

Green Politics and Feminist Consciousness: Exploration of Ecofeminist Perspective in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism as theory and praxis talks about the dominations and exploitations of women, nature and other non-human entities living on this Earth. Over the past few decades, there is an increasing consciousness suggesting that a great deal of civilization is profoundly centered around the human putting the rest of the living world overlooked and left to the margins of existence. Furthermore, most human advancements in recent centuries have been constrained by the male to such an extent that women have been left to the periphery for long. There are various other sections within the biosphere which has been likewise marginalized in different parts of the world as in different provinces of India. Ecofeminism accepts that the social mindset and attitudes that are responsible for the victimization of women is also answerable for the exploitation and abuse of nature. Although ecofeminism has its roots in the West, yet in addition marched fast into Indian writing in English. Indian theorists as well as literary figures especially female writers explore many shades of this women-nature connection through their writings. Anuradha Roy is one such dignified author who exhibits the essence of feminist environmental philosophy through her compositions. This paper endeavours to analyze and interpret the textual and conceptual pith of ecofeminism in her second novel, *The Folded Earth*. Roy uses the setting of a small village, namely Ranikhet, surrounded by the foothills of the Himalaya, where people live peacefully in harmony with nature. Various species are interwoven in the novel and Roy adds an aura of charm and grace to it by depicting its characters as 'good samaritans' to the co-habitats of the wild. Additionally, women characters of this novel depict the changing role of women in Indian context and their constant struggle to surpass the submissive stereotyped characteristics forced by the male-centric society. Nature and women become an inseparable part of this work and they are presented in all its forms.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Women, Nature, Ecology, Environment, Oppression, Exploitation, Degradation

Introduction

Literature provides a gigantic degree to study, consider, examine and comprehend different layers of practical life reflected in various genres. It likewise serves as a device to represent the crisis and catastrophe which set upon the earth because of the belief systems and practices of mankind. One of the striking features of ecological concern that is seen in the present scenario is the assimilation among environmentalism and feminism. Women's activist writings are of crucial interest to the ecological discourse for the reason that both male controlled society and anthropocentrism could be seen to exert various types of exploitation and domination over those are subordinate to them. Often, these marginalized parts are not just the victims of sloppiness of people with power and authority, yet in addition the objects of abuse and exploitation for the egotistical and selfish interests of the dominant groups. These peripheralized segments form the 'other' of the mainstream. Studies about this marginalization and exploitation is a de-schooling process which gives the acknowledgment that individuals having power and influence are always at the center of action, consideration, discourses and thought, leaving the "other" on the margins. And the natural consequence of this is that their existence is never perceived, and their voices remain unheard. Ecofeminism considers both the nature and women among the peripheralized and othered of contemporary life which lacks ethical epistemology. Nonetheless, the yoking together of these two independent narratives- the ecological crisis and accounts of women's liberation- is quite an interesting intellectual venture that has happened in the recent past, joining hands to put forth the politics in the ethical sense of asserting their identities. And the outcome is ecofeminism, which rejects human-centric and androcentric societies and cultures and rather advocates a unified eco-centric social structure and political landscape.

Ecofeminism has its roots in the West, yet in addition marched fast into Indian writing in English. And when it comes to India the connection between Women and Nature can be explained in practical terms as we have a rich history of women's struggle against ecological exploitation and degradation. In events like Chipko movement, Ganga Bachao Andolan, Narmada movement and in numerous other events we see women playing a significant role. Women always take a central position in the struggles to save environment, as they are intimately connected to nature in terms of caring, nurturing, discrimination, exploitation, giving entities and also with their biological status, reproductive role.

With regards to India or any other developing countries, ecofeminism is essential to expose the invasions and exploitations of our environment and its assets by the advance countries in the names of globalization, urbanization and advancement. Simultaneously gender issues can be questioned and analyzed by looking at the predicament of women especially in underdeveloped countries like India where gender itself is a taboo and existing patriarchy constantly try to hold back its women. However, there were a large group of Indian writers, especially female authors who skilfully exhibited ecofeminist perspectives in their writings. Some of the contemporary Indian Female authors whose literary works have advocated the concept of ecology in relation to women, include Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Sashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Usha K.R, Anita Nair, Sarah Joseph, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Anuradha Roy. The aim and objective of this paper is to explore Anuradha Roy's

extraordinary novel *The Folded Earth* in the light of feminist environmental philosophy. Anuradha Roy has chosen to explore the woman-nature connection in an urban setting. She voices her concerns on globalization, growing industrialization and ecological degradation in India and its impact on gender, family relationships, animals, birds and the biosphere at large in its broadest sense. Ranikhet is a remote village until the arrival of the industrialists and politicians. The villagers of Ranikhet shares a strong bond with nature but political tensions and modern ways of living encroaches here too in this place.

Theoretical background

Ecofeminism is a multidisciplinary, intellectual and political movement that emerged in the mid-1970s alongside the second-wave feminism and green movement with the hypothesis that the oppression of women and degradation of the environment are consequences of patriarchy, anthropocentrism and capitalism. Ecofeminism, the neologism is coined by Francoise d' Eaubonne, a prominent French critic and the proponent of the theory of Western ecofeminism, in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Destruction) (1974). She called on women to lead ecological revolution and establish new relationships between humanity and nature as well as man and woman to develop a non-anthropocentric worldview and behavior and to create awareness among women to save the globe from patriarchy. She argues that oppression, domination, exploitation and colonization from the patriarchal society has directly caused unavoidable environmental damage. The term was further developed by Ynestra King who in wrote an article titled "What is Ecofeminism?" (1987) which appeared in *The Nation*. And in 1980s it became a movement. A number of influential texts including: *Women and Nature* (Susan Griffin, 1978), *Gyn/Ecology* (Mary Daly, 1978) and *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (Carolyn Merchant, 1980) helped to propel the association between domination by man on women and the exploitation of nature by human. From these texts, feminist activism of the 1980s linked ideas of the environment and ecology. Movements such as the National Toxics Campaign, Native Americans for a Clean Environment (NACE) and Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), were led by women devoted to issues of human health and environmental justice. The major Indian ecofeminist movements started in India at the later part of 19th century with events like Chipko movement, Ganga Purification, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Harhwal Himalaya and in numerous other events which were led by women. The contribution of major ecofeminist activists like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and a host of other activists and theorists contributed to the movement through their works. *The Voilence of Green Revolution* (Shiva, 1991), *Ecofeminism* (Shiva and Mies, 1993), *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (Shiva, 2010) and a few others shared their views on reasonable grounds of historical experiences of exploitation and domination of Patriarchy. Not only the theorists but also a large group of female authors have exhibited Ecofeminist identities in their fiction. In this thesis the researcher has taken the novel, *The Folded Earth* (2011) by contemporary author Anuradha Roy, for the purpose of exploration of women-nature nexus as depicted in this novel.

Anuradha Roy

Anuradha Roy (1967), an award-winning contemporary Indian novelist and journalist, born in Kolkata and educated in Hyderabad, Kolkata and Cambridge (UK). She is also the editor, designer at Permanent Black, an independent academic press at Ranikhet which she runs with her Husband, Rukun Advani. A young, charming, budding writer who has carved out a niche for herself through her profound and prolific writings, won the Economist Crossword Prize for Fiction for her novel *The Folded Earth* (2011), which was also shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize and longlisted for Man Asian Literary Prize. Her first novel *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) has been published in 18 countries and translated into 15 languages across the world. World Literature Today named it as one of the 60 most essential books on modern India. Her third novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and was longlisted for Man Booker Prize which made her position among the thirteen novelists, longlisted for it. And her latest novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018) brought her Tata Book of the Year Award for Fiction.

The Folded Earth

Though written with great prowess and dexterity, Roy's second novel *The Folded Earth*, has not been widely acclaimed and often escapes the attention of literary scholars. The novel unfolds the tension between the metropolitan and rustic life, as well as between the provincial time and modernity, in contemporary India and is well-expressed. Despite the fact that desolation and dejection imbued the entire novel, nature's magnificence and abundance additionally encompass it. The mountain setting of the novel lends a refreshing glimpse into the beauty and glory of nature with a breath-taking fragrance and freshness, alongside the shades of hill-life, rich description of nature and the peaceful locale of Ranikhet which is a sad reminder of what modern man is missing out. Besides the ideology of environmental ethics, Roy also depicts the issues of women education, ambition, and independence; she also addresses the continual struggles that even a relatively independent woman faces in a patriarchal society. In that way *The Folded Earth* becomes a universal, a book about human instinct and the journey of self-discovery, while providing a heartfelt tribute to a treasured place, rarely noticed in the midst of the hills.

The Folded Earth is fictionalized upon a documentation of the journey of Maya, the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, through the hills of Ranikhet. A young Hindu woman, Maya was disinherited by her pickle-industrialist father for marrying a Christian, namely Michael. The storyline develops with the folded memories of Maya, when she comes to Ranikhet, abandoning the Deccan after the death of her husband on one of his mountaineering

expeditions. In order to overcome with the mishap in her life, she takes up teaching at a Christian convent in the village Ranikhet, instead of going back to her parents. As she tries to hide herself within the simplicity of village life, Maya builds connections with nature around her and a host of characters in her new world, including the plucky village girl Charu, her ignoramus uncle 'Sanki Puran' and grandmother Ama. Other characters include the aging aristocrat Diwan Sahib, who keeps the memories of pre-independence India alive, Mr. Chauhan, self-important civil servant and General, and Veer, Diwan Sahib's nephew, whose arrival threatens to overturn Maya's semi-frozen existence.

The novel revolves around the cyclic seasons of the year and progresses with the twelve months, from long summers to small winters, monsoons, spring, cold, heat corresponding the peace, harmony, sorrows, joy, fear and so forth. The characters too develop with the progress of cyclic process of nature. Maya, Ama and Charu are the main fundamental characters around whom the novel pivots. These characters show their identification with nature and their states of life are deeply ingrained the natural surroundings. The thematic substance of the novel may be followed by two traumatic and interrelated events in Maya's life- she being targeted for criticism by society when she got married to a Christian man, Micheal and second one is Micheal's death in hills of Roopkund in a trekking expedition. Micheal's love for mountaineering is so strong and he gives more preference to it than Maya. The novel is filled with the scenic beauty of hills and the majestic mountains in the northern India. Maya's expedition into the hills and her experiences with Ama, Charu, Diwan Sahib conceals the dilemma of villagers and their day-to-day struggle for survival. The shift from anthropocentrism to environmentalism is the main focus of this paper where Maya is the mouthpiece of Roy who exhibits a simple means of living as exemplified in the ethics of environmentalism.

The hills are hazardous for its dangerous carnivores like tigers, bears, snakes and so on that prey a good many of cattle's every year in Ranikhet. The region, hills, trees, cattle and the constantly declining tiger population is because of the insufficient natural diversity and natural inhabitancy in Ranikhet. The reading stresses on the linkage and inter-dependence between the multitude of elements including human and various living organisms as well as non-living things. The dim and polluted grey world of the city and the green earth of wilderness vitalize within the novel.

Maya's dealing with Michael's death explores the challengeable circumstance for her as her marriage with the Christian man was dismissed by her parents. Maya much against the desires of her father, breaks away familial and cultural expectations by eloping with a man of a different belief and antagonizing her parents. Roy portrays Maya as an individual character who is ambitious and stands consistent with the spirit to carry on with an autonomous independent life. She never returns to her parents asking for help or to seek apology for her mistake of taking a wrong decision. Her self-esteem shows the 'new women' concept that every woman in the modern Indian Society exhibits. With nobody to help or support her and worn out totally, Maya looks for sanctuary from her anguish in Ranikhet to begin a new life, in a new environment. The remote village gives her solace and warmth that gives peace to the disturbed mind. She moulds herself to the rhythms of the village, where individuals happily

live with natural environment and herself becoming “a hill person who was only at peace where earth rose and fell in waves like the sea” (20). Maya likewise makes herself comfortable in the vast green valleys, hills and mountain ranges forgetting her painful past and finding a new significance to her present existence. She feels quite safe and secure amidst the lap of nature with rich, magnificent and astounding scenery comprising of “...gushing mountain rivers, barren cliffs sides, pin cushioned with cacti, deep forests and stii-grey-blue lakes” (17).

The country-men depend on natural resources like food, milk, wood, shelter and so on for their sustenance. Roy represents another self-regulating and self-governing village girl Charu as ‘the child of the hills’ as she understands the language of the forest and has immense familiarity with the hills. She serves as the representative of the author. She used to spend most of her time wandering around the woodlands grazing the cattle and usually go towards Aspen Lodge and Dhobi Ghat which comprises of deodar, pine, oak backwoods, a rivulet and few peasant huts. She knew “which of the yellow berries that studded the bushes were edible and which ones were poisonous.” (35). Charu gets comfort with her cow, named Gauri Joshi, apart from anybody: “Gauri had come as a large-eyed, timid, sweet-faced calf when Charu was a girl and at whenever she was troubled or scolded by her grandma she ran to Gauri and buried her face in the cow's warm flanks” (37). There exists a strong bond between them. Charu shares all her secrets to Gauri and in that manner, she ascribes humanness to the cow, additionally by attributing her name. Gauri takes humanness to some degree, Charu takes on the cowness to some extent. Once Gauri, went missing and was found after a day lying in a pool of blood. It had fallen in off-kilter position- its lower portion is jolted at an odd point which appears as was certainly broken, and it had a deep wound close to its neck. Charu and her family made efforts to mend its wound. Her affection and care towards the cow while nursing its injury is quite explicit. Charu had a great passion for Kundan Singh, who was a cook working in the restaurant in the outskirts of Ranikhet. Once she leaves Ranikhet to meet her lover Kundan in Delhi. Charu had never travelled alone out of Ranikhet previously, however for the sake of her love for Kundan, she overcomes her fear and insecurity, even as she spends a night alone resting on the passageways of Nanital hospital. Roy portrays her as strong-willed girl who makes her own decisions in life and dares to reach her lover very boldly crossing her only known village and people behind. In that way through Charu, Roy addresses the ‘new women’ concept in Indian women who, even if ignorant, are courageous enough to do things according to their own will.

Roy has elevated the character of Ama, an elderly village woman and Charu’s grandmother, by portraying her as a strong person and the most magnificent woman in Ranikhet who, “was not afraid of anything or anyone” (18). Regardless of whether she has a place with a downtrodden community, she holds self-dignity and honor. This illiterate rural woman demonstrates herself to be independent even at the age of sixties and is quite bold and astute. She manages the whole family without any assistance of any male. She is courageous enough to kick out her younger son, Charu’s father who was an alcoholic and used to beat Charu’s mom every day in a drunken fit. Here, one can realize that suppression continues till

the feminine principle devalued male guidelines and liberation of women is bestowed. Also, Ama was resolved to raise her grandchild with proper education. She told that “she did not require a man around the house if it was a man like him” (18-19). In words of Vandana Shiva, Ama can be considered as “feminine principle, the larger creative force in the world” (35). Shiva has appropriately remarked “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” (47). Hence, Ama was an illustration of a rustic society of underdeveloped third world nation who worked alone for the food and sustenance of her family. Furthermore, she, indeed, turns into the true nurturer both for Charu and her uncle Sanki Puran. But her responsibilities and circumstances don’t permit her to show as much affection and sympathy for the animals as her son Puran and granddaughter Charu do. It’s not that she is incapable of love, as there are occasions when she understands Puran’s and Charu’s concerns for the animals, but her material reality reminds her of more significant concerns: “That Puran... He’s senseless about his deer as about everything else.... and feeds it all the grain I store for the hens. Between his deer and Charu’s useless dog, I am losing all the money I acquire from selling milk” (117). Ama’s practical approach, based on her experience, can’t be marked as her lack of association and connection with nature. Contrasted with other characters she has more crucial needs and concerns that influence her decisions. It is her financial requirements that decide her relationship with nature.

However, the calm peaceful life of this hilly folk is disturbed with the appearance of intruders like the power-hungry government officials, politicians and Veer, the nephew of Diwan Sahib. Especially, with the arrival of Veer, Maya’s idyllic world begins to fall apart when she finds herself attracted towards Veer. Only in the end Maya confronts the traumatic truth that Veer has tricked her and he has been the reason behind the declining in Sahib’s health and death. But what’s the most shocking to her is another truth, when she finds that her lover Veer had been Michael’s last accompanying friend and that “he had left him to fend for himself in a snowstorm with a broken ankle when both of them knew it meant certain death” (242). Roy depicts Maya far from being the typical Indian woman- all forgiving, self-sacrificing heroine. Instead of Sita, Maya appears more like a Kali figure- taking revenge of her husband’s death from Veer by destroying all documents bearing the truth of his birth-right.

Another point is of contamination in terms of environment which can't be ignored in any discussion as far as its man’s ecological concern today. The life in Delhi as depicted in novel brings about the changes in the climate and biosphere which is man-made and viewed as distressing and similarly self-destructive at the same time. A feeling of horror, insecurity and barrenness pervades the landscape of Delhi. Charu describes the atmosphere of the Delhi as “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... Beyond, there was a haze of smoke” (TFE 214). Charu found it was chaotic and contaminated, brimming with brutality and dread. It resonates with London as a doomed place, as projected in “City of the Dreadful Night” by James Thomson. Kundan too, misses the things from Ranikhet and asked Charu for sending him something from that point. In Roy’s books the seasons, hills, trees, birds, animals and flowers symbolize hope,

expectation, regeneration, recovery and freshness. Nature in Roy's fiction plays significant role in governing the life and perspective of the characters. Peace, Harmony, joy and love happen manifest in the realm of nature. Through its various moods and elements nature projects a profound shadow over the spirits of these characters who live in this astonishing sight of nature.

The Folded Earth opens various possibilities betwixt individuals and their ecology. It shows hill tribes as simple, uncontaminated, living a peaceful life and on the other hand experiences of Charu and Kundan as tarnished, polluted and dirt stormed life of city people. People living in such rural hilly areas are devoid of the artificial comforts and diverse administration amenities. While cities are devoid of natural resources like fresh air and pure water. Countryfolk are recognized for their environmentally sound means of livelihood guarded by a profound thoughtfulness and deep knowledge of their ecology. Those simpletons depend on the woods to meet up their daily needs. The solid fields in addition to woods were adequate to keep up with their satisfied life, the entire thing that is available there is implicit in their suitable connection to their own indigenous habitat. Again, apart from Maya, rural Indian women like Ama, Charu unravels what women experience about their own strength and power. All of them emerge themselves as 'New Women' exhibiting their potentials to subvert male power and at the end celebrating their autonomy in the lap of nature.

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