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Affective Landscapes and Indigenous Ecologies: Re-reading Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* through Tinai

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Abstract: This article attempts to explore an individual's search for the meaning of existence as unravelled in the Indian English writer Anuradha Roy's novel *The Folded Earth*. The focus is predominantly on how subjectivity is moulded by memory, affect, and ecological space. The Western concept of affect theory and the Tamil ecological and aesthetic concept of *tinai* form the theoretical framework of the study. The paper also employs Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery to examine how Maya, the protagonist, attempts to tide over the trauma caused by the loss of her husband Michael in a mountain accident. Maya's retreat to Ranikhet, a Himalayan hill town, her emotional journey, and eventual healing are investigated through the lens of the classical Tamil ecocritical theory of *tinai*, which connects human emotions to landscapes.

Keywords: *Affect, Trauma, Tinai, Memory, Subjectivity, Landscape, Space, Ecocriticism*

Conventionally, the notion of subjectivity has rationally conceptualized the self as a stable and autonomous entity with internal coherence, with no connection to the environment. Contemporary theoretical frameworks like affect theory and postcolonial theory have challenged this notion of stable subjectivity. Postcolonial literary studies have analysed the role of space and environment in the construction of subjectivity.

The Folded Earth by the Indian English author Anuradha Roy deftly navigates the relationship between subjectivity and environment by portraying the natural space as an affective field rather than an inert backdrop. The novel is an exploration of Maya's present as shaped by multiple layers of memory, grief and the physical environment. Maya, a young widow, leaves her hometown Hyderabad and shifts to Ranikhet, a hill town in search of solace after the untimely and shocking death of her husband Michael in a mountaineering expedition just after six years of marriage . She had married Michael, a Christian, against the wishes of her family. As she has no family to return to, Maya decides to move to Ranikhet, the town closest to the Himalayas where Michael died.

Ranikhet is in the foothills of the Himalayas with deep valleys, dense forests, and geological folds. The title of the novel suggests the literally folded landscape of the region where the narrative is set. At the same time, it is metaphorical of the hidden, multilayered stories, emotions and secrets of the characters. Maya as well as the other characters have complex and layered experiences, just like the mountains which are folded, uneven and pressed and bent by pressure over time.

Classical Tamil Sangam literature classifies geographical landscapes into five categories named *kurinji* (hilly region*)*, *mullai* (pastoral tract), *marutam* (wetlands), *neytal* (coastal area) and *palai* (arid land) to represent the intricately woven bond between nature and human beings. The flora, fauna, deities, occupations and music are unique to each *tinai*. *Tinai* poetics projects an inextricable link between human emotion (akam) and the landscape (puram).

The novel *The Folded Earth* delves into the interconnectedness between the mountainous setting of Ranikhet and Maya's emotional travails. The themes of love, loss, grief and healing attributed to *kurinji* are applicable in the analysis of Maya's emotional journey. Ranikhet functions as a reservoir of memory and plays a crucial role in her emotional transformation.

Kurinji and *mullai* are the landscapes that are dominant in the novel. The *kurinji* landscape helps Maya to come to terms with her grief. Conventionally, *kurinji* signifies union. But in Maya's case it evokes a sense of isolation resembling *palai* because of her mental aridness. The novel charts her mind's progress from a state of desert-like emotional barrenness to a lively and interactive relationship with ecology.

Affect theory offers a productive framework for understanding this transformation. Sara Ahmed argues that emotions circulate between bodies, objects and spaces rather than remaining confined within the individual subject. Brian Massumi,meanwhile, conceptualizes affect as a pre-conscious bodily intensity emerging through encounters between bodies and environments. Together, these formulations help explain how Maya's emotional life becomes inseparable from the Himalayan landscape. The mountains are not passive scenery but active participants in the generation of feeling. Maya's subjectivity gets reconfigured when she encounters the mountains.Thus an affective topography is constructed in the novel. Feeling gets distributed spatially.

The theory of trauma and recovery put forward byJudith Herman is relevant in analysing how Maya deals with her mental anguish. Herman postulates safety, remembrance and mourning as the three stages of recovery from trauma. Maya's withdrawal into herself and the retreat to the alien Ranikhet is the first phase. Her mingling with the local people like Diwan Sahib, Charu and Veer is the second phase. Betrayal in her attachment to Veer and the discovery that Veer was complicit in Michael's tragedy is the third phase when the process of her recovery is complicated further.

In the opinion of Wilson and Thomas, "Herman's stages of recovery—establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring connections—are not linear but often require survivors to revisit earlier phases" (Wilson and Thomas 112). Maya's journey of recovery is not a linear one, but one which moves back into the folds of memory. While affect theory provides the broader framework for understanding emotional circulation between bodies and landscapes, tinai offers an Indigenous ecological grammar through which emotional states are spatially encoded. Judith Herman's trauma theory supplements this analysis by illuminating the non-linear process of Maya's recovery.

Maya was the only daughter of rich parents. Though she was her father's favourite daughter, when she married Michael against his will the father disowned and abandoned her. On Michael's death she did not return to her father because she would have to apologize to him and admit that her decision to marry Michael was a wrong one. Thus she freed herself from the patriarchal bondage and asserted her independence and autonomy. Even when struggling with loss and grief she was able to maintain emotional resilience and cope with the new circumstances. With the help of father Joseph, Michael's friend, she got the job of a school teacher at Ranikhet and started her life anew.

It is quite ironic that Maya decides to move to a place closer to the place which took Michael's life in order to escape from the trauma of his loss. The novel equates Maya's unstable and folded inner self to the rugged and unstable mountainous landscape: "I had come to a place that made small my life and yet held it up"(3?). The therapeutic power of nature is highlighted through the evocative descriptions of the landscape. Maya's inner turmoil is calmed in the presence of the mountains and

she gets a sense of peace and rootedness by observing the mountains which constantly remind her of the continuity of life.

When Maya settles as a teacher a shift happens in the nature of the landscape from *kurinji* to *mullai*, ie, from the peaks to the forested outskirts. Like *mullai* which represents patient waiting, Maya waits patiently to overcome her grief. The rural rhythm of daily life, the teaching routine and the slow nature of the social life in the small town show domestic steadiness: “Days began to have a solidity; the town moved like a careful animal”(5?).The emotional repair happens through daily repetition.

From Maya's reminiscence one can understand that Michael was a person who was in love with the mountains. Maya says, “ My rival in love was not a woman but a mountain range”(6). This shows how the mountains compete with human intimacy as an affective force. She continues, "Michael's yearnings made me understand how it is that some people have the mountains in them while some have the sea.”(6). This explains how his mind’s landscape is in an inexorable pull towards the mountains. The permeability of subjectivity proposed by affect theory is evident here when the boundaries between inner and outer worlds are blurred. On reaching Ranikhet Maya's mind too gets attuned to the hills. Her words are a proof to her newfound life: “But I was at home…I became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea”(21). Her immersion in the new *kurinji* space is a demonstration of the creation of affect. *Kurinji* is often linked with silent emotions hidden in the mind. The folded mountains of Ranikhet provide Maya with a comfortable sanctuary in her distress.

Maya had lost all human connections after marriage. She says, “I was alone. I had no contact with friends: I had lost them over the years of being wrapped up in Michael. I had in effect no family although my parents did live in the same city”(11). Maya understands the significance of interpersonal relationships when she stays in Ranikhet. The rented house she lives in is owned by Diwan Sahib who was a former Royal member. Maya finds a father figure in him. Maya moved to Ranikhet to overcome her grief through isolation. However, affective relationships get established with Diwan Sahib and Charu leading to a gradual re-emergence from her grief. She moves from solitude to interpersonal engagement suggesting that human relationships are essential for recovery from trauma. Her fractured identity begins to heal and regain coherence.

She gets a refuge from the estrangement from her father and the loss of the sense of familial belonging. Diwan Sahib’s old house provides her with a semblance of emotional stability. Roy describes in detail the silence, fading grandeur and accumulated histories of the old house which function as a mirror to Maya’s emotional condition. In Gaston Bachelard’s view the house is a “repository of memory” (Bachelard 8) where each space is associated with emotional reminiscences.

Maya's relationship with Diwan Sahib is intricately connected to the space of the house he resides in thus mixing the interpersonal and the spatial in an inseparable manner. Her bond with him grows slowly as a relational comfort resembling aspects of the *mullai* landscape of tinai. *Kurinji* represents emotional intensity whereas *mullai* is associated with waiting, patience and quiet endurance.

Similarly, Maya gets attached to Charu, a village girl, who connects her with everyday local life. Charu's ecological connectedness and local rootedness allow Maya to reconnect with life and relational belonging. She facilitates Maya's connection to human beings and her social participation. The ordinary moments of conversation, companionship and shared experience bring Maya out of the self - imposed secluded space of mourning. Her interactions with Charu result in relational belonging. The healing process is boosted through human connection.

Maya is enamoured by Veer, the nephew of Diwan Sahib because of his charm and a shared engagement with the landscape. Initially, Veer's presence gives a feeling to the readers that affect in Maya's case is getting reoriented toward relational attachment,moving away from solitary grief. Veer walks, climbs and traverses the hills. When seen through the framework of tinai , this association with the *kurinji* landscape suggests the revival of union and intimacy. As per the classical concept of tinai, union is capable of stabilizing emotional experience. But Maya's attachment to Veer does not result in fixing her emotions but is infused with latent tension. There is only a provisional stability which gets transformed very soon. The betrayal by Veer is foreshadowed evidently in the subtle narrative cues. Michael's attachment to the mountains was a reverential one unlike the secretive and lucrative one of Veer.

Looking through the methodology of tinai, a transition of affective state from *kurinji* landscape to *palai* landscape is visible when emotional intensity is replaced by estrangement and danger.The physical landscape remains the same. However,the affective valence becomes a fluid psychological register. The pivotal moment when Maya understands Veer's complicity in Michael's death converges narrative tension with affective rupture. The mountains which were sites of memory and healing for Maya stand for deception and loss. Herman asserts that trauma is created when relationships which are expected to offer safety shatter the trust invested. The affective bond which Maya believed to have existed with Veer collapses resulting in an emotional and spatial disorientation. The mountains which catered to intimacy turns to be reminders of deception. Though they become terrains of confrontation intersecting memory, betrayal and grief, it is significant that it does not result in a total alienation for Maya. Experience teaches Maya to renegotiate her perception allowing her to inhabit the same place with a better awareness. She reaches the final stage of recovery formulated by Herman through reestablishing connection in an altered form by reconstructing a new meaning(Herman 196). The mountains remain the same but their meaning has changed. The emotional register is no longer

singular but multiple and even contradictory.

The novel explores affective landscapes through the narrative tension created by Veer's betrayal explicating how the mountains are unstable and susceptible to re - signification. The hills of Ranikhet evolves as a dynamic field which produces, disrupts and reconstitutes emotions continuously. Maya's subjectivity is forged anew through a lively negotiation with both memory and environment. The folded earth becomes a layered repository of memory, trust, betrayal and forgetfulness. The betrayal by Veer plays its own role in the process of Maya's recovery. The deception and loss makes Maya understand that emotional recovery is less dependent on romantic ties than day to day network of empathy and acceptance. Maya's sense of belonging had been fractured by trauma and separation. It is restored slowly through her interpersonal relationships. " In this folded earth, hidden by the mountains, there was space for silence, for solitude, for small cherished hopes.(Roy 10)

The healing power of nature and the support of the community in overcoming grief is intricately explored. Maya moves out of the shell of isolation and interacts with the people of Ranikhet getting involved in local events. This and her genuine attachment to the landscape gives her resilience and a chance to craft a new identity. Nature serves both as a backdrop and as a character in her journey of self - recovery. The healing happens through the impact of the landscape and human connection. Roy does not present healing as the restoration of a stable and autonomous subjectivity. Maya acquires a relational subjectivity which is deeply connected to the affective and ecological interconnectedness. It is worthwhile to investigate the close link between affective landscapes and indigenous ecologies further.

Maya lives in a cottage encircled by the forest. Even when engulfed by her grief she interacts with the environment with genuine connection and learns the names of trees like the deodars and the rhododendrons and closely observes the habits of leopards. When the leopard attacks the dogs in the village and threatens the village people Maya understands that the boundaries of the *mullai* landscape are 'porous'. The leopard is a symbol of the untamable character of nature that cannot be 'folded'in accordance with the convenience of human beings. The botanical elements in the novel can be analysed through tinai as *karupporul* which means characteristic objects. In tinai, the *mutal* and *uripporul* are combined by *karupporul.* The immovable mountains in the novel are the *mutal* and the fluid human emotions are the *uripporul.* The deodar trees are the pillars of memory and endurance. They are dominant in the landscape of Ranikhet as well as in the mental world of the characters. They have a verticality and stability which represents stoicism as far as Maya is concerned. Maya receives a sense of surrogate stability from the trees. The scent of the pine and cedar trees triggers memory. The olfactory character of the "resinous,sharp smell" anchors Maya in the present whenever she is under the grip of her past trauma, ie, the wasteland of *palai.* There is no literal desert in the novel. It is an

emotional desert of desolation, exile and separation.

The novel traces the existence of a tension between indigenous knowledge and colonial science. The Diwan's library is full of books of colonial history. The novel shows how the coloniser's interest in the Himalayas was to classify them whereas the indigenous inhabitants felt and lived the landscape. Maya recognizes the tension between the colonial perspective and the lived reality. At the initial stages of her life in Ranikhet Maya studies the landscape. Later, she grows into a union with it and becomes a part of it.

As per the tinai framework the Diwan functions as the *arivan* who is a wise person with knowledge of the landscape. His library can be considered as an intellectual *mullai* with a collection of botanical surveys from the colonial perspective. Though he is trying to document the mountains using Western science, it is his intimacy with the landscape that gives him real insights. His soul is in communion with the indigenous rhythm of the place. Maya's realisation that the colonial maps in the Diwan's library are not helpful in predicting the landscape or the path of a leopard makes her to reach a tinai perspective in which geography is something which is felt and lived not one which yields to be mapped. It is a sensory experience. The body is the basic tool of mapping. The maps do not help Maya to learn the real ecological consciousness of the mountains. The "ache in her calves" and "the smell of pine resin"( ) give her better understanding of the mountains than the maps. Reading through the concept of tinai the novel moves beyond a mere novel about the romantic aspect of nature to a documentation of the biosemotics of grief demonstrating that the folds of the earth and the heart share the same geography.

The *marutam* aspect of tinai represents agrarian and social quarrel as well as public conflict. The tension associated with elections, communal agitation and the intrusion of outside political forces illustrate the characteristics of *marutam.* It is said, "Strangers had come to divide us with promises and threats" (3?)

The rhododendron is a powerful affective symbol. The red blooms appear like a splash of "blood" against the snow, reminding Maya of Michael's death. The local people of Ranikhet prepare squash and jam from the blossoms of rhododendrons. Thus the wild flower is transformed into a domestic commodity. This is similar to the process of Maya's effort to transform her raw grief into a meaningful domestic existence.

Roy portrays the oak and the Chir pine as conflicting ecological entities. The pine tree is presented as a self-centred tree that draws water from the earth and dries it up in turn. It stands for the ecology of exploitation. The colonisers' eyes were on its timber and resin. Contrastingly, the oak is regarded as a nurturer who serves as a mother of the water sources of the hills. The exploitative

ecology associated with the thirsty pine recalls aspects of marutam conflict.Whereas the oak embodies a more ancient "mullai". At first Maya prefers the pines for their aesthetic beauty. Later, when she grows closer to the local lands and its inhabitants, she grasps the crucial necessity of the oaks. This reflects her shift in perspective from a tourist's superficial view of the Himalaya to the necessity of viewing it as a lived and enduring presence and consciousness.

Unlike the grand narrative manifested by the tall trees, the mosses and lichens signify the "folds" of the earth in the novel's title. The lichens are described as "the handwriting of time on stone" (...). They are organisms that live in the interspace between the biological and the geological, an epitome of affective ecology. The physical closeness to the earth heals Maya.

The dampness of the moss and the roughness of bark make her grounded to reality. Her true belonging to the landscape happens through her intimacy with the small things. Maya is metamorphosed from a mere observer of the mountains to a local creature inhabiting among the lichens.

"News arrived like driftwood from far places"(3?. There is no sea in the novel and hence no direct *neytal* references. However, news which reach Ranikhet from outside like reports of churches being burnt and the appearance of strangers recall *neital*'s theme of itineracy and how external currents unsettle local life. The coastal sense is metaphorical.

An affect-oriented and tinai-based analysis of *The Folded Earth* moves one away from a human-centred exploration of Maya's recovery to a sophisticated affective ecology. The novel illustrates how the external environments (puram) shape the internal landscapes perpetually "folding" them. Anuradha Roy suggests that in order to survive the manyfolded traumas of life, an indigenous consciousness has to be developed. The human heart must flourish coexisting with the mountains and the forest as a single, breathing entity. In *The Folded Earth*, Anuradha Roy reimagines the Himalayan landscape not as a passive backdrop to human suffering but as an affective ecology that actively shapes memory, grief and recovery.

Through the interpretive frameworks of affect theory and tinai poetics, the novel reveals how subjectivity emerges relationally through continuous interaction between body, emotion and environment. Maya's journey demonstrates that trauma cannot be overcome through isolation or rational self-mastery alone; rather, healing becomes possible through ecological immersion, sensory experience and renewed interpersonal belonging. The mountains of Ranikhet function simultaneously as spaces of mourning, betrayal, endurance and transformation, continually altering their emotional significance. By bringing indigenous ecological consciousness into dialogue with contemporary affect studies, Roy's novel ultimately challenges anthropocentric notions of identity and proposes a mode of existence grounded in interdependence between humans and the more-than-human world. The "folded

earth" thus becomes a powerful metaphor for the layered and unstable nature of memory, affect and survival itself.

In *The Folded Earth*, Anuradha Roy reimagines the Himalayan landscape not as a passive backdrop to human suffering but as an affective ecology that actively shapes memory, grief and recovery. Through the interpretive frameworks of affect theory and tinai poetics, the novel reveals how subjectivity emerges relationally through continuous interaction between body, emotion and environment. Maya's journey demonstrates that trauma cannot be overcome through isolation or rational self-mastery alone; rather, healing becomes possible through ecological immersion, sensory experience and renewed interpersonal belonging.

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