



Echoing the Cosmic Symphony: O.V. Vijayan's *Madhuram Gayati* in an Ecocritical Perspective

Dr. Princy Jacob
Dr. Sanil T. Sunny

This article offers an ecocritical reading of O. V. Vijayan's *Madhuram Gayati*, examining its deep portrayal of the inextricability between humanity and the natural world. The novel is presented as a cosmic symphony that weaves together spiritual, cultural, and ecological consciousness to advocate for the harmonious coexistence of all living beings. Vijayan critiques the growing disconnection between modern humanity and nature, crafting a vivid web of life where flora, fauna, and human characters are active participants in a shared ecosystem. By emphasizing the spiritual and ethical dimensions of ecological awareness, the novel urges readers to recognize the sacred bond between humans and their environment, highlighting the detrimental consequences of environmental degradation and unsustainable practices. Ultimately, *Madhuram Gayati* is positioned as a literary masterpiece that bridges cultural narratives and environmental ethics. Integrating mythological and spiritual frameworks with ecological concerns, the novel offers a compelling, visionary critique of industrialization and advocates for a return to holistic living for a sustainable future.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecological harmony, human-nature interdependence, sustainability, environmental degradation

O. V. Vijayan, a renowned Indian writer, is known for his deep exploration of the complex relationship between humans and the natural environment. His literary works consistently demonstrate a strong awareness of ecological concerns, highlighting the need for peaceful coexistence among all living things. Vijayan's literary contributions, particularly his novels and short stories, present a distinctive ecological perspective that is rare in Malayalam literature. Works such as *Khasakkinte Itihasam*, *Dharmapuram*, *Gurusagaram*, and *Madhuram Gayati* are infused with his deep awareness of nature. These narratives explore the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world, intertwining Indian mythology with ecological themes to highlight the harmony of all living beings. In Vijayan's works, nature is not merely a passive backdrop but an active participant in the moral and philosophical journeys of his characters. He emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of nature, where the flora and fauna are not just part of the environment but are integral to the narrative's ethical and existential struggles. In his acclaimed novel, *Madhuram Gayati*, Vijayan vividly depicts this environmental awareness and the inseparability of life, often conveying a broader, deep ecological view. O. V. Vijayan believes in what Greg Garrad points out in his book *Ecocriticism*, "recognition of the intrinsic value of nature" and advocates a "shift from human-centred to a nature-centred system of values" (21).

This paper employs an ecocritical methodology to analyze *Madhuram Gayati*'s engagement with environmental themes. Drawing upon the principles of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and deep ecology, which focus on the connection between literature and the physical environment, this analysis treats the non-human world not as an inert setting but as active agents and sentient subjects. The core of the analysis utilizes the ecocritical concept of ecocentrism, contrasting it with anthropocentric viewpoints, to show how Vijayan decentralizes the human experience. This is crucial for demonstrating how individual destiny is integrated with the "cosmic symphony" of the natural world. Close reading is used on natural imagery and mythological allusions to trace how the novel's philosophical exploration of love, aging, and transcendence is linked to the ecological cycles of decay and renewal.

Furthermore, the paper explores how *Madhuram Gayati* challenges modern scientific rationalism by embracing an indigenous ecological spirituality, offering a unique contribution to Indian environmental philosophy.

Ecocriticism, also known as “green studies,” is an interdisciplinary field of literary and cultural theory that emerged formally in the 1990s, dedicated to examining the relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment. Moving beyond the traditional human-centered critical approaches, ecocriticism fundamentally questions how humanity understands and represents the non-human world, recognizing that nature and culture are inextricably linked. As Cheryll Glotfelty puts it,

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to an informed ecocriticism. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and non-human (xix).

Madhuram Gayathi is a novel that weaves together themes of ecology, history, philosophy, allegory, and spirituality. The text portrays the intricate interactions and dynamics that exist between people and nature. The title itself reflects the concept of a “sweet symphony,” symbolizing the unity and harmony of all elements within nature. Drawing from ancient literature, the novel resonates with the idea of the universe emerging from *nada*—the principle of “Nada Brahma,” or the cosmic sound. Through the interplay of *nada*, *varnam*, or words, a symphony is born, representing the inextricability of existence. Vijayan here emphasizes the delicate balance of the cosmos, where harmony sustains life, and any disruption of it through domination, destruction, or discord leads to chaos and disarray.

O. V. Vijayan's eco-conscious vision stems from his commitment to reinventing traditional Indian narratives to address the complexities of the man-nature relationship and the mysteries of human existence. He argued that humanity is not a solitary entity but an inseparable component of the universe, proclaiming the necessity of man-nature symbiosis. This worldview dissolves the rigid distinction between animate and inanimate beings, recognizing a mutual and complementary relationship essential for survival. As Christian Diehm writes, "we are intimately connected to the more-than-human world, to realize that we are members of natural or ecological communities that are constitutive of who we are" (4). It is this vision of fundamental inseparability between humanity and nature that firmly establishes O.V. Vijayan as a significant eco-conscious writer. In the article titled "Consciousness towards Flora and Fauna in the select novels of O. V. Vijayan: Environmental Perspectives," the authors contend:

Environment in Vijayan's works has a deep impact on people's lives and societal institutions. His constant attention to the fragile balance that exists between human activity and the natural world sheds light on how human activity affects the ecosystem. Vijayan has a great concern for environmental conservation and sustainable living practices. He urges us to re-evaluate our interactions with the natural world, place more importance on peace, and to give environmental management more careful thought. (Yadav and Mehta 541)

Madhuram Gayathi embarks on a spiritual and ecological journey, emphasizing the sacredness of our connection with the natural world. Central to the narrative are Mruthyunjayan, Sumangala, and Sukanya, three characters who live in harmony with nature. Their cow, Nandini, symbolizes the nurturing aspect of the environment, providing for all their needs. However, their peaceful existence is disrupted when Nandini is forcibly taken away by machines originating from the Northern Hemisphere, a realm symbolizing modernity and industrialization. Overwhelmed by despair and driven by their unwavering attachment to their sacred cow, Mruthyunjayan and Sumangala make the heart-wrenching decision to leave behind the serenity of their natural environment. Their pursuit of Nandini takes

them into a cold, mechanical world dominated by machines, where the hum of industry and artificiality replaces the rhythms of life. In their absence, Sukanya, their daughter, is left to grapple with her own sense of loss and longing. It is during this time that she encounters Aalmaram, the wise and compassionate king of plants. Aalmaram, deeply moved by Sukanya's sorrow and determined to aid her, pledges to help reunite her with her parents and reclaim Nandini. Their journey unfolds as a daring quest, one fraught with trials and tribulations. Together, Sukanya and Aalmaram traverse treacherous landscapes, where the clash between the organic and the mechanical becomes increasingly apparent. The lush, vibrant essence of nature is starkly juxtaposed against the cold, unyielding structures of the machine-dominated hemisphere.

As they venture deeper into this world of discord, they encounter numerous adversities, each posing a test of their resilience and determination. Their path is not only a physical journey but also a symbolic struggle to restore harmony between nature and the artificial forces threatening its existence. Sukanya and Aalmaram's alliance stands as a bold example of the eternal strength of natural bonds and the deep inseparability of all living beings, as they strive to reclaim what has been lost and heal the rift between two opposing worlds.

The novel masterfully presents a striking contrast between two distinct realms: the “world of nature” and the “world of machines.” The natural world is personified through characters such as Mruthyunjayan, Sumangala, Sukanya, Nandini, Aalmaram, the luminous beings known as Jyothisukal, Sakuntala, and the ethereal beauty of the lotus flowers. Each of these elements embodies the vitality, inextricability, and nurturing essence of nature. In contrast, the “world of machines” is dominated by the imposing presence of the great machine, Mahayantram, supported by its smaller mechanical counterparts and loyal assistants. This mechanized domain represents the artificial, calculated, and often unyielding aspects of human innovation and industrialization. Carolyn Merchant, a radical ecologist, opines, “It [mechanistic worldview] entailed an ethic of the control and domination of nature and supplanted the organic world's I-thou ethic of reciprocity between humans and nature. Mechanism and its

ethic of domination legitimizes the use of nature as commodity, a central tenet of industrial capitalism” (11).

As the narrative progresses, it delves into the escalating tension between these two opposing forces. The world of nature struggles to preserve its organic harmony and inherent balance, while the machine-driven world relentlessly expands, seeking to dominate and reshape its surroundings. The conflict is not merely physical but deeply symbolic, reflecting humanity’s ongoing struggle to reconcile technological advancement with ecological sustainability.

Madhuram Gayati, sometimes described as Vijayan’s bold foray into eco-fiction, is an allegory of the natural and human spirits fighting for survival in today’s machine world. The novel asserts that man can survive the holocaust of the machine culture only if he agrees to live as part of his natural environment, paying due regard to the grace of the elders, what Vijayan elsewhere designates “the guru spirit” within him. (Raveendran 53)

Yet, the story resists the simplicity of victory emerging from this confrontation. Instead, it offers a deep resolution through the boundless love, wisdom, and compassion of Mother Earth. She becomes the ultimate mediator, bridging the gap between these conflicting realms. Through her intervention, the discord gradually transforms into a harmonious coexistence, where both nature and machines find their rightful place in the web of existence. In such instances, the novel clearly bears ecofeminist overtones where the narration juxtaposes women and nature narratives as parallel thoughts. A noted ecofeminist contends:

Ecofeminism does urgently put into question the relation of women and nature; on the one hand, contesting the identification that makes women as passive and powerless as the exploited natural world, but on the other hand, promoting a positive identification of nature with the reproductive capacity of women who share a material commitment to the survival of the planet through the children they bear. (Madsen 125)

The novel vividly contrasts the “world of nature,” represented by characters like Mruthyunjayan, Sumangala, Sukanya, Nandini, Aalmaram, the lights (*Jyothisukal*), Sakuntala, and the lotus flowers, with the “world of machines,” embodied by the great machine (*Mahayantram*), its assistants, and the smaller machines. O. V. Vijayan writes:

Plants, animals, snakes, fish, birds, and atoms froze and died in the darkness and cold. Their seeds, however, slept in the deep womb of the earth. In the northern hemisphere, artificial consciousnesses imprisoned in machines also slept. In the southern hemisphere, a guru and his disciple, who were in meditation during the explosion, were enveloped by their breath like a crystal shell. The guru and disciple sat motionless within the crystal. (1)

Rich in mythological allusions, *Madhuram Gayati* offers a comprehensive vision of existence, portraying a world where the animate and inanimate are equally vital and interconnected. The novel weaves mythology into its narrative fabric, grounding its characters in ancient Indian myths and *puranas*, thereby endowing them with archetypal and symbolic depth. Each character serves as a bridge between the contemporary world and the timeless wisdom of mythological traditions, enriching the narrative with layers of cultural and spiritual significance.

The protagonists—Mruthyunjayan, Sumangala, and Sukanya—are not merely individuals but embodiments of larger mythological and philosophical ideas. Sumangala, in particular, is intricately linked to Indian mythology through her journey of salvation and self-realization. Her story recalls her past life as Matsyagandhi, a significant figure in the *Mahabharata*. Matsyagandhi, born as the daughter of a fisherman, carries a deep symbolic resonance. Her transformation into Satyavati after her marriage to King Santanu signifies a shift in destiny, where a humble origin evolves into a position of immense influence. Satyavati becomes the matriarch of a lineage that includes the Pandavas and Kauravas, the central figures of the *Mahabharata*. Through this lineage, she indirectly shapes the epic’s narrative arc, underscoring her pivotal role in Indian mythology.

By invoking such mythological connections, *Madhuram Gayati* transcends the boundaries of a conventional novel, presenting an array of stories that resonate with India's cultural heritage. The novel uses these references not merely as a backdrop but as a means to explore profound themes of identity, transformation, and interconnectedness. The characters' journeys reflect the cyclical nature of life and the enduring influence of mythological archetypes in shaping human experiences.

Furthermore, the novel's holistic worldview challenges the conventional divide between the human and the non-human, the material and the spiritual. It suggests a cosmos where all elements—be they living beings, natural phenomena, or even seemingly inanimate objects—play an integral role in the symphony of existence. By doing so, *Madhuram Gayati* invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the world around them, urging a harmonious coexistence rooted in mutual respect and understanding. Through its rich mythological narrative, the novel becomes a profound meditation on the equilibrium of all life forms, bridging the ancient and the modern in a timeless vision of unity.

Similarly, Sukanya's character draws inspiration from the mythological figure Kalyani, continuing the lineage of mythological storytelling from Vijayan's earlier novel, *Gurusaagaram*. This interplay of myth and narrative deepens the philosophical and ecological themes of the novel, reinforcing the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and the cosmos. Through its allegorical tale, *Madhuram Gayati* offers a timeless message about the need for balance and harmony in an increasingly mechanized world. The co-existence of the characters shows how Vijayan continues his stories within the mythological framework. As one Malayalam critic remarks:

Madhuram Gayathi, which raises the fearful question about the fate of our earth, is a rare experience in our language. The novel presents to us a kind of reason unknown to us. It is the reason of humanism which is beyond the reason of Science. The novelist searches into the secrets of life by mixing dream with myth. (Rajasekharan 22)

The mythological figure of Nandini, daughter of the wish-fulfilling Kamadhenu, is utilized as a central ecocritical symbol in the novel. She embodies the fundamental principle of nature's boundless, selfless nurturing and the resulting ecological balance. Her role as a life-giver—providing nourishment and symbolically giving birth to Sukanya—serves as a powerful metaphor for the earth's maternal capacity for sustenance. This connection simultaneously highlights the sacred interdependence between humanity and the natural world, arguing that life is not merely supported, but generated, by nature. The narrative uses Nandini's forced removal to issue a potent warning: disrupting this source of generative abundance through exploitation or industrialization is equivalent to destroying life itself, inevitably leading to ecological and social disharmony. Thus, the novel advocates for a fundamental shift in values toward reverence and coexistence, viewing the protection of figures like Nandini as an essential duty to preserve the delicate web of existence.

The feminine qualities in *Madhuram Gayati* are intricately linked with the characteristics of nature and are frequently associated with the earth. This connection opens up avenues for interpreting O.V. Vijayan's *Madhuram Gayathi* through the lens of ecofeminism as mentioned earlier. This is how a writer in a chapter entitled "Ecofeminism, Politics and Culture" writes

Ecofeminism incorporates the accepted tenets of environmentalism and various ideologies of feminism and is becoming a global movement by placing women and nature as its core concern. Its aim is the liberation of both women and nature. It aims to combine environmentalism, feminism, and socialism by identifying environmental problems as those affecting and affected by humanity. Women are often at the receiving end of hardships emanating from environmental disasters. In this context, ecofeminists have taken up the responsibility of both nature and livelihoods, thus becoming a revolutionary force against the patriarchal assault against women and nature. (Beegum 34)

There is convergence between the ecological and feminist thoughts. As the critics argue in their article, “Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology,” “Ecological feminism is a feminism which attempts to unite the demands of the women’s movement with those of the ecological movement” (Warren & Cheney 179). Patriarchal oppression is frequently linked to modes of rationality and technocratic principles, which ecologists contend are key factors in the disruption and domination of the natural world. In O.V. Vijayan’s *Madhuram Gayathi*, this theme is powerfully illustrated through the plight of Nandini, the sacred cow, who becomes a victim of the mechanized world represented by Mahayantram, the Great Machine. Nandini, a symbol of Mother Earth and the nurturing essence of nature, is abducted by Mahayantram, which seeks to exploit her for its insatiable thirst for power and control.

Mahayantram attempts to extract milk from Nandini’s udder to satisfy its thirst, symbolizing the mechanized world’s relentless exploitation of natural resources. However, this effort fails, emphasizing the inability of the artificial and mechanized to fully harness or replicate the life-giving essence of nature. Frustrated by its failure, Mahayantram commands its smaller machines to create an exact genetic replica of Nandini. This leads to a horrifying act of violence, where the assistants of the Great Machine tear apart Nandini’s body in a futile attempt to replicate her. Here, O. V. Vijayan proclaims publicly the need for surpassing human greed for the well-being of other beings, else it results in chaos, and for that one must follow a biocentric view. A similar view is shared by Timothy Clark in his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*: “Such a *biocentrism* would affirm the intrinsic value of all-natural life and displace the current preference of even the most trivial human demands over the needs of other species or integrity of place” (2).

The attempt to clone Nandini highlights the arrogance of the technocratic mindset, which assumes that science and reason can override the natural order. While the machines succeed in creating a physical copy of Nandini, the clone is lifeless and soulless. Mahayantram’s anguished outcry upon seeing the hollow replica underscores the fundamental failure of artificial creation to capture

the essence of life, which lies beyond mere physical form. This moment becomes a profound critique of the mechanistic worldview, revealing its limitations and its inability to replicate the intangible, spiritual essence of life.

Vijayan's narrative also addresses broader ethical concerns associated with modern scientific advancements, such as cloning, in vitro fertilization, and genetic modification of crops. These technologies, while often hailed as breakthroughs, carry significant risks of unintended consequences. They can disrupt personal, social, and cultural norms and ultimately harm nature's delicate balance. By illustrating the disastrous outcomes of Mahayantram's actions, Vijayan warns of the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition when it is divorced from ethical considerations and respect for the natural world.

Through this allegory, *Madhuram Gayathi* critiques the exploitation of nature under patriarchal and technocratic systems, emphasizing the importance of preserving the intrinsic harmony and rhythm of the natural world. Vijayan's sensitivity to these issues resonates deeply in contemporary debates about the ethical implications of scientific advancements and their potential to destabilize ecological and social equilibrium. The novel serves as a reminder of the limits of human intellect and technology and calls for a more respectful relationship with the natural world.

The current environmental crisis, marked by widespread degradation and imbalance, calls for more than just technical solutions—it demands a profound spiritual response. As highlighted in *Madhuram Gayathi*, the discord between the natural world and mechanized systems reflects a deeper crisis of values and consciousness. This crisis cannot be addressed solely through advancements in science or technology; it requires a fundamental reorientation of human awareness and a commitment to actions rooted in ethical and spiritual principles. Vijayan's narrative underscores the importance of harmony between humanity and nature, drawing on the wisdom of Indian mythology to highlight the interconnectedness of all life.

The character Almaram holds profound significance in *Madhuram Gayathi*, embodying wisdom, resilience, and the power to restore humanity's lost connection with the Earth. As a character, the tree understands its purpose in the world: to mend the dehumanizing harm inflicted by the mechanized forces of the northern hemisphere. Vijayan uses the tree as a symbol of healing and renewal, highlighting its ability to breathe new life into a fractured world. This process also rekindles relationships, such as the sacred bond between a master and a disciple, which modernity often neglects. The connection between Sukanya and the Tree is intricately woven, reflecting the complexity of evolutionary history. While evolution often progresses through the principle of fertility, the Tree becomes a victim of human greed and lust, personified by Devadatta. With an axe in hand, Devadatta seeks to cut down the tree, symbolizing the disruption of natural growth and balance. This act of destruction, driven by blind ambition, contrasts sharply with the liberating presence of sage-like figures such as Sumangala and Mrithyunjayan, who embody true wisdom and spiritual enlightenment.

During their journey, both the Tree and Sukanya fall into a deep sleep and experience symbolic dreams. The Tree envisions truths about Yogi Harmony, the Sudarshana Chakra, and the essence of creation. It also dreams of an imaginary pot filled with real water, symbolizing the restoration of life and balance. Sukanya, on the other hand, gains a deeper understanding of existence. She perceives fear in the face of the Creator—a fear rooted in the realization that creation itself harbors truths and threats predating its origin. Observing Sukanya, the Banyan Tree recognizes her superior subtle consciousness, a level of awareness that surpasses its own understanding.

Sukanya, Sumangala, Renuka, and Nandini represent the dynamic evolutionary forces of the universe, offering a stark contrast to the cold rationality of the Master Machine, Mrithyunjayan, and even the Tree. Sumangala's attraction to gold symbolizes the drift toward alien cultural values and the abandonment of natural harmony. This shift, from the garland of flowers (nature) to the chain of gold (culture), critiques humanity's obsession with material wealth and the exploitation of Earth's resources. The Master Machine, representing

the northern world, epitomizes this cold rationality, standing in opposition to the feminine forces and the organic unity they symbolize.

As the Tree and Sukanya venture to the northern hemisphere in search of their parents, they are imprisoned by the Master Machine. Despite the dire situation, the tree urges Sukanya to remain connected to it until the crisis passes. Sukanya, in a moment of desperation, asks to be transformed into a plant, while the tree prays to become an animal, symbolizing their shared desire for transformation and unity. What Vijayan highlights is the “symbiotic coevolution between different life forms” (Zapt 57). The tree then sinks its roots into the southern hemisphere, and through their union, the river Yamuna begins to flow. This union, witnessed by the Master Machine, revitalizes the barren northern world, allowing seeds of natural life to sprout even in the heart of the mechanized domain. The tree challenges the Slave Machines, asserting its unique connection to the sacred and the natural world. Sukanya perceives cracks forming in the rigid northern world, signaling the beginning of its transformation. Remarkably, the union between the tree and Sukanya prompts a profound change within the Master Machine itself. It begins to recall its sacred origins as the Yantra of the first Scientist, recognizing that the separation between plants and machines was a divergence in the course of evolution. Thus, the true power of nature is at last unveiled. Vijayan here shares what environmentalists like Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman share in their article titled “Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory.”

Rather than perpetuate the nature/culture dualism, which imagines nature to be the inert ground for the exploits of Man, we must reconceptualize nature itself. Nature can no longer be imagined as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic-it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world. We need ways of understanding the agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world-ways that account for myriad “intra-actions” (in Karen Barad’s term) between phenomena that are material, human, more-than-human, corporeal, and technological. (145)

As the prakriti of Sukanya merges with the Shiva (cosmic consciousness) of the Banyan Tree, a new harmony emerges. The union is marked by the rise of *nada brahma*—the divine sound of creation. From this sacred convergence, a seed is born upon a banyan leaf, signifying the beginning of a new journey and the renewal of life. Karen Barad explains the idea of this mutual growth in a theoretical way. She writes: “We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (185). Through this allegory, Vijayan conveys a profound vision of reconciliation, where the natural and the artificial, the feminine and the rational, find unity in the eternal cycle of creation.

Madhuram Gayati extends this principle to human life in a more focused way and attempts to glimpse the cosmic unity that exists not only between the non-human world and the human world, but between the human world and the machine world as well. It was unwise of the organic community to have extricated itself from this unity and divided into the separate worlds of birds, bees, beasts, flowers and the humans. It was this division that finally led to the separation and consolidation of a crude and unethical “machinality.” (Raveendran 53)

O. V. Vijayan, as a philosopher, and writer, was deeply troubled by the growing disconnect between humanity and the natural world, alongside the increasing mechanization and chemical manipulation of nature. He was critical of industrial and technological advancements that were often celebrated as monumental progress for humanity. Instead, Vijayan believed these developments led to an estrangement from the essence of life and the environment. For him, human existence was frequently overshadowed by existential dilemmas and the complex forces that both nurture and threaten nature. Through his works, Vijayan questioned the glorification of industrialization, advocating instead for a return to a simpler, more natural way of life, one that embraced the peaceful coexistence of humans and the Earth.

In *Madhuram Gayati*, the natural world is portrayed not just as a setting but as a character with its own agency, embodying both the nurturing and destructive forces of life. Through this portrayal, Vijayan critiques the modern world's alienation from nature, urging readers to reassess their relationship with the Earth. His fusion of mythology and ecological concerns invites readers to view nature as both a physical and spiritual entity, reinforcing his belief that true progress can only be achieved when humanity recognizes and honors the wisdom inherent in the natural world. Through these thought-provoking narratives, Vijayan challenges the prevailing modern worldview, advocating for a more respectful and holistic engagement with the environment.

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Dr. Princy Jacob

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Newman College, Thodupuzha

Pin: 685585

India

Ph: +91 9961435299

Email: jacoprincy@gmail.com

ORCiD: 0009-0008-1875-2194

&

Dr. Sanil T. Sunny

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Pavanatma College, Murickassery

Pin: 685604

India

Ph: +91 9496440044

Email: saniltsunny@gmail.com

ORCiD: 0009-0009-8372-1930