

# Hills of Healing: An Ecofeminist Reclamation of Nature and Womanhood in The Hills of Angheri

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**Abstract**—Ecofeminism is a philosophy that explores the relationship between women and nature to redress the dual oppression of both in the hands of a male-dominated society. In Kavery Nambisan's semi-autobiographical novel *The Hills of Angheri*, the protagonist Nalinakshi (Nalli) embodies this philosophy through her journey from a village girl to a surgeon, as her connection to the environment provides her internal power and she demonstrates the mental strength needed to confront patriarchal forces that hinder her medical ambitions. While characters like her friend Jai succumb to capitalist greed and urban materialism and criticise village life as a coarse existence, Nalli remains committed to her roots and the principle of reciprocity with the earth. Her life illustrates key ecofeminist values such as eco-dependence, compassion, and the valorisation of local culture, as she rejects traditional hierarchical notions to remain true to her internal and external nature. The novel ends with Nalli returning to Angheri, signifying a personal and social transformation rooted in a harmonious relationship with the natural world. Through a comparison of characters such as the eco-dependent grandfather Ajja and the capitalist-driven Jai, this study examines the conflict between traditional reciprocity and the exploitation of nature for the sake of modern lifestyle. The novel deals with the glorification of cultural knowledge, the critique of patriarchal society and the nuclear family system, and the impact of modernisation on social and ecological transformation.

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**Keywords**—Ecofeminism; Patriarchy; Marginalization; Identity; Bildungsroman; Eco-dependence; Gender Bias; Anthropocentrism; Double Colonization; Sustainability

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## I. Research Methodology

The methodology for this study is grounded in a qualitative and analytical research design, utilising literary criticism to explore the intersection of gender, nature, and identity in the works of Kavery Nambisan. The primary source, *The Hills of Angheri*, is analysed through three primary critical lenses: ecofeminism, feminist theory, and postcolonial perspectives. The study applies the concept of 'Double Colonisation,' examining how native women are subjugated by both colonial/feudal and patriarchal cultures. The data analysis follows thematic analysis, character inquiry, contextual mapping, and comparative analysis. Ecofeminist theory by Vandana Shiva (reciprocity and the Chipko movement), feminist philosophy from Simone de Beauvoir (the 'Second Sex' and autonomy), and Gayatri Spivak (subalternity and self-representation) are taken as guiding sources to elaborate the central ideas.

### **Research Objectives**

The study pursues the following objectives: to investigate how education acts as a catalyst for eliminating gender biases and empowering women; to evaluate the role of native/experiential knowledge versus Westernised scientific paradigms; and to demonstrate how the liberation of nature is intrinsically tied to the liberation of women.

## II. Introduction

In the verdant embrace of Angheri's timeless hills, Kavery Nambisan's *The Hills of Angheri* emerges as a profound ecofeminist manifesto, where the protagonist Nalli embodies the indissoluble nexus between feminine resilience and ecological sanctity. This paper unveils how Nambisan masterfully interweaves the subjugation of rural women — trapped in patriarchal edicts and urban modernity's sterile allure — with the desecration of ancestral landscapes, as logging and 'progress' rend the hills that cradle village identity. Through Nalli's odyssey from village dreamer to surgeon and reluctant returnee, the novel critiques anthropocentric hierarchies that devalue women's intuitive earth-wisdom, paralleling their oppression with nature's exploitation by capitalist ambition.

Drawing on ecofeminist tenets of relational ethics and biophilic kinship, this analysis illuminates Angheri's hills as sentient matriarchs — symbols of nurturing continuity against cultural erosion — while Nalli's unyielding quest for a village hospital heralds restorative praxis. Ultimately, Nambisan forges a clarion call for symbiotic harmony, where women's emancipation entwines with ecological redemption, challenging readers to envision a world where hills and heroines rise unbroken.

Ecofeminism is a philosophy that looks at the deep connection between women and nature, specifically how both have been unfairly treated or oppressed by society. It teaches that the way humans dominate the environment is linked to the way women are often dominated by patriarchal systems. It is a call for 'equality for all,' 'eco-dependence,' and 'mutual care and love.' It advocates for fairness between men and women, and between humans and the natural world. Ecofeminists believe in a two-way relationship where we give back to the earth as much as we take, seeking a social transformation where both people and the planet are treated with respect and live in harmony.

Ecofeminism, coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, posits that misogyny and environmental destruction stem from shared dominator logics, where women — historically tied to earth's cycles — are devalued alongside nature. Renowned scholar Vandana Shiva has been a leading voice in this field, emphasising that Indian women are 'eco-dependent' guardians of the earth. Nambisan, a surgeon-turned-novelist, draws from lived experience to portray rural Karnataka's transformation under 'development,' where logging erodes hills paralleling constraints on Nalli's agency. The practice of ecofeminism is reflected in Nalli, who draws spiritual and mental strength from the hills of Angheri to challenge patriarchal constraints, embodying the philosophy's core tenets of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

This paper explores how the novel breaks down the common belief that human 'culture' and 'nature' are two separate things, showing instead that they are deeply intertwined. It argues that women in the story act as ecological stewards who actively resist a society built on capitalist patriarchy. The analysis examines landscape symbolism — how the hills of Angheri act as a maternal source of spiritual and mental strength for Nalli — and investigates her hybrid knowledge system, where she blends professional surgical training from England with the traditional, nature-based medical wisdom of her village. This study contributes to Indian environmental literature by showing how the fusion of nature and culture can be used as a resistance strategy against oppression.

## III. Plot Summary and Structural Analysis

The novel *The Hills of Angheri* follows the life of Nalli as she grows up in the village of Angheri, where life is closely tied to nature and the hills guide the seasons. Nalli dreams of becoming a doctor and building a hospital to help her people. However, she faces many challenges because she is a woman in a society that favours men — her grandfather tells her that if God wanted her to be a doctor, He would have made her a boy. Despite these patriarchal pressures, Nalli escapes the expectation of a traditional marriage to pursue her education. She travels to Madras and then to London, where she trains to become a skilled surgeon. While Nalli excels in her medical studies, she finds that life in the city is very different from her green village: urban hospitals are noisy and polluted, smelling of petrol and chemicals instead of the fresh scent of orange and jasmine from her home. Disillusioned by the city, Nalli returns to Angheri to fulfil her childhood dream. Despite initial scepticism from villagers and rejection from her own cousin, she finds the 'power-from-within' to persevere and builds her clinic, which symbolises a rebirth of her spirit and a return to her true self.

Structurally, the novel mirrors ecological cycles: exposition roots in fertile symbiosis, rising action fractures via migration, climax confronts 'progress,' and resolution restores hybridity. The hills as leitmotif — mist-veiled sentinels — anchor identity, their wounding paralleling Nalli's alienation. Ajja, the elder, transmits oral eco-knowledge through herbal cures and seasonal lore, embodying generational continuity. After a long spell of crying, Nalli complained to Ajja that she would be better off without a family, but Ajja disagreed, expressing the hills' familial bonds:

*"How can that be? Even the hills have a family," he told her. "See... the three hills with the rugged peaks, sturdy shoulders and hard knees — Doddabetta, Hulibetta and Kadubetta — and Donkubetta with the crooked flank, they're the men. That rounded hill, Jenubetta, is the grandmother. She likes to be warm and the sun pampers her for a while longer than the rest. And there's the dark sister, Chinnabetta, standing a little apart from the rest of the family." (p. 13)*

#### IV. Ecofeminist Analysis

##### *The Hills as Maternal Presence and Biophilic Kinship*

The village of Angheri acts like a maternal presence that protects and cares for the characters. The hills are seen as family members — a grandmother, a sister — creating a sense of 'biophilic kinship,' a natural, family-like bond between humans and the earth. Nambisan uses sensory language to show how the environment feels like a protective, womb-like enclosure that supports life, from the sowing of seeds to the use of traditional healing herbs. Nalli shares a deep, physical bond with this land; she climbs the peaks and drinks mountain water to find the mental strength she needs to follow her dreams. This beautiful relationship stands in sharp contrast to the 'urban sterility' of the city:

*"When she (Nalli) was young, Ajja had weaved magic around the hills. They lived and breathed like humans and if she listened very quietly, she would hear them speak. Nothing was so great, so pure and so true as the hills of Angheri. Cleaning her teeth with a mango twig and salt, Nalli would look at the hills swimming in mist, or bathed in the glow of dawn. She saw them sprout wings and fly away, leaving the skies as bare as a bald man's head. Alarmed, she would rub her eyes and look again to reassure herself. The rock and mud of the hills, the mist-soaked trees, the scrub and stones were quietly telling her to do, do, do. But what?" (p. 174)*

##### *The Parallel Oppression of Women and Nature*

The journey of Nalli suggests that attacking nature is like attacking a person. When trees are cut down for profit, it is viewed as a violation of 'mother-earth.' This destruction of the land mirrors the way women are often treated as objects or 'commodities' in society, showing that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are deeply linked. The difference between man and woman is observed at root level when Nalli dreams of becoming a doctor but her own grandfather discourages her:

*"Ajja tried to divert Nalli's mind from the crazy idea of studying to be a doctor. He taught her to milk cows without hurting them, to tend sick calves, cut sugar cane and husk paddy. All of it she learnt, but when he tried to show her how to cook, she was not interested." (p. 16)*

When she informs Jai of her decision to become a doctor, he reflects the patriarchal mirror of society:

*"I'm going to be a doctor," she said. I heard. 'They're all against it.' 'I know.' He was looking down at his feet which were wet from washing. 'I can't see why you want to. All for a degree that'll be an ornament around your neck.' Nalli wondered if he was joking. 'When you come back here and start your hospital, I'll help,' she said. 'What a crazy idea. You'll soon be someone's wife.'" (p. 23)*

Nambisan also exposes the exploitation of women in describing the family conditions of Jai, whose father Shanku Master tortures his wife, who meekly bears everything. The social indifference toward Nalli's ambition is further revealed by the contrast with how Jai's decision was received:

*"Five years earlier, it had been big news when Jai, the favourite son of Angheri, declared that he would be a doctor. No such enthusiasm greeted Nalli's decision. She was a girl." (p. 35)*

### ***Hybrid Knowledge and the Critique of Anthropocentrism***

In the village of Angheri, life is integrated; traditions like paddy festivals grow directly from the land. However, in the city, culture is placed 'over' nature. Urban life tries to 'conquer' human bodies in the same way that loggers try to 'conquer' the hills. Nalli feels this conflict inside herself — her surgical tools feel as 'foreign' as city smog compared to her green home. To resolve this, she creates a hybrid clinic that uses her high-level medical training alongside the traditional herbal knowledge of the village Vaidyar, showing an ecofeminist way of living where modern science and nature work together.

Nalli also exposes how patriarchy uses the same logic as big developers: just as developers use the word 'progress' to justify destroying the forest, village men use the word 'tradition' to keep women confined to the home. She recognises that dowry payments — which drain a woman's family — are analogous to timber sales that drain the earth's resources. Both are ways for those in power to dominate others for economic gain.

### ***Women's Resistance and the Ethics of Care***

By rejecting a suitor to follow her own dreams, Nalli chooses a spiritual connection to the hills over forced marriage. This 'hugging of the hills' is a metaphor for the Chipko movement, where Indian women hugged trees to protect them. When Nalli builds her clinic, she practices 'earth democracy' — a cooperative effort that values women's leadership and treats the 'sickness of the land' as being just as important as human illness. Rural women also show collective strength by working together to block loggers and protect their traditional seeds, just as Nalli fights for her own independence.

Nambisan also warns against an anthropocentric view of the world; in the story, the hills 'remember' being mistreated, and disasters like floods are seen as nature's way of demanding reciprocity and respect from humans. In the novel, cutting down the forests represents a kind of 'forgetting.' When the trees and fields are destroyed, old rituals are lost and young people migrate to cities, breaking the chain of traditional knowledge passed down through generations. Nalli's new clinic is described as a 'seedling among stumps,' representing a fresh start and hope in a damaged landscape.

### ***Global Comparisons and Universal Themes***

Nalli's struggle reflects the work of famous women activists around the world. She is likened to Wangari Maathai in Kenya, who helped women find power by planting 51 million trees; to the Indigenous women at Standing Rock who protected rivers as family members; and to Berta Cáceres in Honduras, who fought to protect her spiritual ties to the land. These examples prove that Nambisan's themes are universal: everywhere, rural women are standing up against the destruction of nature to fight for both ecology and gender justice.

Her subconscious mind hovers over the Angheri hills. Her frequent wish to reconnect with Angheri while in London is poignantly expressed:

*"Awake at night, reading a letter from home, I thought about how far away from Angheri I had come. My life seemed unreal to me. And yet I did not feel very different from the Nalli who longed to plough the fields, cut grass and tie hay in neat stacks, like Jai." (p. 208)*

And again, in a nostalgic reverie while travelling:

*"The bus spluttered on its way and I fixed my gaze towards Angheri. The sky was overcast, the clouds dark and determined. When the rain came, it pelted the glass windows and beat angrily on the gutted roads. After a long while it slowed. The hills were invisible, sequestered behind the mist. The bus bumped along for another hour before it took the familiar turn around the bamboo grove." (p. 259)*

She believes that the 'dark and holy hills stood, consoling her with their strength' (p. 263).

## **V. Conclusion**

The Hills of Angheri shows that when humans live in harmony with nature instead of trying to dominate it, women can truly be free. Nalli's journey from a 'broken dreamer' to a holistic healer offers hope in a world facing environmental crises. Her determination to achieve higher education and become a doctor comes from her inner strength. Her educated self is worthy to transform her status and condition in society,

while her love for and connection with nature remains unshaken. Nambisan encourages us to look toward a future where we treat the hills as kin and value women's wisdom in how we govern ourselves.

For Indian literature, this novel adds deep meaning to environmental studies; globally, it inspires activists to link the fight for feminism with the fight for climate justice. Nalli's purpose, like that of nature itself, is captured in the novel's own words: 'Our natures are the physicians of our diseases' (p. 167), and 'To help people' (p. 176). The novel stands as a manifesto for relational ethics, affirming that we must live in a way that respects our deep connection to the natural world, especially during the current climate crisis. The hills of Angheri are not merely a geographical setting but a living testament to the inseparable bond between women's emancipation and ecological redemption.

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