

## Subjugation of Female Voice in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

RASHMI SINHA

**Abstract.** Women have faced subjugation and oppression over the centuries, enduring the dominance of men in both familial and societal contexts. A remarkable transformation has been instigated by eminent Indian women novelists in the realm of literature. The emergence of women writers in Indian English writing brought a rich tapestry of voices and narratives to Indian English literature, enriching the literary canon with their experiences, insights and perspectives. Women's Studies aim to comprehend cultural, social and historical restraints that have compelled writers and critics pay their attention on the issues related to women and share a common goal to free the world from sexism and racism. The assertion of female identity in a patriarchal social structure refers to women claiming their individuality, agency and rights within a societal framework dominated by male privilege and power. It involves challenging and resisting traditional gender roles, expectations and norms that limit women's opportunities and scope of freedom. Anuradha Roy, a contemporary novelist, explores various facets of the female psyche, revealing the trauma born from frustration, fear, loneliness, and a disintegration of identity. Anuradha Roy is perceived as a feminist writer due to the thematic concern with gender, agency, and the question of identity in her novels, particularly in the Indian context. She writes about multifaceted women trying to survive and rebel against traditional roles and constraints, elements like patriarchy, marginalization, and self-perception. Her novel *The Folded Earth* (2011) reflects the idea of loss and a sense of belongingness in the dishevelled life of the protagonist and other female characters. It also asserts the identity of female characters after struggling to overcome the unfortunate fate forced upon them by the androcentric society. Anuradha Roy weaves an evocative and deeply moving tale of a young woman making a new life for herself amid the foothills of the Himalaya. Desperate to leave a private tragedy behind, Maya, the protagonist of the novel, abandons herself to the rhythms of the little village, where people coexist peacefully with nature. But all is not as it seems, and she soon learns that no refuge is remote enough to keep out the modern world.

**Keywords:** Identity; belongingness; resilience; patriarchy; female psyche.

The position of women worldwide varies significantly across countries, regions and cultures. Feminism is an awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society and conscious action by both men and women to change this situation. Linda Gordon, a noted historian, defines "feminism as an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it" (Gordon 107). While progress has been made in advancing gender equality and women's rights, women still face many global challenges and disparities. Women's progress, personal choices, desires and passions do not find any place in the dictionary of males and, are instead, considered bizarre and superfluous. The quest for identity is a fundamental human journey, and for women, it holds significance due to historical, social and cultural fetters. The pursuit of identity ensures that women have equal agency over their lives. It allows them to participate in decision-making, express their opinions and have control over themselves without giving any space to the males. It becomes a way to resist oppression and reclaim their autonomy and voice. The socio-cultural aspects pertaining to women in the twenty-first-century India, reflect a complex mix of historical discrimination, evolving gender roles, progressive initiatives and ongoing challenges. Literacy spread rapidly and women began to utilize the power of the pen. Betty Friedan, the mother of Modern Feminism with the publication of *Feminine Mystique* initiated this new change. The new women's movement expanded into a commanding political force, "Women are an oppressed class.... We are exploited as sex objects." (Friedan 42) While significant strides have been made, there is still an immense amount of work to be done to achieve full gender equality and women's empowerment in the Indian society.

Indian writer, Anuradha Roy with her four award-winning novels, has evolved into one of the most exhilarating new voices of South-Asian literature. Anuradha Roy's novels often challenge societal stereotypes and expectations placed on women. She emphasizes the importance of asserting one's individuality and breaking free from social constraints to shape their own identity. Roy's prospect on the assertion of female identity manifests through her portrayal of emotionally strong and unconventional female characters. She explores the inner lives of her characters exploring their desires, aspirations and struggles. In doing so, the author's works contribute to a broader discourse on gender and empowerment, focusing on the profound and intricate ways in which women navigate and transcend

the limitations imposed upon them. Anuradha Roy won the Economist Crossword Prize for Fiction for her novel, *The Folded Earth*, which was nominated for several other prizes including the Man Asia. Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011) reflects the idea of loss and a sense of belongingness in the dishevelled lives of the protagonist and other female characters. Set in the picturesque Himalayan town of Ranikhet, the story revolves around the protagonist, Maya, a young widow who flees the city to escape the memories of her husband's tragic death. Maya's decision to enter into an inter-religious marriage was met with severe repercussions, prominently characterized by her estrangement from her father and the broader conservative social milieu. Maya's mother emerges as a poignant representation of the role of women in traditional Indian society, particularly in the dynamics of a familial setting. She, a nameless figure in the narrative, symbolizes the passive and often marginalized position imposed upon women within the confines of conventional Indian societal norms. Though constrained by the expectations and instructions of her husband, Maya's mother exhibits a form of agency through her unwavering support of her daughter's choices and decisions. Maya's stay in Ranikhet not only marked a turning point in her life but also introduced her to a cast of characters, including Charu, her uncle Puran Singh, and her grandmother Ama. Charu, like Maya, grapples with societal and cultural constraints when attempting to express her marital preferences. Contrary to conventional expectations for women, Charu emerges as a strong-willed and independent being, defying traditional familial and societal norms. Despite facing numerous obstacles, the female characters in the novel break the social boundaries, challenging established norms and emerging as relatively independent, decisive and self-assured individuals. *The Folded Earth* is a poignant meditation on the resilience of the human spirit, the enduring quest for belonging, and the necessity of navigating the complexities of societal change with integrity and resilience. Through this powerful exploration, Roy creates a timeless reflection on the human condition and the intricate web of relationships that shape our lives. and traditions of their country

The subjugation of women varies in terms of a distinct society, class, caste, religion and socio-cultural practices. Gender roles play a foremost and significant role in dominating the nature and feelings of a woman. Roy has portrayed her female characters as revolutionaries and makes them challenge the inherent social taboos and traditional dogmas.

*The Folded Earth* is the second most popular and best-seller book written by Anuradha Roy. The novel won the Hindu Literary Prize in 2011 and was also shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011. This novel is set in the foothills of the Himalayan region and its beautiful small town Ranikhet in India. This novel presents a good portrayal of the human relationships in the society. It reflects women's suppressed emotions, unsolved issues, and many hidden realities of human life. It is also the story of unfulfilled desires, love & loss, the memory of the dark past, betrayal, and hope for a new life. Roy's female characters consistently emerge as embodiments of resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression.

In *The Folded Earth* the protagonist Maya abandons the predictable path prescribed by her family and traditional society by moving to the remote Himalayan town of Ranikhet. This decisive action represents not only a physical displacement but also a symbolic rejection of the constraints imposed on her gender. In *The Folded Earth*, Roy features four prominent female characters: Maya, her mother, Charu and Ama. Among these characters, Maya and Charu, representing the younger generation, stand out as unique individuals characterized by their intense desires for independent and self-determined lives, thus attaining a complete sense of self. In contrast, Maya's mother and Ama, belonging to the older generation, emerge as the concrete illustrations of the detrimental effects of patriarchal dominance and societal expectations. While both of them harbour an underlying desire to transcend these societal fetters, their capacity to actively assert their individual decisions and desires remains limited. It is true that the women characters suffer silently. Roy depicts it clearly that women cannot show their needs and expectation because it is only the patriarchal society and culture that determines the life of women. Most of the female characters in *The Folded Earth* highlight the traditional role of women in a particular culture. The main protagonist Maya is disowned by her industrialist father because she has married Michael, a Christian. The parent rejects the relationship with their only daughter to keep up their status and dignity in the society. This definitely points out the system of patriarchy, racism and class discrimination is present in the novel. Instantly, Charu's love with Kundan a cook is rejected by her grandmother because of the employment and its standing status in the society.

The patriarchal system of power subjugates and hegemonizes women systematically. It works by giving their oppression institutional

and legal standing when “Women changes have so far not been able to appropriate that is make their own, the social Women to which they have been subjected passively in the course of history” (Mies 42) need cultural metamorphosis. Maya, Charu, and Ama are characters who transformed themselves culturally in their lives.

In *The Folded Earth*, Maya was confined to home for loving a Christian boy, Michael and later publicly abandoned by her father for marrying him. She had to endure religious disparity and patriarchal dominion by being disowned by her family and society in general. The act of disownment by her father signifies the adherence to traditional religious precepts, which often prioritize intra-faith unions and condemn inter-religious unions as incompatible or blasphemous. Moreover, this act not only signifies the familial dimension but also alludes to the broader community's expectations and pressures. Nevertheless, it is apparent from Maya's discourse that she was adamant not to acquiesce to the constraints levied upon her by her paternal authority and the prevailing societal norms. Maya's anguish is evident in her following statement:

But I was his daughter. Before my fall from grace, he had done his best to train me to follow his example: to be ruthless in getting what one wanted, to take calculated risks. His efforts must have yielded results. I escaped him, within a fortnight, knowing I would never return home. (*The Folded Earth* 14)

Her bold decision made her an uncompromising woman in terms of personal choices and leading her life. Surprisingly, her mother, who could never free herself from the clutches of the oppressive patriarchal society, stood as a staunch supporter of Maya in her brave endeavour. Her secret meetings with Maya and her constant support and encouragement to become a liberated and independent person, made her a revolutionary character. Maya, after shifting to Ranikhet, was ridiculed and looked down upon by the fellow villagers for being an independent widow. She was observed for her growing closeness with Veer, her landlord's son. Mr. Chauhan, the Administrator of the town, was not even directly linked to Maya but exercised his lawful authority to ridicule her for her personal choices. He mocked after knowing about her love affair with Veer, “Arre, Maya Memsab, you are looking ten years younger! Tell me the secret,

and I will buy it too!”(147) ‘Memsab’ was a mockery at Maya as it is the name of a Hindi film based on Madame Bovary, who entertains herself by having a sequence of love affairs. The superiority of class and gender made him consciously critical of her life choices. Although she was initially perturbed by the androcentric mindset yet, gradually, she adopted a carefree outlook. She used to consume rum secretly in her cottage not to be labelled by the society.

In the novel *The Folded Earth*, Roy portrays Maya as a protagonist. Maya has encountered unfolded memories throughout the novel. Since her childhood, she has struggled with an Indian-typical mother and a restrictive father. Due to constraints, she was unable to convey her affection for Michael. She married Michael, who is an intercaste person, so both of their families did not support them. Even after her married life, she is not liberated from patriarchal dominance. Her husband did not notice her intentions; due to his trekking interest, he disrespected Maya’s feelings and emotions. Michael sounds like a patriarchal mindset because of his individual intentions. He lost his life in one trekking spot in a heavy snowstorm, making Maya isolated for a long life. Even in solitude, she could not seek both her parents and husband’s parental help. Instead, she opted to move from Deccan to Ranikhet, where she hoped to find tranquillity and relief from the hardships of life. Maya had found a job at St. Hilda without depending on anyone; she tried to survive against patriarchal norms. She got some assistance from the aristocrat Diwan Sahib and grew a positive relationship with the surrounding environment. Again, in the form of Veer, she wrestled with hegemony power. At the time of solitude, Maya replicated her folded memories, “The summer nights grew warmer. I could not fall asleep; however long I lay in bed, I shut my eyes tight. I sat for long hours looking at the forest fires outside my window”. (134) They happened every summer, and they could go on for weeks. She dreamed herself back to Hyderabad’s long-ago summer afternoons, birds and mosquitoes falling exhausted in the scorched air, the heat-dead stillness churned by the creak of our ceiling fan. Roy narrated that patriarchal characters like Maya’s father, Michael, Veer, politicians, and others exert dominance over women and exhibit overpowering actions.

Roy addresses to highlight the complexities and challenges, contributing to a more nuanced portrayal of the protagonist character in the novel. Throughout the novel, Anuradha Roy skilfully portrays female

assertion as a powerful force that empowers the women in the story to break free from restrictive norms and stereotypes. In the novel, the protagonist encounters numerous fatalities, but she still tries to live courageously. Since her childhood, Maya's individual freedom has been locked by patriarchal mindsets in the form of her father, late husband Michel, and present companion Veer. She even noticed that veer cunning nature about the last trekking companion of her husband Michael, but she was saddened inner self. The novel setting is an indication of hierarchal dominance.

Anuradha Roy's narrative lens focuses keenly on the aspect of personal liberation – a journey that entails breaking free from societal constraints and fostering an environment where women can actively engage in decision-making processes and enjoy autonomy. Her novels are marked by her emphasis on the emotional stability, self-discovery and personal growth of her characters. For Roy, this journey of inner exploration and development represents the quest for identity. *The Folded Earth* explores the theme of women and nature, in a way connected, as oppressed beings by the patriarchy and the capitalist attitude of the dominant world order. Regardless of the ultimate fate of these women, Roy's novel powerfully illustrates that female subjectivity is fluid, embodied, and irreducible to fixed or pure forms, instead tenaciously forging its existence within the complexities of history and power.

#### **Rashmi Sinha**

Research Scholar

P.G. Dept. of English & Research Centre

Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

#### **Works Cited**

- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York Dell Press, 1963.
- Linda Gordon. *The Women's Liberation Movement in Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*. Norton, 2014.
- Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Feminist Research: Science, Violence and Responsibility*. Zed Books Ltd, 2014.
- Roy, Anuradha. *The Folded Earth*. Maclehorse Press, 2011.

