



Seeds of Tomorrow: Ecological Consciousness and Sustainable Futures in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

*Ecological consciousness has emerged as a pivotal theme in contemporary English literature, reflecting growing anxieties about environmental degradation and the urgent need for sustainable living. This article examines how literary narratives articulate environmental perspectives and propose sustainable solutions, with special focus on Anuradha Roy's novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018). Rooted in ecocritical theory, the study explores Roy's deployment of deep ecological principles that foreground the inherent value of non-human life and advocate harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.*

Roy's narrative intertwines personal histories with ecological and political upheavals, demonstrating how environmental degradation mirrors the deterioration of human well-being. Through eco-feminist dimensions, the novel depicts women as both victims and stewards of the environment, emphasizing their role as custodians who preserve ecological balance amidst colonial and post-colonial disruptions. The text critiques excessive human interference and exploitative attitudes that deplete natural resources, aligning with Arne Naess's deep ecology framework that promotes ecological consciousness among the human community.

The article identifies sustainable solutions embedded in Roy's fiction: recognizing the richness and diversity of life forms, utilizing nature only to satisfy vital needs, and reducing population pressure to allow non-human life to flourish. These transformative changes accentuate environmental responsibility as essential for sustainable living. Furthermore, Roy's eco-spiritual narratives reveal the emotional toll of ecological degradation, illustrating the enduring connection between personal and ecological histories.

This study demonstrates that English literature, particularly Roy's work, serves as a powerful medium for shaping environmental consciousness, urging readers to reimagine the human-environment relationship and embrace practices that ensure ecological sustainability for future generations.

Keywords: Ecological consciousness, deep ecology, eco-feminism, sustainable futures, ecocriticism, bioregionalism

Introduction

In an era marked by accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, the call for ecological consciousness has become not merely academic but urgently imperative. Literature, as a powerful medium of cultural reflection and transformation, serves as a vital site for cultivating environmental awareness and envisioning sustainable futures. Among contemporary Indian writers, Anuradha Roy emerges as a distinctive voice whose novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018) transcends conventional historical fiction to embed profound ecological principles within its narrative fabric. This research paper, titled "Seeds of Tomorrow: Ecological Consciousness and Sustainable Futures in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*" examines how Roy's work functions as a literary vessel for deep ecological wisdom, eco-feminist resistance, and bioregional awareness—metaphorically represented as "seeds" that may germinate into transformative environmental practices for future generations.

Ecocriticism, as a separate school of literary criticism, emerged during the 1970s to study the interconnection between literature and ecology from an interdisciplinary perspective. Within this critical framework, Roy's novel stands as a compelling example of how narrative literature can advance ecological consciousness while simultaneously addressing personal, political, and historical dimensions of human experience. Through its central characters—particularly Myshkin, the elderly horticulturalist, and his mother Gayatri, the artist who is "one with the elements"—Roy presents models of ecological being that challenge anthropocentric paradigms and advocate for harmonious coexistence with the natural world. The novel's historical setting—spanning pre-independence India, World War II Europe, and post-colonial transitions—parallels contemporary tensions around climate change, environmental justice, and sustainable development.

Ultimately, "Seeds of Tomorrow" argues that Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* represents more than aesthetic achievement—it embodies an ethical imperative for ecological transformation. The novel encourages readers to rethink the human-environment relationship by demonstrating how women, as carriers of personal and cultural histories, also serve as custodians of the environment. In a world facing unprecedented environmental challenges, such literary seeds offer hope for futures where humans and nature coexist in harmony, respecting the inherent value of all life forms and embracing the transformative changes necessary for environmental responsibility.

Ecocriticism and Environmental Literature

The institutionalization of ecocriticism in the 1990s marked a decisive moment in literary studies, establishing the environment as a central category of critical inquiry. A foundational contribution to this movement is "The Ecocriticism Reader", edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, which consolidated key essays and theoretical positions in literary ecology. Glotfelty famously defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, emphasizing textual representations of nature and

environmental crisis. Complementing this framework, Lawrence Buell's "The Environmental Imagination" explores environmental representation in American literature, particularly through *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. Buell argues that literary texts cultivate ecological consciousness by reshaping cultural perceptions of place, responsibility, and sustainability. Together, these works established ecocriticism as an interdisciplinary field bridging literature, ethics, and environmental studies. By foregrounding ecological awareness within textual analysis, early ecocritical scholarship encouraged readers and researchers to reconsider canonical works through an environmental lens, thereby expanding the scope and relevance of literary criticism in an era of mounting ecological concern.

Literature as a Call to Action:

Literature has historically functioned as a catalyst for social and political transformation, and environmental writing continues this tradition by mobilizing awareness and activism. A landmark example is "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson, which influenced ecocriticism by helping establish the idea that literature can expose the ecological consequence of human power over nature, not just describe scenery or private feeling. Fictional narratives likewise serve as powerful calls to action. In "The Overstory", Richard Powers interweaves multiple storylines to highlight the interconnectedness of human and plant life, underscoring the moral imperative of conservation. By portraying environmental degradation alongside acts of resistance and stewardship, such works inspire readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world. Literature therefore transcends passive representation, functioning as an active force that challenges complacency and advocates collective responsibility toward ecological preservation. Within this literary landscape, Anuradha Roy's "*All the Lives We Never Lived*" stands as a distinctive contribution that approaching ecological themes through intimate, personal narratives rather than overt environmental activism. The novel's ecological consciousness operates silently, embedded within descriptions of gardens, trees, and natural landscapes that serve as both aesthetic embellishments and profound philosophical statements about human-nature relationships.

Narrative Structure and Ecological Metaphor in *All the Lives We Never Lived*

The novel is about Myshkin and his mother Gayatri who was an artist. His mother abandons the family for chasing of freedom. In that time, Nazism came in power then an artist from Gayatri's past who was a German seeks her out. The novel primarily unfolds in the early 20th century, with segments set against the national drama of Indian independence, set against the backdrop of growing tensions in the Europe of the late 1930s.

Anuradha Roy sets family drama against the national drama of Indian independence. This historical framing creates a narrative space where personal liberation and ecological awareness emerge as parallel pursuits.

Myshkin is extremely close to his mother, and when we meet him, he is elderly, retired from working as the town's landscape director and gardener, and living alone in greatly reduced circumstances compared to the ones in which he grew up. His whole life has been nothing but sorrow and loss since his mother abandoned him.

Myshkin pursues a career as horticulturalist specialising in urban tree planting. Myshkin's career as a horticulturalist specializing in urban tree planting positions him as an ecological witness whose life work embodies deep ecological principles.

“Over the next weeks, my long-unused sketchbooks filled with studies of the trees and plants in the garden that I associated with my mother: the pearly carpet of parijat flowers, *Nyctanthes arbortristis*, that she loved walking on barefoot; the neem near the bench where she had sat with Beryl listening to the story of Aisha. I barely slept, I forgot meals, I drew and painted her garden as if possessed.”

This passage demonstrates how Myshkin's artistic engagement with nature represents more than aesthetic appreciation—it embodies a profound ecological connection that transcends utilitarian relationship with the environment.

Gayatri Sen left India for Bali with German artist Walter Spies and another friend of his Beryl. While in Bali, Gayatri would write letters to her son but particularly long and detailed ones to her best friend Lisa McNally. The descriptions of the gardener plucking the jasmine and collecting them in a basket of white cloud to later thread them as a *gajra* for Gayatri brought back a flood of memories. Gayatri's association with vibrant natural descriptions positions her as an ecological steward whose artistic practice embodies harmonious coexistence with the environment.

Deep Ecological Principles in Character Development and Narrative

The paper explores the need for humans to realise the inherent values of the non-human world and to promote harmonious coexistence with the environment by valuing the richness and diversity of life forms. Roy's novel demonstrates this principle through characters' relationships with specific plants and trees that possess value independent of human utility. The passage describing Myshkin's painting of Queen of the Night and the garnet blossoms of the *Plumeria rubra*, the *champa* illustrates this principle.

The deep ecological principles highlight that richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realisation of values and are values themselves. Roy's novel celebrates botanical diversity through extensive descriptions of flowering trees, gardens, and natural landscapes. The descriptions of the gulmohar and amaltas trees are stupendous. One has to live in this ghastly dry heat of the north Indian plains to realise just how much the bright deep rich yellows and fiery reds actually seem pleasant on a hot summer day.

The novel's ecological imagination encompasses diverse ecosystems—from the scorching dry heat of north Indian plains to the tropics of Bali to mountain vegetation—demonstrating how biodiversity itself constitutes environmental value. This geographical diversity mirrors the novel's thematic exploration of cultural and personal diversity as equally valuable.

It further examines the need for a decrease in population for non-human life to flourish and to reduce excessive human interference with the ecosystem. The novel subtly critiques excessive human interference through narratives of environmental degradation accompanying colonial and political upheavals.

Deep ecology insists on seeing ecosystems as interconnected wholes rather than collections of separate parts. Roy's narrative structure embodies this principle by weaving together personal histories, political upheavals, and ecological concerns into an interconnected narrative web.

Gayatri's statement "I am finding out how limited my world was" seems to resonate at many levels for this story and modern India. This recognition of limited worldviews parallels deep ecological recognition that human perspectives must expand to encompass ecological wholeness. The novel demonstrates how personal liberation, political freedom, and ecological consciousness are interconnected pursuits.

Eco-feminist Dimensions: Women as Victims and Stewards

The characters, particularly women, are depicted as both victims and stewards of the environment amidst colonial and post-colonial upheavals. Through an eco-feminist lens, this research investigates how political and ecological disruptions shape the characters' lives and identities. Roy's work highlights the enduring connection between human and environmental well-being, illustrating how the degradation of one reflects the deterioration of the other.

In a very male house-hold there are only two women – the ayah/cook Banno Didi and Gayatri—who "typically" do not have much of a say in what is happening but the authorial eye gives sufficient clues to the existence of the women. Yet the author makes visible the thoughts of the women, their innermost thoughts, their experiences that are usually made public. This narrative strategy reveals how women's ecological stewardship operates within patriarchal constraints while simultaneously challenging those constraints. Gayatri's ecological consciousness becomes a source of liberation that enables her to transcend traditional gender roles.

Roy's novel encourages readers to rethink the human-environment relationship by demonstrating how women, as carriers of personal and cultural histories, also serve as custodians of the environment. Gayatri writes letters to Lisa that become transmissions of both personal memory and ecological knowledge.

Bioregionalism and Geographical Ecological Consciousness

Bioregionalism emphasizes living with the natural character of a place, not just within political boundaries, and the novel's landscapes are described as life-shaping environments with their own ecological and cultural logic. In the critical reading of Roy's work, Myshkin's attachment to trees, his insistence on district-level horticulture, and his sense that "I knew every tree, and the trees would know me" show a reciprocal relation between person and place rather than human mastery over nature. Gayatri's letters from Bali also matter here because they present

villages, forests, mountains, flowers, and local life as a connected bioregion with its own richness and distinctiveness.

Geographical ecological consciousness in the novel appears as awareness that land, history, and human conduct are intertwined. The novel's settings are not decorative: deforestation, logging, flyovers, power plants, and urban pressure are shown as direct disruptions of ecological balance. Myshkin's response to these changes is practical and ethical, since he argues for a horticultural division, watershed thinking, and greener city planning, which reflects a place-based ecological responsibility.

Bioregionalism entails "responsiveness to one's local part of the earth whose boundaries are determined by a location's natural characteristics rather than political boundaries". This concept grounds ecological consciousness in specific geographical contexts, recognizing that environmental relationships are shaped by local ecosystems, climate, and cultural practices. Roy's novel demonstrates bioregional awareness through detailed descriptions of specific landscapes and their ecological characteristics.

"Seeds of Tomorrow": Ecological Wisdom as Sustainable Futures

The title "Seeds of Tomorrow" functions as a metaphorical framework for understanding how ecological consciousness transmitted through narrative becomes legacy for future generations. Seeds represent both botanical reality (the plants, trees, and gardens central to the novel) and metaphorical possibility (ecological wisdom that can grow into sustainable futures). Myshkin's horticultural career epitomizes this metaphor—he plants saplings that will grow into trees benefiting future generations.

The passage where Roy describes Myshkin filling up his long-unused sketchbooks with studies of trees and plants in the garden while remembering his mother are like the last movement of a symphony, where everything comes together as a whole. It is as if Myshkin is expressing his delight at discovering the joy of who his mother was and experiencing her life through his paintings. This intergenerational transmission of ecological knowledge—from Gayatri to Myshkin—demonstrates how ecological consciousness becomes inherited legacy.

This paper reiterates the necessity to adhere to each deep ecological principle, accentuating the significant, transformative changes to be embraced to promote environmental responsibility for sustainable living. Roy's novel embodies this transformative practice by demonstrating how characters' ecological consciousness enables personal transformation. Gayatri's statement "I am finding out how limited my world was" seems to resonate at many levels for this story and modern India.

Contemporary Relevance: Ecological Consciousness in Modern Environmental Crisis

The novel does make explicit references to contemporary movements prevalent in modern India. These contemporary references position the novel's ecological consciousness within current environmental debates.

The incipient tension of pre-independence India parallels contemporary tensions around climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainable development.

Roy's work highlights the enduring connection between human and environmental well-being, illustrating how the degradation of one reflects the deterioration of the other. The distress at the unnecessary felling of the neem trees in Calcutta parallels contemporary concerns about urban deforestation, loss of native species, and environmental degradation in rapidly developing Indian cities. Myshkin's grief demonstrates emotional ecological connection that contemporary environmental movements seek to cultivate.

"Seeds of Tomorrow" as Metaphor for Sustainable Futures

The metaphorical framework of "seeds of tomorrow" represents how ecological consciousness transmitted through narrative, art, and intergenerational relationships becomes legacy for future generations. Myshkin's horticultural career—planting saplings that will grow into trees benefiting future generations—epitomizes this metaphor. The novel demonstrates that sustainable futures require fundamental transformation in how humans conceptualize their relationship with nature, adhering to deep ecological principles that recognize inherent value, diversity, and interconnectedness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "All the Lives We Never Lived" presents ecological consciousness not as a separate theme but as part of a larger moral vision that links human freedom, historical change, and environmental responsibility. Through Myshkin's care for trees, forests, and urban greenery, Anuradha Roy shows that sustainable living begins with respect for the intrinsic value of non-human life. Roy's novel repeatedly contrasts care and destruction: planting saplings, protecting neem trees, and imagining a green town stand against logging, pollution, and development driven by greed. This makes the text a strong example of deep ecology, because it values nature for itself rather than only for human usefulness. The novel also suggests that ecological damage and social damage are intertwined, since political upheaval, colonial violence, and environmental loss shape the same human world.

The novel's implied solutions are ethical as much as practical: limit exploitation, protect biodiversity, and adopt planning that respects forests, water systems, and urban ecology. Myshkin's vision of a horticultural division and greener civic planning represents a forward-looking model of sustainability rooted in expertise, restraint, and public responsibility. In this sense, Roy's fiction argues that sustainable futures depend on changing attitudes, policies, and habits, not just technology.

Ultimately, the novel teaches that ecological consciousness is a form of social conscience: when people learn to see trees, rivers, and other life forms as partners in existence, sustainability becomes possible. Roy's narrative

therefore concludes, at the level of meaning if not plot, with a call for harmony between human aspiration and the living world.

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