



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 241-244
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 10-01-2024
Accepted: 20-02-2024

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Convergence of gender and nature in Anuradha Roy's 'The Folded Earth'

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1d.300>

Abstract

This paper uses an ecofeminist lens to examine the intersection of gender and nature in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011), exploring how the novel weaves together women's struggles with environmental degradation. Set against the increasingly threatened landscape of the Himalayan foothills, this narrative follows Maya, a young widow who seeks refuge from personal trauma in the small town of Ranikhet. The novel reflects this ecological decline of the surrounding landscape as well as reflects larger systemic exploitations on both women and nature; while Maya grapples with her own loss as well as the constraints of a patriarchal society, the paper draws upon the core ecofeminist ideas to analyse how the female characters depicted by Roy, each negotiating their existence in a patriarchal social order, demonstrate complex interconnections between gender, ecology and power. This parallel marginalisation and objectification of women and the natural world both come under exploitation in the capitalist and patriarchal structures. With its narrative of ecological degradation and feminine resilience, *The Folded Earth* underlines the inseparable bond between feminine identities and the environment. Therefore, this paper argues that by critiquing the different forms of cultural and environmental destruction, Roy's work reveals how gender and ecological concerns are interlinked through these convergences that the paper explores, helping to further the discourse over ecofeminism but emphasising that the two could not be approached in separate manners.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, ecology, gender, nature, patriarchy

Introduction

Anuradha Roy is an important Indian novelist journalist and editor, celebrated through her writing for her sensitive storytelling and exploration of complex human emotion. Her debut novel, the poignant multigenerational family saga *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) was acclaimed internationally and nominated as one of the "60 Essential English Language Works of Modern Indian Literature" by World Literature Today. Her second novel is *The Folded Earth* (2011), where the author reveals the intricacies of nature and human life in hill communities in Ranikhet. Some of her other notable works are *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), and *The Earthspinner* (2021). She co-founded Permanent Black, which is a publishing house working towards academic literature. She is an essayist and her writing has appeared in *The Hindu*, *The Guardian*, and *Indian Express*, among other publications. She writes about displacement, identity, and the environment, which she has been instrumental in defining in contemporary Indian literature through her novels and essays.

Ecofeminism analyses the interconnection between the exploitation of women and nature within patriarchal institutions. The inclusion of Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* in the title emphasises the particular literary work under examination for these issues. Intersecting Narratives of Gender and Nature illustrates the novel's examination of the interconnection between human and environmental conflicts. The title indicates that the presentation will examine the intricate relationship between Roy's depiction of women's lives and the natural environment, elucidating the wider ramifications of ecofeminism theory within the novel's context. This methodology corresponds with the primary objective of the research, which is to elucidate the interconnections among gender, nature, and socio-cultural processes within the story.

Ecofeminism arises at the intersection of feminist philosophy and environmentalism, asserting that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected

expressions of patriarchal power structures. This research study examines the theoretical underpinnings, principal principles, and practical implementations of Ecofeminism, detailing its historical evolution and assessing its significance in modern discussions on gender, ecology, and social justice. This study aims to clarify how Ecofeminism provides a comprehensive framework for understanding, utilising multidisciplinary scholarship, case studies, and activist movements and tackling the interconnected oppressions of gender-based discrimination and environmental degradation.

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of Ecofeminism ideology, which posits that the issues confronting women and the environment are interconnected under a patriarchal socioeconomic framework. In the patriarchal paradigm, qualities linked to masculinity are ascribed greater significance or prestige than those linked to femininity, leading to "hierarchical dualisms" (Warren 6-8). All ecofeminists believe that the "logic of domination," coupled with value-hierarchical reasoning and value dualisms, perpetuates and legitimises the dual oppression of women and the environment. Warren asserts that all Ecofeminists believe that the "logic of domination," coupled with hierarchical value systems and value dualisms, perpetuates and legitimises the dual oppression of women and the environment. Consequently, ecofeminists assert that the supremacy of women and the environment is fundamentally rooted in ideology. This may be addressed by re-examining and reformulating the foundational patriarchal principles and structural dynamics of one's culture while promoting peaceful, egalitarian, and non-hierarchical organisational frameworks to facilitate the emergence of new social forms. Ecofeminism is a theoretical framework that unites feminist theory with environmental action, based on the intersection of the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature. It contests patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures that foster both gender oppression and environmental degradation, positing the two as intimately connected issues. Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* is a rich exploration of this connection against the backdrop of the Himalayan foothills. The novel follows Maya, a young widow who finds refuge in the town of Ranikhet, where personal trauma and ecological decline unfold in tandem. The landscape, in turn, is serene yet endangered, reflecting the emotional as well as societal struggles of its female characters reflection of how both women and nature are marginalised in a patriarchal system. Through its ecofeminist lens, *The Folded Earth* is a poignant narrative about the need for environmental stewardship and gender justice, urging a rethinking of how the exploitation of nature and women are linked in contemporary discourse.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach using literary analysis from the context of an ecofeminist viewpoint towards the convergence of the perspectives of gender and nature with Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*. The majority will be a close reading that focuses on how Roy weaves the issues relating to female characters in relation to the ecological breakdown happening in the Himalayan foothills. Using the theoretical lens of ecofeminism, the study will examine how the novel critiques patriarchal systems that oppress women and the environment. The research will draw on concepts such as environmental justice, intersectionality, and the

impact of capitalism to guide the analysis. A comparative approach will contextualise Roy's narrative within broader ecofeminist literature, drawing parallels to other works that address similar themes. The study will be further enriched by secondary research, comprising critical essays and academic articles on ecofeminism and postcolonial theory. This method is used to uncover the novel's contribution to ecofeminist discourse and its critique of social and environmental injustices.

Discussion

The well-known exponent of ecofeminism in India is Vandana Shiva, who contends that the capitalist patriarchal system has mistakenly reduced nature, full of beauty and creativity, to a dead, inert resource to exploit. It has confined women to the role of a mere reproductive being, denying them intellect, agency, and economic contribution. Shiva addresses these problems and calls for a freedom road for nature and women with sustainability and harmony instead of exploitation and excess. She presents nature and women in her book *Staying Alive* (1988) as vital to life, depicting their energies together.

With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalisation of women, especially in the Third World. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance. All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants, whose life is organised on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness, also embody the feminine principle. Historically, however, when such societies have been colonised and broken up the men have usually started to participate in life-destroying activities or have had to migrate; the women meanwhile, usually continue to be linked to life and nature through their role as providers of sustenance, food and water. The privileged access of women to the sustaining principle thus has a historical and cultural, and not merely biological, basis. (Shiva 42)

The Folded Earth examines the fundamental assertion of ecofeminism, which posits an intrinsic link between environmental deterioration and the subjugation of women. It showcases a collection of resolute and autonomous female characters that possess a profound connection with their surroundings. It effectively depicts a diverse array of women in Indian culture throughout many generations, encompassing differing levels of education, values, beliefs, and social and economic circumstances. *The Folded Earth* narrates the tale of Maya, a young woman who is her parents' sole daughter and her father's favoured child. Despite her father's support, Maya's aspirations are not within her purview, and she ultimately withdraws to nature. Following her marriage, Maya's mother gains strength and reveals to her that her father would accept her at the birth of her child. Maya separates from her parents by marrying Michael, a guy of a different faith who is passionate about rock climbing. Michael dies prematurely, and Maya assumes a teaching position at a Christian monastery in Ranikhet, a quaint town in the highlands. She relocates to Ranikhet to evade her parents and pursue an alternative lifestyle.

In Ranikhet, Maya assumes a teaching role in a Christian institution and encounters several fascinating personalities, including Charu, a spirited rural adolescent who develops romantic feelings for Kundan Singh. Charu's affection

flourishes after her cherished Kundan Singh relocates from Ranikhet. Charu's grandmother, Ama, is courageous and perceptive, overseeing the home independently without any male assistance. Ama is resolute in raising her granddaughter and advocates for women's liberation from tyranny. The narrative emphasises the conflict between gender roles and the significance of the feminine principle in attaining women's independence. Maya's trip underscores the obstacles encountered by women in a patriarchal environment and the need to foster personal development and autonomy. Shiva has rightly said "The new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated not in passivity, but in creativity and in the maintenance of life" (Shiva 47).

During this period, Maya had a strong association with Diwan Sahib, who was inclined to publish the biography of naturalist and author Jim Corbett. Diwan was a man of profound passions who embraced English characteristics, having lived during the colonial era, and served as the financial minister to the Nawab of Surajgarh. It is said that he held correspondence exchanged between Edwina Mountbatten and Nehru during their stay in Surajgarh. Journalists and academics periodically visit his estate in pursuit of these invaluable historical artefacts. Diwan Sahib serves as a voice for these mountain ranges, which are increasingly losing their splendour to encroaching modernisation. He frequently expresses nostalgia for the halcyon days of his boyhood when he could perch on the spur and observe gorgeous eagles soaring above the mountains,

If you sat still on that spur, after a while the animals would forget you and come out of the forest . . . But no animal comes to that spur now, Diwan Sahib said. There are trucks that come and go, the entrance to the spur is piled high with logs from trees that have been cut from the forests all around . . . They are building a log cabin on the spur for the entertainment of bureaucrats. They are building grand wooden gateways out of logs from these old trees. The trees with the eagles were cut down too. Nobody knows where the eagles went when their trees were felled. That is the forest now - it is a park, it is what is called a resource, a factory. It belongs neither to the people who owned it before nor to the animals and plants that lived in it. (Roy 176)

As the narrative unfolds, Maya also acclimatises to the daily cadence of Ranikhet. She quickly assumes control of a jam-making plant operated by the school administration, transforming local vegetables into delectable delicacies. This is an institution well managed by local women, who combine their efforts with the natural resources of the Ranikhet highlands. Establishing a market for local goods concurrently generates work opportunities for the females living in Ranikhet. Charu, an exuberant rural girl and a student of Maya, is also employed at this plant. She is one of the female characters well familiar with the forests and mountains of Ranikhet. Charu, like Maya, is an individual who does not consistently conform to societal norms. She has little interest in attending school and prefers to spend her time grazing cattle on the hillside. She encounters Kundan Singh, a chef at Aspen Lodge, and develops romantic feelings for him. Ama, her grandmother, disapproves of him due to his occupation as a chef and his affiliation with a different group. Like Maya, Charu's emotions are also considered inappropriate due to her lover's lower social standing. Rather than conforming to societal norms, Charu

opts to live according to her own principles and choose her own romantic partner. Maya and Charu are shown as strong-willed and independent women who confront life courageously despite several challenges, "Charu had never travelled out of Ranikhet before, except once or twice to go to villages further into the mountains for weddings and festivals. She had never gone alone; the only town she knew was Ranikhet" (199).

Roy examines issues of grief, perseverance, and the lasting strength of human connection via Maya's perspective. As Maya faces her inner turmoil and the spectres of her past, she finally discovers atonement and healing under unforeseen circumstances. Maya, a young widow, relocates to Ranikhet following her husband's demise, encountering familial hostility for contravening her father's desires by marrying an individual of a different faith. Her father exemplifies the initial manifestation of a patriarchal attitude in the narrative, as he wholly dismisses Maya's autonomy to live according to her own principles. Simultaneously, Maya's mother exemplifies the archetype of the Indian patriarchal system, acquiescent to her husband's desires and devoid of the autonomy to formulate and execute her own judgements. This scenario illustrates the experiences of several women who have been subjugated and dominated by their spouses.

Folded Earth concludes with the lamentable demise of Diwan Sahib and Maya's recognition of Veer's true nature. She perceives a form of poetic justice by ensuring that the prized letters do not reach Veer, even following Diwan Sahib's demise. As the narrative concludes, Ranikhet is also poised to transform into a thriving township. Although the alteration is considered advantageous by some, it still dislocates the foundations of individuals reliant on the mountains. Ranikhet is characterised as a locale enveloped by animated rocks and communicating fauna. However, their calls, which formerly filled the serene nights of the highlands, are now disregarded by the populace. The identical emotions are eloquently articulated in the words of Diwan Sahib, "You wanted me to call their calls for you—but I've forgotten their voices now. They have no voices any longer" (178). Concurrently with this dispersion of nature is the relocation of women indigenous to these highlands. Charu relocates to a remote city to join her husband, while Ama withdraws farther into the mountains. *Folded Earth* effectively captivates its readers by addressing enduring themes such as the intrinsic link between women and nature, alongside environmental degradation, in a profoundly personal and evocative manner. *Folded Earth* culminates in a compelling conclusion that evokes a profound longing for lost love and bittersweet retribution. It explores themes of love and hatred, continuity and transformation, as well as loss and grief within a credible and evocative setting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy is a valuable contribution to the ecofeminist discourse in contemporary literature, presenting a layered critique of patriarchal structures and their interconnected impact on both gender and ecological systems. The novel intricately weaves the personal struggles of the protagonist, Maya, into the environmental degradation of the Himalayan foothills, highlighting how the oppression of women and the destruction of nature are parallel processes in a patriarchal,

capitalist society. This is how Maya's journey and her changed relationship with the land of Ranikhet expose how both human and natural resources have been commodified by systems that only see them as objects of exploitation. At its core, *The Folded Earth* is a call to rethink traditional power dynamics and societal values and move toward relationships that respect, sustain, and equalise. The novel urges the reader to rethink how humans relate to nature and each other and to question dominant paradigms of control and domination.

The integration of gender and environmental narratives drives home the need for an all-encompassing approach toward social and ecological justice wherein feminist and environmental concerns can no longer be separated. In the final analysis, *The Folded Earth* asks readers to recognise deep interconnections between gender and nature and to work for a more harmonious and just world. It thus presents a strong call to rethink societal structures in ways that promote gender equality and environmental sustainability together.

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