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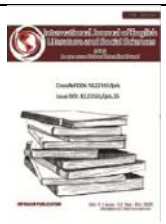

From Anthropocentrism to Ecological Relationality in Anuradha Roy's 'The Folded Earth'

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Abstract— *This paper analyses Anuradha Roy's The Folded Earth through the critical framework of environmental humanities, delineating a conceptual transition from anthropocentrism to ecological relationality. The novel, set in the fragile yet resilient landscape of the Himalayas, shows how human lives are connected to nonhuman nature, challenging the idea that nature is merely a backdrop to human drama. The study contends that by examining the protagonist Maya's emotional isolation, grief and her gradual adaptation to her environment, Roy redefines human subjectivity as relational rather than dominant. The mountains, forests, rivers and animals are not merely aesthetic phenomena; they are also active forces that shape memory, loss, healing and moral awareness. Using eco-critical ideas, the paper shows how the text breaks down binaries such as human/nature, culture/wilderness and control/vulnerability. Roy's story implies that humility, coexistence and awareness of ecological interdependence are necessary for survival and meaning. The Folded Earth depicts environmental fragility alongside individual trauma, articulating an alternative ecological consciousness that opposes exploitative modernity and emphasises care, reciprocity and responsibility. The novel enhances contemporary Indian eco-literature by promoting a relational ethics that connects human existence to the rhythms and constraints of the natural world.*

Keywords— ***Anthropocentrism, Ecological Relationality, Eco-criticism, Himalayan Landscape.***

Anuradha Roy is a well-known Indian novelist, editor and publisher. People love her writing because it is both poetic and complex. She was born in Kolkata and went to school in Hyderabad. She studied English literature at Presidency College in Kolkata and then at the University of Cambridge. Roy's fiction consistently explores themes of identity, memory, social hierarchies and notably, the changing relationship between humans and the natural world. Her novels often question anthropocentric worldviews, showing how people's desires, control and moral choices affect and often change the places they inhabit. The DSC Prize for South Asian Literature went to *Sleeping on Jupiter* in 2016 and the Tata Literature Live! award went to *All the Lives We Never Lived*. The book won the Book of the Year Award in 2018 and was longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. Roy's work has been translated into many languages and is known for moving beyond stories that focus on people to ones that highlight the interconnectedness of ecosystems. This challenges the idea of human dominance and calls for a more relational view of nature.

Anthropocentrism is a human-centred philosophical viewpoint that asserts humans as the primary holders of value in the universe, regarding non-human creatures, plants and ecosystems as resources for human exploitation. Roy critiques anthropocentric ideologies in her novel *The Folded Earth* by emphasising environmental degradation in the fragile Himalayan landscape, demonstrating how human political encroachment and infrastructure development hinder a biocentric, ecologically balanced existence. An illustrative example of this is portrayed in the novel through the character Chauhan, the

administrator of Ranikhet, in the sentence, "He would…off to inspect the site of a new amusement park, his flagship project, for which a swathe of oak forest was being cleared. It was pointless saying to tourists…Ranikhet was to have sight" (Roy 161). This scenario illustrates the aggressive invasion of nature disguised as development, when an untouched oak woodland, symbolising ecological continuity and cultural heritage, is sacrificed for a recreational venture, an amusement park. This narrative instance of deforestation in the novel closely parallels the historical Chipko Movement of the 1970s, a prominent environmental protest led by rural women in Uttarakhand who physically protected trees from felling.

Roy adopted the image of a literary eco-activist to denounce the erosion of ecological ethics, illustrating how capitalism and patriarchal aspirations for growth compromise the fundamental relationship between people and the environment. In commemoration of the Chipko movement, her novel reaffirms literature as a powerful instrument for advancing environmental justice and eco-centric ideas. Roy exposes the intrinsic arrogance of anthropocentrism and social hierarchies in *The Folded Earth* through a scene in which nonhuman life is denigrated for intruding upon a human-defined domain of privilege. A hotel manager at Asphen Lodge arranged a gathering on the hillside, a region historically occupied by pastoral animals and local herders, attended by high-ranking bureaucrats, generals and brigadiers. During the party's disruption caused by a herd of animals inadvertently entering due to the caretaker Puran's negligence, Mr Chauhan, the administrator of Ranikhet, violently declared, "Enough!" he shouted towards Puran…lock you up…with your damned cows and Goats…I will tackle this with immediate effect" (Roy 59), thereafter erecting a signboard that prohibits cattle, therefore symbolically designating non-human lifeforms as intruders in an ecological realm that is now designated as a domain exclusively for human use. Chauhan's outburst and the imposition of spatial boundaries on animals exemplify the entrenched belief in human superiority, resonating with Lori Gruen's epistemological framework of anthropocentrism in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*: "Anthropocentrism is expressed by individuals in particular acts or statements that indicate a chauvinist attitude to animals, such as 'animals are mindless,' but it also informs our epistemologies or what we think we know about animal 'min'" (Gruen 48).

This research utilises a qualitative, interpretative framework grounded in ecocriticism to examine the shift from anthropocentrism to ecological relationality in Roy's *The Folded Earth*. The study involves a comprehensive textual analysis of the work, focusing on narrative voice, character-environment interactions and representations of the Himalayan landscape as an active, relational entity rather than a mere backdrop. The analytical framework is based on foundational ecocritical concepts, including interconnection, non-human agency and environmental ethics. The methodology selectively integrates postcolonial ecological theory to situate the text within the socio-cultural and geographical contexts of contemporary India. Secondary sources, including critical articles on ecocriticism and Roy's literature, are employed to augment the theoretical framework and contextual understanding. The study seeks to illustrate how the novel redefines human subjectivity as interconnected with, rather than dominant over, the natural world by integrating literary analysis with ecological theory.

Roy's *The Folded Earth* can be productively read as an ecocritical narrative that interrogates anthropocentric modes of thinking and advocates an ethics of ecological relationality. Set against the fragile Himalayan ecosystem of Ranikhet, the novel foregrounds the complex interdependence between human lives and the nonhuman world, exposing how environmental degradation, displacement and ethical erosion are outcomes of human-centred development. Rather than romanticising nature as a passive or healing force, Roy presents it as an active presence, vulnerable, responsive and increasingly silenced by modern interventions. In doing so, *The Folded Earth* aligns with the central concern of ecocriticism: the critique of nature's reduction to a utilitarian resource and the recovery of place-based ecological consciousness.

Maya's arrival in Ranikhet after the death of her husband, Michael, marks the novel's initial movement away from an urban, anthropocentric environment toward a landscape governed by natural rhythms. Michael's death during a trek to Roopkund destabilises the illusion of human mastery over nature. Although deeply attached to the mountains, Michael approaches them through endurance and conquest, assumptions that ultimately prove fatal. His death in a snowstorm underscores what Lawrence Buell terms the "environmental unconscious," the failure to recognise nature as an autonomous force operating beyond human intention (22). Nature here is not hostile; it simply refuses to conform to human desire. Maya's subsequent life in Ranikhet illustrates a gradual reorientation toward ecological embeddedness. Her work at the church-run school and later at the jam-making unit reflects a sustainable engagement with the local environment. The factory transforms local fruit into economic sustenance without depleting the land, exemplifying an ecocritical model of coexistence rather than extraction. Such integration of labour and landscape resists anthropocentric capitalism, which, as Timothy Morton argues, treats nature as an "external object" rather than an interconnected system (55).

Charu's character deepens the novel's ecocritical dimension through her intimate, embodied relationship with the mountains. Her knowledge of forests, cattle and weather patterns is experiential rather than institutional, challenging dominant epistemologies that privilege formal education over ecological literacy. Charu's discomfort in the city further reinforces Roy's critique of urban modernity. The city assaults her senses with pollution and confinement: it "smelled of putrid things, filthy drains, sewage, burning rubber and smoke from factories" (Roy 214). The sky, once expansive and blue, appears "slate-grey," obstructed by concrete and smoke (214). This sensory estrangement exemplifies ecocriticism's concern with how industrial spaces sever humans from meaningful contact with the natural world.

Ama, Charu's grandmother, represents an older ecological consciousness rooted in survival, care and moral accountability. Although illiterate, Ama demonstrates a profound respect for animals and the land, coupled with an uncompromising ethical stance regarding human violence. Her decision to expel her abusive son reflects a moral ecology in which destructive behaviour, toward humans or nonhumans, is intolerable. Roy does not idealise Ama; her reliance on superstition coexists with her ecological awareness, suggesting that traditional knowledge systems are complex and internally contradictory. This portrayal resonates with Greg Garrard's argument that ecocriticism must resist simplistic binaries of "primitive harmony" versus "modern destruction" (16).

The most explicit ecocritical voice of the novel emerges through Diwan Sahib, whose memories function as a record of ecological loss. He recalls a time when forests were alive with animals and human presence was minimal. His lament that the forest has become "a park… a resource, a factory" exposes the anthropocentric language that legitimises ecological violence (Roy 176). The transformation of forests into economic units exemplifies what Ramachandra Guha describes as the displacement of subsistence ecologies by state-driven development (98). Diwan Sahib's grief is not nostalgic but ethical; he recognises that modernisation has severed reciprocal relationships between humans and the land.

This ecological disruption intensifies with the arrival of Mr Chauhan, whose ambition to turn Ranikhet into the "Switzerland of India" reflects a postcolonial continuation of colonial environmental aesthetics (Roy 50). Roads, benches and tourist infrastructure are imposed without regard for local ecology or community needs. Animals that once roamed freely are expelled and green spaces are replaced by concrete. Such "development" reinforces anthropocentrism by prioritising visual order and economic gain over ecological balance. Veer functions as a human embodiment of anthropocentric exploitation. As a professional climber and entrepreneur, he treats the mountains as commodities and opportunities for profit. His abandonment of Michael during the fatal trek and his manipulation of Diwan Sahib reveal a worldview devoid of ecological or ethical responsibility. Veer's actions illustrate Val Plumwood's critique of mastery, where nature and vulnerable lives are reduced to expendable means (52).

The political violence depicted during the election period further extends the novel's ecocritical framework. The attempted assault on Beena, a deaf-mute girl, parallels the violation of the land by political spectacle and pollution. Just as nature is exploited without consent, marginalised bodies are subjected to violence and silencing. Roy thus demonstrates that anthropocentrism operates across domains, normalising domination wherever vulnerability exists. By the end of the novel, ecological and human displacement converge. Diwan Sahib dies, Charu leaves the mountains and Ama retreats deeper into isolation. Maya remains a witness to irreversible change. Diwan Sahib's admission, "They have no voices any longer," captures the devastating silence imposed on the natural world by unchecked development (Roy 178). The loss of animal calls symbolises not only environmental degradation but the erosion of ethical listening.

The novel raises a disturbing question about what it really means to live ethically in an environment that is not very stable. The mountains in *The Folded Earth* are not shown as perfect or easy to understand; instead, they are changeable, resistant and often indifferent to what people want. This tumultuous relationship makes it hard to simply celebrate being part of the environment. Instead, it emphasises a state of limited understanding and control. This picture makes you think about how being responsible for the environment might mean being aware and moderate instead of controlling or preserving it. The story thus suggests an ecological ethic based on humility, in which humanity recognises its dependence on uncontrollable forces.

There is a lot of tension between individual consciousness and systemic authority. It seems like acts of kindness, being aware of the environment and being aware of the environment are important but not enough when compared to the forces of bureaucratic planning, tourism and political aspirations. Land changes happen slowly and people often use language about improvement and organisation to justify them, making it hard to stay against them. This conflict shows that environmental damage does not always show up as obvious destruction. Instead, it can happen slowly over time, making degradation seem normal.

The depiction of environmental change as gradual and cumulative challenges simplistic perceptions of ecological disaster and highlights the emotional fatigue linked to extended ecological decline.

The novel also prompts reflection on displacement as an ecological as well as emotional condition. Leaving the mountains is not merely a physical move; it also signifies that long-lasting ties between people and their environment have been broken. The resulting sense of alienation is marked by changes in how people perceive their senses, such as differences in air, sound and space that change how they see themselves and the world around them. These examples show how important memory and emotion are for understanding the environment. They also show that environmental damage is felt just as strongly through absence and silence as it is through visible harm. The story makes readers see ecological problems as something that affects them personally, not just as an abstract environmental problem.

This study emphasises *The Folded Earth* as a crucial ecocritical work that challenges anthropocentric interpretations of Indian hill narratives. By redirecting focus from anthropocentric loss to the incremental silencing of the Himalayan environment, the paper effectively illustrates how Roy transforms nature from a mere picturesque setting into an ethically significant entity. The analysis transcends mere descriptive ecofeminist analogies and situates the novel within broader ecocritical discussions of commodification, development and ecological displacement. This pivotal stance reinforces the argument by demonstrating that environmental degradation in the novel is not incidental but fundamentally integrated within political, economic and cultural systems that prioritise human ambition over ecological equilibrium.

A significant feature of the study is its interpretation of location as a dynamic agent rather than a static environment. This study analyses Ranikhet as a contested ecological place influenced by tourism, bureaucracy and capitalist aspirations, aligning Roy's story with ecocriticism's focus on spatial ethics and environmental justice. The author persuasively contends that anthropocentrism in the novel is evident not only in the explicit exploitation of land but also in nuanced language and administrative procedures that recharacterise woods as resources and mountains as commodifiable experiences. This discovery enables the research to connect literary analysis with practical environmental discourse, underscoring the significance of ecocriticism in modern Indian literature.

Nonetheless, the study also presents opportunities for additional essential development. Although it adeptly delineates the shift from anthropocentrism to ecological relationality, a more profound exploration of indigenous environmental epistemologies pertinent to the Himalayan region could enhance the thesis. Furthermore, the analysis should be augmented by contextualising Roy's work among other Indian ecocritical writings to emphasise its uniqueness within the national literary canon. Nevertheless, the research offers a nuanced, morally informed interpretation of *The Folded Earth*, illustrating how Roy's narrative compels readers to reevaluate their ecological responsibilities amid a rapidly escalating environmental crisis.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, *The Folded Earth* articulates a distinctly ecocritical vision that challenges anthropocentrism and advocates ecological relationality. Roy does not propose a return to a pristine past; instead, she urges an ethical reimagining of coexistence grounded in humility, attentiveness and restraint. By foregrounding place, memory and interdependence, the novel affirms ecocriticism's central claim: that human survival is inseparable from the survival of the more-than-human world.

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