

Navigating Gendered Landscape: The Power of Female Agency in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

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ABSTRACT

Women's agency refers to the faculty of women to make independent choices and take actions based on their own desires, beliefs, and values. However, women's agency is not a uniform experience, as it can be influenced by factors such as race, class, ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic status. Various forms of discrimination and societal barriers can limit women's agency, requiring efforts to address systemic inequalities and create inclusive environments that promote women's autonomy and empowerment. Set in the remote Himalayan town of Ranikhet, Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* is an evocative tale that offers a sneak peek into the lives and experiences of the people living in the hills and explores their struggles and challenges. The story is narrated by its protagonist, Maya, a young woman who abandons her family to unite with the love of her life, only to lose him to a snowstorm. She moves to Ranikhet to begin a new life and closely witness the predicaments of the people, particularly women. The novel explores the diverse strands of love, memory, loss, ecological imbalance and its repercussions, capitalist greed, power politics, the patriarchal oppression of women, and the emergence of dynamic women who refuse to be subjugated. The proposed paper seeks to delve deeper into an array of issues faced by women that contribute to their subjugation and explores how the female characters battle the oppression and make a strong comeback by asserting their agency and autonomy, and even acting as an agent in uplifting others.

Keywords: *Patriarchal oppression, dynamic women, subjugation, agency, autonomy, empowerment.*

Women's agency refers to the capacity of women to act autonomously and make choices that shape their lives and influence the world around them. It encompasses the ability of women to exercise control over their bodies, make decisions about their education, careers, and

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relationships, and participate in social, economic, and political spheres. Women's agency is rooted in the principles of gender equality and women's rights. It is essential for achieving gender equality and empowering women. It recognizes that women should have the freedom and opportunity to determine their own lives, express their opinions, pursue their goals, and control their resources and decisions. It emphasizes that women should not be limited by traditional gender roles or discriminatory practices that restrict their choices and opportunities. It enables them to advocate for their rights, make informed decisions, and contribute to social and political change. Women's agency is a crucial aspect of women's empowerment, which involves increasing their access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power.

However, a woman's agency can be questioned and challenged in an androcentric society, which places men and masculinity at the center and devalues women and femininity. Androcentric societies often have prescribed gender roles and expectations that limit women's choices and opportunities. Women may face pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, such as prioritizing family and caregiving over their own ambitions. This restricts their agency by imposing societal expectations on their roles and behaviour. Cultural and social norms can reinforce and perpetuate androcentric values and practices. Women may face pressure to conform to these norms, which can limit their agency by discouraging them from questioning or challenging established gender roles and expectations. Androcentric societies often have patriarchal power structures, where men hold disproportionate power and control over resources, decision-making processes, and institutions. This power imbalance can restrict women's agency by denying them equal access to opportunities, participation in decision-making, and control over their own lives and bodies.

Winner of the 2011 Hindu Literary Prize, Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011) is set in the foothills of the mighty Himalayas. It is primarily the story of the dishevelled life of Maya, a young woman of twenty-five, who, after losing her husband, Michael, on a mountaineering expedition, embarks on a journey to carve out her own identity and shape her destiny to come to terms with her loss. She abandons the city life of Hyderabad and embraces the rhythms of a village in Ranikhet as her 'home'. Leaving her tragedy and her family behind, she comes to think of her landlord, Diwan Sahib, and her neighbours, Ama, Puran, and Charu as her family. The narrative traces her journey intermingled with those of other characters. It is also the story of Charu, a little girl who refuses to conform to societal expectations and emerges as the bravest

character who doesn't fear even the perilous situations she comes across and is stubborn in asserting her agency. The novel explores the complexities of human relationships, the significance of man-nature relationships, capitalistic greed and a mad race for development, women's deplorable status and struggles, and the power of female solidarity. Roy sensitively weaves together a heart-wrenching tapestry of love, loss, identity, memories, and new beginnings.

The novel is narrated by its protagonist, Maya. Maya, the only daughter of well-off parents, was her father's favourite, but their relationship fragmented at the altar of Maya's love and intimacy for Michael, a Christian boy. Her father exercises his patriarchal rod of authority by imposing restrictions and even a house arrest on her, on learning about her love for Michael. He also echoes the patriarchal notion of viewing a woman's body as an object of control and possession as Maya says, "At times, I felt his cold-eyed gaze traveling over my body as if he were trying to gauge which parts of it Michael had touched." (14). Still, Maya took control of her life by fleeing her home and marrying Michael. Maya was a headstrong daughter of a headstrong father. She says, "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." (14) Enraged at her defying his decree by marrying Michael, her father disinherits and abandons Maya. Bell Hooks, the acclaimed feminist, in her book, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, posits that "The moment we choose to love we begin to move against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others." (298) His utter disregard for his daughter's freedom makes him a symbolic manifestation of the patriarchal mindset. Simone de Beauvoir, the celebrated feminist, in her groundbreaking work, *The Second Sex*, asserts that "The relation of woman to husband, of daughter to father, of sister to brother, is a relation of vassalage."

Maya's trials and tribulations began with her marriage to Michael and climaxed with his unfortunate death. Maya is devastated but exhibits a strong sense of assertion when she decides to move to Ranikhet, a remote Himalayan town in the lap of nature, following her husband's tragic death. She could've chosen to go back to her parents, but her acceptance into the family would've come at the cost of feeding her father's patriarchal ego by admitting and apologizing for her 'wrong' decision, an act which she sincerely denied. Maya narrates, "The edge of my

father's anger was blunted now that Michael had left my side. All I had to do was tell him that I had been wrong and misguided, and beg him to trust me again." (20) Instead, by choosing to start a new life away from her family and the familiarity of urban life, Maya asserts her independence and autonomy, seeking to find her own path. Despite the challenges and uncertainties, her decision to build a new life on her own terms showcases her strength in embracing change and facing the unknown. Maya grapples with personal grief and loss, yet she maintains emotional resilience. She navigates her emotions and strives to find meaning and purpose, reflecting the required to cope with difficult circumstances. She takes charge of her life by rejecting her parents' home and deciding to move to Ranikhet after Michael's death to live his dream. Maya reflects, "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)

Ama is an old, illiterate, but wise woman. Her invaluable wisdom comes from her long years of experience. She is another strong-willed woman who takes the narrative forward. She lives life by her strong and uncompromising morals and does not hitch before disowning her drunkard son for beating his wife to death. "She was not afraid of anything or anyone, and had thrown Charu's father, her younger son out of her house for being drunk every day and beating his wife to death in a drunken fit. She would bring up her grandchild alone, she had said, they did not need a man around the house if it was a man like him." (18) She is bold and assertive. However, the downside of her character is that she is unconsciously the bearer of patriarchy. Taslima Nasrin, the distinguished feminist author, in her book, *No Country for Women*, strikingly comments that "Most women are upholders and bearers of the patriarchal system...This deplorable condition is due to this patriarchal system." (18) Several episodes in the novel reflect how patriarchy is deeply embedded in Ama's psyche. Her reaction to Charu's growing interest in studies and constant emphasis on marriage as the end goal of a woman's life is a product of the thought process she has grown up with. She even calls the Ohjha frequently "to exorcise evil spirits from her cows." (182) She is given to believe that Charu too is under a spell and needs to be exorcised. She tells Maya, "I called the Ohjha for Charu. Here I am trying to fix a match for her and she makes things go wrong. She is in the clutches of a bad spirit." (183) Women have increasingly started prioritizing their careers and chasing their dreams over marriage but Ama's notion of an ideal life for a woman only constitutes marriage, family, and children which can be attributed to her lack of education. She argues, "But Charu can't work in that jam factory forever. She has to have a normal life: marriage, children, her

own home.” (121) She regards the deaf and mute Lati giving birth to two deaf and mute daughters as God’s punishment to her for having slept with a foreigner. Her reaction to the interfaith relationship of Janaki’s daughter echoes her small-town conservative and patriarchal attitude. Spitting, she comments, “Shameless hussy!...Doesn’t care that everyone knows she’s carrying on with that boy at Liaqat’s medicine shop. He’s not just a different caste, no – he’s a Muslim!” (123) She even disapproves of Charu’s increased inclination toward studies and criticizes it at every opportunity that she could avail. She says, “Girls who study too much are no good for anything – she won't get a husband and she’ll have all sorts of silly ideas about herself.” (119) Maya finds her judgmental and patriarchal presence intrusive and starts avoiding her.

Education is a tool that plays a crucial role in empowering the subalterns. Educating women is instrumental in their empowerment. It is education that helped Maya rebuild her life from scratch by securing her a job as a teacher at St. Hilda’s after moving to Ranikhet. Hooks in her book, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, states that “My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness individuals positively transforming lives and the world around them. Educating is a vocation rooted in hopefulness.” (14) Maya’s dedication in educating Charu reflects her belief in the transformative power of knowledge, demonstrating her strength in advocating for positive change. Charu too, viewed education as her passage to emancipation and her unbridled enthusiasm and commitment to learning to read and write is reflective of the journeys of all the young girls who break out of the clutches of patriarchy, oppression, and expectations by resorting to education as the only means to help them carve their distinguished identities and giving them a voice to express and fight for their concerns. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, Hooks writes, “I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.” (20)

The appearance of Veer created ripples in the tranquil life of Maya. It had taken Maya a great deal of effort to come to terms with her loss and restore calm to her life, but Veer unconsciously brought back the memories of Michael. His presence started causing emotional upheavals inside Maya. Her attraction and desire for Veer grew dominating. The comfort level and the easy flow of conversations with Veer filled Maya with new vigour and zeal for life. She looked forward to his visits. She could sense the change. Veer was like a happy sunshine in her

otherwise gloomy world. The exploration of Maya's romantic relationships and her choices regarding her personal life reflects her agency over her own body and desires. Her overwhelming and suppressed physical desires flapped and flitted in Veer's presence, struggling to be set free. Veer had a hypnotizing effect on the otherwise lonely Maya and she unchained all her heart's deepest desires. She reflects, "A bird fluttered its wings beneath the stretched curtain of my skin, trying to get out." (189) Maya longed for a physical touch and the gap after Michael's death could only be bridged by Veer. Maya's physical intimacy with her landlord's son is an act of social defiance as she outrightly rejects the repressive widowhood norms, customs, and expectations. Ama disapproves of Maya's growing friendship and intimacy with Veer because she dislikes him and wants Maya to adhere to the conventions and strictures of widowhood and fit into the patriarchal mould of a widow by renouncing all kinds of pleasures and happiness.

In Indian society, widows often face social isolation and restrictions. Maya's refusal to be defined solely by her widowhood demonstrates her agency to challenge societal expectations and reclaim her identity beyond her marital status. Her refusal to accept widowhood restrictions and the pursuit of her own desires exhibit her strength in asserting her individuality and resisting oppressive norms. This challenges societal constraints on women's sexuality and portrays them as individuals with their needs and desires. Jennifer F. Chmielewski, et.al in their research article entitled Pathways to Pleasure and Protection: Exploring Embodiment, Desire, and Entitlement to Pleasure as Predictors of Black and White Young Women's Sexual Agency opines that "Sexual agency is a fundamental dimension of sexual subjectivity and well-being." But in a social landscape where the conventional ideologies of femininity continue to exist as the dominant social forces, women often struggle and struggle to navigate their sexual agency.

Regardless, Maya's ultimate rejection of Veer exhibits her strength of character and appropriates her agency. Her rejection of Veer showcases her strong-willed and self-sufficient character and establishes that she doesn't need a man to sail through the journey of life. Veer's clandestine engagements and mysterious absences were an enigma for her. The lack of transparency in their relationship baffled her. She sometimes even felt that she didn't know him at all. She remembers, "His face was as impersonal as a stranger's." (189) Despite spending close intimate moments and cultivating a bond with him, she was clueless about his temperamental changes. She narrates, "Yet I was in a restless welter of confusion. I could not

understand why I felt so disturbed about the changes in his moods that afternoon. I was used to it, not only in him, in his uncle as well. I had resented it sometimes, the burden of being the good-tempered one.” (190) She begins to understand that Veer is indifferent to her feelings and only exploits her loneliness to feed his own desires. He neither reciprocates her love nor has any emotional attachment. Kate Millett, the noted feminist in her seminal work *Sexual Politics* writes, “The concept of romantic love affords a means of emotional manipulation which the male is free to exploit, since love is the only circumstance in which the female is (ideologically) pardoned for sexual activity. (37) Maya’s feelings and attachment to Veer make her vulnerable but her realization of Veer’s selfishness and manipulations actually emancipates her from the clutches of her one-sided love by rejecting and discarding him. The knowledge of Veer being Michael’s last companion, abandoning him to die, and never mentioning it to Maya, feels like a personal betrayal to her. She recounts, “He had not told me he had left Michael to fend for himself in a snowstorm with a broken ankle when they both knew it meant certain death.” (246) She felt an utter sense of despair and almost hated herself for being letting Veer close, physically and emotionally. Maya vents, “I had grieved Michael’s death before. Now I would torment myself to the end of my days for my intimacy with the man who had walked away from him when he most needed help. How had I allowed it to happen?” (246) She avenges Veer by ripping up Diwan Sahib’s letters and will, formally bestowing his property and resources on Veer.

Like Maya, Charu was a rebel in love too. Counterintuitive to Ama’s rigorous efforts of fixing up a match for Charu, her courage and audacity in turning away the prospective grooms are reflective of her agency. Charu plays up all sorts of tricks to foil Ama’s plans. She deliberately pretends cripple and insane before the potential grooms and their families, to resist and repel them. Ama tells Maya:

The Kawasaki sisters had gone away suspecting Charu was feeble-minded, and perhaps deaf. “That is how the wretch behaved with them!” Ama said. “They asked her simple questions and she kept staring at them as though she’s an idiot and she went on squawking, ‘What? What?’ like a parrot.” With the other groom’s family, Ama had spotted Charu working up a squint when she thought her grandmother was not looking. When asked to serve the Coca-Cola that had been bought for the guests, she had limped to and from the kitchen as though one of her legs were shorter than the other, and had spilled half a glass of the precious drink on the floor. (185)

She didn’t flinch before abandoning everything familiar and embarking on a journey, entirely new and alien and fraught with challenges, for a life with her Kundan Singh. “Charu had never

travelled out of Ranikhet before, except once or twice to go to villages further into the mountains for weddings and festivals. She had never gone alone; the only town she knew was Ranikhet” (199), but she dared to take the risk and go that extra mile to reunite with her lover in Delhi. Even the perils on her way and the lecherous autorickshaw drivers in Delhi couldn't subdue her iron will. With her audacity and courage, Charu emerges as the bravest character in the novel. Hooks in her book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, contends that

“Dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community.”
(197)

Sisterhood, or the collective bond and support among women, can be a powerful tool for empowering women and helping them reclaim and assert their agency. Sisterhood allows women to challenge internalized oppression and self-doubt. By witnessing other women's achievements and hearing their stories, women can reframe their narratives and recognize their potential. Sisterhood encourages self-affirmation and helps women break free from limiting beliefs and societal expectations. The novel depicts meaningful friendships between women, highlighting the support and camaraderie that can exist between them.

Female bonds are often undervalued or overshadowed in literature, and their portrayal contributes to feminist discourses. Maya's relationships with other characters, particularly her friendship with Charu, highlight her caring and nurturing nature. Maya's passion for educating Charu underlines her commitment to empowerment. She reflects, “I was possessed by my task: it had become a mission. I had failed with Charu all those years ago when she was a little girl in my class. This time it would be different!” (115) There was a sisterhood of solidarities. By being a safe keeper of Charu's secrets, Maya acted as Charu's safe space. Their interactions depict different aspects of female agency, from seeking support and friendship to asserting one's beliefs and convictions. Maya's willingness to support and uplift others showcases her strength in forming meaningful connections and fostering a sense of community. The novel also highlights instances of female solidarity and support among the women in the town. Through their mutual understanding and empathy, they assert their collective strength in the face of adversity. Miss Wilson stood by her side reading from the Bible when Maya went to bury Michael's ashes all by herself. Sisterhood validates women's experiences by acknowledging the systemic barriers and discrimination they face. Sharing stories and

experiences helps women recognize that their struggles are not isolated incidents but are part of broader societal patterns. When Charu imagined the worst possible scenarios of failing to locate Kundan in Delhi and taking a return journey to Ranikhet, she even anticipated its consequences and Ama's ruthless rage but she optimistically believed, "Maybe Maya Mam would fight for her. She would shelter her for a few days. She too had married out of caste – and religion – and she had lost her family." (209) Maya's mother was a silent but ardent supporter of her daughter. She was intimidated by her husband, but she exercised her agency by sneaking away to secretly meet Maya in a temple on every occasion that she could, helping her financially by thrusting pieces of jewellery into her hands and encouraging her to stay strong by staying by her side rock-solid. The jam-making factory in Ranikhet, an institution successfully run by women, is a manifestation of female solidarity through women empowerment. By fostering a sense of community and solidarity, women contribute to a collective empowerment movement. It is like a closely-knit women's community where the efforts of the local women are integrated in order to provide them with employment opportunities and harness their potential. Building networks and support systems can provide emotional support, validation, and collective strength. In her book, *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Hooks asserts, "[O]ne of the most vital ways we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone." (227) The factory serves as a safe sanctuary for oppressed girls and provides them with a platform to exercise their agency by contributing to creating a market for the indigenous produce and becoming financially independent. It provides a safe and supportive space where women can share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations and express themselves without constraints. Emotional support from other women can help build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging, fostering a stronger sense of agency. By working together, women can create networks, organizations, and movements that amplify their voices, and shape societal attitudes.

The female agency can significantly promote ecocritical consciousness, which involves recognizing the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment and advocating for sustainable and equitable ways of living. There is an innate connection between the degradation and exploitation of the environment and the subordination, abuse, and oppression of women. Rapid development adversely affects both nature and women. Women in the novel share an intimate bond with their environment and vehemently question and reject the prevailing patriarchal paradigms. The characters in the novel, especially Diwan Sahib,

Puran, and Charu exemplify humans' profound bond with the mountains. Maya, too, gradually develops a deep connection with Ranikhet's gentle hills and pristine skies. The serene mountains soon become her refuge. However, the arrival of Mr. Chauhan and his firm plans to transform Ranikhet into a tourist attraction inevitably disrupts the harmony. "Ranikhet has to become the Switzerland of India. Or at least it must be another Shimla" (Roy 50) The lush greenery that beautified the pavements was ousted to furnish them with grey slabs and set up concrete benches. This capitalist mania of destroying the natural habitat in the name of development enrages Maya as well and she even gets into a heated argument with Mr. Chauhan. Vandana Shiva, the celebrated Ecofeminist in her book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* postulates, "'Development' could not but entail destruction for women, nature and subjugated cultures, which is why, throughout the Third World, women, peasants, and tribals are struggling for liberation from 'development' just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonialism." (290) It is important to recognize and respect the diversity of women's experiences and perspectives, as well as the intersectional nature of gender and environmental issues. By empowering women, valuing their agency, promoting gender equality, and integrating diverse perspectives, we can foster more effective and sustainable approaches to environmental conservation and address the complex interplay between gender and the environment, thereby creating a more inclusive and ecologically conscious society. It is crucial to recognize and address the gendered dimensions of environmental challenges and involve women as agents of change in environmental decision-making and action.

Power is accrued in political division. The rabble-rousing politics targets and victimizes women in order to prove their mettle. The narrative delineates several instances of power-hungry politicians targeting an attack on and inspiring fear and panic among women. The election onset brings a deluge of politicians who try to exploit and abuse women. Umed Singh, the MP candidate canvassing in Ranikhet, stirred up people's passions and prejudices against other communities, the missionaries in particular. He was driven by the patriarchal quest for power. He emphasized the prevailing government's stance of a Hindu Nation and pitted Hindus against Christians. The vandalizing of churches and graveyards by political miscreants became a usual phenomenon. St. Hilda's, a convent, became an obvious target. The women at the convent were afraid. Miss Wilson was threatened for objecting to her school playground to be used as a parking lot for the political rally. Her Christian identity and her female sex made her vulnerable to oppression. The news from Odisha, the attacks on the missionaries in general and her brother

in particular, made her acutely aware of her powerlessness. Umed Singh's hate-filled speeches with an attempt to poison the minds and tear down the fabric of unity was a blatant manifestation of his rabble-rousing politics. He overtly criticized the Church for sending the deaf and mute destitute girls, Beena and Mitu to a missionary school in Banaras. The narrator informs that "Earlier that year, when the twins turned fifteen, they had been sent off at the church's cost to a convent in Varanasi, where destitute, disabled girls were schooled and trained in vocational skills." (22) However, Umed Singh questions the Church's intentions and claims that the concealed motive was to get them converted. He even accused the jam-making factory, a church-run institution, of misleading and forcibly converting Hindu girls to Christianity and raided it but was embarrassed when his plan backfired. However, Beena fell victim to the embarrassment and rage as one of the party workers sexually abused her by attempting to rape her. It was a demonstration of powerful male authority and politicians, as such, are presented as symbols of oppression and abuse of women. Even though she is faultless and manages to escape, she gets thrashed by her mother for her choice of clothing. However, Maya's rage and undeterred determination to report Beena's case to the police and get the culprit behind bars, despite Ama and Diwan Sahib's discouraging remarks, exhibit her agency.

Traditional gender norms and stereotypes assign specific roles and expectations to men and women. Millett articulates, "The image of the woman as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs." Men are often expected to be the primary breadwinners, decision-makers, and heads of households, reinforcing their position of authority. Women, on the other hand, are expected to be submissive, nurturing, and subordinate to men. Beauvoir further foregrounds the assumed status of women by positing, "Doomed to procreation and secondary tasks, stripped of her practical importance and her mystical prestige, a woman becomes no more than a servant." Maya's mother, a submissive housewife, is a perfect product of the oppressive Indian patriarchal system who lacks the power and courage to make and implement her decisions and instead submits to her husband's demands. Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes contribute to a culture of violence and the normalization of harmful practices. In addition to Maya's mother was Mrs. Chauhan, among the typical products of a patriarchal setup. She too was troubled and denied of her agency. She was caged in a lifeless marriage but was too enduring to break out of it or make an assertion to choose her autonomy. She tells Maya, "I have a dull married woman's life. You tell me about yours! So many things happen in it." (223) She has accepted the systematic patriarchal subordination as a woman's

destiny and therefore lacks the courage to stand for herself. She was too complacent to challenge her husband's authority and assert her agency. She narrates, "He [Mr. Chauhan] makes me wait also...Maybe that is a woman's fate." (225)

Several female characters, including Maya, challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations. For instance, Maya's refusal to adhere to widowhood customs or Charu's defiance of her family's expectations showcase how women can assert their agency by resisting norms that limit their choices. Beauvoir asserts, "All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception." (238) Maya's mother is a symbol of non-verbal protest. She silently rebels against her intimidating husband and his oppression by abandoning her husband and her marital bed in their later life. She denied anyone access to her bedroom, "guarding it as an inviolable refuge" (190) taking delight in her solitariness. The patriarchal oppression of women can impact them in myriad ways and can elicit unprecedented reactions. The fear and psychosis even make women defensive by resorting to violent measures if they sense a possible danger. Maya reflects, "My uncle said he had found there a thin, curved, lethally sharp steel knife, capable of sliding into flesh as easily as into a ripe mango...Why did she sleep with it under her pillow?" (190)

Patriarchy is a hegemonic power structure that systematically subjugates and hegemonizes women. It functions by institutionalizing and legitimizing their oppression. Challenging and transforming these androcentric dynamics requires addressing systemic inequalities, promoting gender equality, and creating inclusive spaces that value and support women's agency. This involves efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes, promote women's rights, increase women's representation and leadership roles, and create supportive environments that enable women to exercise autonomy and make choices according to their own aspirations and needs. Women's rights movements, legal reforms, and awareness campaigns seek to address gender disparities, promote gender equality, and empower women. However, transforming deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and power dynamics requires sustained efforts at the individual, community, and systemic levels to challenge and change attitudes, behaviors, and structures that perpetuate male supremacy.

The story is told from a female perspective, providing insights into the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the female characters. This narrative choice helps to highlight their complexities and challenges, contributing to a more nuanced portrayal of women's lives. The *Folded Earth*

beautifully portrays the journey of a woman discovering her agency and finding her voice in a world that often seeks to constrain and limit her. Maya's story highlights the importance of individual agency, personal growth, and the pursuit of self-empowerment in the face of societal constraints. Female assertion becomes a prominent theme that runs throughout the narrative. Their acts of assertion demonstrate their resilience, strength, and determination to shape their destinies. Throughout the novel, Anuradha Roy skillfully portrays female assertion as a powerful force that empowers the women in the story to break free from restrictive norms and stereotypes. By asserting their independence, pursuing their passions, and standing up to prejudice, these characters defy the limitations imposed on them by society and claim agency over their own lives.

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