



Against the Synthetic: Deep Ecology, Materiality, Memory and the Search for Authenticity in the Anthropocene in Selected Poems of Rajiv Khandelwal

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Abstract: Rajiv Khandelwal's *Dwelling with Denial* explores the relationship between human emotion, memory, domestic life, and the non-human world. This paper examines "Mother's Mothering" and "Reminiscence" as complementary explorations of the tension that lies between organic environments and technologically mediated modernity. The paper examines the ancestral house, garden, kitchen, botanical imagery, insects, domestic labour, and the "smart home" as interconnected sites of memory and emotional experience. "Mother's Mothering" connects human growth with botanical growth through the image of the Gulmohar tree, while contrasting maternal care and domestic labour with technological convenience. "Reminiscence" creates a garden world filled with flowers, plants, and butterflies through which the speaker returns to memories of the past. Taken together, these poems suggest that ecological separation and emotional loneliness are closely knitted, as both arise from a loss of connection with the places we inhabit and the forms of care that give them meaning. Instead of presenting environmental awareness as ecological separation and emotional isolation limited just limited to policies or local concerns, Khandelwal connects ecological thinking with memory, personal identity, and everyday life. His poems therefore suggest that living meaningfully in the present does not simply depend on technological convenience. It also requires us to reconnect with our immediate surroundings and recognise the value of the human and non-human relationships that sustain us.

Keywords: Deep Ecology, Material Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Domestic Ecology, Topophilia, Culinary Memory

I. Introduction

Rajiv Khandelwal is a distinctive voice in contemporary Indian English poetry. His collections often explore subjects closely connected to everyday life, particularly the complexities of modern relationships and life in general. He presents these experiences through picturesque imagery and simple, minimalist structures, while irony and vivid images run through many of his themes. Beneath this simplicity, his poems carry a raw and expressive quality that can leave the reader with a sense of awe as they move through his works.

Contemporary Ecopoetics increasingly moves beyond the idea of untouched wilderness and turns its attention to the ordinary spaces where human and non-human life coincide. Homes, gardens, kitchens, and schoolyards can all be understood as important ecological spaces. These everyday environments shape our memories and emotions while bringing together plants, animals, materials, and technologies in constantly changing ways. Such spaces are particularly important in Rajiv Khandelwal's *Dwelling with Denial*, where memory, longing, and identity are repeatedly attached to specific domestic and botanical environments.

The poems "Mother's Mothering" and "Reminiscence" are especially significant in this context. "Mother's Mothering" places the speaker between an ancestral domestic environment and the technologically equipped present of the "smart home." "Reminiscence" by contrast, reconstructs a garden populated by flowers, plants, butterflies, and caterpillars that carries the power to transport the speaker mentally to his yearning memories of the past.

Across both works, nature is more than a backdrop to human experience, where the plants and animals actively shape the speakers' psychological and emotional worlds. Their presence also highlights the tension between organic ways of living and the increasingly synthetic, technology-driven conditions of modern life we are rushing towards. This contrast establishes a tension between organic and synthetic forms of livelihood. Modern technology promises efficiency and convenience, yet the speaker suggests that technological convenience cannot replicate the sensory intimacy of older forms of domestic and ecological experiences. The speaker's longing is therefore not simply for a person or a lost moment. It is also for the material conditions through which that person and moment were experienced: the ancestral house, the garden, the kitchen, the smell of spices, the movement of insects, and the physical labour associated with care.

This paper argues that Khandelwal's poetry challenges the superficial and artificial separation between ecological reality and human emotion. By bringing together domestic labour, plant growth, animal movement, memory, and technological alienation, the poems show how ecological separation and emotional isolation can emerge from the same underlying sense of disconnection. This paper examines how Khandelwal locates ecological consciousness within ordinary, lived spaces.

II. Deep Ecology and Ecology of Care

Deep ecology provides an important framework for understanding the poems' challenge to human-centred perspectives. Naess's ecological philosophy emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human life and the interconnectedness of living beings. To distance oneself from nature and the 'natural' is to distance oneself from a part of that which is "I" is built up of. (Naess 164) Modern ecologists almost

unanimously emphasize the importance of togetherness and cooperation in the plant and the animal world. (Naess 170)

“Mother’s Mothering” begins with a striking ecological parallelism between human and botanical growth: “Where both me and the Gulmohar / Were reared from sapling stage/ With love and attention” (Khandelwal, lines 5-7). The word “sapling” ordinarily belongs to the vocabulary of plant growth, yet the speaker applies it to both himself and the Gulmohar tree. Both are presented as forms of life that require time, attention, and utmost care, where the speaker creates a shared vocabulary of growth and forms part of the speaker’s developmental and psychological history.

If we expand ourselves to include other people, species, and nature itself, altruism becomes unnecessary. The larger world becomes part of our own interest. (Naess 9) This comparison resonates with deep ecological thinking, which challenges rigid separations between human and non-human life and emphasizes the interconnectedness of living beings.

The relationship between human identity and the natural environment can therefore be understood as an ecological self. The speaker’s identity is partly constituted by the environment in which he grew, making the tree inseparable from personal memory.

“Reminiscence” extends this interconnectedness to animal life. The butterfly and caterpillar are not simply decorative or picturesque elements. Their movements and biological processes contribute to the poem’s structure and emotional meaning. The speaker recognizes aspects of his own behaviour in the butterfly, but the insect also retains an independent presence within the garden. Structurally too, the specific line of the poem forms a concrete shape like that of a movement of a butterfly. “While a butterfly fluttering/ Flitting/ Diving/ Settling” (Khandelwal, 5-8).

While the dishwasher “whines” and the purifier “buzzes” (Khandelwal, 22-23), shows a technological environment where these sounds stimulate sensory presence, while contrasting with the organic sensory world of the ancestral home.

The poem consequently constructs two material environments: one characterized by direct bodily interaction with natural materials and another characterized by technological mediation.

III. Domestic Labour and Material Ecology

The poem becomes particularly productive when read through an ecofeminist framework underlining the Ecology of Care. Ecofeminist criticism examines relationships between the domination of nature and the devaluation of women’s labour. It replaces the ‘angel in the house’ version of women by the ‘angel in the ecosystem’ version. (Plumwood 9)

In “Mother’s Mothering,” care operates simultaneously at the human and ecological levels. The mother tends the household, and similarly, the garden requires comparable forms of attention and maintenance. The image of the mother’s physical labour connects bodily effort with ecological maintenance. Her work sustains both the domestic household and its surrounding environment.

The comparison between gardening and domestic work is therefore significant. Weeding, tending plants, cooking food, and maintaining a household all involve repeated acts of love and attention. They are forms of care heavily dependent upon bodily presence. The poem consequently draws attention to labour that is often normalized and undervalued because it occurs within everyday mundane routines.

The technological present complicates this relationship. Modern appliances can reduce manual labour, but the speaker's longing for his mother suggests that convenience does not necessarily result in emotional fulfilment, sensory familiarity, or cultural memory. The poem thus distinguishes between efficiency and intimacy.

Material ecocriticism strengthens this reading by challenging the assumption that physical matter is merely passive or secondary to human action. As Oppermann argues, matter possesses its own agency, participating directly in meaning-making through its expressive and narrative capacities (Oppermann, 21–36). In Khandelwal's poetry, objects, tools, spices, plants, and spaces cease to be static backdrops; instead, they operate as active participants in the speaker's emotional and psychological landscape.

The technological objects of the contemporary kitchen are also materially present. The dishwasher “whines,” while the water purifier “buzzes” where these verbs give technological objects an active presence within the poem's sensory environment. The mechanical sounds contrast with the sensory world of the ancestral kitchen, where spices evoke smell, gardening evokes touch, and the Gulmohar tree provides visual and emotional memory.

Khandelwal consequently constructs two material ecologies: one characterized by direct interaction between human bodies and natural materials, and another characterized by technological mediation. The speaker's longing emerges from the tension between these environments.

IV. Botanical Landscape and Animal Movement

The repetition creates a psychological loop in which the speaker remains suspended between his remembered past and

the inaccessible present moment. Nature does not simply “heal” the speaker. Rather, the landscape provides the material through which memory becomes possible.

The butterfly occupies a central position in the poem. Its movement is described through kinetic verbs such as “Flitting,” “Diving,” and “Settling”. These verbs give the insect an active presence within the poem. The speaker associates the butterfly’s unpredictable movement with his own earlier behaviour outside the school gate, which becomes an analogue for human restlessness around objects that he cannot fully possess. The comparison does not reduce the butterfly to a conventional romantic symbol. The butterfly thus creates a bridge between animal behaviour and human memory, while retaining its own material and biological presence at the same time. The caterpillar contributes to this ecological imagery differently. Its feeding behaviour emphasizes biological continuity and transformation. The movement from caterpillar to butterfly introduces a natural life cycle into the poem. While the speaker remains emotionally attached to the past, the non-human world continues through its own cycles.

This contrast between biological movement and psychological fixation is central to the poem. Nature continues to change, while memory repeatedly returns to the same emotional point.

V. Organic and Synthetic Worlds: Technological Alienation and Spatial Nostalgia

Taken together, “Mother’s Mothering” and “Reminiscence” reveal a sustained tension between organic experience of temporal displacement and technologically mediated modern life. Both ask what happens when human beings become separated from the places and practices through which emotional relationships were formed.

In “Mother’s Mothering”, the emotional force of the poem becomes clearer when the speaker contrasts this past with his contemporary surroundings: “Sitting in my smart home / I hanker / For my mother’s / Mothering” (Khandelwal, 37-40). The ‘smart home’ represents technological comfort, yet the speaker experiences that comfort as a form of emotional confinement. The efficiency of modern domestic technology cannot recreate for the bodily and emotional dimensions of maternal care; rather, it critiques its substitution. The verb “hanker” suggests a desire deeper than ordinary nostalgia. It conveys a persistent longing for human interaction that technological convenience cannot provide at any cost.

In “Reminiscence” the opposition is more temporal, where the speaker is though surrounded in memory by a living garden of flowers and insects, his present reality is defined by emotional distance and unfulfilled longing. The garden becomes the material site through which the past remains emotionally present, while it also mirrors certain cosmic values and environmental attitudes. (Tuan 138) The natural world becomes a material archive of emotional experience/.

Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of *topophilia* helps explain this attachment to place. Tuan describes the affective relationship between people and place, arguing that ‘A man’s belongings are an extension of his personality; to be deprived of them is to diminish, in his own estimation, his worth as a human being. (Tuan, 99). Khandelwal’s poems demonstrate that places acquire emotional significance because they contain accumulated experiences, as they have become repositories of memory. Awareness of the past is an important element in the love of space, where the speaker does not remember an abstract childhood; he remembers it through a particular environment.

VI. Ecofeminism and Culinary Ecology

The ecofeminist dimensions of “Mother’s Mothering” emerge from its treatment of care and the tendency to treat women’s domestic labour as endlessly available. Such labour can become invisible precisely because it is normalized (Plumwood 110).

The mother’s work is simultaneously domestic, bodily, and ecological. Gardening, cooking, cleaning, and nurturing are forms of labour that sustain life but are frequently rendered invisible because they occur within everyday routines (Plumwood 104).

The mother’s physical condition intensifies this dimension. Her labour in the garden and kitchen demonstrates the embodied nature of care. The comparison between gardening and domestic work is particularly significant. Weeding, tending plants, cooking food, and maintaining a household all involve repeated acts of attention. They are forms of care dependent upon bodily presence.

The kitchen provides an additional dimension by providing another connection between ecology and memory. Ingredients such as cumin, cinnamon, asafoetida, and onion connect the domestic space to agricultural and botanical systems beyond the house. It establishes an olfactory trigger becomes a complete figurative argument about the irreplaceability of maternal care. (Pathak 153).

Cooking transforms materials derived from the earth into nourishment through human knowledge and labour. Grinding, tempering, cooking, and serving become forms of interaction between humans and the material environment.

In Richards’s term, the three smells are not selected arbitrarily: the asafoetida’s pungency is associated with

cooking under pressure, the cumin's warmth with the familiar and everyday, the cinnamon's sweetness with festivity and care. Their convergence in a single remembered kitchen is a complete sensory biography of maternal devotion. (Pathak 154), when he cannot remember his mother exclusively as an abstract emotional figure. He remembers her through the environment she inhabited and through food associated with her care. The kitchen thus becomes an archive of embodied memory.

The kitchen thus becomes an indoor ecological space where natural materials, cultural practices, human labour, and memory intersect. Culinary practice becomes a form of cultural and ecological continuity.

VII. Psychoanalysis, Topophilia, and the Architecture of Memory

The poems' treatment of memory can also be examined through psychoanalytic theory. Freud's essay in 1899 on Screen Memory, defined a Screen Memory as a childhood memory that is striking for its triviality, serving to conceal a more emotionally significant or repressed adult or adolescent conflict. (Freud 299-322). It is useful for understanding how apparently ordinary or idealized memories can carry deeper emotional significance.

In "Mother's Mothering," the ancestral house, garden, kitchen, and maternal care provide an idealized emotional environment against which the speaker experiences his present condition. The longing for "mother's mothering" suggests a return toward a state associated with childhood security.

The "smart home" is consequently psychologically significant. Although it represents comfort and technological

advancement, it cannot recreate the emotional security associated with the maternal environment. The word “addict’s” is precisely chosen: it implies a longing constitutionally incapable of rational satisfaction, a hunger that the present genuine comfort cannot address because it is specifically for what the present cannot provide. (Pathak 155) The speaker’s “addict’s craving” expresses the intensity of this desire to return to an earlier form of attachment.

“Reminiscence” produces a comparable psychological structure. The garden becomes the material setting through which the speaker encounters an earlier romantic attachment. Its beauty does not erase the pain of loss; instead, it provides the sensory material through which the loss is repeatedly remembered, like a trigger.

Lacan’s ‘Theory of Lack’ offers another way of understanding this persistent longing. Desire is structured around an absence that cannot be filled or resolved. Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation. (Lacan 223) The butterfly and the memory of the beloved function as unattainable objects of desire. The speaker chases an idealized image from the past, trapped in an endless loop of anticipation and simulation where the real object is forever lost in time.

In “Reminiscence” the repeated hope for an “elusive glimpse” illustrates this structure’s anticipation and incompleteness. The repetition of “Hoping” creates an anticipatory cycle in which desire remains active precisely because fulfilment is uncertain, can be seen in the lines: “Hoping/ hoping for an elusive glimpse”.(Khandelwal, 20-21) The turquoise bench, school gate, grass, plants, flowers, and insects collectively establish a geography of memory and material framework for the speaker’s recollection.

In “Mother’s Mothering,” the object of desire is maternal care, where the desired object is located in a past that is inaccessible in its original form.

VIII. Conclusion: Reclaiming the Ecological Self

Rajiv Khandelwal’s “Mother’s Mothering” and “Reminiscence” bring together ecological imagery, domestic experience, memory, and psychological longing to examine the consequences of disconnection in contemporary life. Although the poems differ in setting and emphasis, both demonstrate that human identity is materially embedded in particular places.

Central to both works is the recognition that environment and identity are inextricably linked. The poems carry ecological weight not because they depict nature in isolation, but because they refuse to treat human emotional life as separate from its material surroundings. Rather than staging a crude rejection of modern technology, Khandelwal complicates the boundary between organic existence and synthetic reality. Rather, Khandelwal questions the assumption that technological convenience equals human fulfilment. The “smart home” may reduce physical labour, yet the speaker continues to experience absence. The garden may preserve beauty, yet it cannot restore the past. In both cases, the poems expose the limits of substitution.

Reclaiming authentic human life in the Anthropocene means refocusing on our immediate surroundings. Khandelwal brings trees, insects, kitchens, and human hands together into one continuous thread of memory and care. Rather than framing ecological awareness as a massive planetary issue, his poems make it an intimate, everyday reality. To reconnect with the environment is also, in Khandelwal’s poetic world, to reconsider how human beings remember, care, belong, and understand themselves. The search for authenticity consequently begins not with escape from the material world but with renewed awareness of the living environments in which human experience takes shape.

The significance of Khandelwal's poetry therefore lies in its attention to micro-ecologies. Rather than approaching ecological crisis only through large-scale images of climate change or environmental destruction, his poems locate profound ecological consciousness within ordinary experiences of food, gardening, childhood, family, and place.

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