



Miyazaki and Environmentalism: Rediscovering *My Neighbour Totoro*

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Keywords: Ancient tree, Environmentalism, Forest spirit, Human-Nature relation, Landscape, My Neighbour Totoro

Let me begin this essay with a personal anecdote, my very first encounter with Hayao Miyazaki's magical world of animation.

It all started on a lazy evening which I very well remember. I randomly stumbled upon a new movie and began watching it without much expectation. It was *My Neighbour Totoro*. Prior to that, I had little idea of Miyazaki, let alone *Totoro*.

It is about the story of a little girl (Satsuki) and her sister (Mei) in the countryside where they have gone to live with their father and wanted to be closer to their hospitalized mother. Satsuki and Mei happened to absolutely love the place, venture out, and eventually meet elusive and gentle creatures called *Totoros*. They live in the nearby forests, often come close to Mei's house, and soon they are befriended by these two girls, and a whole new magical world unfolds gradually before them. They set out for new adventures amid pristine and serene landscapes dotted with trees, forests, sunshine and rains, soft siesta, mesmerizing nights, and moonlight.

Attuned to the standard animation narrative of stark polarized perception of good and bad, I fumbled wearily for a sequence of events or a specific incident that might bring forth a villainous protagonist with negative intentions. Take for example all super-human movies where a superhero fights with a prodigious villain and eventually saves the earth from destruction. But it struck me very soon that the story may be deviating from the conventional rendering of god and demon, good or bad, black and white, and so on. And then gradually, dislodging me from that core thought and expectation, it enveloped my senses with awe, slothfulness, and joy. The overall picturesque landscapes, two lively kids, a family of enigmatic creatures, forests with enormous trees, lush with green foliages, a wandering cat-bus, rainy night and silence, and a rare moonlit get-together on a tree.

However, this essay is less about my personal feelings about Miyazaki's *Totoro* and more about the general sense of environmentalism invoked through various living and non-living elements in the story, the sequence of events, symbols, and the vividly portrayed landscapes. Perhaps the inertia of Miyazaki can be backtracked to pre-1988 era (1988 was the year of the movie's release in Japan) when the nation experienced the first economic boom after the devastating world war. The economic boom brought in a deep existential crisis devoid of any organic connection with nature (Mandal 2022). Also, some commentators have drawn

parallels between Miyazaki's films and oriental philosophical thoughts (Taoism, Buddhism, etc) expressed in the films. Others have come across the lines of ecological economical ideas or environmental messages (Chan 2015; Mayumi et al 2005). I'll deviate from the past trends and strive to keep the essay simple, non-jargony, and less technical while flying through and touching upon the excerpts, symbols, dialogs, imageries - the milieu of the film.

In the audiovisual journey, the entity that overwhelms the story is the vast verdant landscape, green and somewhat serene, peaceful and very much rural in nature. With three major protagonists, Mei, Satsuki, and *Totoro* roaming in the lush green landscape, it appears and reappears, and dominates in our spells of attention variously, be it the home garden, giant tree-clad forests, rural neighborhoods, cycling through the village road, or searching for Mei, standing in the darkness, or enjoying the moonlight. The generous use of watercolor to create the animation perhaps adds a dimension, it looks so neat and simple yet lively and colorful, as if you suddenly tend to forget the faster rhythm of your urban life. It is in the rural and forested landscape Mei meets *Totoro*, the puny creature that resembled a bunny rabbit and it is omnipresent in many different sizes, small, medium to extravagantly oversized. The smallest version behaves more like a little rabbit or soft and furry rat (some critics say they are chinchilla, a type of nocturnal rodent) that wanders around their household and attracts the little girls' attention. But more

important is their super-cute appearance, a bit clumsy and chubby, and their hopping behavior. The ingrained child-like curiosity of the little girl, Mei, leads her to the enormously large *Totoro* lying on the forest's edge. She may be linked to the forest spirit or the soul of the forest. Her sister also joins her. Here they also confront a majestic tree that fills them with awe and respect. The expedition of Mei and Satsuki is notable at this point, here they are out in the lap of nature, meet *Totoro*, come across the tree, sprouting the seeds, return from school on a rainy day, journey to the hospital, sow seeds in the field - all these small clippings signify their intricately woven association with nature and the deep emotion inculcated in them. Also, critical to the crux of the story is finding simple and innocent joy in everyday events. Some of the fascinating examples of discovering simple joy, beauty, and playfulness surrounding the various elements of nature are invoked through multiple incidents and remain



the central theme of the movie. Also intermingled with this, comes the implicit message of inseparable bonding between humans and nature manifested through love, wonder, and reverence, perhaps a strong reflection of Miyazaki's environmental philosophy and deep-rooted nostalgia entwining his upbringing. It unfolds in *My Neighbor Totoro* through the imagery of Japan's religious traditions and adorable fictional creatures in the dark mystic forests or in the corners of abandoned homes and also expanded in the other movies. The same core philosophy of Miyazaki's environmentalism we come across in *Princess Mononoke* (1997) where the forest spirit heals the wounds of the protagonist, Ashitaka, though the forest is under grave threat of human-mediated deforestation. In another movie, *The Wind Rises* (2013), the characters seek refuge in nature for healing physical or mental illnesses (Fujiki 2015). In *Totoro* also, the undisturbed forests emerge as a place of peace, pleasure, and high-spiritedness where the beautiful camphor tree teems with life and a romanticized perception of being the guardian of their home. The tree seemingly distracts both the sisters from their anxieties about their mother's health but also assures care and protection (Toh 2021). Also, remember the scene of the father with his daughters observing and paying respects to the huge camphor tree. He narrates in a deeply emotional tone "What a beautiful tree. This tree must have stood here for years and years." Here the father raises up and voices over the intangible heritage values of the long-enduring trees and forests, a rare bond humans share with nature. The short dialog and its context are quite strong in their inner meanings and are well-placed in the scene.



I now indulge in revisiting a few excerpts from the movies to show how Miyazaki has woven the positive emotions depicting the landscape and describing incidents thereby adhering strongly to environmentalism and spreading the message in a very implicit manner that does not seem preachy. Instead, they emerge gradually and naturally from the scenes or dialogs,

attempt to drench you with vibrant romance, and finally, assimilate in your mind. Reimagine the scene where Satsuki is standing in rain with an umbrella, the fine portrayal of the distinct pitter-patter of falling raindrops that renders the darkness and loneliness intense, it is so evocative yet subtle that one may wish to recall the sound even though the movie is over. The bathing scene of the father with his daughters and the great fun they were having, the gift of seeds by *Totoro* to Mei and Satsuki and Mei bursting in amazement, their unbound innocence; the rapid and magical growth of trees and forests from seeds which symbolizes the rejuvenation of nature, the night adventure of the kids with *Totoro* to collect seeds for sowing and regenerating plants, the catbus journey, the scene enjoying a moonlit night on a branch of a tree are few of the mesmerizing examples that viewer can come across while watching the movie. As mentioned earlier, they recurrently engage you with the protagonists, nature, and its elements, and invigorate deep emotional upheaval. However, they are many more such clippings in the movie than which can be individually named.

Another crucial element of Miyazaki's *Totoro* is the illustration of green foliage of numerous kinds, colorful flowers, butterflies, grasses, forest spirits, etc which are deeply embedded in the sequence of events. Try to recall the leisurely time when Mai was sleeping on the flat and fluffy belly of the huge *Totoro*, their picturesque house amid the flower and garden, Satsuki in search of Mei, etc. All of these moments are heavily charged with colors, impregnated with flowers, and foliage, and appeared to be saturated with life and energy. Now since we have gleaned through the nuances of the film, and tried to crack open its underlying environmental or ecological message, the larger appeal of *My Neighbor Totoro* remained limitless. It is true that there are many fantastic documentaries and highly appreciated environmental feature films that already had engaged audiences at large, nudged them, and have been quite powerful in their own right. Nevertheless, their viewer base was perhaps quite limited, from academia to activists, sensitive citizens to nature-lovers. It was likely that the majority excluded children en masse. In that sense, Miyazaki's *Totoro* reached out widely with simple narratives, tender and adorable characters, and soft and colorful imageries, and quite successfully disseminate the message while winning the hearts of millions. There is no attempt to preach to children or set up some utopian example to emulate, it is just simple storytelling of a family and their life in the



countryside. Simplicity thus has been the key to broader acceptance. Interestingly, the movie can be watched and rewatched at different ages, and a plethora of shades splattered to lead to the road of discovery and rediscovery. When the message of human nature emotional bonding manifested through exploration of nature, be it trees, rains, forests, animals, or rejuvenation and healing in nature's lap, is too constraining to be conveyed through traditional modes, like films, books, posters, or stories, Miyazaki's films and especially *My Neighbor Totoro* emerges as an easy vehicle to soothe one's mind and soul and reconnect them with nature.

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