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Between Land and Loss: Ecofeminism and Female Identity in Anuradha Roy's Novel the Folded Earth

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes of nature's fury and women's strength in Anuradha Roy's novels through an ecofeminist perspective. Both women and nature make a significant impact on Earth, which is often referred to as "Mother Earth" due to their shared nurturing and life-giving attributes. While nature provides resources and solace, women contribute a profound sense of balance and peace to society. However, when subjected to relentless exploitation and oppression, both nature and women exhibit fierce resistance and resilience. Through her novels, Roy intricately weaves ecological and feminist concerns, highlighting the struggles and empowerment of women alongside the turbulent forces of nature. This paper examines these themes across her works, emphasizing how Roy portrays the interconnectedness of environmental and gender issues, demonstrating the power of resistance and survival.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature's Fury, Women's Strength, Resilience, Resistance.

Introduction

The intricate relationship between women and nature has been a subject of extensive analysis across multiple academic disciplines, including literature, gender studies, sociology, philosophy, anthropology, legal studies, economics, and management. Scholars worldwide present their findings on this intersection in national and international conferences, shedding light on the ways in which both women and nature have faced systemic oppression and exploitation.

Anuradha Roy's novels vividly capture this dynamic, illustrating the resilience of women and the formidable power of nature when confronted with adversity. The concept of ecofeminism becomes particularly relevant in this discourse, as it underscores the shared struggles of women and the environment against patriarchal and capitalist forces. Roy's narratives highlight how both nature and women, despite being subjected to oppression, possess immense strength to resist and reclaim their agency. Examining the perspectives of ecofeminist thinkers provides deeper insight into how Roy intertwines these themes to emphasize resistance, survival, and empowerment.

The concept of 'ecofeminism' emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, highlighting the intersection between feminist and environmental concerns (Ortner, 2002). According to Bianchi (2012), the term was first introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist, in her 1974 work *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (*Feminism or Death*). D'Eaubonne argued that women, due to their historical and social roles, are

central to environmental change (Bianchi, 2012).

Anuradha Roy's novels illustrate this interconnected struggle by depicting the dual oppression of women and nature, while simultaneously showcasing their strength and resilience. Through her narratives, Roy challenges the traditional binary that associates men with culture and women with nature, instead portraying female characters who harness the power of both nature and their own agency to resist exploitation. This ecofeminist perspective sheds light on how women and the environment are not merely passive victims of destruction but also forces of renewal and transformation in the face of adversity.

Understanding the social relevance of ecofeminism is crucial in today's world, where environmental catastrophes and gender inequalities continue to shape global realities. Environmental crises affect societies across different sectors, revealing the unsustainable injustices of modern economic structures. Anuradha Roy's novels provide a compelling ecofeminist perspective, illustrating the deep interconnectedness between women and nature in the face of oppression and devastation.

Anuradha Roy: A Voice for Women and the Environment

Roy's narratives highlight how both nature and women endure exploitation under hierarchical systems that prioritize dominance and control. Her works challenge these traditional power structures, portraying nature's fury as a response to human interference and women's strength as a force of resistance and resilience. Ecofeminism, as reflected in Roy's storytelling, dismantles rigid dualisms—such as man versus nature or male versus female—by replacing them with themes of interconnectedness, interdependence, and mutual survival. By emphasizing diversity and coexistence, her novels advocate for a world where both nature and women reclaim their power, asserting their rightful place in the cycle of renewal and transformation.

Vandana Shiva, in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, portrays both nature and women as forces of resilience and survival:

"The exploitation of nature is deeply linked to the oppression of women, especially in societies where both are seen as resources to be controlled. Women do not just sustain life biologically but also socially and culturally,

ensuring the well-being of families and communities. Just as nature retaliates through storms, droughts, and other manifestations of its fury, women, too, rise in resistance when subjected to relentless subjugation. Across history, ecological communities that thrived on sustainability embodied the feminine principle of balance and renewal. However, with external forces of colonization and industrialization, these structures were disrupted—men were often drawn into destructive economic activities, while women remained the protectors of land, water, and life itself. This enduring connection between women and nature is not merely biological but deeply rooted in historical and cultural frameworks." (Shiva 42)

The passage portrays an ecofeminist perspective, emphasizing the deep connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist scholar, argues that both nature and women have historically been treated as resources to be controlled, marginalized, and exploited—especially in patriarchal and colonial societies.

Anuradha Roy is a distinguished Indian novelist, journalist, and editor known for her evocative storytelling and deep engagement with socio-political themes. Her debut novel, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, is a poignant multi-generational saga set in 20th-century India, exploring themes of love, loss, and belonging. The novel has been translated into eighteen languages and was recognized by *World Literature Today* as one of the '60 Essential English Language Works of Modern Indian Literature.'

Her second novel, *The Folded Earth*, offers a rich depiction of life in the hill town of Ranikhet, nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. Through its protagonist's journey, the novel weaves together themes of grief, exile, and resilience, while also highlighting the tensions between modernization and tradition in India's remote communities.

Roy's third novel, *sleeping on Jupiter*, delves into themes of trauma, gender violence, and religious hypocrisy, earning the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and a nomination for the Man Booker Prize. *All the Lives We Never Lived*, her fourth novel, blends historical fiction with personal narratives, shedding light on the impact of colonialism and war on individual lives. Her most recent work, *The Earth Spinner*, published in September 2021, examines artistic passion, identity,

and the struggle for creative freedom against societal constraints.

Beyond her literary accomplishments, Roy co-founded *Permanent Black* in 2000, an esteemed publishing house specializing in academic literature. Alongside her husband, Rukun Advani, she has contributed significantly to India's intellectual and literary landscape, ensuring that scholarly works find a discerning readership.

In Anuradha Roy's novel *The Folded Earth*, the protagonist Maya embodies both the resilience of women and the struggles they face in a world that seeks to control and suppress them. Her journey reflects the deep-seated parallels between the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women. Maya, a young widow, defies societal norms by marrying Michael, a Christian man, without her parents' consent. Her father, embodying patriarchal authority, reacts with fury, restricting her freedom and eventually forcing her into exile upon discovering the marriage.

Maya's experience highlights how women, much like nature, endure oppression yet find ways to resist and reclaim their strength. She recalls, "From the day my father had found out about Michael, he had become as watchful as an animal waiting to pounce...He no longer allowed me to leave the house, not even to go to college" (13). This moment underscores the suffocating control exerted over women, mirroring the relentless exploitation of the environment. However, just as nature retaliates with its fury when violated, Maya refuses to succumb to oppression, carving out her own path of survival and self-discovery amidst the challenges imposed upon her.

Her marriage to Michael, though a defiant act of love and independence, was not one of unbroken happiness. Michael was an ardent trekker, deeply connected to the mountains, often prioritizing his adventures over their life together. His insatiable longing for the peaks ultimately led to his tragic demise when, during an expedition to Roopkund, he was caught in a merciless snowstorm with a broken ankle, unable to survive the unforgiving conditions.

For Maya, who had forsaken her family and the security of her past to build a life with him, the weight of grief became unbearable. Hyderabad, once their shared home, turned into a painful labyrinth of memories, where every street, every object, echoed his absence. Seeking escape from this

suffocating grief, Maya chose to leave behind the remnants of her old life and seek solace in Ranikhet, a remote village cradled in the lap of the Himalayas. Here, she found herself immersed in a world where nature dictated the rhythm of life—untamed, raw, and indifferent to human suffering, yet offering a quiet sanctuary for renewal.

As she settled into her new existence, Maya began forging an intimate connection with the land. Her garden, though initially a neglected patch of hillside, soon became a source of comfort and healing. Describing its serene beauty, she observes, "An unkempt patch of hillside, but it rippled with wildflowers on this blue and gold morning. Everything smelled damp, cool, and fresh from the light rain that had fallen at dawn" (4). In this moment, Maya's relationship with nature mirrors her personal journey marked by loss and upheaval, yet resilient, constantly adapting, and ultimately, capable of regeneration.

Maya gradually becomes the center around which the lives of those around her unfold, her presence quietly anchoring the interconnected narratives of Ranikhet. She finds solace and purpose at St. Hilda's, a small school run by the church, where she takes up a teaching position. Seeking independence, she rents a modest cottage on an estate, where she slowly integrates into the rhythm of mountain life.

Over time, Maya forms deep bonds with the people around her. The estate's landlord, Diwan Sahib, an elderly, wise, and somewhat enigmatic man, becomes both a mentor and a source of paternal warmth. Her closest neighbors, Charu, a young girl with dreams beyond the confines of her simple life, and Amma, her guardian, extend to Maya the companionship and affection she had lost after Michael's death. Through these relationships, she begins to rebuild a sense of belonging, creating a chosen family in the heart of the tranquil mountains.

However, Maya's newfound peace is soon threatened by external forces. Mr. Chauhan, an ambitious and unscrupulous politician, sets his sights on transforming Ranikhet's untouched beauty into a commercialized tourist hub. His plans threaten not only the pristine environment but also the lives and livelihoods of the locals who depend on the land's natural harmony. Maya finds herself drawn into this larger battle, standing against the forces of exploitation that seek to ravage the land she has come to love.

Simultaneously, Maya faces personal turmoil when Veer, a man she grows to trust and love, ultimately betrays her, shattering her fragile sense of security. His sudden disappearance leaves her grappling with loss once again, forcing her to confront the transient and often cruel nature of human relationships.

Despite these setbacks, Maya refuses to succumb to despair. Channeling her resilience, she establishes a thriving pickle-making business, a symbol of her determination to carve out a life on her own terms. Through this venture, she not only sustains herself financially but also asserts her independence, proving that despite adversity, she possesses the strength to rebuild and redefine her own destiny.

Ecofeminism underscores the deep connection between women and nature, highlighting how both endure oppression yet persist with remarkable strength. *The Folded Earth* serves as a powerful narrative that intertwines these themes, illustrating how women, much like nature, face relentless exploitation but also possess an unyielding force of resistance. The novel portrays nature's fury as a response to human destruction, just as women rise against societal subjugation.

Maya's Journey: Resistance and Survival

Maya's journey is a testament to this resilience. She experiences loss, exile, and betrayal, yet she refuses to be broken. Her ability to rebuild her life in the face of adversity mirrors nature's capacity to regenerate even after devastation. The mountains, the forests, and the land of Ranikhet serve as both a refuge and a symbol of strength, reinforcing the ecofeminist perspective that women and nature are inextricably linked in their suffering and their power.

Through Maya's story, *The Folded Earth* emphasizes that the strength of women, like the force of nature, is not passive but fierce and transformative. Despite the storms she faces, Maya, like the earth itself, reclaims her space, asserting her identity and independence. Her story reaffirms that both nature and women, when pushed to their limits, do not simply endure—they fight back, reclaim, and thrive.

Nature as a Refuge and a Battleground

In *The Folded Earth*, Anuradha Roy intricately weaves nature into the protagonist Maya's journey, portraying it as both a sanctuary for healing and a contested space threatened by human inter-

vention. The novel captures the deep connection between women and the environment, emphasizing how both serve as sites of resilience and struggle. For Maya, the natural world becomes a refuge from personal grief and societal oppression, yet it is also a battleground where power struggles over land and identity unfold.

Nature as a Sanctuary for Healing

After the tragic death of her husband, Michael, Maya seeks solace in Ranikhet, a quiet town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas. The mountains, forests, and open landscapes offer her an escape from the suffocating confines of her past, allowing her to rebuild her life away from patriarchal constraints. Her connection to the land manifests through her daily experiences—whether tending to her garden, walking through the hills, or observing the changing seasons, nature becomes a source of comfort and renewal.

Maya's deepening bond with the environment reflects ecofeminist thought, which recognizes nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active presence that nurtures and sustains life. The cyclical rhythms of nature mirror her own journey of loss and regeneration. As she immerses herself in the natural world, she begins to reclaim a sense of agency, illustrating how nature provides not only physical shelter but also emotional and spiritual restoration.

The Struggle against Exploitation

While nature offers Maya refuge, it is also a contested space under constant threat from external forces. The novel highlights the encroachment of modernization and commercial interests, embodied by the politician Mr. Chauhan, who seeks to transform Ranikhet's untouched landscape into a lucrative tourist destination. His plans threaten the delicate ecological balance of the region, endangering both the land and the people whose lives depend on its preservation.

Maya, along with other residents of Ranikhet, becomes entangled in this struggle, resisting the forces that seek to commodify the natural world for profit. This conflict underscores the ecofeminist critique of capitalist exploitation, which prioritizes economic gain over environmental and social well-being. Just as women are often subjected to control and subjugation, nature too is viewed as a resource to be dominated. However, both refuse to be passive victims—Maya's defiance and nature's resilience reinforce the novel's underlying

message of resistance against oppression.

Nature and Female Agency: A Parallel Struggle

The novel draws clear parallels between Maya's personal battles and the broader fight to protect the environment. Much like the landscape of Ranikhet, Maya faces persistent attempts to control and diminish her autonomy—first by her father, then by societal expectations, and later by betrayals from those she trusts. However, just as nature endures despite human interference, Maya too finds ways to reclaim her independence. Her decision to establish a pickle-making business symbolizes her determination to carve out a life on her own terms, much like the land's ability to renew itself despite exploitation.

Roy's depiction of nature as both a refuge and a battleground aligns with the ecofeminist view that women and the environment share a deeply intertwined fate. The novel challenges dominant structures that seek to suppress both, advocating instead for coexistence, renewal, and resistance. Through Maya's journey, *The Folded Earth* presents a powerful narrative that redefines strength—not as domination, but as the ability to endure, adapt, and reclaim agency in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* serves as a poignant ecofeminist narrative, illustrating the deep interconnections between women and nature. Through the protagonist Maya's journey, the novel explores themes of resilience, oppression, and renewal, emphasizing how both women and the environment endure systemic exploitation yet possess an undeniable capacity for resistance and transformation.

Nature functions as both a sanctuary and a battleground in Maya's life—offering her refuge from personal and societal constraints while simultaneously being threatened by external forces of commercialization and political greed. This dual role mirrors the struggles faced by women, who often seek solace in their own agency while resisting patriarchal control. Just as nature retaliates against destruction, Maya asserts her independence, carving out a life that defies traditional norms and expectations.

Roy's storytelling aligns with ecofeminist thought, challenging rigid binaries of male dominance over both women and the environment. By presenting

nature as an active force rather than a passive entity, and by portraying women as agents of change rather than victims, the novel calls for a reevaluation of societal structures that prioritize exploitation over harmony. Ultimately, *The Folded Earth* advocates for a world where both women and nature reclaim their rightful place—one that values coexistence, resilience, and renewal. Maya's journey serves as a testament to the power of survival, reinforcing the ecofeminist belief that resistance is not just necessary but inevitable. In a world increasingly shaped by environmental and gender crises, Roy's novel offers a compelling vision of strength, hope, and the possibility of transformation.

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