Revering Nature: Deep Ecology and Shinto Animism in Japanese Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

As environmental crises intensify, literature offers alternative views on human-nature relationships. This paper analyses Mushishi (1999–2008) by Yuki Urushibara and Princess Mononoke (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki to explore ecological and spiritual worldviews in Japanese manga. Mushishi portrays coexistence with mysterious lifeforms (Mushi), while Princess Mononoke dramatises industrial expansion versus nature's sacred forces. This study uses deep ecology and Shinto animism to reveal how both texts challenge anthropocentrism, emphasising interdependence and environmental consciousness. By depicting nature as agentic rather than passive, these narratives function as cultural ecological texts, advocating for non-human agency and ecological ethics in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Manga, Shinto, Animism, Deep Ecology, Agency, Interdependence, Kami.

The environment is the basis of all life on earth, influencing ecosystems and biodiversity and shaping culture, traditions, and society. Throughout history, different civilisations have recognised nature's significance, sometimes as a sacred entity, sometimes as a resource that oftentimes gets exploited. With the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation, the modern world has increasingly distanced itself from nature, merely looking at nature from a utilitarian point of view, leading to ecological crises that threaten life and all aspects of nature. In *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Timothy Clark explains, "The environment is not a passive backdrop to human actions; it is deeply entangled with the very fabric of human culture, economy, and ethics" (4). Similarly, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* critiques the mechanistic worldview that reduces nature to mere raw material, arguing that such perspectives contribute to ecological destruction (9). Recognising these challenges, environmental philosophy and literary studies have sought to re-examine human-nature relationships, giving rise to Ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field.

The degradation of the environment is not a recent issue but has been an ongoing concern, aggravated by industrial revolutions, deforestation, pollution, and the exploitation of natural resources. The Anthropocene is an unofficial proposed geological time used to describe the most recent period in earth's history, marking significant human impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. It has forced scholars to rethink the traditional boundaries between humans and the non-human world. As the effects of climate change and ecological destruction become more apparent, scholars have sought to rethink the human-nature relationship. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* introduces the concept of a "land ethic" which emphasises that humans are not separate from nature but rather a part of an interconnected web of life (Leopold 202). Similarly, Bruno Latour, in *Facing Gaia*, argues that the traditional view of nature as something outside of human society is flawed; instead, humans and nature are fundamentally entangled, influencing and shaping one another. These perspectives challenge humans to move beyond a purely utilitarian approach to nature and recognise its intrinsic value.

Ecocriticism takes these representations seriously, examining how literature, film, and other media contribute to or critique anthropocentric worldviews (Garrard 5). Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (8). He also says that Ecocriticism focuses on the interconnectedness of nature and culture, mainly as reflected in cultural artifacts like language and literature. It operates as a critical approach rooted both in the study of literature and in the natural world (ibid 9). Early ecocritical work often focused on pastoral or wilderness narratives in Western contexts. Yet, more recent scholarship extends to global texts, other domains of humanities, diverse media, including manga and anime. Eco critics argue that narratives are not merely entertainment; they influence and reflect societal attitudes toward non-human life (Garrard 2–6). Greg Garrard defines Ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history" (5). Unlike other critical theories, it explicitly foregrounds ecological crises, asking how texts reinforce or challenge anthropocentrism. Key to Ecocriticism is the critique of the human-nature binary, which often frames humans as separate from and superior to the environment, ignoring how humans are part of nature and how cultural systems can shape ecosystems. Ecocritical readings frequently uncover how narratives challenge this binary, inviting readers to see humans as participants in a broader ecological and cultural system. Simon Estok offers a definition of ecocriticism that focuses on the analysis and promotion of works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature (16). This definition is broad and aims to both analyse and inspire action regarding environmental issues.

The growing environmental crisis led to various subfields in humanities that tried to add an environmental dimension to their disciplines. In philosophy, that emerged in an effort to decipher the root causes of environmental degradation and to create an alternative view of existence, one that will provide an "ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with earth" (Glotfelty 10). Deep ecology is a philosophical and environmental movement that emphasises the intrinsic value of all living beings and ecosystems, irrespective of their utility to humans (Naess 95–96). It was developed in the 1970s by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. It calls for a shift in human consciousness, encouraging harmony with the natural world and advocating for an ecocentric worldview rather than being anthropocentric. It stresses "biospheric egalitarianism," asserting that human well-being is inseparable from the flourishing of other species (Devall and Sessions 66–72). Though the term "deep ecology" originated in the West, its principles of interdependence and non-hierarchical valuing of life resonate with numerous Eastern thoughts, including certain strands of Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto.

In a scholarly sense, Animism refers to "the attribution of life or personhood to entities that modern Western thought considers inanimate or non-sentient" (Harvey 11). It is not merely a "primitive" belief system but a complex ontology that assumes an interconnected community of humans, non-humans, and spirits. In Japanese contexts, Shinto is often cited as a prime example of an animist-informed religion (Kasulis). Shinto beliefs hold that spirits called kami dwell in natural phenomena like mountains, rivers, forests, and other elements of the environment. Thomas P. Kasulis, discussing Shinto in *Shinto: The Way Home*, explains that "Shinto locates the sacred in the very midst of daily life, in the rice fields, the mountains, and even the kitchen" (3). However, it is important to understand that Shinto has both its nature-centric practices and historical evolution into more institutionalised forms with various agendas. The distinct practices are usually referred to as Jinja Shinto (Shrine Shinto) and Kokka Shinto (State Shinto). The former practice emerged first. It was a decentralised, animistic, and folk-based spiritual tradition that developed in Japan over centuries without a formal religious structure. It was community-based, centred around local shrines, and practiced in small villages and communities long before written records existed. It emphasised rituals and ceremonies honouring kami associated with natural elements, reflecting a reverence for nature. The latter, however, emerged later, during the Meiji Era, wherein it was an attempt to systematise and nationalise Shinto practices to align with the imperial government's objectives. Shinto was used as a tool for fostering national unity and identity, thereby promoting loyalty to the emperor. The government separated Shinto from Buddhism, created an official hierarchy of shrines and used it to reinforce imperial nationalism. It was abolished after WWII, but its influence lingers in their collective memories and among certain nationalistic circles. The focus of this paper is purely on the Jinja Shinto and the animistic orientation that it holds, that kami (spirits or gods) "manifest in every aspect of the natural world including living beings, objects, and forces alike" (Kasulis 15).

This paper proposes that *Mushishi* (1999–2008) by Yuki Urushibara and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) by Hayao Miyazaki operate as cultural ecological texts, critiquing anthropocentrism and promoting a non-dualistic relationship between humans and nature. By integrating deep ecology's vision of interdependence and ecological humility with Shinto's spiritual reverence for nature, these works depict nature as an active, moral force rather than a passive backdrop. The analysis will demonstrate how both texts reject conventional human-nature hierarchies, offering a vision of reciprocity, humility, and ecological consciousness.

Literature can be seen as a medium for exploring environmental concerns. From Romantic poetry to modern eco-fiction, literary traditions have depicted nature as sublime, destructive, or endangered. As global storytelling evolves, these themes extend into cultural narratives and contemporary media. Manga, originating in Japan, has become a powerful form of storytelling, often merging folklore, history, and contemporary concerns to reflect upon human-nature relationships. It was in 1920 that the term "Manga" came to refer to comics in Japan; it was derived from the Chinese term "Manhua" (Patterson 128). Manga has a rich history dating back to the 12th century with illustrated scrolls. However, modern manga took shape in the post-World War II era, influenced by artists like Osamu Tezuka (Gravett 10). Unlike American comics, which often follow a superhero-centric, full-colour, and episodic storytelling format, manga is typically black-and-white, serialised in magazines before being compiled into volumes, and covers various genres and themes appealing to all age groups (Yadao 15). The storytelling in manga is often more immersive, using cinematic panelling and emotional depth, distinguishing it from the action-heavy and dialogue-driven narratives of Western comics (Patterson 23). Manga's global popularity has surged since the late 20th century, with series like *Naruto, One Piece*, and *Attack on Titan* reaching international audiences, leading to adaptations in anime, films, and merchandise, making it a dominant force in pop culture (Gravett 45).

Mushishi began as a manga that ran from 1999-2008, and it was adapted into anime by Hiroshi Nagahama. It has two seasons and a movie installation so far. Both were well received and won several accolades. It explores the ecological relationship between humans and "mushi". Ginko is a traveling specialist who deals with mushi meaning "insect", they are mysterious entities that inhabit liminal spaces between the natural and supernatural realms. They are extremely small yet diverse in nature like basic forms resembling protozoa and microbes. As someone who can see them, Ginko is referred to as "Mushishi" or "Insect Master." The stories often revolve around Ginko trying to solve the problems that mushicause to humans while insisting that they are not doing so on purpose but are merely trying to survive and how it is largely resorting to creating trouble when it is their home that is being threatened or invaded.

In contrast, *Princess Mononoke* by Miyazaki offers a more dramatic and confrontational narrative that centers on the struggle between human industrial ambitions and the sanctity of the natural world. The story is set in a loosely historical Muromachi Japan, during a period of booming industrial growth, which threatens the forest that is home to various beings, including animal gods (Kami). The manga narrates the story of Ashitaka, the prince who a boar god curses. As he searches for its cure, he finds himself amidst this conflict between Lady Eboshi and San and the Forest Gods. He finds himself in a dilemma between human progress and the destruction of nature. The film-comic adaptation of Hayao Miyazaki's film captures this battle's epic scale visually and narratively. It emphasises the destructive consequences of human greed in the name of progress. It hopes to shed light on the possibility of reconciliation through understanding and respect for the natural world. The character of San, raised by wolves who are wolf Goddesses, is fiercely protective of the forest. This, alongside the depiction of the forest spirits, brings out the manga's animistic themes, portraying nature as a living, breathing entity deserving of respect and reverence. Despite their stylistic differences, Urushibara's being introspective and calm, and Miyazaki's being epic and confrontational, both works challenge conventional hierarchies by portraying nature as an active participant, that which has agency, moral significance, and spiritual resonance.

Both these works, *Mushishi* and *Princess Mononoke* have vivid portrayals of non-human beings, entangled lifeforms, and the complexities of ecological coexistence. By examining them through an ecocritical lens that uses Deep Ecology as the conceptual framework and Shinto animism as the cultural context, the paper hopes to show how these cultural texts propose ecological balance and a voice against environmental degradation, aligning with deep ecology's radical egalitarianism and Shinto's reverence for the living world.

Mushishi mainly comprises 10 volumes, each chapter focusing on a mysterious occurrence that involves *mushi*. In the very beginning of Volume 1, Ginko states, "The Mushi do not mean harm… They simply exist, like the wind or the seas, unaware of what humans are" (Urushibara 23). This line emphasises a fundamental point in the story, that *mushi* are neither harmful on purpose, nor are they incapable of harm; they possess an agency and go by their own accord. In another scene, a villager afflicted by *mushi* exclaims, "I thought it was a curse, but it is just part of nature's flow," (10:28) revealing the shift in perspective from fearing Mushi as evil spirits to recognising them as natural phenomena. Such direct quotes show how *Mushishi* frames the human-*mushi* relationship not as a battle but as a negotiation of coexistence, an ethos reminiscent of deep ecology's tenet that "no species, including our own, has more of a right to live and flourish than any other" (Devall and Sessions 69). Many episodes end with Ginko arranging minimal interventions, such as relocating the Mushi's habit at or teaching villagers how to appease these creatures rather than eradicating them. In Volume 4, he tells a desperate family, "If you drive the Mushi out forcefully, the mountain itself may suffer" (Urushibara 112). This caution parallels a deep ecological ethic: one cannot simply prioritise human comfort if it leads to ecological imbalance. By situating Mushi in a "larger

web of life," Mushishi illustrates how "a disruption of even the smallest node can reverberate through the entire system" (Naess 101). In another instance where the villager attempts to drive *mushi* away from a river, Ginko warns "If you force the Mushi out, the river itself will lose its balance" (Urushibara 3:87), again demonstrating their actions might disrupt the equilibrium of the ecosystem, the river's balance is tied to the *mushi's* presence hinting at the interdependence aspect that is central to deep ecology. Another instance in which this interdependence is highlighted is in Volume 5 when villagers suffer agricultural decline after driving away the *mushi* from the soil; this is shown in the quote, "When the Mushi disappeared, crops withered, and the village's life dried up" (71).

In Volume 4, Ginko explains to the villagers, "This land has lived with Mushi longer than humans have. It belongs to them as much as it does to us" (112), portraying biospheric egalitarianism, which is asserting equal rights for all beings to coexist. It also reflects Shinto's concept of harmony with kami. In short, the manga portrays a relational worldview in which neither human nor *mushi* entirely "own" the land, capturing the kind of reciprocal respect that also characterises Shinto: "In venerating kami, one acknowledges that one's life depends on forces beyond one's own making" (Kasulis 29). *Mushishi* thus exemplifies a quiet yet profound model of ecological humility.

Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) is typically known as a film, a film-comic (or manga adaptation); it was released by TokumaShoten in 4 volumes, preserving the film's visuals in sequential form. The story unfolds across several volumes, capturing the epic struggle between Lady Eboshi's Iron Town and the forest gods, the wolves, the boars, and the sacred Deer God (*Shishigami*). In Volume 1, Prince Ashitaka is cursed by boar god's hatred and he remarks "The forest is angry… and I can feel its hatred burning in my arm" (Miyazaki 34). This line immediately introduces non-human sentiment as a tangible force, reinforcing Garrard's claim that ecocritical texts often dramatise nature's agency through conflict with industrial or human expansion. From the outset, the forest gods in Princess Mononoke articulate their intentions. Moro, the wolf goddess, declares to San, "We fight to protect our home, child. The humans have no right to this land. The forest was here long before humans carved it open" (2:56). Such direct statements present the non-human realm as self-determining; the gods are not just symbolic placeholders but actual moral agents with agendas. This animistic perspective is overtly Shinto: "We see the wolf, the boar, and the Deer God as kami, each embodying the spiritual essence of the forest," writes Susan Napier in a commentary on Miyazaki's works (212). In Volume 2, a villager is seen to describe *Shishigami* to Ashitaka by saying, "The Shishigami gives life and takes it away. He is the forest itself" (Miyazaki 2:76). This reflects deep ecology's cyclical understanding of nature and Shinto's reverence for Kami as a life-giving force. In the manga adaptation, the visual close-ups of Moro's and Okkoto's eyes are often filled with rage or sorrow, which reinforces their personhood. Such images embody what Harvey calls "the animist conviction that animals, trees, and rivers all dwell in the shared community of persons" (10).

By bringing in industrial themes, one could see that Eboshi's Iron Town depends on extracting ore and burning charcoal, *Princess Mononoke* explores the tension between human progress and ecological integrity. Eboshi justifies her actions: "We need iron to protect our people. Without it, the beasts of the forest would have torn us apart long ago" (Miyazaki 2:75). This stance exemplifies an anthropocentric worldview critiqued by deep ecologists, who argue that "the belief in human superiority leads to systematic environmental destruction" (Devall and Sessions 66). However, the manga complicates a simple "humans bad, nature good" narrative. Eboshi, after all, rescues and employs lepers and former prostitutes, indicating moral complexity. The forest gods, too, are portrayed as vengeful. As Ashitaka states when witnessing the boar god's assault, "Their rage will swallow them, just as hatred swallowed the boar who cursed me" (Miyazaki 3:102). This moral

nuance aligns with Naess's observation that deep ecology does not romanticise nature; instead, it "regards the non-human world as neither wholly benign nor wholly demonic, but as a sphere in which rights and responsibilities are distributed among all living entities" (Naess 97). A climactic moment occurs when Eboshi, under pressure from the emperor's agents, beheads the Deer God (the *Shishigami*). Instantly, the forest decays and a lethal black ooze spread. "He was our life," mourn the Kodama spirits (Miyazaki 4:130). In the same volume, "The Kodama spirits vanish when the forest is harmed, they are the forest's voice, silenced." (4:131) This scene exemplifies what Garrard calls the "apocalyptic motif" in Ecocriticism (86), dramatising the catastrophic result of violating nature's spiritual core, symbolising the spiritual and ecological void created by environmental destruction. In Shinto terms, it also represents a profound defilement of the kami, leading to spiritual corruption (Kasulis 50).

Ashitaka and San's desperate effort to return the *Shishigami's* head is a bid to restore ecological balance. "We must give him back what we stole, or we all perish," pleads Ashitaka (Miyazaki 4:137); this emphasises the necessity of reparative action, which is central to deep ecology's ethics and Shinto's relational worldview. The aftermath leaves the forest changed; it is no longer the same primal wilderness, but the cyclical power of the *Shishigami's* presence eventually regenerates new growth. Thus, the manga ends on an ambiguous yet hopeful note that genuine harmony requires respect for the forest's autonomy, an idea perfectly consistent with both deep ecology and Shinto beliefs, which demands recognition of "the equal right of all beings to blossom" (Devall and Sessions 68).

The analysis of Mushishi and Princess Mononoke through the frameworks of Deep Ecology and Shinto Animism demonstrates how these narratives conceptualize nature as an active, interconnected force that disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies. This paper has reached a conclusion on how these manga can function as cultural ecological texts, affirming the hypothesis that they reject human dominance and promote a non-dualistic relationship between humans and nature. The analysis has shown that through their narrative structures, character roles, and thematic concerns, both works emphasise an interconnected world where nature is not merely a setting but an active participant in shaping human experiences. By integrating deep ecology's vision of interdependence and biospheric egalitarianism with Shinto's spiritual reverence for nature, both narratives present a world where nature is not passive but holds agency and moral significance.

Mushishi presents nature's autonomy through the liminal creatures *mushi*. Ginko's role as a mediator rather than an exterminator reflects Deep Ecological principles, emphasising coexistence over destruction. His encounters with: *mushi* illustrate how human intervention in nature often leads to unintended consequences, reinforcing the idea that humans must adapt to nature rather than trying to dominate it. The manga's refusal to demonize *mushi* reflects deep ecology's emphasis on nature's inherent worth. Similarly, *Princess Mononoke* dramatises the tension between industrial expansion and the sacredness of nature, while also reinforcing Shinto animism's belief in the agency of kami. Ashitaka's role as a bridge between opposing forces highlights the need for balance and respect, mirroring deep ecology's call for interdependence and ethical responsibility. Through both these texts, it can be seen how mediation rather than conquest promotes ecological harmony, thus substantiating the core argument of this paper.

Both narratives challenge the conventional human-nature binary, illustrating that environmental crises stem from a failure to recognise nature's intrinsic worth. Their rejection of domination in favour of harmony aligns with Naess's philosophy that all life has intrinsic value and Kasulis's assertion that spiritual gratitude to nature fosters ethical coexistence. Through Ginko's careful interventions and Ashitaka's balancing act, one can see that humanity's welfare is intimately linked to the flourishing of Mushi, forest gods, and myriad other non-human lifeforms. Ultimately, these

works cast nature not as an inert stage but as an active, even sacred presence, a perspective that resonates deeply with contemporary ecological discourse. By looking from these perspectives, one can uncover a possibility for more holistic, respectful interactions with the environment. Far from escapist fantasy, these manga remind humans that their collective destiny depends on the visible and invisible voices of a vibrant, more than just human world. They advocate for a relational worldview where humans are only one part of a broader ecological system.

Not all traditional practices of a religion or culture can be environmentally friendly; some may have unintended negative consequences. Therefore, it is important to note that it is only sometimes the cultural beliefs and practices that can bridge this divide and align with the ecocritical view of the point. Even in Shintoism, that is the case with the two streams, as discussed earlier. Ultimately, these works go beyond fantasy; they serve as ecological allegories that urge readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. In a time of climate crisis and ecological upheaval, *Mushishi* and *Princess Mononoke* offer vital reflections on coexistence, humility, and respect for non-human life, reinforcing the urgent need for a sustainable environmental ethic.

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