourse that frames indigenous life as archaic, irrational, or incompatible with progress (Santos, 2014; Shiva, 1988).

In *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, O.V. Vijayan constructs a mythopoeia landscape where ecological rhythms, ancestral spirits, and ritual practices are integral to the community's epistemic life. Knowledge circulates through oral traditions, embodied performance, and communal labor rather than through textual authority or institutional education. Villagers interpret the world through spiritual frameworks embedded in nature—via birdsong, monsoon patterns, dreams, and healing practices. Their understanding of the environment emerges from lived engagement, revealing a cosmology in which ecology and ethics are inseparable.

The narrative structure of *Khasakkinte Itihasam* itself mirrors this oral epistemology. Episodic, nonlinear, and layered with parables and symbolism, the text enacts the cyclical temporality that governs indigenous knowledge systems. Ravi, the protagonist, arrives in Khasak as a state-appointed teacher—a symbol of Enlightenment rationality and institutional pedagogy. Yet, his encounter with the village's subaltern epistemologies precipitates a personal and philosophical crisis. His increasing estrangement reflects what Spivak (1988) identifies as "epistemic violence": the process by which colonial or modern knowledge systems render indigenous voices unintelligible.

The villagers' resistance is not insurrectionary but subtle and persistent. Their continued veneration of snake deities, maintenance of ancestral rituals, and collective memory practices constitute a powerful form of sacred resistance. Through this, Vijayan critiques the state's developmental agenda not by opposing it directly but by revealing the richness of the world it attempts to overwrite.

In *Nellu*, P. Valsala articulates sacred resistance through the everyday practices of the Adiya and Kurichya tribal communities in Wayanad. Here, indigenous knowledge is sustained through agricultural rituals, lunar-aligned farming, and oral narratives. The *nellukuthippattu* (threshing song), among other performative traditions, functions as an embodied archive of ecological and social knowledge. These rituals are not merely cultural artifacts but serve as epistemological acts that link memory, labor, and spirituality.

Women occupy a central role in this resistance. Through seed preservation, herbal healing, and ritual labor, they act as custodians of a gendered ecology, affirming the ecofeminist argument that women's labor is often the locus of both ecological insight and cultural resilience (Shiva, 1988). Valsala critiques the homogenizing logic of state agrarian reforms that seek to impose standardized agricultural models, eroding the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. Yet, her narrative also affirms the resilience of these communities, whose spiritual and ecological practices resist commodification and disruption.

Gift in Green by Sara Joseph extends this vision through an explicitly ecofeminist and decolonial lens. The fictional island of Aathi is portrayed not merely as a geographic location but as an epistemic landscape where relational ethics govern human-nature interactions. The community's resistance to projects like bridge construction and land commodification is rooted in an ethos of reciprocity, care, and interdependence. Women such as Ponmani, Kunjumathu, and Karthiyayani embody an intimate ecological consciousness grounded in daily practices like fishing, seed saving, and ritual bathing.

The novel reframes resistance not as protest but as care—an insistence on ethical relationships with land, water, animals, and memory. These characters do not perceive the environment as a resource but as kin. Their refusal to endorse development projects emerges not from political ideology but from emotional and spiritual obligation. As Joseph's narrative unfolds, *Gift in Green* becomes what Shiva (1988) calls a "living cosmology," where knowledge, ethics, and sustainability are rooted in embodied, feminine, and ecological modes of being.

Collectively, these novels articulate sacred resistance as a form of epistemological survival and cultural continuity. In doing so, they challenge not only developmental paradigms but also the ontological premises of modernity. By reclaiming ritual, memory, and ecological relationality, *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, *Nellu*, and *Gift in Green* assert the vitality and validity of indigenous epistemes and offer literary blueprints for imagining just and sustainable futures.

The sacredness of Aathi's ecology is expressed through poetic imagery and affective rituals. As one character notes,

"The water here is made of tears. That's why it's so pure" (Joseph 78).

This suggests that even grief becomes a medium of communion with the land, reinforcing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of place-based knowledge. The natural world is imbued with communicative power

"The thud of hills, the sway of trees—they all have a language we fail to hear" (Joseph 89) which stands in stark contrast to the extractive logic of modern development. *Aathi* functions as a literary critique of ecocide and epistemicide. It bridges the concerns of ecology, gender, and indigenous culture, offering a holistic perspective that resists the binaries of tradition and modernity. In a time of global ecological crisis, the novel's message is urgent: sustainable futures require not just technological solutions but the restoration of indigenous worldviews rooted in respect, reciprocity, and relationality.

6. Conclusion

This study contends that Khasakkinte Itihasam, Nelli, and Aathi function as literary interventions that preserve and revitalize Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within Malayalam fiction. By centering oral traditions, ecological symbolism, and gendered epistemologies, these novels critique hegemonic structures rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Each text reclaims narrative sovereignty through formal and thematic strategies that foreground cyclical temporality, embodied experience, and place-based worldviews. In doing so, they advocate for epistemic pluralism and ecological justice. Situated within the broader framework of decolonial and ecofeminist theory, the novels challenge dominant models of development and rationality, offering instead relational and sustainable alternatives. Malayalam literature thus emerges as a critical archive of indigenous futures and a site of sacred resistance.

REFERENCES

1. Devika, J. (2005). *Her-Self: Early writings on gender by Malayalee women*. Stree.
2. Joseph, S. (2011). *Gift in green* (V. Thampu, Trans.). Harper Perennial.
3. Kumar, A. (2020). *Indigenous knowledge systems in Indian literature*. Routledge India.
4. Nair, K. (n.d.). *Malayala novelinte charithram*. Kerala Sahitya Akademi.
5. Santos, B. de S. (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.
6. Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology and development*. Zed Books.
7. Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 66–111). University of Illinois Press.
8. Valsala, P. (1972). *Nelli*. DC Books.
9. Vijayan, O. V. (1969). *Khasakkinte itihasam*. DC Books.