Ecofeminism in Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth: Intersecting Narratives of Gender and Nature

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of gender and nature through an ecofeminism lens in Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth. Set against the stunning yet imperiled landscape of the Himalayan foothills, the novel intricately weaves narratives of women's lives with the surrounding environment, uncovering the interconnected oppressions they face within a patriarchal social order. At its core, The Folded Earth portrays the struggles of Maya, a young widow seeking refuge from personal trauma amidst the pristine, yet slowly degrading, landscape of Ranikhet. The novel reflects how women's experiences are inherently tied to ecological concerns, revealing that both are subject to exploitation, marginalization, and objectification under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Roy's portrayal of female characters—each negotiating their existence against a backdrop of environmental degradation—underscores the intrinsic bond between feminine identities and the natural world. The novel echoes core ecofeminist principles by juxtaposing cultural exploitation with environmental destruction and reflecting how social hierarchies dictate power dynamics between gender and nature.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Gender and Nature, Patriarchy, Environmental Degradation, Ecological Justice and Social Justice.

Anuradha Roy is an acclaimed Indian author, editor, and publisher known for her evocative storytelling and lyrical prose. Born in Kolkata, India, she was educated in Hyderabad and later attended Presidency College in Kolkata, followed by the University of Cambridge, where she studied English literature. Roy's writing often explores themes such as identity, memory, social dynamics, and the human relationship with nature, drawing deeply from the rich cultural and geographical tapestry of India.*Sleeping on Jupiter* won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2016, and *All the Lives We Never Lived* was awarded the Tata Literature Live! Book of the Year Award in 2018 and was long listed for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction.Roy's work has been translated into multiple languages, and she continues to be celebrated for her ability to weave narratives that are both culturally rich and universally resonant.

Ecofeminism examines how the exploitation of women and nature are interconnected under patriarchal systems. By including Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth in the title, it highlights the specific literary work being analysed for these themes. Intersecting Narratives of Gender and Nature reflects the novel's exploration of how personal and environmental struggles are intertwined. The title suggests that the paper will analyse how Roy's portrayal of women's experiences and the natural world are deeply connected, revealing the broader implications of ecofeminism theory in the context of the novel. This approach aligns with the core focus of the study, which is to uncover the relationships between gender, nature, and socio-cultural dynamics within the narrative.

Ecofeminism emerges at the nexus of feminist theory and environmentalism, positing that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature are intertwined manifestations of patriarchal systems of power. This research paper explores the theoretical foundations, key concepts, and practical applications of Ecofeminism, tracing its historical development and analysing its relevance in contemporary discourses on gender, ecology, and social justice. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship, case studies, and activist movements, this paper seeks to elucidate how Ecofeminism offers a holistic framework for understanding

and addressing the interlocking oppressions of gender-based discrimination and environmental degradation. Ecofeminism has emerged as a dynamic theoretical framework that seeks to bridge the gap between feminist theory and environmental activism, highlighting the interconnectedness between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. This introduction provides an overview of the core tenets of Ecofeminism and situates it within broader discussions of gender, ecology, and social justice.

Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary analytical approach that posits a link between the plights of nature and women stemming from their mutual subjugation within a patriarchal society. This theory holds that patriarchal systems nurture hierarchies and binary oppositions that foster societal imbalances, privileging men over others. Through this patriarchal lens, a series of contrasts emerge, such as male versus female, culture versus nature, and rationality versus emotion, where the first element in each pair is typically valorised. In such a system, masculinity is associated with culture, consciousness, reasoning, and the soul, whereas femininity is tied to nature, the subconscious, emotion, and the physical body. Women and the environment are thus analogously perceived and marginalized within a male-dominated framework. The underpinning of this connection is their shared capacity for reproduction and sustenance; women give birth to human life, while nature propagates life through its resources.

Additionally, both are often seen as passive entities within societal constructs and are considered dependent. Fertility casts women into roles of domesticity and passivity, leaving those without financial autonomy reliant on men. In parallel fashion, inherently static and voiceless, nature assumes a human-dependent role. This alignment naturalizes women's reproductive capabilities and casts the fecundity of nature in feminine terms. The closeness of women to nature normalizes their reproductive potential and frames motherhood as their ultimate biological imperative.

Consequently, both women and nature are commoditized and exploited. This systemic association serves to side-line women from societal roles. The investigation illuminates the oppressive mechanisms of male supremacy, revealing how women and nature are made analogous and marginalized. It delves into the binary hierarchy of men/women, culture/nature, and human/environment, drawing on the narrative of Adam and Eve to illustrate the historical repression of women and nature. Ultimately, this study offers a comprehensive view of Ecofeminism theory, which contends that the challenges faced by women and the environment are intertwined within a male-oriented societal structure. It is an "awareness" that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man's attitude toward women and tribal cultures…"(Birkeland18). Within the patriarchal conceptual framework, all those attributes associated with masculinity are given higher status or prestige than those associated with femininity, resulting in 'hierarchical dualisms.' (Warren 6-8) All Eco feminists are of the view that it is the "logic of domination" in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature. According to Warren, all Eco feminists are of the view that it is the "logic of domination" in association with value hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature. Therefore, Eco feminists believe that women's dominance and nature are essentially ideologically based. This can be remedied by reconstructing and rethinking the underlying patriarchal ideals and structural relationships of one's culture and encouraging nonviolent, egalitarian, and non-hierarchical organizational structures to usher in new social forms.

Ecofeminism is grounded in several core concepts that underpin its analysis of gender, ecology, and social justice. This section examines critical concepts such as the "dualism of domination," which posits parallels between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, as well as notions of interconnectedness, care, and sustainability. The intersections between Ecofeminism and other critical theories, including intersectionality and post colonialism, are also explored.

Ecofeminism stands as an integrative scholarly and activist paradigm, advocating that the subjugation of women and the environment is fundamentally interconnected under a patriarchal system. This theoretical framework espouses that there is a direct correspondence between the on-going ecological crisis and the perennial issues plaguing women's rights. The sustainability of a patriarchal regime is linked with the perpetual devaluation of nature, parallel to the persistent inequity faced by women. Concurrently, gender

disparities are seen as a perpetrator of environmental degradation. Coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, Ecofeminism critiques the predominantly white, Western patriarchal construct that enforces cultural hegemony, instilling social stratifications and dichotomies. These structural binaries – such as male/female, white/black, culture/nature, Western/Eastern, strength/weakness, spirit/body, intellect/emotion – serve to maintain and legitimize societal imbalances within Western discourse. The former attributes are consistently valorised within these dichotomies, culminating in a dominant/subordinate dynamic. In scholarly discourse, the hierarchical dynamics posited by dualisms elevate certain groups while subordinating others. For instance, the societal construct often places white individuals in privileged tiers, conversely positioning black individuals in subordinate strata.

Furthermore, Western perspectives have historically depicted the East as primitive and uncultivated. In contrast, the West is associated with progress and rational enlightenment—a duality that Edward Said emphasizes, portraying the East as naive and inferior, starkly contrasting to the rational, civilized, and altruistic West. (Said 301) Such rigid binaries, as Simone de Beauvoir notes, relegate women to 'the second sex' within a gender hierarchy, enabling men to assume the role of the primary, dominant sex. Parallel to this is the dominance of culture over nature in patriarchal discourse. Attributes like culture, intellect, and power—deemed superior qualities—are often linked to masculinity, while nature, emotionality, and passivity, seen as inferior traits, are inscribed upon femininity. This alignment situates women and nature within a shared category of subordination in a male-centric societal framework. Consequently, in domains ruled by patriarchal values, women and nature are marginalized and oppressed concurrently, validating the interconnectedness of gender and environmental concerns. Eco feminists endeavour to extricate both women and nature from male supremacy, emphasizing their intertwinement and seeking collective liberation.

Françoise d'Eaubonne, in her 1974 seminal work *Le Feminismou la Mort*, articulates the concept of Ecofeminism, drawing connections between the subjugation experienced by disparate marginalized entities—including women, minorities, children, and the impoverished—and the exploitation of the natural world, encompassing fauna, flora, terrestrial bodies, and atmospheric elements. In her analysis, d'Eaubonne presents a critique of the Western patriarchal framework, illustrating how its mechanisms of oppression, domination, and colonialist endeavours have culminated in profound and potentially irreversible ecological degradation. Beyond her intellectual contributions, d'Eaubonne's activism was pervasive, advocating for a comprehensive extinguishing of societal inequities that transcend beyond gender and environmental spheres.

In Indian literary discourse, Ecofeminism presents a complex tapestry of motifs encompassing gender dynamics, ecological concerns, and activism. This body of work delves into the multifaceted representation of women, simultaneously as custodians and casualties of ecological disruption. Indian authors employ an array of literary genres, such as fiction, poetry, and critical essays, to interrogate the underpinnings of patriarchal and capitalistic systems, underscoring the symbiosis between femininity and the natural world. Through this critical examination, they give voice to the often-silenced and champion environmental equity, imagining a future founded on the principles of fairness and diligent stewardship of the planet. The current research probes into the intersecting identities of women and nature within the context of activism, scrutinizes the myriad literary expressions and sociocultural narratives, acknowledges the role of literary advocacy in effectuating societal transformation, and acknowledges the import of Ecofeminism insights in confronting and resolving the salient environmental and social issues of our times.

In the realm of Indian literature, Ecofeminism presents itself as a dynamic conversation seamlessly intertwining themes of gender, ecological consciousness, and activism against the expansive backdrop of India's cultural and societal fabric. Utilizing various literary forms— including stories, poetry, and critical essays—this dialogue casts light on the intricate relationship between women's dual roles as caretakers of their environment and as those who bear its degradation. It also honours the aesthetic, spiritual, and life-sustaining essence of the natural world. Indian authors, drawing upon ancient traditions and present-day circumstances, craft intricate examinations of the subjugation of both women and nature, emphasizing the entangled nature of patriarchal oppression, economic systems, and ecological calamity. Through the

compelling storytelling of Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*, the sharp analytical prose of Vandana Shiva, the haunting narratives of Mahasweta Devi, and the poignant verses of Kamala Das, Ecofeminism in Indian literature emerges as a critical force. These works confront established societal constructs, elevate the experiences of those historically overlooked, and call for a commitment to ecological justice and enduring sustainability. These Indian authors harness the power of the written word to prompt introspection about societal bonds to the natural world, to highlight the unequal burden of ecological harm borne by women—especially those from disenfranchised groups—and to propose visions of a future where ecological balance and societal fairness are intertwined. The examination of such works enriches our understanding of the intricate tapestry woven by gender, environment, and authority within the Indian milieu and catalyses motivation for initiating change toward a world characterized by fairness and ecological integrity.

Within the variegated tapestry of Indian literature and its multitudinous cultural narratives, one finds a reflective medium through which the entwined narratives of women and the environment can be scrutinized and comprehended. Authors portray women as both guardians and casualties of their natural surroundings, drawing analogies to the simultaneous subjugation of women and ecological systems. Moreover, depicting the environment as central to sustenance, ethereal beauty, and spiritual fulfilment underscores its inherent value and the imperative for its preservation. Within this paradigm, environmental activism is championed as a crucial element of Ecofeminism thought, calling for sustainable and just solutions to urgent ecological dilemmas. An exploration of these crossroads in Indian literature invites a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay among authority, subjugation, and defiance while also encouraging a united pursuit of a more equitable and environmentally sound future. In the Indian context, the nexus between women and the environment is grounded in a tangible history marked by women actively confronting ecological injustices. Landmark movements such as Chipko and Narmada BachaoAndolan epitomize women's pivotal role in environmental advocacy, reflecting their deep-seated bond with nature. Indian theorists and literary minds delve into the multifaceted relationship between femininity and the environment. Theoretically, they distinguish between spiritual Ecofeminism, which rekindles the reverence of nature as a deity, and material Ecofeminism, emphasizing the tangible impact of environmental harm on women's lives. These theoretical strands shape the contours of Indian Ecofeminism.

Indian women writers, in particular, probe deeper into the nuances of the nature-women connection, often revealing complexities that may elude theoretical discourse. They raise pertinent issues such as gender, social class, and ethnicity, dissecting the virtues and vices of urban life and proposing an alternate vision of modernity that refrains from marginalizing the 'other'. Their literary works, steeped in Indian settings from the 1940s to the new millennium, portray female protagonists from various walks of life and explore how their ties to the natural world have transformed over time.

This exploration reveals that Indian Ecofeminism cannot be encapsulated in simplistic, uniform definitions. It is an intricate tapestry of interwoven relationships among humans, animals, plants, and the environment, resisting isolation and underscoring unity. The notion of interconnectedness becomes profoundly apparent as one approaches the development of a uniquely Indian Ecofeminism ideology—a concept strongly informed by women authors whose contributions to this discourse are crucial. Through their narrative depictions of Indian village life and diverse female experiences, these authors present a holistic image of Ecofeminism that is intrinsically Indian.

Ecofeminism elucidates an additional, critical link between women and the environment: a mutual chronicle of subjugation. Historically perceived as mere resources, nature and women have endured eras of conquest, ownership, domination, and exploitation. Eco feminists posit that the root of this sustained oppression stems from a patriarchal, capitalist mind-set that relegates both nature and women to an inferior "other," thus giving rise to binary oppositions such as culture versus nature and man versus woman. The Ecofeminism movement intends to deconstruct these prevalent binary constructs, probing their historical origins. In their quest, Eco feminists confront pivotal questions, such as the rationale behind the association of women with nature, the distinct ways in which they are plat formed together, the role of traditional knowledge systems in perpetuating dualisms, and how prevailing power structures foster the chasm between humanity and the

natural world. These inquiries formulate the crux of Ecofeminism interrogation and critique as they strive to dissect and address the underlying causes of these dualistic separations.

Anuradha Roy has become a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature, captivating readers with her poignant narratives and evocative prose. Anuradha Roy's novels are characterized by their exploration of themes such as identity, place, memory, and social dynamics. In *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, for instance, Roy delves into the intricacies of family relationships, the search for belonging, and the impact of history on individual lives. Similarly, *The Folded Earth* grapples with themes of loss, grief, and redemption against the backdrop of the Himalayan foothills. At the same time, *All the Lives We Never Lived* explores the interplay between personal and political upheaval in pre-independence India.

*The Folded Earth by*Anuradha Roy is a poignant and evocative novel that delves into the complexities of human relationships, the search for identity, and the struggle for survival amidst the backdrop of the majestic Himalayan foothills. Set in the picturesque town of Ranikhet in Uttarakhand, India, the novel intricately weaves together the lives of its diverse characters, each grappling with their hopes, dreams, and sorrows.

At the heart of the story is the protagonist, Maya, a young widow who moves to Ranikhet seeking solace and a fresh start after the tragic death of her husband. Maya's journey of self-discovery and healing forms the emotional core of the narrative as she navigates the challenges of rebuilding her life in a new environment while grappling with grief and loneliness.

Against the backdrop of Ranikhet's stunning natural beauty, Anuradha Roy paints a vivid portrait of the town and its inhabitants, from the enigmatic mountain guide Diwan Sahib to the eccentric Englishman David Burton. Through her lyrical prose and keen observations, Anuradha Roy captures the essence of small-town life in India, with its intricate social dynamics, deep-rooted traditions, and simmering tensions.

As Maya immerses herself in the rhythms of daily life in Ranikhet, she encounters a cast of characters who each leave a profound impact on her journey. From the spirited schoolgirl Charu to the enigmatic caretaker Mohan, Maya forms unexpected connections that challenge her preconceptions and broaden her perspective on life. Central to Maya's journey is her quest to uncover the truth about her husband's mysterious past and the circumstances surrounding his death. As she delves deeper into the secrets of Ranikhet's tight-knit community, Maya discovers shocking revelations that force her to confront the complexities of love, betrayal, and forgiveness. Through Maya's eyes, Roy explores themes of loss, resilience, and the enduring power of human connection. As Maya grapples with her demons and confronts the ghosts of her past, she ultimately finds redemption and healing in the most unexpected places. As Maya, a young widow who moves to Ranikhet after her husband passes away; she faces rejection from her family for defying her father's wishes and marrying someone from a different religion. Her father is portrayed as the first example of a patriarchal mindset in the novel, as he completely disregards Maya's freedom to live life on her terms. Meanwhile, Maya's mother embodies the typical product of the Indian patriarchal system, submissive to her husband's wishes and lacking the authority to make and act on her own decisions. This situation reflects the experiences of many women who have been oppressed and controlled by their husbands.

Michael, her husband, was a passionate trekker who could not stay away from the mountains for long. His deep love for the mountains led him to embark on a trek to Roopkund, where he tragically passed away after getting trapped in a snowstorm with a broken ankle. Devastated by this loss, Maya, who had left her family and familiar life to be with Michael, found it unbearable to continue living in Hyderabad, where reminders of him were everywhere. She decided to start anew in Ranikhet, a secluded village nestled in the Himalayas, away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, where people live harmoniously with nature. In Ranikhet, Maya found a job at St. Hilda, a school run by the church, and rented a cottage on an estate called the Light House. Over time, Diwan Sahib, the landlord of the estate, and Charu and Amma, the tenants in the closest cottage, became her new family in Ranikhet. Maya's perspective became a central thread connecting the other characters and their stories in the narrative.

Diwan Sahib, a venerable elderly gentleman, formerly held the esteemed position of finance minister under the Nawab of Surajgarh. Speculation abounds regarding his possession of correspondence between Edwina Mountbatten and Nehru during their sojourn in Surajgarh. Journalists and scholars alike frequent his residence on occasion in pursuit of these invaluable historical artefacts. In a sense, Diwan Sahib emerges as a spokesperson for these mountainous terrains, which are gradually succumbing to the forces of modernization. He frequently expresses sorrow for the bygone era of his youth, reminiscing about the days when he could perch upon the precipice and observe regal eagles soaring above the peaks. "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).

Roy's narrative not only reflects the core tenets of ecofeminism—highlighting the parallelisms between the subjugation of women and the degradation of nature—but also advocates for a reconsideration of traditional power dynamics and societal values. Through Maya's journey and the environmental backdrop of Ranikhet, the novel critiques the commodification of both human and natural elements, and calls for a reimagining of relationships that foster respect, sustainability, and equity.

In conclusion, The Folded Earth serves as a significant contribution to the discourse on ecofeminism within contemporary literature, offering a compelling critique of patriarchal dominance and its impact on gender and ecological systems. The novel's intricate depiction of these intersecting narratives underscores the importance of integrating feminist and environmental perspectives to address broader social and ecological issues. Roy's work encourages readers to recognize the profound connections between gender and nature and to advocate for a more harmonious and just world.

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