

Analysing Ecofeminist Perspectives in Anuradha Roy's

The Folded Earth

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees an innate connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women in contemporary society. It challenges the existing patriarchal paradigms and holds that there is an inseparable connection between women and nature. This paper attempts to explore the intimate link between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature by closely analysing Anuradha Roy's celebrated novel *The Folded Earth*. It presents before the readers an array of strong willed and independent female characters who share an intimate bond with their immediate environment. It succeeds in beautifully portraying a spectrum of women in Indian society belonging to different generations, with different education, values, beliefs as well as social and economic conditions.

Keywords: Anuradha Roy, Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Sustainability

Ecofeminism as a movement has developed gradually over the decades and finds itself as a relevant school of thought that explores the co-existence of feminist, activist and environmental theories. It challenges the existing patriarchal paradigms and holds that there is an inseparable connection between women and nature. "Mary Mellor, a British

academic, defines ecofeminism as ‘a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women’” (Singh). The term ‘ecofeminism’ was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French writer and feminist, in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death?). Throughout the coming years, the term was increasingly adopted by authors and activists alike and gained popularity in India through writers like Arundhati Roy and Vandana Shiva.

One of the pioneering voices of Ecofeminism in India is Vandana Shiva, who talks about how this age of capitalist patriarchy has falsely declared that nature with its abundance of beauty and creativity is dead and inert matter, simply raw material for exploitation. It has also declared that women are merely reproductive machines with no minds, no brains and no other contribution to the economy. Vandana Shiva addresses these concerns and argues that the path to liberation of nature, women and men is one based on sustainability and harmony, not exploitation and surplus. In her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Shiva portrays both nature and women as producers of life:

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)

Ecofeminism tries to examine some common causes linked to environmental destruction and social injustices like poverty, racism and sexism. It states that a kind of hierarchical thinking has developed in our society over the years which places humans above nature and thereby justifies the domination of nature by human beings. Ecofeminism reflects that this same hierarchical thinking is manifested in the domination of women in a patriarchal society.

This paper attempts to explore this intimate link between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature in contemporary society by closely analysing Anuradha Roy's celebrated novel *The Folded Earth*. Anuradha Roy is an Indian novelist, journalist and editor whose debut novel *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, is an immensely moving tale of three generations of an Indian family set during the 20th century. It has been translated into eighteen languages and was named by *World Literature Today* as one of the '60 Essential English Language Works of Modern Indian Literature'. *The Folded Earth*, her second novel, beautifully portrays the delineating hill communities in India by offering an in-depth exploration of the town of Ranikhet in the foothills of the Himalayas. Her other works include *Sleeping on Jupiter*, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, and her most recent novel *The Earthspinner*, published in September 2021. Roy, along with her husband Rukun Advani, founded Permanent Black, a publishing company focusing on academic literature in 2000. Her essays and reviews have appeared in newspapers and magazines like *Indian Express*, *The Hindu*, *Guardian* and most recently in John Freeman, ed., *Tales of Two Planets*.

Folded Earth explores the central claim of ecofeminism, that there is an inherent connection between the degradation of nature and the oppression of women. It presents before

the readers an array of strong willed and independent female characters who share an intimate bond with their immediate environment. It succeeds in beautifully portraying a spectrum of women in Indian society belonging to different generations, with different education, values, beliefs as well as social and economic conditions. *Folded Earth* opens with the story of Maya, a young widow, who has come to live in Ranikhet after her husband's death. She was disowned by her family for going against her father's wishes and marrying a man belonging to a different religion. Her father becomes the first symbol of patriarchal mindset in the novel as he completely disregards his daughter's freedom to live her life according to her own choices and ideals. Maya's mother is a perfect product of the Indian patriarchal system who is submissive to her husband's wishes, lacking the power to take her own decisions or to implement them. She becomes the typical example of women who remained oppressed under their husband's control.

Michael, her husband, was someone who loved trekking and couldn't be parted long from the mountains. This intense longing for the mountains leads him to go on a trek to Roopkund where he dies after being trapped on a snowstorm with a broken ankle. Maya, who had traded her family and everything familiar to her for a life with Michael, is devastated by this tragedy and can no longer continue living in Hyderabad where every mundane thing reminded her of him. She decides to start a new life in Ranikhet, a remote village nestled in the lap of the Himalayas, cut off from the bustle of the outside world, where people coexist peacefully with nature. Maya becomes a nexus that connects all the other characters in the narrative and their stories are often portrayed through her perspective. She secures a job in St. Hilda, a church run school and rents a cottage on an estate called the Light House. Diwan Sahib, the landlord of the estate, and Charu and Amma, the tenants occupying the cottage closest to Maya, gradually becomes her family in Ranikhet.

Diwan Sahib is a respected old man who had once been the finance minister of the Nawab of Surajgarh. It is also rumoured that he possessed notes that Edwina Mountbatten and Nehru had written to each other during their visit to Surajgarh. Reporters and historians alike visit his estate occasionally in search of these priceless historical gems. Diwan Sahib in a way becomes a voice for these mountain ranges that is gradually losing its glory to impending modernization. He often laments the golden days of his youth when he could sit on the spur and see majestic eagles taking flight over 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 story progresses Maya too becomes accustomed to the quotidian rhythm of Ranikhet. She soon becomes in charge of a jam making factory run under the school administration that turns the local produce into delicious products. This is one instance of an institution run successfully by the local women integrating their efforts and the natural produce of the mountains of Ranikhet. While creating a market for the local produce it also succeeds in providing employment opportunity for the girls residing in Ranikhet. Charu, a cheerful village girl, and Maya's student also works at this factory. She is one of the female characters who knows the forests and mountains of Ranikhet like the back of her hand. Charu like Maya is

someone who doesn't always confirm with the expectations of the society. She is not at all interested in attending school but would rather spend her time grazing cattle in the hillside. She meets Kundan Singh, a cook in Aspen Lodge and falls in love. Ama, her grandmother, doesn't approve of them because of his job as a mere cook and because he belongs to a different community. Similar to Maya, Charu's feelings too are deemed unacceptable because of her lover's inferior social status. But instead of trying to be submissive to the rules of the society, Charu decides to live her life on her own terms and chooses her love.

Both Maya and Charu are portrayed as strong willed and independent women who faces life bravely despite many obstacles. "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" (Roy 199). Yet she decides to go after Kundan Singh rather than accept her fate as some government babu's wife. Both Maya and Charu show the readers different aspects of Ranikhet. Maya, a city girl, quite used to the clamour and bustle of the city finds refuge in the calm and serene mountain ranges. While Charu, someone whose entire life has been entwined with these mountains leaves them behind for a new start in a strange city. Charu who had always felt a deep bond with the pure and pristine skies and rivers of Ranikhet was completely unprepared for the sights and smells of the city. Through Charu's perspective the author brings a soulful comparison between the sights and smells of the pristine mountains and the foul odour and deceptive sights of the bustling city.

It smelled of putrid things, filthy drains, sewage, burning rubber, and smoke from factories. The stench came in through the windows of the bus; it was all around and she could hardly draw breath without coughing. She had not been prepared for the sky. She had thought skies were blue everywhere, as grass was green or red roses red; but here the sky was the slate-grey colour of village roofs,

only dirtier. You could not see far at all, just till the next few towering pillars of buildings, which stood close together like walls with square holes. They all looked the same, and as if they would fall any moment. Beyond, there was a haze of smoke. (Roy 214)

Another important female character taking the narrative forward and deciding its course till the end is Ama, Charu's grandmother. Ama is an illiterate old woman residing in Ranikhet but she possesses invaluable wisdom that is gained only through age and experience. She is a woman of strong morals who has disowned her own son for being a drunkard. "She was not afraid of anything or anyone, and had thrown Charu's father, her younger son, out of her house for being drunk every day and beating his wife to death in a drunken fit. She would bring up her grandchild alone, she had said, they did not need a man around the house if it was a man like him" (Roy 18). In spite of being the wisest and one of the most intuitive characters in the novel, Ama believes that Ohjha (a sorcerer) could cure a hurt animal rather than the vet. She often calls Ohjha "to exorcize evil spirits from her cows or to exorcize Charu" (Roy 182). The author draws a true portrait of Ama rather than present her as a perfect female without any flaws.

The peaceful existence of this small group of people is soon threatened by the arrival of Veer, Diwan Sahib's nephew. Veer was a climber, a professional whose work it was to take other people on climbs and treks. He came to Ranikhet intent on starting a new trekking company there. Quite mysteriously after the arrival of Veer, Diwan Sahib's health starts deteriorating every day. Maya also becomes close to Veer who gradually starts being a companion through her lonely days. Veer's true intentions remain veiled from everyone till the end with only Ama suspecting the nature of his sudden arrival.

Ama said after a minute. “You are blinded, you can’t see. There he is, swearing love and care for his uncle, but who looked after the old man through his illnesses? Was he here? Oh no, he only turns up when it is all finished, to see what he can get. All these months, he kept leaving cigarettes all over the house, and getting Diwan Sa’ab drunk. Didn’t you notice how his health collapsed after his nephew came into his life again?” (Roy 240)

From the very start Veer had only been interested in finding the letters treasured by Diwan Sahib and was even responsible for his sudden decline of health. It is also revealed that Veer had been Micheal’s last trekking companion who abandoned him on a snowstorm. But he never said a word about it even when Maya had told him everything about her husband’s death.

Another arrival which threatens the peaceful co-existence of man and nature in Ranikhet is Mr Chauhan, the new administrator, who wants to bring about a glamorous “change” in the town. He wishes to make Ranikhet a tourist destination. “Ranikhet has to become the Switzerland of India. Or at least it must be another Shimla” (Roy 50). Ranikhet is home for a tight knit community which shares a deep bond with the mountains. This harmony between nature and man is disrupted greatly by Mr. Chauhan’s plans of ‘smooth roads’ and ‘clean benches’. Animals who had the right to roam around freely in the town before are now banned from their own land. Pavements adorned with lush creepers and miniature flowers are replaced by grey slabs and concrete benches. This change is labelled as ‘development’, but it is done for the betterment of political parties and people in power, not the ordinary man or helpless animals abiding there.

The onset of elections in Ranikhet also brings with it swamps of politicians who tries to pollute the land as well as abuse the women. One such instance is that of Beena and Mitu, the twins who lived down the hill. Neither could speak nor hear.

Their father was a drunk who could not pay their fees. Their deaf-mute mother barely managed two meals a day from cleaning houses and washing people's clothes. Earlier that year, when the twins turned fifteen, they had been sent off at the church's cost to a convent in Varanasi, where destitute, disabled girls were schooled and trained in vocational skills. (Roy 22)

Someone from the election campaign tries to molest Beena who barely manages to escape unharmed. Even though the girl was not at fault and fought back the best she could, she still gets blamed and beaten by her mother. Characters like Veer and the politicians are presented as symbols of oppression, who abuses the hills as well as the women for their selfish needs.

Folded Earth ends with Diwan Sahib's pitiful death and Maya realising Veer's true colours. She finds a sort of poetic justice by making sure that the coveted letters doesn't end up in Veer's hands even after Diwan Sahib's death. As the story winds up Ranikhet too is on the way to metamorphose into a bustling township. Though the change is deemed beneficial by some, it still displaces the roots of many dependent on the mountains. Ranikhet is described as a place where you are surrounded by rocks that breathe and animals that call to each other. But now their calls which fills the tranquil nights of the mountains are forgotten by the people. The same sentiments are beautifully described in Diwan Sahib's words: "You wanted me to call their calls for you—but I've forgotten their voices now. They have no voices any longer" (Roy 178). Occuring parallel to this dispersion of nature is the displacement of women native to these mountains. Charu moves away to a distant city to be with her husband and Ama retreats deeper into the mountains. *Folded Earth* successfully engages it's readers with numerous long-standing debates like the inseparable connection between women and nature as well as the destruction of the environment, in a truly human and emotive way. Culminating in a gripping climax that leaves the readers with a poignant yearning for lost loves and sweet revenge, *Folded*

Earth is a story about love and hate, continuity and change, loss and grief in a convincing and memorable settings.

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