



WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT, AND LITERATURE: REPRESENTATION RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines the interconnected relationship between women, the environment, and literature, using the ideas of representation, resistance, and resilience as its guiding lens. It suggests that women's experiences with the environment—whether through everyday subsistence work or their heightened vulnerability to climate change—have shaped a rich cultural archive of writings, movements, and policies. Literature, in this context, does not simply reflect these realities; it also actively reshapes them. Drawing on ecofeminist perspectives and South Asian environmental histories, the study traces a clear trajectory—from early grassroots resistance, such as the Chipko movement, to today's gender-responsive climate policies and livelihood transitions led by self-help groups (SHGs). It places well-known voices like Rachel Carson and Vandana Shiva alongside regional Indian writing and broader Global South narratives, reading them in conversation with state policies (including FRA provisions, SAPCC and NAPCC frameworks, and MoEFCC initiatives) as well as journalistic accounts. Through this layered approach, the paper shows how literature and public discourse come together to shape how environmental issues are understood. At its core, the argument is that literary representation is far from passive. It acts as a material force—one that nurtures resistance and builds resilience. Through metaphors of care, kinship, and stewardship, literature challenges extractive models of development and offers alternative ways of imagining ecological futures that are more just and inclusive. To bring these ideas together, the paper introduces a “4R framework”—Representation → Recognition → Resistance → Resilience—as a way of linking literary expression with policy and practice. It closes by outlining a practical roadmap: integrating gender-responsive climate action, strengthening community forest rights, and adopting creative, inclusive pedagogies that place women's environmental knowledge at the heart of democratic ecological governance.

Introduction:

Since at least the 1970s, feminist theory and environmental thought have come together to explore how ideas about gender and nature are shaped under patriarchal and extractive systems. The term “ecofeminism,” introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, brings together a range of approaches that question familiar hierarchies—male/female, culture/nature, mind/body—that have long supported both gender inequality and environmental exploitation. Over time, ecofeminism has branched into materialist, cultural or spiritual, and liberal strands. Yet, across these variations, one concern remains central: the intertwined marginalization of women and the environment, and the search for more equal and cooperative ways of living.

India offers a particularly compelling context for examining this connection. Much of its environmental history is closely tied to women’s everyday labor—collecting forest produce, fetching water, gathering fuelwood. Its literary traditions, too, have long reflected the relationship between gendered bodies and landscapes, from devotional poetry in regional languages to contemporary eco-fiction. Alongside this, news reports and policy documents continue to record ongoing struggles around forest governance, climate adaptation, and shifting livelihoods—areas where women often stand at the forefront, both as primary stewards and as those most directly affected.

This paper contributes to the environmental humanities by bringing together four distinct streams of knowledge: encyclopedic sources for conceptual grounding, scholarly books and articles, government policies, and journalistic writing. Taken together, these sources support a central claim: literature does more than represent reality—it helps shape it. It provides the metaphors, language, and imagined futures that guide resistance and sustain resilience for women and their ecological worlds.

Ecofeminist scholarship highlights how women are often more exposed to environmental pressures—whether through the time-intensive work of collecting water and fuel, greater vulnerability to climate extremes, or exclusion from decision-making spaces. At the same time, it recognizes that women hold valuable knowledge about sustainable practices. Recent work has also pushed the conversation further by emphasizing intersectionality—how class, caste, indigeneity, and race shape environmental experiences—and by moving away from simplistic notions that link women and nature as inherently connected. Instead, the focus has shifted toward a more grounded critique of political economy, extractive industries, and governance systems.

Global frameworks, particularly those developed by the United Nations and UNEP, have begun to formalize these concerns through gender mainstreaming, Gender Action Plans, and the idea of “just transitions.” These approaches stress that climate adaptation and mitigation must be gender-responsive, and that women’s participation is essential at every stage of policymaking.

In India, these intersections play out across national and state-level climate strategies, including the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), State Action Plans (SAPCCs), and sector-specific missions such as the Green India Mission. While these policy spaces increasingly acknowledge gender concerns, scholars continue to point out uneven implementation, gaps in data, and the need for stronger capacity-building efforts.

To bridge the worlds of literature, activism, and policy, this paper proposes a “4R framework”: Representation, Recognition, Resistance, and Resilience. Representation refers to how literary and media narratives name environmental harms and challenge dominant, extractive ways of imagining nature. Recognition involves the role of law and policy in acknowledging rights—such as those under the Forest Rights Act (FRA)—and addressing gendered vulnerabilities in climate planning. Resistance highlights the ways social movements mobilize both people and stories, often led by women, as seen in the Chipko movement. Finally, resilience points to how community

institutions like self-help groups (SHGs), together with supportive policies, help create adaptive livelihoods and restore ecological balance.

The Chipko movement of the 1970s in the Garhwal Himalaya remains one of the most powerful examples of women-led environmental resistance. Villagers—especially women—literally embraced trees to prevent them from being cut down, linking the protection of forests to their everyday needs for fuel, fodder, and water. The movement introduced a language of care and nonviolent resistance that resonated far beyond its immediate context, influencing both public imagination and forest policy.

Over time, Chipko’s imagery and message have circulated widely through literature, journalism, and visual culture. Newspaper reports, poems, and later academic studies transformed the image of women hugging trees into a lasting ecofeminist symbol, even as more detailed histories remind us not to oversimplify the movement’s leadership and dynamics. This layered archive—part text, part lived struggle—shows how representation and resistance work together to shape public understanding.

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) helped create a powerful bridge between science and storytelling. By revealing the hidden dangers of chemical pollution, it gave ordinary readers a new vocabulary to talk about toxicity and environmental harm. In many ways, it set the tone for modern environmental writing. In South Asia, a comparable influence can be seen in Vandana Shiva’s *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, which connects ecological degradation with patriarchal models of development and science. Shiva places rural Indian women at the center—as both knowledge-holders and active agents of change—reshaping how environmental struggles are understood.

In *Staying Alive*, chapters such as “Women in the Forest,” “Women in the Food Chain,” and “Women and the Vanishing Waters” trace how resource use and environmental damage are deeply gendered. These sections have gone on to inform later research and reporting on forests, agriculture, and water systems. The book’s continued circulation and critical attention speak to its lasting impact.

Across Indian languages, women writers and activists add further depth to this conversation by documenting the textures of everyday ecological labor—fetching water, collecting fuelwood, preserving seeds. Their narratives resist simple labels of victimhood or agency, showing instead a more complex, lived reality. At the same time, platforms like Mongabay-India have reported on women-led forest practices such as *thengapalli* in Odisha, where community patrol systems intersect with legal recognition under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Here, lived experience, law, and storytelling come together in meaningful ways.

For decades, *Down To Earth* magazine has played a key role in shaping public discussion around environmental governance and climate change. Its reporting has consistently highlighted women's contributions, grounding debates in data while keeping them accessible. This kind of journalism works alongside literary texts, expanding the space in which environmental issues are understood and contested.

Ecofeminist literary criticism builds on these developments by rethinking how texts themselves function. Rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop, it sees literature as a space where relationships—between humans and non-human life—are actively reimagined. More recent scholarship has also drawn a clear line between older, essentialist ideas that link women “naturally” to the environment and newer, justice-oriented approaches that focus on ethics, power, and material conditions. This shift has important implications not just for theory, but for how policies are framed and implemented.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, implemented from 2007, marks a significant legal step in recognizing the rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. It includes provisions for joint land titles for women and emphasizes decision-making through the Gram Sabha, making it central to questions of access and governance. Yet, implementation has been uneven. Gaps remain in recognizing community forest resource (CFR) rights and ensuring meaningful gender inclusion.

Recent discussions—within government circles and organizations like UNDP—have highlighted the need for better record-keeping, stronger gender equity measures, and even debates around introducing a “sunset clause.” These conversations have also drawn media attention, raising broader questions about how to balance conservation goals, tenure security, and administrative processes.

Newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *India Today* have amplified concerns from civil society, especially around delays in implementation and the tendency to blame the FRA for forest loss. In doing so, they underscore how media narratives can hold policy frameworks accountable and shape public understanding. Similarly, analyses of State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) reveal uneven attention to gender, with scholars calling for better data, targeted training, and deeper integration of gender concerns across sectors.

At the global level, frameworks developed by UNEP and the UNFCCC continue to push for gender-responsive climate policies, especially within National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Together, these efforts form a complex policy landscape—one that literature and journalism help interpret and translate for wider audiences.

Government platforms such as MoEFCC's PARIVESH portal and mission-specific pages, including those for the Green India Mission, provide the institutional backbone for these initiatives. They outline guidelines and coordination mechanisms that are essential for both practitioners on the ground and researchers studying environmental governance.

From the Chipko movement to more recent forest rights campaigns, women’s resistance often grows out of everyday practices of care—gathering firewood, tending crops, saving seeds. These lived experiences frequently evolve into collective action, reframing forests not as commodities but as shared commons. Reports in outlets like *The Hindu* capture both the successes—such as women-led patrols leading to CFR recognition—and the ongoing challenges, including slow implementation and persistent gender biases.

But resistance is not only material; it is also imaginative. Poems, memoirs, and journalistic narratives transform local practices—whether it’s “hugging trees” in Chipko or *thenga* rotations in Odisha—into powerful symbols that inspire broader movements. In this sense, literature does more than describe reality; it actively reshapes it, expanding what people see as possible.

India’s National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM) has brought together more than 10 crore women into nearly 90 lakh self-help groups (SHGs). What this has created is not just a support system, but a vast social infrastructure—one that is increasingly driving agro-ecological practices, producer networks, and market linkages. In many ways, these groups are becoming the backbone of climate adaptation and nature-positive livelihoods. Government reports and sectoral studies point to initiatives like Mahila Kisan platforms, integrated farming clusters, and women-led producer collectives, all of which align closely with resilience-building efforts.

Recent partnerships, such as those between NABARD and NRLM, are expanding access to finance, enterprise development, and climate-resilient agriculture for SHG members. At the same time, international philanthropic organizations have begun to highlight the role of these groups in strengthening financial inclusion and generating long-term resilience benefits. Literature and media play an important role here, helping carry these stories beyond local contexts and into wider public awareness.

At the policy level, frameworks developed by UNEP and UN Women continue to push for gender-responsive “just transitions.” These approaches aim to align environmental goals with social justice, ensuring that women not only benefit from but also lead in emerging green sectors. National gender budgeting and sector-specific initiatives—especially in areas like water management and renewable energy—further reinforce the practical pathways through which resilience takes shape. Reporting from journalists and UN-affiliated platforms in India often underscores both sides of this reality: the risks women face, such as higher vulnerability during disasters or limited land access, and the opportunities for women-led solutions.

Public-facing platforms like *Down To Earth* have acted as important bridges in this landscape. By translating technical policies into accessible narratives and data-driven formats—such as the *State of India’s Environment* reports—they help readers understand how climate risks, forest governance, and gendered labor are deeply interconnected. Crucially, this kind of journalism

highlights women not just as victims, but as active agents, placing care work, commons management, and household-level ecological practices at the center of policy conversations.

Environmental literature, too, carries its own kind of force. From Rachel Carson’s evocation of “silence” to Vandana Shiva’s recurring images of soil, seeds, and water, such writing draws on emotion—grief, wonder, solidarity—to move people toward collective action. In the Indian context, movement poetry, autobiographical writing, and regional storytelling—especially from forest-dwelling communities—continue to express an ethics rooted in the commons. These ideas often find their way into policy frameworks, whether in the recognition of community forest rights or the emphasis on Gram Sabha-based governance.

Today, ecofeminist writing and policy discussions circulate not only in academic spaces but also in community libraries and grassroots networks. Women’s collectives are using everyday tools—WhatsApp messages, short films, vernacular zines—to share knowledge about seed saving, water testing, and forest monitoring. In doing so, they translate ideas from literature into practical, lived routines.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that literature and journalism do far more than reflect environmental realities—they actively shape them. They create the conditions for recognition, resistance, and resilience to take root. In India and elsewhere, women’s environmental labor—long undervalued and often invisible—has gradually been brought into public conversation, from the symbolic power of Chipko to the formal language of community forest rights, gender budgets, and just transitions. The 4R framework helps make sense of this process: representation leads to recognition, recognition enables resistance, and resistance, in turn, builds resilience through institutions like SHGs and Gram Sabhas, as well as through gender-responsive planning.

Looking ahead, the way forward calls for a few clear steps: expanding women’s voices in climate and forest policymaking, investing in SHG-led agro-ecological initiatives and community monitoring, strengthening transparency and accountability in rights-based laws like the FRA, and bringing environmental humanities into public education. At its heart, this vision treats women’s environmental writing—whether in the form of poems, testimonies, manuals, or policy briefs—as a shared body of knowledge. It becomes a commons in its own right, where care is recognized as essential infrastructure and resilience is understood as something built together.

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