



Research Article

Neo – Chipko Activism: Literary Eco Feminism and Eco-resistance “From Reni to Rishikesh: Echoes of the Chipko Movement & Literary Representations of Himalayan Eco-resistance”

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Abstract

The forest region of the Himalayas has long been ecological survival, labour, cultural memories, and values of generations. An area of whole regions make spiritual identity of green revolution and sacrifices of peoples, the communities of Himalayan are became embodied resistance and also knowns as Indigenous ecological Knowledge This paper Neo-Chipko Activism: Literary Eco-Feminism and Eco-Resistance - From Reni to Rishikesh: Echoes of the Chipko Movement and Literary Representations of Himalayan Eco-Resistance traces a genealogy of Himalayan eco-resistance that begins in 1974 with the tree-hugging protest of twenty-seven women from the village of Reni, led by Gaura Devi, who physically embraced trees to prevent their being cut down and ends with the recent Neo-Chipko protests around Rishikesh, where citizens and environmental groups have similarly adopted the motif of the tree hug as a way to fight off deforestation, the building of new hydroelectric plants, and the incursion of Rishikesh as a commercial and pilgrimage destination.

In this paper, the author argues that these two episodes in the long history of Himalayan environmentalism should be understood as part of the same process, one that draws on a particular feminist and ecological grammar of embodied resistance, one that insists on the conflation of women's bodies, the forests, and the livelihoods of the region.

This paper Illustrated into both movements within in longer historical event, the Chipko Movement and recently neo- chipko2.0. It pays particular attention to the literary afterlife of the movement: How might fiction, memoir, and folk narrative by Himalayan and Himalayan-adjacent writers encode and reencode the themes of the Chipko movement? What might the recovered stories of this region's eco-resistance reveal about the ways in which “Chipko” itself has been naturalised as a discourse, a set of symbolic and material practices?

In foregrounding the connections between activist practices and literary representation, and by pursuing these connections across different media and texts, this paper contends that Himalayan eco-resistance is best understood as a compound cultural practice.

This paper ultimately proposes “Neo-Chipko” as a conceptually useful category for thinking about militancy, gendered ecological knowledge, and literary representation in tandem.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent reports from Rishikesh, the region lying on the edge of the Garhwal Himalayas, which has been both a sanctuary and a crucible for a certain way of life, as it has been a land of faith, facing growing pressure from development, have long been invested with spiritual significance.

An expression, Chipko, “to cling”, was demonstrated by the villagers who, by hugging the trees, sought to stop further cutting down of the forest, and this act of love turned into a great eco-protest. These “echoes of Chipko” are heard in the discussions and writings in both political and scientific fields and also in the literature, where authors depict the Himalayas as an ecological and geographical landscape that is both under threat of and capable of resisting human-caused climate change, loss of biodiversity, dam construction and other pressures like mass tourism.

Indeed, the Chipko movement is seen as a model of environmental resistance, one that drew on unique feminist and ecological resources to oppose the deforestation and commercialisation of the Himalayan region. It was a Gandhian eco-feminist movement, one that stemmed from the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of the Indian independence struggle. But the everyday experiences of peasant women who fought to save the forests by “clinging” to the trees (and thus physically stopping any attempt to cut them down) were embedded in the metaphysical understandings of the region, particularly the notions drawn from Indian philosophy and religion, such as the ideas of Prakriti (Nature as power and creative energy) and Shakti (a manifestation of universal power). And the Chipko movement is seen not only as an example of environmental activism but also as a phenomenon that involved women’s agency in a unique way. In their efforts to protect the forest, women like Gaura Devi and her peers used nonviolent but physically taxing means of resistance, such as tree hugging. At the same time, they took on tremendous personal risk, as they had to endure the pressures of both domestic and external matters (such as the threat of state security forces). By becoming politically active, these women challenged the status quo and reimagined their roles in society, a process that ultimately helped to reshape forest governance in the region.

The literature review discusses ecofeminism and the Chipko Movement; both deal with the relationship between women, nature, and the environment. Women’s lives, their roles, beliefs, values, lifestyles, and attitudes are deeply connected with the natural world. Ecofeminism views women as caretakers of nature and men as users of it. Ecofeminism views women as earth and earth as woman. Ecofeminism holds that the same social values are responsible for the domination of women by men and nature by man. Nature is considered to be Mother Earth; natural resources are Mother Nature; fertile soil ‘virgin land’) is to be ‘tilled’; and bad land is ‘barren’, as if there was no womb of woman, childbearing capacity, and fertility as we see in the world of (Warren, 2000). Ecofeminism views the female creative principle as corresponding to the creative principle of nature. Indeed, the concept of ecofeminism is related to environmental issues, gender issues, and even to

Indian culture; the concept was actually developed and advanced by Ecofeminist women writers.

So let's talk about what ecofeminism is. – Ecofeminism came to propose an alternate worldview where the earth is sacred, an ecological consciousness is invoked, and women and nature are interconnected and interdependent in myriad ways. On the other hand, Ecofeminists argue that patriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature.

• The Impact of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism examines the relationships between women and nature. In sociology, the connection between nature, women, and the environment is deeply intertwined. Historically, culturally, and mythologically present across almost all societies. Women and nature share an intrinsic bond. For instance, in India, women are frequently envisioned as Prakriti (nature) in both imagination and practice. Ecofeminism introduces a vital dimension to this relationship by examining the dynamics of hierarchy and domination. By establishing this intersection, ecofeminism highlights the close link between patriarchal domination over women and the natural world.

Through the feminist lens, ecofeminism examines the following:

- How a patriarchal society treats the powerful combination of Shakti (nature) and women.
- The parallel exploitation of women and nature by patriarchal society.
- The role of development, the destruction of nature, and patriarchal exploitation as parallel processes.

The modern environmental crisis reflects a broader structural failure in how human societies inhabit, which ecofeminist theory addresses by challenging the dominant capitalist frameworks. Ecofeminist philosophers argue that capitalist modernity disrupts ecological balance by prioritising growth over life. To counter this, they propose an alternative paradigm centred on care, repair, and cross-species solidarity. This framework establishes an “ecofeminist grand narrative” that foregrounds structural interdependence and generativity as essential practices for planetary survival. While poststructuralist, postcolonial, and traditional feminist thinkers have historically critiqued grand narratives for marginalising vulnerable subjects, ecofeminists argue that strategic meta-narratives remain crucial for mobilising collective political action.

The Chipko movement drew significantly from these ecofeminist principles, employing Gandhian nonviolence as its guiding force. Indeed, the backbone of the Chipko resistance movement was fundamentally comprised of local women, including such prominent figures as Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, Bimla Behn, Hima Devi, Gauri Behn, Gunga Devi, Bachani Devi, and Itwari Devi.

While men like Sunderla Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Ghanshyam Shalini, and Dhoom Singh Negi became highly visible leaders, they largely served as students and followers of these revered foundation women. Notably, Mira Behn, one of Mahatma Gandhi’s closest disciples, transferred her activism to

the Himalayan region in the late 1940s. There, she established the Pashulok cattle centre between Rishikesh and Hardwar. Understanding the importance of cattle in sustainable farming, this pioneering activist-scholar began her journey from the cow and then moved to forests in her quest to document and understand the Himalayan ecosystem and its endangered resources. Similarly, the same thoughts were expressed by Vandana Shiva in her extraordinary work “*Staying Alive*”(1989), an ecological development which expresses the environmental activist; for instance saw ancient India as possessing a more environment-friendly culture. Then an incredible author (Mahasweta Devi’s) work ‘*A Red Flower*’ illustrates a powerful postcolonial text tracking how tribal women and their sacred forests are simultaneously destroyed by industrial capitalism.

• **Ecofeminist Re-readings of Chipko -**

The ecofeminist literature on Chipko constitutes the most influential interpretive turn of the past three decades. Banerjee’s 2025 *Chipko Movement: An Ecofeminist Analysis* traces the genealogy of the movement from the eighteenth-century Bishnoi sacrifice to the Reni women’s nonviolent protest and reads Chipko as “a message about justice, resiliency, and the necessity of inclusive development strategies rather than merely an environmental protest” than an environmental protest. This genealogical approach resonates with the present paper’s concern with the continuity of Himalayan eco-religious practices, except that Banerjee emphasises gender, ecology, and community solidarity as constitutive of the Chipko ethos. These themes are consonant with the embodied resistance theorised by the present paper, which views the tree-body connection as a specific form of semiotic practice.

Another significant contribution to the ecofeminist scholarship on Chipko is Emara’s 2017 reading of Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*. Emara’s chapter provides the most precise historical details about the Reni women’s pioneering protest. However, beyond the standard factual observations about the date, number of participants, and the impact on the watershed (all of which appear in the text), the author offers little commentary on the specifics of the eco-activist praxis. Emara reads the landscape in the novel as an extension of the protagonist’s eco feminist subjectivity. Critically, Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1989) furnishes a foundational ecofeminist critique of the appropriation of nature as a site for patriarchal exploitation of women. Similarly, Castaing’s 2013 “*Gender Trouble*” essay, which analyses the eco-feminist representation in contemporary Hindi novels, is useful for the present paper in that it extends the Chipko discourse from the realm of historical sources to that of fiction. Indeed, Castaing’s analysis of the eco-feminist engagement with the Forest Act of 1980 reveals that Garg’s novel represents the forest as a gendered entity. The author’s conceptualisation of gendered landscape provides the theoretical link to the present paper’s argument on embodied resistance.

Finally, in keeping with the present paper’s emphasis on interpreting Chipko through the lens of gendered materialist discourse, it is worth noting Manna, Shannon and De Meulder’s 2023 *Forest* figures of the past (and present)

study of the post-Chipko regulation and state forest policy in the Garhwal Himalaya. This research highlights the impact of the Forest Act 1980 on the local forest livelihoods and communities. In turn, this serves to inform the present paper’s argument on how post-Chipko forest governance has shaped the Rishikesh eco-activist praxis. In particular, the findings on the imposition of reductionist forest management on the Himalayan forest practices resonate with the ecofeminist themes of the present paper. Indeed, by introducing the concept of second nature (reductionist forest management), Manna et al essentially problematize the very notion of the Chipko Act as a forest management practice.

Begum’s 2025 study of Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* constitutes the most pertinent piece of scholarship for the ecofeminist themes running through the present paper. Specifically, Begum’s chapter furnishes a detailed ecofeminist reading of the cultural practices and beliefs of the Arunachal Pradesh tribe that informs Dai’s novel *The Legends of Pensam*. The key finding of Begum’s analysis is the revelation of the gendered ecological worldview that informs the tribal traditions concerning the forests, water resources, snow lion, and the mountain. This finding is particularly informative for the present paper, in that it builds on the ecofeminist themes introduced by Banerjee in his historical analysis of the Chipko movement. Indeed, Begum’s analysis of the gendered ecologies and ecofeminist consciousness in *The Legends of Pensam* complements the findings of Banerjee’s chapter on the Himalayan forest practices. Together, these two pieces of scholarship provide the conceptual basis for the present paper’s argument on the regional and cultural specificities of the Chipko eco-activist praxis.

• **Gaps in the Existing Literature -**

The review above reveals four gaps that the present paper seeks to address. First, the existing literature on the Chipko movement is heavily skewed towards the historical movement in Reni with its 1974 episode and has paid insufficient attention to the recent Rishikesh protests. Second, while the ecofeminist scholarship on Chipko is extensive, it has focused primarily on the historical praxis and has said little about its literary aftermath, with the important exceptions of the aforementioned critics (Castaing, Gupta, Sahil & Naqvi, et al.). Third, the literary criticism has tended to read the Himalayan ecofeminist text in isolation from the activist praxis, thus failing to engage the connection between the two. Fourth, the stewardship tradition has read Chipko as an ecofeminist discourse of domination but has said little about the contemporary stewardship practices in the region, particularly those concerning the Rishikesh Himalayan eco activists.

The present paper addresses these gaps by attempting to read Reni and Rishikesh as a single phenomenon; by foregrounding the links between literary and activist practices; and by exploring the themes of stewardship and domination in the context of the Himalayan eco activists’ experience.

CONCLUSION OF THE REVIEW

To conclude, in general, the conclusion argues that Chipko’s legacy is alive, if transformed, across the country. Its new

manifestations in Rishikesh are part of an evolving ecofeminist discourse that brings together activism and literature to advance a set of environmental values. The chapter that follows looks more closely at how these values are embedded in the activist praxis and the literary discourses. It begins with a brief discussion of the Chipko legacy in contemporary Indian environmentalism and goes on to examine the specific ways in which the Rishikesh activists and authors have intervened in the national conversation on the environment.

From Reni to Rishikesh, the argument must intervene: on the closure of the historical episode, on the separation of activism from literature, on the urban-blindness of much ecofeminist scholarship, and on the under-theorisation of stewardship in pilgrimage-town ecologies. The chapters that follow build on this literature to propose Neo-Chipko activism as the analytical category that holds these sites together. Fiction, memoirs, and indigenous narratives do not merely reflect Chipko but actively participate in its afterlife, shaping cultural memory and ecological consciousness. Thus, it unites militant conservation, gendered ecological knowledge, and literary imagination, offering a framework for modern environmental advocacy under urban and global ecological pressures.

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Natasha Paneri is associated with Janardan Rai Nagar Rajasthan Vidyapeeth, Udaipur, Rajasthan, India. She is actively engaged in academic and research activities with a focus on interdisciplinary studies. Her interests include promoting quality research, higher education, and contributing to scholarly publications through innovative and evidence-based academic work.