

From Creation to Crumbling: Environmental Decline and Artistic Resistance in Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner*

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Abstract

This article explores how Roy employs the metaphor of clay and the motif of pottery to articulate an urgent ecological vision rooted in artistic resistance. Anuradha Roy's The Earthspinner is a poignant meditation on the interwoven threads of environmental destruction, artistic creation, and sociopolitical strife. Through the life of Elango, a potter striving to shape beauty from a crumbling world, Roy presents an eco-critical narrative that underscores both environmental decline and the resilience of artistic agency. Using principles of eco-criticism and deep ecology, this article examines the tensions between tradition and modernity, creation and destruction, and humanity and nature. The article argues that The Earthspinner transcends a personal or regional tale to deliver a universal message about our collective responsibility toward the planet and the creative forces that resist its degradation.

Keywords : Eco-criticism, Environmental Decline, Artistic Resistance, Clay Metaphor, Deep Ecology, Creation and Destruction, Nature and Identity

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Anuradha Roy's *The Earthspinner* (2021) offers a rich landscape for examining the ecological imagination through fiction. The novel, set in South India, centers on Elango, a potter caught in the crosscurrents of personal desire, communal violence, and environmental degradation. Clay, in this narrative, is not merely a material, but it is a living metaphor for the earth itself, a symbol of both creation and destruction. As ecocriticism becomes an increasingly relevant lens through which to read contemporary literature, *The Earthspinner* stands out for its nuanced treatment of how artistic expression serves as resistance against environmental decline and socio-political fragmentation.

Eco-criticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (18). In the Indian context, writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Anuradha Roy have increasingly engaged with ecological themes to interrogate the cultural and environmental crises of modernity. Indian eco-fiction often reflects the confluence of spirituality, land, and livelihood, making environmental destruction not just a material loss but a metaphysical wound.

In *The Earthspinner*, Roy contributes to this growing body of ecological literature by focusing not on vast environmental catastrophes but on the slow, intimate disintegration of nature, tradition, and community. Her narrative is rooted in the local but resonates with global ecological concerns. Elango's story, while deeply personal, is emblematic of a wider human disconnection from the earth. Anuradha Roy intricately weaves the metaphor of clay into the fabric of her narrative, transforming it into a powerful symbol of ecological consciousness, spiritual connection, artistic expression, and the fragility of both the earth and human existence. At the heart of the novel lies the life of Elango, a skilled potter whose relationship with clay is not merely occupational but sacred. For Elango, clay is not inert material to be molded into objects of use or beauty, but it is a living extension of the earth, carrying the weight of cultural memory, spiritual resonance, and emotional depth. His act of pottery becomes a communion with the land, a ritual that ties him to ancestral traditions, and a form of resistance against a world spiraling into environmental and moral decline. Roy's portrayal of clay extends beyond its physical properties, drawing on its metaphorical richness to reflect the transformation of the earth in human hands and how it can be shaped with care into life-affirming art or destroyed through neglect, violence, and greed.

The metaphorical use of clay begins with its fundamental connection to the earth. Clay, formed from centuries of geological processes, embodies nature's patience and resilience, but also its vulnerability. Elango's tactile relationship with clay mirrors his reverence for the natural world. Roy writes, "When he touched clay, the world fell away. It was only the form he was bringing to life that mattered" (34). This moment illustrates a transcendental act, where the potter becomes a conduit for the earth's expression. The shaping of clay becomes a sacred gesture, a moment of ecological and spiritual alignment. In this sense, clay becomes a metaphor for a world that can still be shaped into harmony.

However, this act of creation is set against a backdrop of destruction. Elango lives in a community increasingly alienated from its ecological roots. His practice, which once commanded respect, is viewed with suspicion or dismissed as irrelevant in a modernized, polarized society. The erosion of environmental awareness and traditional knowledge mirrors the erosion of clay as a cultural medium, making Elango's commitment to his craft an act of resistance. His kiln, studio, and clay horse are all under siege, both literally and symbolically. As urbanization spreads and communal tensions rise, the earth becomes an object of violence. The same clay that holds potential for beauty becomes a site of struggle, reminding readers that the earth's fate lies precariously in human hands.

Furthermore, Roy expands the metaphor of clay to reflect Elango's emotional and existential journey. The malleability of clay and its ability to change shape, to be reformed, broken, and re-fired. It parallels Elango's own experiences of love, loss, and perseverance. His unfulfilled romance with Zohra, a woman from a different religious and social background, introduces personal suffering into his life but also intensifies his creative drive. His obsessive labor on the terracotta horse, which he envisions as both an artistic masterpiece and a sacred symbol, becomes an outlet for his anguish and longing. The horse, much like clay itself, carries multiple symbolic registers. It evokes traditional Indian folk art, especially the Aiyandar horses of Tamil Nadu, which are linked to village protection and fertility rituals. In crafting such a figure, Elango attempts to bridge the past and the present, the sacred and the personal, the artistic and the ecological. The horse is monumental, not meant for utility or commerce, but as an assertion of beauty and meaning in a crumbling world.

Elango's relationship with clay also embodies a silent form of ecological ethics. His rejection of mass production and mechanization and his insistence on handcrafting each piece position him as an advocate of slow, mindful engagement with the earth. This aligns with the principles of deep ecology, which advocate for a "fundamental shift in how humans relate to the natural world—not as conquerors or consumers, but as participants in a shared ecological existence" (Naess 95). Elango does not exploit clay; he collaborates with it. He listens to its grain, adjusts to its temperament, and accepts its imperfections. This intimate, almost animistic, relationship is contrasted with the violence that others in the community inflict upon the environment. Trees are destroyed, water sources polluted, and traditional crafts discarded in favor of synthetic materials. Roy draws attention to this contrast through Elango's quiet defiance. His insistence on working with earth, fire, and water becomes a political statement, an act of ecological remembrance. In a world that forgets its roots, Elango's pottery recalls the earth's original voice. The metaphor of clay thus functions not only on a symbolic level but also as a critique of unsustainable modernity.

Moreover, the metaphor of clay extends into questions of identity, memory, and cultural inheritance. Elango is a character suspended between love and isolation, past and future, tradition and change. His art, shaped by the land, carries

his memory, and through it, the collective memory of a vanishing culture. When he molds clay, he does more than create form; he preserves a way of life. Roy writes, "Each pot he made carried a history, not just of the earth it came from, but of the hands that had known how to shape it" (87). This statement highlights the generational continuity encoded in clay. It connects Elango to the earth, to his ancestors, and to a future that may yet rediscover this harmony. At the same time, the destruction of his art implies a rupture in this continuity, a warning that if we lose our connection to the earth, we lose our identity.

The novel also uses the metaphor of clay to explore themes of impermanence and rebirth. Clay, after all, is not a permanent medium. It can crumble, dissolve, and be remade. In religious and cultural traditions across India, clay is used to make idols that are worshipped and then immersed in water, symbolizing both divinity and transience. Roy draws on this symbolism subtly but powerfully. Elango's broken horse does not mark an end; it becomes part of the landscape, like ruins that tell a story. This echoes the Buddhist notion of samsara and the ecological idea of cycles, where death feeds life and where destruction leads to regeneration. Thus, even in the novel's tragic moments, the metaphor of clay offers a vision of hope. The earth can be shaped again. Art can be made again. The potter's hands, though wounded, can still create.

In addition to Elango's journey, Roy introduces the voice of Sara, the narrator and a young girl who observes Elango's world with wonder and sensitivity. Through Sara, the metaphor of clay is extended into pedagogy and legacy. Elango's teachings, his approach to clay, and his understanding of beauty become imprinted on Sara's consciousness. She does not become a potter herself, but she carries his vision forward. In this way, clay becomes a metaphor for knowledge transmission, for environmental and artistic sensibilities passed across generations. It affirms that even when the material is broken, its essence survives in memory and story. Roy thus reaffirms the enduring power of creation in the face of destruction, suggesting that artistic and ecological consciousness are not only interlinked but vital for the survival of human culture.

Anuradha Roy's use of clay as metaphor in *The Earthspinner* is a masterful integration of environmental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual themes. Clay becomes a conduit through which the novel explores the fragile interdependence between humans and the earth. It symbolizes the possibilities of creation in a destructive world, the resilience of tradition in an era of erasure, and the ethical responsibility of shaping the world we inhabit. Through the figure of Elango, the potter, Roy articulates a vision of the artist as an ecological custodian, someone who listens to the earth, honors its rhythms, and seeks to create not for profit, but for meaning. The metaphor of clay thus becomes central to understanding the novel's environmental ethos, offering a poignant reflection on how, in the potter's hands, the earth itself speaks, breaks, and endures.

Elango's art is not merely aesthetic; it is deeply political and ecological. His attempt to build a giant terracotta horse, a sacred object in folk tradition. It becomes an act of defiance against cultural amnesia and environmental disregard. Roy frames this horse as "something beyond use or profit," a symbolic reclamation of lost values (112). In creating the horse, Elango challenges the utilitarian ethos of modernity, which sees the earth and its resources only in terms of exploitation. The horse, however, cannot escape the violence of its time. It is broken, like the environment, like Elango's dreams. Yet, Roy does not present this as a defeat. Rather, the act of creation itself becomes an enduring form of resistance. In eco-critical terms, this reflects what Timothy Morton calls "dark ecology"—a recognition of environmental ruin that does not relinquish hope but adapts to the complexity of coexistence (16).

Moreover, Roy suggests that creation is inherently oppositional. To create is to push back against erasure, to insist on continuity. Elango's defiance is quiet but powerful; it is rooted in the belief that beauty and meaning can emerge from brokenness. One of the novel's most striking features is how environmental degradation is tied to cultural and moral decline. The local lake, once central to community life, is polluted and abandoned. Trees are felled, fields disappear under concrete, and traditional crafts vanish. Roy states, "The earth he knew was vanishing, its memory receding under tar, noise, and smoke" (91). These images are not incidental, but they are central to Roy's ecological critique. She shows how the destruction of nature is mirrored by the collapse of community, tradition, and ethical responsibility. The violence that erupts in the town is not isolated; it is part of the same logic that destroys forests and silences art. In this sense, *The Earthspinner* participates in what Lawrence Buell terms the "environmental imagination"—a mode of storytelling that reveals the interdependence of human and nonhuman life (2).

Roy weaves a poignant narrative that laments the degradation of both the natural environment and the cultural fabric of contemporary India. Through the life and struggles of Elango, a village potter dedicated to his craft and the land, Roy creates a parallel between the slow, violent erosion of ecosystems and the displacement of artisanal traditions and pluralistic values. The novel portrays a world where the earth itself, once revered and shaped with care, becomes a casualty of religious extremism, consumerism, and environmental neglect. Roy's use of lyrical prose, symbolic objects like the clay horse, and dual narrative perspectives enables her to expose how environmental and cultural breakdowns are not isolated phenomena but deeply interconnected processes resulting from systemic violence and loss of rootedness.

Elango's identity as a potter ties him intimately to the natural world. His use of clay, water, fire, and wood underscores a sustainable relationship with the earth, one shaped by sensitivity, craft, and continuity. "Clay was the beginning and the end," the narrator reflects, situating Elango's craft in a cyclical worldview that respects natural rhythms (Roy 23). His artistic process becomes symbolic of a more holistic way of life. In contrast, the social world around him is marked by speed,

violence, and division. Urban expansion threatens green spaces, communal tensions boil over, and traditional knowledge systems are dismissed in favor of mass production. The ecological crisis, in Roy's narrative, is inseparable from the cultural one.

The novel situates this environmental and cultural collapse within the broader context of religious and political radicalization. Elango's romance with Zohra, a woman from a different religious background, becomes the catalyst for violent backlash from his conservative community. "Ethnic conflict between groups that share an equal amount of income and power is possible under an unranked system" (Mehmood 863). The punishment he suffers is not only personal but emblematic of the broader destruction of India's syncretic traditions. His terracotta horse is a grand, imaginative creation intended to symbolize love, mythology, and beauty, but it is eventually destroyed by fundamentalists.

The horse's fate mirrors that of the natural environment: what is sacred, beautiful, and rooted in the past is shattered under the weight of ideological rigidity. This symbolic act of violence against the horse, crafted from the earth itself, represents the twin erosion of ecological sensibility and cultural plurality. (Roy 176)

The novel's narrative structure, alternating between Elango's story and the voice of Sara, a young girl observing his decline, amplifies the sense of loss across generations. Sara, as a bridge figure between the past and future, is both witness and inheritor of Elango's ecological wisdom. She recognizes the spiritual and artistic magnitude of his craft and the tragedy of its disappearance. His marginalization, therefore, signals not just the death of a man or a tradition, but the silencing of an alternative worldview that sees the earth not as a resource to be exploited, but as a sacred collaborator. Roy writes, "He believed in the soul of clay. He shaped it as if shaping the world itself. And when the world turned against him, the clay, too, shattered" (89). Roy's engagement with ecological themes is not abstract but embodied through material practices like pottery, fire-kiln burning, and landscape observation. Her depiction of clay, in particular, is rich with metaphorical and environmental significance. Clay is not just a material but a witness to time, memory, and suffering. It holds stories, absorbs intentions, and, when broken, reveals the violence that lurks beneath the surface of societal change.

Simultaneously, Roy's novel critiques the erosion of cultural practices and oral traditions. Elango represents a lineage of potters who once held cultural authority in rural India. However, the rise of urban aesthetics, plastic commodities, and mechanized production has pushed such crafts to the periphery. The cultural erosion is not only economic but also symbolic; the values that once sustained ecological harmony and artistic integrity are dismissed as irrelevant or backward.

The community's rejection of Elango is also a rejection of a worldview that values slowness, care, and the handmade. Roy's portrayal is thus deeply postcolonial, echoing critiques of modernity that argue how colonial and capitalist

paradigms disrupted indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable relationships with the environment. Furthermore, the novel underscores the psychological effects of environmental and cultural alienation. Elango's internal deterioration parallels the external collapse of his surroundings. As his creative vision is thwarted and his love deemed unacceptable, he spirals into despair. His once vibrant workshop becomes a space of ruin. The broken horse, lying in the dust, is a grave marker not only for artistic freedom but also for the possibility of harmony in a world increasingly defined by borders. Yet, Roy resists total pessimism. Through Sara's observations and memories, the possibility of continuity persists. Even in the fragments, there is an urge to remember, to preserve, and to tell stories that might inspire future reconnection.

Roy also critiques how masculinity is shaped in relation to environmental and cultural decay. Elango's gentleness, artistry, and emotional openness stand in stark contrast to the hyper-masculine violence of the mob that attacks him. The novel implicitly critiques a patriarchal culture that equates power with destruction. Elango's vulnerability becomes a site of ethical strength; his refusal to abandon beauty or the earth marks him as an emblem of resistance. Roy positions environmental ethics as deeply gendered and linked to nurturing, care, and humility rather than dominance. In doing so, she extends the metaphor of the earth as not only physical space but also a space of gendered meaning, capable of being mothered or mutilated. In the final pages of the novel, the lingering presence of clay, fire, and memory suggests a cyclical, if fragile, hope. The ecological and cultural damage cannot be undone, but neither can the stories be erased. Elango's broken horse, though destroyed, becomes a relic, its shards whispering of another way to live. Sara, in remembering him, becomes a guardian of that vision. Roy's novel thus offers both critique and elegy: a searing account of what has been lost and a quiet invocation to restore what might still be saved.

The Earthspinner is a powerful reminder of the fragility of both nature and creativity. Roy's ecological vision is not one of grand gestures but of quiet, persistent acts of creation in a world that is breaking apart. Through the figure of Elango and the metaphor of clay, she crafts a story that speaks to our collective responsibility toward the planet. Art, in this novel, is not an escape from the world but an immersion in its most painful truths. It is a mode of resistance, remembering, and reshaping. In a time of environmental crisis, *The Earthspinner* offers not only a lament but also a blueprint for resilience and a belief that from crumbling earth, new forms may still rise.

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