



Reimagining Nature and Nurture: Ecofeminist Ethics in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

Dr. Arun Malik

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Guru Gobind Singh University, Dwarka, Sector-16
C, New Delhi - 110078, India.

Email: malik.arun17@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research paper examines Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011) through the lens of ecofeminism, focusing on how the novel reimagines the interconnectedness of nature and nurture within a framework of environmental ethics. Ecofeminism, which critiques the dual oppression of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems, provides a critical perspective to explore the novel's themes of ecological sensitivity, displacement, and personal healing. Set against the backdrop of the Himalayan landscape, the novel portrays a deep and evolving bond between the female protagonist and the natural world, suggesting that the ethics of care traditionally associated with women can extend to the environment in powerful and redemptive ways. The study investigates how Roy's portrayal of the natural world reflects both ecological and emotional terrains, offering a critique of human exploitation while presenting nature as a space of solace, resistance, and identity formation. Through this approach, *The Folded Earth* emerges not only as a personal narrative of loss and recovery but also as a subtle environmental commentary. This paper argues that Roy's work contributes meaningfully to Indian ecofeminist discourse by promoting a vision of harmony based on empathy, sustainability, and interconnectedness - redefining both feminine agency and environmental ethics in contemporary fiction.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environmental Ethics, Feminist Literary Criticism, Ecocriticism, and Gender and Ecology.

Introduction

Anuradha Roy is a critically acclaimed Indian novelist, editor, and journalist whose

works are noted for their engagement with themes of memory, loss, displacement, and the human connection to nature. *The Folded Earth*

(2011), Roy's second novel, is set in the Himalayan town of Ranikhet and follows the story of Maya, a young widow who seeks solace and healing after the tragic death of her husband. Against the backdrop of political unrest and environmental degradation, the novel weaves together personal grief and collective histories, highlighting the fragile relationship between humans and their environment. Roy's portrayal of the natural world is both vivid and symbolic, reflecting the emotional and psychological states of her characters. Through richly drawn landscapes and intimate human experiences, *The Folded Earth* becomes a powerful narrative that not only explores the interiority of loss but also critiques socio-political and ecological violence. The novel's subtle yet persistent environmental consciousness aligns it with the concerns of ecofeminism, making it a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English fiction.

In recent decades, ecofeminism has emerged as a vital critical framework that explores the interconnected oppressions of women and nature, challenging patriarchal structures that exploit both. Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* offers a compelling narrative space to examine this intersection, blending themes of ecological consciousness, gendered experience, and emotional healing within the Himalayan setting of Ranikhet. The novel presents nature not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic presence that interacts with human emotions, particularly those of the female protagonist, whose personal loss finds resonance in the rhythms of the natural world. This paper applies the lens of ecofeminist ethics - particularly the ethics of care - to investigate how the novel critiques anthropocentric and patriarchal paradigms, while offering an alternative model of coexistence rooted in empathy, resilience, and restoration. By reimagining both nature and nurture, Roy's narrative invites a rethinking of environmental responsibility and feminine agency in the context of contemporary Indian

literature. As Greta Gaard emphasizes, "ecofeminism recognizes the interconnectedness of the domination of women and the degradation of nature, and works to transform both" (Gaard, 27).

Maya, the central protagonist of the novel, is a young woman devastated by the untimely and tragic death of her husband, Michael, who dies in a mountaineering accident. Their inter-religious marriage - Maya being Hindu and Michael Christian - was marked by love but also by societal disapproval, adding emotional complexity to Maya's grief. As Maya reflects, "Michael had died because he loved the mountains, and I had followed him here because I loved him" (Roy, 5). This poignant confession illustrates how her love binds her not only to Michael but also to the geography of his death, making her grief inextricably tied to the natural world. Unable to cope with the loss and the alienation that follows, Maya retreats to the remote Himalayan town of Ranikhet in search of solitude and healing. Her journey is not only a physical relocation but also an inward movement toward emotional survival. In Ranikhet, she finds herself gradually reconnecting with life through her relationship with the landscape, the people around her, and her work as a school teacher. However, her grief remains a constant undercurrent, shaping her perceptions of the world and deepening her bond with the natural environment. As she notes, "In Ranikhet, the air had a stillness that felt like peace, like forgetting. Here, grief could be folded away, packed into layers of silence" (Roy, 6).

Maya's story is one of silent endurance and emotional reconstruction, and it is through her connection with the mountains and forests that she begins to find a sense of peace. This relationship between personal trauma and the landscape supports a reading grounded in ecofeminist theory. As Greta Gaard notes "Ecofeminist literary criticism reveals how personal grief is often articulated through metaphors of ecological connectedness,

highlighting the healing capacities of nature for traumatized women" (Gaard, 23). Similarly, Buell argues that "landscape in literature often mirrors the emotional states of characters, functioning as both metaphor and medium for transformation" (Buell, 123). In Maya's case, the hills are both a sanctuary and a silent witness to her sorrow and recovery, offering geography of emotional regeneration.

Charu, a local village girl, experiences another kind of struggle - that of navigating life as a woman in a patriarchal and politically volatile environment. Her forbidden love for a Muslim boy and her resistance to societal control expose her to familial and communal hostility. Yet, like Maya, she finds moments of resilience in the folds of the natural world. Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, Maya and Charu's stories reveal how the exploitation of women parallels the degradation of nature. As Vandana Shiva argues, "the logic of domination that destroys nature also marginalizes women" (Shiva, 38).

In the novel, nature is not merely a backdrop but a living entity that holds space for feminine sorrow, endurance, and recovery. Maya's growing empathy toward Charu reflects a deeper ethics of care - a central tenet of ecofeminism - transforming grief into solidarity. As Maya notes, "it had taken me months to learn how to be alone without being lonely, and now I was learning to care again" (Roy, 239). Their interconnected narratives offer a powerful commentary on how emotional healing, mutual care, and environmental attachment can challenge and resist patriarchal violence. In doing so, the novel reimagines feminine resilience as rooted in a compassionate relationship with the land - a vital site for ecofeminist recovery.

In *The Folded Earth*, Anuradha Roy constructs Ranikhet not merely as a setting but as an active witness to Maya's sorrow and gradual recovery. The Himalayan landscape - with its mist-laden forests and snow-clad

peaks - becomes geography of emotional regeneration, where nature both mirrors and mediates the protagonist's grief. Through an ecofeminist lens, Ranikhet is reimagined as a space where feminine suffering and natural endurance converge. Maya's psychological landscape is entwined with the topography around her: "The mountain closed around me like a fist. I could not breathe in that embrace, but I could not escape it either" (Roy, 3). This image underscores the landscape's dual role - as suffocating and sustaining - a dynamic often explored in ecofeminist discourse where both woman and nature are victims of domination but also sources of resilience.

The relationship between Maya and Diwan Sahib in the novel illustrates a cross-generational and empathetic bond that subtly reinforces the ecofeminist ethics of care. Diwan Sahib, a reclusive, elderly scholar deeply immersed in his love for books and the natural world, becomes both a mentor and a silent companion to Maya as she navigates her grief. His presence in her life, rooted in gentleness and non-intrusiveness, contrasts with the patriarchal figures of control elsewhere in the novel. Like Maya, Diwan Sahib has experienced personal loss - having distanced himself from society after the political and emotional betrayals of the past. Their shared silences and appreciation for the mountains of Ranikhet reveal a nurturing companionship grounded in mutual respect and solitude rather than domination or dependence. Roy describes Diwan Sahib's home as "a museum of another time, where silence grew like moss" (Roy, 121), linking human interiority with the quiet endurance of nature. In the ecofeminist light, their bond reflects an alternative model of rationality - non-exploitative, reflective, and rooted in the ethics of nurture and ecological harmony.

Veer, a forest contractor with a mysterious past, enters Maya's life as a complex figure that challenges and complicates her emotional recovery. Initially, his rugged charm and deep connection to the natural landscape of

Ranikhet offer Maya a temporary sense of warmth and attraction. However, as their relationship unfolds, Veer's association with exploitative and politically motivated activities, including the illegal timber trade and communal violence, becomes increasingly evident. Roy subtly contrasts Veer's physical closeness to nature with his morally detached and utilitarian approach to it. His character ultimately embodies the patriarchal and capitalist systems that ecofeminism critiques - those that commodify both women and nature for power and profit.

Maya's disillusionment with Veer marks a turning point in her journey toward emotional autonomy and ethical clarity. As Roy notes; "he belonged to the forest, but not in the way I did - he knew how to take from it, I only knew how to listen" (Roy, 215). This distinction encapsulates the ecofeminist ethic of care at the heart of the novel, wherein Maya, through pain and reflection, begins to distinguish between possessive desire and nurturing connection. Veer thus serves as a narrative contrast that sharpens Maya's reimagining of nurture - not as dependence on the masculine, but as a compassionate bond with the self and the natural world.

Jim Corbett, though not a living character in *The Folded Earth*, looms large in the cultural and environmental memory of Ranikhet, symbolizing a historical connection to the region's forests and wildlife. His legacy is preserved and revered by characters like Diwan Sahib, who collects memorabilia and writings about Corbett with great devotion. In the ecofeminist context, Corbett's presence represents a transitional figure - one who, despite being a colonial hunter, developed a deep empathy for nature and advocated for wildlife conservation. This ambivalence is significant in the novel's reimagining of environmental ethics, as Corbett's story serves as a bridge between the exploitative narratives of conquest and the emerging ethic of ecological care. Roy writes, "Corbett had come to kill but

stayed to protect. He had learned the forest's language and listened" (Roy, 142), highlighting a shift from dominance to understanding.

The changing seasons in Ranikhet - summer, spring, and winter - play a vital symbolic and emotional role in *The Folded Earth*, reflecting the rhythms of life, loss, and renewal that echo through Maya's inner journey. Anuradha Roy uses the natural cycles of the Himalayan landscape not merely as scenic descriptions but as deeply intertwined with the characters' emotional and ethical experiences. Spring, with its blooming rhododendrons and reviving warmth, represents moments of tentative hope and healing. Roy writes, "The hillsides blushed with rhododendron blooms, and the air began to hum with unseen life" (Roy, 56), suggesting nature's nurturing role in Maya's gradual reawakening after loss.

In contrast, winter descends with harsh silence and emotional weight, mirroring Maya's grief and solitude. Yet even in its starkness, winter is not lifeless - it is a season of introspection and quiet endurance. Summer brings both warmth and tension: a time when political unrest heightens but also when personal connections deepen. These seasonal shifts, under an ecofeminist reading, emphasize the cyclical, nurturing power of nature and its ability to mirror and guide human emotional landscapes. They invite a reconceptualization of nurture - not only as human care, but as something offered and embodied by the natural world itself, fostering empathy, resilience, and ethical awareness.

Throughout the novel, Anuradha Roy intricately weaves the personal with the political, the emotional with the ecological, constructing a narrative in which nature is not just a backdrop but a central force in shaping the characters' lives and ethical choices. Maya's evolving relationship with the landscape, her nurturing bonds with characters like Charu and Diwan Sahib, and her disillusionment with figures like Veer and Chauhan collectively

foreground a quiet but profound resistance to patriarchal and exploitative structures. The changing seasons of Ranikhet, the ever-present mountains, and the natural world become mirrors and mediators of inner transformation, underscoring the ecofeminist principle that the oppression of women and the degradation of nature are intertwined.

Roy's subtle yet insistent portrayal of care, empathy, and coexistence offers an alternative ethic - one grounded not in domination but in mutual respect and restoration. As Roy observes, "In the stillness of the mountains, I found a slowness that made pain bearable and beauty visible again" (Roy, 223). This observation encapsulates the novel's ethical core and prepares the ground for a concluding reflection on how the novel contributes to ecofeminist discourse in Indian English literature by reimagining both nature and nurture as interdependent sources of healing and resistance.

In conclusion, *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy stands as a subtle yet powerful ecofeminist text that redefines the relationship between women and nature through the lens of care, resilience, and ethical responsibility. By portraying the interconnected struggles of Maya, Charu, and other characters within a richly described Himalayan landscape, Roy emphasizes that both women and the environment are subjected to similar systems of control, silencing, and exploitation. Yet, through the ethics of nurture - manifested in human relationships, seasonal rhythms, and the healing presence of nature - the novel resists these dominant paradigms and offers an alternative vision grounded in empathy and coexistence. Roy does not present nature as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in emotional and ethical transformation. Her narrative contributes meaningfully to Indian ecofeminist literature by advocating for a worldview where care for the self, the other, and the environment is not a sign of weakness, but a profound act of resistance and renewal.

Ultimately, *The Folded Earth* invites readers to reimagine nurture as an inclusive, ecological ethic - one capable of transforming grief into grace, and silence into strength.

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