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**FRAGILE SLOPES, FOLDED LIVES: AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF  
ANURADHA ROY'S *THE FOLDED EARTH***

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**Dr. S. Mahalakshmi**Assistant Professor of English, Chikkaiah Government Arts and Science College, Erode  
638 004, Tamil Nadu, India.

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**Abstract:**

Literary studies increasingly recognise environment as a decisive force in shaping culture, memory, and human conduct, especially in regions where livelihood and landscape remain closely bound. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii), and this article applies that frame to Anuradha Roy’s *The Folded Earth*. Set in Ranikhet, a small Himalayan town surrounded by forests, valleys, rain, mist, animals, and fragile slopes, the novel places human life within a demanding mountain ecology. The narrative follows Maya, whose move to the hills after Michael’s death turns the landscape into a space of mourning, shelter, recollection, and ethical awareness. Roy’s description of Ranikhet as a place where “on every side there are mountains and forests” (Roy 23) shows how the setting exceeds scenic function and becomes a living presence. The article argues that landscape, memory, environmental vulnerability, and human grief remain inseparable in the novel’s ecological imagination. By reading the Himalayas as witness, archive, and wounded terrain, the study shows how *The Folded Earth* presents ecological ethics as a call to respect place, local life, and the delicate balance between human desire and nature’s endurance in contemporary Indian fiction and culture today.

**Keywords:** Ecology; Ecological memory; Environmental ethics, Environmental Anxiety, Local Lives, Landscape, Loss, and Emotional Recovery.

**Introduction**

Environmental literary studies have widened the scope of fiction by reading land, weather, animals, forests, rivers, and mountains as shaping forces in human life rather than as decorative surroundings. In that broad context, Anuradha Roy stands as an important contemporary Indian English novelist whose fiction links private sorrow with place, history,

and the quiet pressures of social change. Her novel *The Folded Earth* unfolds in the Himalayan town of Ranikhet, where the mountains shape movement, memory, fear, attachment, and survival. Roy announces the power of landscape early in the narrative when Maya admits, “My rival in love was not a woman but a mountain range” (Roy 13). As a contemporary writer, Roy avoids a purely romantic picture of hill life and presents the Himalayas as beautiful, intimate, vulnerable, and morally demanding. The novel’s rootedness in the Himalayan region makes it suitable for an ecocritical reading, since every major emotional movement in the text carries the imprint of slope, forest, rain, cold, animal life, and ecological fragility. Cheryll Glotfelty gives the most useful starting point for such a reading when she defines the scope of ecocriticism in relation to literature, environment, gender, class, and earth-centred interpretation:

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (Glotfelty xviii).

Lawrence Buell’s view that an environmental text shows how “human history is implicated in natural history” (7) strengthens the reading of *The Folded Earth*, where Maya’s grief cannot be separated from the mountain world that receives her after Michael’s death. Roy locates Ranikhet as “a little town deep in the Himalaya” (Roy 22), and the phrase signals not only geography but also a mode of life shaped by height, distance, climate, and ecological dependence. Greg Garrard’s definition of ecocriticism as the study of “the relationship of the human and the non-human” (5) also clarifies the novel’s central concern, for Roy places human longing beside forests, birds, animals, stones, roads, and dangerous slopes. The research problem of this article is that the novel does not treat nature as a mere background but presents it as an active presence that shapes human life, memory, and loss. Maya’s later recognition that she “became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea” (Roy 27) shows how landscape remakes identity through lived experience. The objective of this article is to examine how *The Folded Earth* constructs an ecocritical vision through the Himalayan landscape, ecological memory, environmental vulnerability, human grief, and the ethical need to respect fragile places.

### **Ecocriticism: Theoretical Framework**

Ecocriticism offers a literary approach through which texts can be read in relation to land, climate, place, animals, plants, and the larger physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty defines its basic concern with clarity when she writes, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii), and such a definition shifts attention from human-centred narration to the ecological world that surrounds and

shapes human life. In literary study, place does not remain a silent setting; it becomes a meaningful field where memory, culture, loss, labour, and belonging gather. Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* invites such a reading from the very beginning, as Maya admits, "My rival in love was not a woman but a mountain range" (Roy 4), making the Himalaya central to love, grief, and destiny. Landscape in the novel carries emotional force, and the mountain is not merely scenic beauty but a presence that reorganises human desire. Ecocriticism helps to read such moments as signs of a deep bond between human feeling and the material world.

Lawrence Buell's idea that "human history is implicated in natural history" (7) gives a useful frame for understanding Roy's treatment of Ranikhet. The town, its forests, valleys, roads, animals, and seasonal changes shape the rhythm of human relationships and social memory. Maya's arrival in the hills after Michael's death shows how landscape becomes a site of mourning and recovery, where personal pain moves through the memory of mountains. Roy writes that in the hills, "Here is where sky begins and ends" (Roy 14), a line that presents place as an enclosed emotional and ecological world. Such writing resists anthropocentrism because it does not place human life above the natural world; rather, it folds human life into air, rock, trees, weather, and altitude. Serenella Iovino's material ecocritical thought is also relevant here, as the novel treats land and bodies as mutually connected forms of memory.

Greg Garrard describes ecocriticism as a study of "the relationship of the human and the non-human" (5), and *The Folded Earth* builds its narrative around that relationship. The novel shows human-nature interdependence through village labour, animal care, forests, rain, cold, food, and movement across difficult terrain. Ecological ethics enters the text through attention to ordinary life in the hills, where survival depends on respect for land, animals, water, and seasonal limits. Maya's transformation becomes complete when she says that she "became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea" (Roy 18). Environmental memory operates through such moments, as place stores grief, love, exile, and renewal within its forms. Ecocriticism, in reading *The Folded Earth*, reveals how Roy presents the Himalayan world as a living structure of memory, relation, and moral awareness.

### **The Himalayas as Living Landscape**

The Himalayan setting in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* functions as a living ecological space that shapes feeling, movement, memory and social life. Lawrence Buell's statement that "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination" (2) helps to read Roy's hills as more than physical location, for the novel asks readers to imagine landscape as a force that alters human experience. Roy begins with a sensory world in which "the whistling thrushes had barely cleared their throats" (Roy 1), placing birdsong before human

action and making the morning soundscape part of the narrative rhythm. The hills wake through voices, footsteps, wood-smoke, animals and changing light. Such details do not decorate the story; they establish a world in which human life moves to the pulse of place. Maya's mood responds to these elements as the hills slow her haste, deepen her perception and open spaces of memory after loss. The Himalayas gain emotional density because they absorb grief, longing and the desire for renewal.

Ranikhet appears as a terrain of mountains, forests, rain, mist, paths and seasons that constantly shape the characters' lives. Roy presents the journey from the plains into the hills as a passage into another ecological order where trees change from tropical growth to "pine, oak, cypress and cedar" and where "Ferns fountain from rockfaces, flowers blossom on stone" (Roy 14). The precision of these images gives the landscape material force, making the mountains appear textured, breathing, and alive. Rain and mist alter visibility, close roads, soften boundaries and make the hills both protective and dangerous. Seasonal shifts affect work, travel, cattle, food and household routines. Paths through forests carry lovers, villagers, workers and fugitives across uneven ground, so movement itself becomes a form of ecological experience. Roy gives the Himalayan world symbolic depth by making height, cold, forest shade and mountain distance mirror the characters' inner states without reducing nature to a simple metaphor.

Greg Garrard's view of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (5) suits Roy's representation of the hills because every major relationship in the novel develops through contact with the non-human world. Michael's passion for climbing shows how mountains can command desire more powerfully than domestic stability. Maya's move to Ranikhet begins as a flight from unbearable grief but gradually becomes a re-rooting of the self in a new ecological home. Charu's daily life also depends on cattle, forest paths, fruit trees, rain, market roads and the fragile economy of hill labour. The hills hold beauty, yet they also contain risk, as landslides, darkness, leopards, cold, and isolation remind the characters that human wishes cannot control nature. Maya's final recognition that she "became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea" (Roy 18) confirms the landscape's transformative power. Roy's Himalayas stand as a living presence that stores memory, directs movement and binds human survival to the rhythms of earth.

### **Landscape, Loss and Emotional Recovery**

Maya's relocation to the hills in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* begins not as a romantic search for nature but as an act of emotional flight after Michael's death. The loss breaks her relation with Hyderabad because the city no longer holds meaning without him. Roy presents bereavement through domestic emptiness when Maya says, "A tin with ashes

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lay in my bed where Michael should have been. I was twenty-five years old and already my life was over” (Roy 9). The sentence compresses marriage, death and widowhood into one image of unbearable absence. Maya’s grief does not move towards easy consolation, for she cannot complete her letter to the mountaineering institute or bear the public exposure of her pain. Loneliness becomes both social and spatial since she loses contact with friends and stands outside the security of family. The hills enter the narrative at this stage as a distant place where silence may hold what speech cannot carry.

Roy connects Maya’s movement towards Ranikhet with the memory of Michael’s mountain desire and with the need to leave behind a life made uninhabitable by loss. The decision comes after a moment of emotional collapse, when the imagined face of Michael rises from the water and forces Maya into action.

Father, find me work in Ranikhet. Please,” I said. “I can’t stay on here a single day longer.” Four months after Michael died, I climbed into the train that had taken him away from me. It went from Hyderabad to Delhi, a northward journey that took a day and a night. One more night on a different train brought me further north, to Kathgodam, where the train lines stopped and the hills began. It was another three hours by bus over twisted, ever-steeper roads to Ranikhet, a little town deep in the Himalaya. In my bag was the address of the school in which Father Joseph had fixed me a job. I was going to be two thousand kilometres from anything I knew, but that was just numbers (Roy 12–13).

It turns geographical distance into emotional distance. Train, road and mountain ascent mark the stages through which Maya leaves the old world. Ranikhet does not erase the wound but gives it another climate, another rhythm and another frame of survival.

The mountain environment becomes a refuge because it allows Maya to live beside memory rather than escape from it. The hills provide silence, routine, and a slower rhythm of belonging through schoolwork, Charu, Ama, Diwan Sahib, and the daily life of the Light House. Roy does not present nature as a simple medicine for sorrow; the same mountains that draw Maya into recovery also preserve the memory of Michael’s death near Roopkund. Ecological space gains emotional force because it holds contradictions: shelter and danger, beauty and bereavement, solitude and human connection. Maya gradually learns to inhabit loss through ordinary hill life, where cattle, paths, fires, rain, forests and neighbourhood voices become part of her survival. Her sense of displacement changes into belonging when she says, “But I was at home” and later recognises that she “became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea” (Roy 18). Roy’s treatment of landscape shows that emotional recovery does not mean forgetting pain; it means finding a place where grief can remain without destroying the possibility of life.

**Ecological Memory and Folded Histories**

The title *The Folded Earth* suggests more than the physical shape of Himalayan terrain; it also presents land as a metaphor for layered memory. Roy's hills fold personal, local, colonial and ecological histories into one another like ridges seen from a distance. The land does not appear as empty ground on which human events occur, but as a deep archive where desire, death and settlement leave traces. Roopkund offers the most striking example of such ecological memory, as the mountain lake preserves an ancient human past in its cold waters. Roy writes that "The bones were stripped of their jewellery and most of them were left where they were" (Roy 5), and the line shows how the land keeps the residue of violence after human greed has taken what it wants. The lake stores what written history cannot fully explain, turning altitude, ice and water into forms of remembrance. In such moments, the earth appears folded, its surface hiding layers of forgotten lives.

Diwan Sahib deepens this pattern of folded history through his memories, letters, papers and historical interests. His decaying house in Ranikhet becomes an archive that holds the remains of princely India, colonial hunting culture and postcolonial political transition. Maya's work on his Corbett manuscript links local ecology with colonial memory, for she says, "I had learnt a great deal from the manuscript about the hills in which I now lived" (Roy 19). The statement matters because the manuscript teaches her to read the hills not only as landscape but as a field of animal movement, human fear and historical narration. Jim Corbett's world of tigers, leopards, and forests enters the novel through Diwan Sahib's papers, reminding readers that ecological knowledge often arrives mixed with violence. Diwan Sahib's own past as the former Diwan of Surajgarh brings another layer to Ranikhet, where private memory carries the burden of national history. His stories show that place keeps what official history simplifies.

The letters associated with Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten add another layer of buried meaning to the novel's idea of place as archive. Scholars and dealers travel to Diwan Sahib because they believe his house contains documents that could reshape public memory. Roy captures the tension between institutional archive and private custody when Ramachandra Guha tells him, "Those letters should be in the Nehru Memorial Library, Sir" (Roy 24). Diwan Sahib refuses such neat historical transfer because memory in the novel does not move cleanly from life into record. The trunk, the house, the garden, the files and the old estate preserve history in a fragile, disorderly form. Roy also links secrecy to geography, for Ranikhet's remoteness allows political stories, family wounds and ecological memories to remain half-hidden. The folded earth finally becomes a figure for all that human society forgets, denies, or misplaces, while land continues to bear the pressure of buried stories.

**Development, Damage and Environmental Anxiety**

Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* presents the Himalayan region as a fragile ecological space exposed to the pressures of development, tourism, construction and political ambition. The hills in the novel do not stand outside history or commerce; they face steady intrusion from roads, hotels, cantonment schemes and administrative plans that treat land as an object for improvement. Aspen Lodge offers an early sign of this anxiety because an old estate with deodar and oak forests, a stream and terraced slopes enters the market imagination when "the house had been bought by a hotel chain that planned to start operations elsewhere in our town" (Roy 27). It shows how tourism begins by entering spaces already shaped by local memory, animal movement and seasonal labour. Charu brings her cattle there for grazing while the hotel economy sees the same ground as property, leisure and profit. Roy places these two visions beside each other to reveal the tension between lived ecology and commercial use. The hill estate appears vulnerable because modern ownership can quickly disturb old relations between land, animals and people.

The novel also questions the language of progress through Mr Chauhan's administrative dream of turning Ranikhet into a polished tourist destination. His plans sound comic at first, yet they carry a harsher logic of control over land, movement and public space. Chauhan declares, "Ranikhet has to become the Switzerland of India. Or at least it must be another Shimla" and adds that he is "getting many roads re-laid" (Roy 45). Such ambition reduces the mountain town to a model of visual appeal and tourist access. The proposed viewpoint, telescope, painted parapets and improved roads transform the hills into a managed spectacle rather than a living habitat. Roy suggests that careless development often hides itself behind cleanliness, efficiency and civic pride. Human greed also enters the scene through rumours of kickbacks, official favour and the link between road repair and property interests.

Roy's environmental anxiety becomes sharper in her depiction of congestion and pollution in the bazaar. The road cannot bear the pressure placed on it as "cars, motorbikes, scooters and trucks" fill the narrow space, while "The air was sooty with diesel fumes" (Roy 55). The image connects local disorder with larger ecological concerns in hill regions, where steep terrain, fragile slopes and limited roads make careless expansion especially damaging. Political campaigning worsens this pressure when party workers occupy school space, bring vehicles into children's areas and turn public life into noise and force. Tourism also creates seasonal dependence, visible in the nouns "will only return next year" (Roy 220). Roy does not reject all change, but she exposes forms of development that ignore ecological limits and local dignity. The hills emerge as vulnerable living spaces where modern schemes can scar land, unsettle animals and weaken the delicate balance of mountain life.

**Local Lives and Ecological Belonging**

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Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* presents local life in Ranikhet through daily contact with land, animals, weather and shared labour. Charu, Ama and Puran do not treat the hills as distant beauty; they live through their slopes, cattle paths, fruit trees, water sources and seasonal pressures. Roy first places Charu within this ecology when Maya recalls seeing her "grazing her grandmother's cows" and later hearing "her high voice from across a hill, calling one of them, 'Gouri! Goureeeeee-ooo!'" (Roy 16). The scene shows that Charu's knowledge of place grows through movement, sound and responsibility rather than formal instruction. Her absence from school does not signal a lack of knowledge, since she knows the rhythms of cattle, trees, forests, and grazing grounds. Local belonging in the novel arises from repeated acts of care: feeding animals, collecting fodder, sweeping courtyards, drying chillies, washing clothes and returning before dusk. Roy values such everyday ecological knowledge because it sustains both household and community life.

Ama represents a practical wisdom shaped by poverty, labour and long experience of hill living. Her remark, "I can put grass before the cow. Can I make it eat? But it is still my cow, so I have to feed it, don't I?" (Roy 17), turns animal care into a lesson about duty, patience and limits. The line also reveals a worldview in which human life remains bound to cattle, food and survival. In contrast, outsiders often approach the hills as scenery, property or temporary escape. The hotel manager at Aspen Lodge wants cattle removed so that flowers may be planted and the garden protected, while Charu answers with local certainty: "You don't have to show me any grass patches on these hillsides. I know them all" (Roy 28). Her response separates inherited ecological understanding from outsider control. Roy uses such moments to show that people who live close to the land understand nature through practice, memory, and dependence, while visitors often translate the same hills into leisure, possession, or visual charm. The novel finally presents ecological belonging as a lived relation between people, animals, labour and place.

### **Conclusion**

Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* offers a layered ecocritical vision in which landscape, memory, grief, history and ecological vulnerability remain inseparable. The Himalayan setting does not function as a decorative background but as a living presence that shapes the moral and emotional structure of the novel. Mountains, forests, rain, mist, paths, birds and seasons enter the lives of the characters as forces that guide movement, deepen memory and expose human dependence on the natural world. Through Maya's relocation to Ranikhet after Michael's death, Roy shows that ecological space can hold pain without erasing it. The hills give Maya silence, distance and a fragile form of belonging while preserving the wound that brought her there.

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The novel also presents land as an archive of folded histories. Personal sorrow, local memory, colonial residues and ecological traces gather in the same terrain. Diwan Sahib's stories, letters and historical interests reveal how places carry buried narratives that official memory often neglects. Roy's treatment of Roopkund, Ranikhet and the old estates suggests that the earth remembers what human society forgets, conceals or transforms into property. Local lives further strengthen this ecological vision because characters such as Charu and Ama understand land through labour, animals, weather and daily dependence. Their knowledge contrasts with that of outsiders who view the hills as scenery, an investment, or an escape.

Roy also warns against careless development in fragile hill regions. Roads, tourism, construction, political ambition and human greed threaten the balance of mountain life and turn living landscapes into consumable spaces. The novel resists such reduction by presenting the Himalayas as witness, shelter and moral presence. Its ecocritical importance lies in the way it links environmental neglect with emotional and historical loss. *The Folded Earth* finally asks readers to recognise landscape as memory, responsibility and survival.

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