



The Agentic Earth and the Embodied Healer: Material Feminism and the Plague in the *Year of Wonders*

R. Kaveya

PhD. Scholar, Pachaiyappa's College, Chennai



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL3-Mar26-ES-053

Subject: English Studies

Received: 22.12.2025

Accepted: 23.01.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si3.26.Mar053

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

This study takes a new look at Geraldine Brooks's Year of Wonders (2001) by using material ecocriticism and material feminism. It challenges the standard view that the novel's natural world is just a passive background. Instead, it argues that the plague is an ecological event caused by humans, brought on by global trade and spread through a contaminated piece of cloth. This approach views the epidemic as a necropolitical crisis in which the human body and the environment are closely connected, and both become sites of power struggles. The article shows how Brooks's language blurs the line between bodily decay and environmental processes, treating both as active forces. In response, the novel offers a new way of understanding grounded in embodied, feminine knowledge. As Anna Frith becomes a herbalist and midwife, the story highlights a give-and-take relationship with nature, showing that care and ecological awareness help people survive and heal. In the end, the novel makes the environment a key force for change and a source of holistic understanding during a human-caused disaster.

Keywords: material ecocriticism, material feminism, anthropogenic ecology, necropolitics, embodied knowledge, plague narrative, agency of nature, herbalism, midwifery, patriarchal control, ecological resilience, anthropocene

Introduction

Geraldine Brooks's historical novel *Year of Wonders* (2001) situates the plague-stricken village of Eyam as a site for exploring faith, gender, and trauma. Traditionally, critics have interpreted the natural environment as a passive backdrop to these human narratives, serving as an unchanging stage for societal and spiritual crises. This article challenges such interpretations, contending that they neglect a significant dimension of the novel's meaning. Employing an eco-critical framework informed by material feminism, the analysis posits that the Eyam plague constitutes an anthropogenic ecological disaster, precipitated by the global trade networks of

the seventeenth century. The outbreak, initiated by a contaminated bolt of cloth from London, exemplifies how a local tragedy can function as an allegory for the broader planetary crisis of the Anthropocene.

Brooks's story goes beyond human concerns by blending the lines between the sick human body and the decaying environment, showing both as connected places where power is imposed and challenged. The plague acts as a strong non-human force, which Anna Frith calls "a thing in Nature." This view offers a necropolitical perspective on quarantine, showing how power over life and death is exercised during the crisis. The novel also provides a new way of understanding grounded in embodied,



feminine knowledge. As Anna learns herbalism and midwifery, grounded in a close relationship with nature, the story presents a vision of healing and resilience. In the end, the environment is shown as an active force that drives social change and supports the emergence of new, sustainable wisdom after disaster.

The Fabric of Plague

The plague's arrival in Eyam is portrayed as a human-caused event that disrupts the local ecosystem due to global trade. The disease is not seen as a divine punishment but as a real phenomenon, spread through international trade. The contaminated cloth from London is the novel's main ecological symbol. As Brooks describes, the arrival caused much excitement, but

Mr Hadfield had ordered a box of cloth from London, and there was great excitement when the parcel arrived, as there always is at the coming of goods from the city, with many in the village interested to see what manner of colour and figure might now be worn in town. Because the parcel arrived damp, having travelled the last of its journey in an open cart unprotected from rain, Mr Hadfield asked Mr Viccars to see to its drying, and so he contrived lines in the garth of our cottage and slung the fabrics out to air, thus giving everyone ample chance to look and comment. Jamie made a game of it, of course, running up and down between the flapping fabrics, pretending he was a knight at a joust." (Brooks 29).

The damp cloth, full of plague-carrying fleas, shows how a damaged trade system entered the village's once isolated world. When the tailor dries the cloth by the fire, it helps release the fleas and starts the epidemic. This shifts the plague from a religious punishment to an environmental accident, showing the harmful effects of human trade. This view aligns with a necropolitical approach, in which villagers' bodies reveal the effects of distant economic actions. This local event also stands as a symbol for the global issues of the Anthropocene. As DeLoughrey says, understanding this era requires

To parochialize the Anthropocene... to uncover its place-based allegories... excavating the soil is a vital method of Anthropocene discourse and practice. In this sense the actual fragments of earth, which are material evidence of decay and the passing of time, reflect the story of the Earth writ large. (DeLoughrey 102).

The infected cloth is a piece of global trade that, when viewed locally, reveals the harsh history of ecological imperialism worldwide.

The Agentic Decay of Plague

Brooks's story often mixes the inner decay of a plague victim with the outer decay of the environment. The symptoms are described in vivid, ecological terms, as seen in an early scene where Anna notices the suffering of a man, an animal, and the fruit around them:

Well, I thought, it's easier to bring a small comfort to that poor beast than it is to his master... He'll take a drink without noticing sometimes, even when I can't get him to eat anything. And it's no use letting a cellar full of fruit go bad. If there's one thing I can't stand anymore, it's the scent of a rotting apple. (Brooks 6)

This quote shows that the first sign of plague is not pain but a smell, called "the stench of rotting apples" (Brooks 6), which symbolises the decay happening within the body. For Anna, this smell is so linked to sickness and death that it becomes a strong sensory marker. The body shows blotchy red spots and yellow-purple sores, much like the rotting apple Anna steps on in the orchard. The sick body, uneaten food, and decaying fruit are all connected, showing how natural decay blurs the line between what happens inside people and in the world around them. This imagery fits Serpil Oppermann's idea of material ecocriticism.

Material ecocriticism aims to explore not only the agentic properties of material forms, whether living or not, whether organic, "natural" or not, but also how these properties act in combination with other material forms and their properties and with discourses, evolutionary paths, political decisions,



pollution, and other stories.” (Iovino and Oppermann 7-8).

The apple is not just a symbol; it acts as a force in the story. Its decay shows how the plague spreads, with its smell and breakdown mixing human fear and physical collapse. As people die and leave the village, nature takes over, grass grows in the streets, and a walnut sapling appears. The sapling shows nature’s resilience and indifference, reminding us that plant life lasts beyond human ideas of sin and punishment. As society falls apart, nature remains, showing that human communities are temporary in a lasting natural world.

This material agency and reclamation occur even within the most personal, human spaces. In a moment, as the social order collapses and the wild intrudes, Anna recalls,

I still had the piece of slate on which Elinor had taught me my letters. I drew it out and was scratching down the directions for these dispositions when the door to the cottage opened. He had not knocked, and in the sudden glare, I could not make out his face. I jumped up from my stool and put the table between us. (Brooks 292).

This violence of home boundaries shows how the plague, as a powerful natural force, disrupts human rules and stories. The open door and sudden entry bring in a non-human story, marked by steady and active natural forces. This scene shows how physical things and ideas about disease and disaster create a new reality.

The Witch’s Garden as Embodied Knowledge

This analysis shows that the novel offers a different, embodied kind of knowledge grounded in material feminism that challenges patriarchal and religious control. As Garrard points out,

Like ecofeminism, the positions discussed here do not suggest that environmental problems are caused by anthropocentric attitudes alone, but follow from systems of domination or exploitation of humans by other humans. Focusing on these intraspecies relationships, they perpetuate, deep ecologists claim, the anthropocentrism that ought to

be the target of any Earth-centred critique. (Garrard 31)

This critique manifests in the villagers’ fear, which incites violence not only against the environment but also against individuals who possess alternative, earth-centred knowledge. The witch hunts directed at the Gowdie women exemplify patriarchal attempts to eradicate a competing ecological understanding aligned with nature. Their physic garden operates as a deliberately cultivated micro-ecology of healing, representing a holistic and systemic form of knowledge that stands in opposition to the damaged macro-environment.

Gowdie explicitly expresses the fear that fuels this extermination, recognising the unstable social standing of women possessing such knowledge.

But of her herb knowledge I wanted none; it is one thing for a pastor’s wife to have such learning and another thing again for a widow woman of my sort. I knew how easy it is for widow to be turned witch in the common mind, and the first cause generally is that she meddles somehow in medicinals. (Brooks 38)

This shows how the material feminist approach to herbalism and women’s care work, which uses local resources to support life, is tightly controlled and watched. Still, this knowledge survives as Anna Frith and Elinor Mompellion choose to learn and use it, becoming caretakers of natural remedies. Anna changes from an illiterate maid with blind faith to a skilled healer who understands herbs and the body, acting as a symbol of the Enlightenment with ecological significance. When she sees the plague as a thing in Nature, like a stone that causes harm, she makes disease something real, not just spiritual. This view supports an eco-critical approach that values wisdom from human effort and nature, directly challenging systems that keep humans at the centre.

Conclusion

Geraldine Brooks’s *Year of Wonders* is not just a story about human suffering and faith. It is also a deep eco-critical and material feminist look at ecological disaster and resilience. By framing the plague as a human-caused event, spread by global



trade and contaminated cloth, the novel shows the strong links between human commerce, ecological harm, and control over life and death. This view turns the plague from a religious or biological idea into a real “thing in Nature,” an active force that challenges the power structures in Eyam. By intricately intertwining representations of the human body and the natural environment, the narrative advances a material ecocritical perspective in which disease, decay, and renewal are interrelated processes. The rotting apple, the overgrown village, and the resilient walnut sapling function as active agents within the story, emphasising nature’s indifferent power and persistence beyond human crises. This dissolution of boundaries reinforces the novel’s central ecological assertion: human communities are transient within an expansive, enduring natural world. Ultimately, *Year of Wonders* advocates for an alternative, redemptive epistemology rooted in embodied, feminine wisdom. Through Anna Frith’s progression from superstition to expertise as a herbalist and midwife, the novel endorses a holistic, reciprocal relationship with nature as a foundation for healing and resilience.

This material feminist stance, inherited from figures such as the Gowdies and Elinor Mompellion, directly opposes systems of domination and exploitation, presenting a model of ecological wisdom that is local, nurturing, and sustainable. Thus, the novel not only documents a historical quarantine but also provides a lasting allegory for the Anthropocene, urging a reconsideration of humanity’s position within, rather than above, the intricate and dynamic web of the natural world.

References

Primary source

1. Brooks, Geraldine. *Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague*. Harper Perennial, 2008.

Secondary source

1. DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Duke University Press, 2019
2. Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.
3. Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.