The Academic
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research

An Online Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal
Volume 4 | Issue 10 | October 2026
ISSN: 2583-973X (Online), SJIF IF(2026): 5.6
Website: www.theacademic.in

Adrienne Rich's "The Trees": An Ecocritical and Ecofeminist Reading

Nabajit Debnath

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Maharaja Bir Bikram University, Agartala

DOI : https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24491479

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 01-11-2026

Accepted: 07-11-2026

Published: 20-11-2026

Keywords:

Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Nature's Liberation, Environmental Domination, Nature and Patriarchy, Deforestation

ABSTRACT

Adrienne Rich's "The Trees," included as Chapter 7 in the NCERT Class 10 *First Flight* anthology, is a compact but politically charged poem about trees escaping a domestic interior and returning to an emptied forest. Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) was an American poet, critic, and activist whose work became increasingly feminist and political from the 1960s onward. Her poetry and prose consistently examine gender inequality, social constraint, and injustice, making "The Trees" especially receptive to feminist and ecological interpretation. The poem was published in Rich's 1963 collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, a work associated with her emerging attention to women's constrained social position. "The Trees" can be interpreted as a powerful expression of ecological consciousness and resistance against the domination of nature. The poem presents trees that are confined within a house and gradually struggle to return to the forest, their natural habitat. Although the poem appears to describe the movement of trees from a house into a forest, it carries deeper meanings concerning human interference with nature, ecological imbalance, freedom, resistance and the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Introduction:

Adrienne Rich's poem *The Trees* presents nature as an active presence that resists human confinement and seeks to reclaim its natural environment. Through the symbolic movement of trees from the house towards

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

the forest, Rich questions the human tendency to appropriate nature for personal convenience and decorative purposes. The poem highlights the interconnectedness of different forms of life by referring to birds, insects, leaves, lichen and other natural elements. From an ecocritical perspective, it emphasises the independent value of nature and the importance of maintaining ecological balance. Moreover, an ecofeminist reading reveals the symbolic connection between the confinement of nature and the broader structures of domination and oppression. The trees' struggle for freedom can therefore be interpreted as a resistance against imposed control. Even in the contemporary context, the poem remains relevant as it raises concerns about deforestation, biodiversity loss, urbanisation and humanity's continuing interference with the natural environment.

Two theoretical approaches are particularly relevant to this poem:

- Ecocriticism: Examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, including human exploitation of nature, ecological imbalance and the value of non-human life.
- Ecofeminism: Examines the interconnectedness between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. It questions patriarchal attitudes that treat both women and nature as objects to be controlled, possessed or confined.

This article argues that “The Trees” operates on two interconnected levels: as an ecological allegory of nature’s restoration after human extraction, and as a feminist allegory of women’s liberation from domestic and patriarchal confinement. Its central image—the tree breaking through glass—fuses environmental and gender politics into a single vision of freedom.

Line-by-line analysis

First stanza

Lines 1–2:

The trees inside are moving out into the forest,
the forest that was empty all these days

Ecocritical interpretation:

The opening presents an unusual situation: trees are moving out of the house and returning to the forest. The forest is described as empty, suggesting the consequences of human interference with the natural environment. A forest without trees is an image of ecological destruction. A forest is not simply a collection

of land and vegetation; it is a living ecosystem that supports different forms of life. The movement of trees towards the forest can therefore be interpreted as nature's attempt to reclaim its original space.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The expression moving out suggests liberation from confinement. The trees have been placed inside a human-controlled space, separated from their natural surroundings. From an ecofeminist perspective, this confinement can symbolically represent the restriction of women within patriarchal structures. Just as nature is controlled and appropriated by human beings, women have historically been subjected to restrictions imposed by dominant social systems.

The trees' movement becomes an expression of resistance against control and domination.

Lines 3–5:

where no bird could sit
no insect hide
no sun bury its feet in shadow

Ecocritical interpretation:

These lines reveal the ecological consequences of a treeless forest. Birds and insects have lost their natural shelter and habitat. Even sunlight cannot interact with the forest in its usual way because there are no trees to create shade. Rich highlights that trees are essential to the survival of other living organisms. Their significance extends beyond their usefulness to human beings. The poet thus emphasises ecological interconnectedness: the destruction or absence of one natural element affects the existence of others.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

These lines can also be read as a representation of the consequences of domination. When nature is deprived of its freedom and natural environment, other forms of life also suffer. Ecofeminism challenges the hierarchical thinking that places human beings above nature and justifies the control of the non-human world. The absence of birds and insects symbolises the silencing and displacement of vulnerable forms of life.

Lines 6–7:

the forest that was empty all these nights
will be full of trees by morning.

Ecocritical interpretation:

The poet anticipates the restoration of the forest. The return of trees suggests the possibility of ecological renewal and the recovery of natural balance. The expression by morning is particularly significant because morning symbolises a new beginning. Nature is presented not as a passive object but as an active presence capable of reclaiming its space.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The anticipated return can symbolise liberation from oppression. The trees are no longer willing to remain confined within a space controlled by human beings. Their collective movement can be interpreted as resistance against systems that suppress freedom and independence.

Second stanza

Lines 8–10:

All night the roots work
to disengage themselves from the cracks
in the veranda floor.

Ecocritical interpretation:

The roots are presented as active agents struggling to free themselves from the artificial surroundings of the house. The veranda floor represents human-made structures that restrict the natural growth of trees. The roots, which should remain connected to the soil, are trapped within an environment that does not allow their natural development. This highlights the conflict between human civilisation and the natural environment.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The roots can symbolise the struggle of oppressed individuals to free themselves from restrictive social structures. The word disengage is important because it suggests a deliberate effort to break away from confinement. From an ecofeminist perspective, this can represent resistance against patriarchal systems that restrict the freedom and independence of women.

The roots' struggle becomes symbolic of the desire for autonomy.

Lines 11–13:

The leaves strain toward the glass
small twigs stiff with exertion
long-cramped boughs shuffling under the roof

Ecocritical interpretation:

The leaves, twigs and branches are described as struggling against the limitations of the house. The glass and roof represent barriers between the trees and their natural environment. The trees cannot grow freely because their natural development is restricted by human-made spaces. Rich gives movement and physical effort to the different parts of the trees. This personification makes nature appear alive, sensitive and capable of expressing its own needs.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The words strain, stiff and cramped suggest restriction, suffering and the struggle for freedom. The trees can be interpreted as representing individuals whose identities and potential have been restricted by dominant structures. Ecofeminist criticism draws attention to how control over nature and control over women can operate through similar attitudes of possession, confinement and domination.

Lines 14–16:

like newly discharged patients
half-dazed, moving
to the clinic doors.

Ecocritical interpretation:

Rich compares the branches to patients who have recently been discharged from a hospital. The comparison suggests that the trees have experienced a condition of confinement and are now beginning to recover their freedom. The image also raises an important ecological question: what happens when living organisms are removed from their natural habitats and placed in artificial environments?

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The comparison suggests vulnerability and the experience of suffering under confinement. The trees' movement towards freedom may be read as a symbolic recovery of their independence and dignity. However, the comparison should not be taken as a direct representation of women's suffering; rather, it offers a possible analogy between different experiences of restriction.

Third stanza

Lines 17–20:

I sit inside, doors open to the veranda
writing long letters
in which I scarcely mention the departure
of the forest from the house.

Ecocritical interpretation:

These lines introduce the human speaker, who remains inside the house while the trees are preparing to leave.The speaker appears to be aware of the trees' departure but does not openly acknowledge it. The phrase scarcely mention suggests a degree of human indifference or an inability to express the significance of what is happening. This can be interpreted as a criticism of the human tendency to overlook environmental destruction. People often continue their ordinary activities while nature undergoes significant changes. The contrast between the speaker's stillness and the trees' movement is particularly meaningful. While nature is struggling to reclaim its freedom, human beings remain occupied with their own concerns.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The speaker's silence can be interpreted in relation to the silencing of those who experience domination. The trees are finally asserting their independence, but the human speaker does not openly acknowledge their struggle. This raises questions about whose experiences are recognised and whose voices remain unheard. From an ecofeminist perspective, the poem challenges the assumption that human beings have the authority to determine the position and purpose of other living beings.

Lines 21–24:

The night is fresh, the whole moon shines
in a sky still open

the smell of leaves and lichen
still reaches like a voice into the rooms.

Ecocritical interpretation:

These lines emphasise the sensory relationship between human beings and nature. The freshness of the night, the moonlight and the smell of leaves and lichen create an atmosphere of natural beauty. Nature communicates with the human world through its presence and fragrance. The expression like a voice is particularly significant. Although trees cannot communicate through human language, their presence conveys a message.The poet gives nature a form of expression, suggesting that the natural world has its own existence and significance beyond human perception.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The image of nature reaching into the rooms like a voice can be interpreted as the recovery of a silenced presence. Ecofeminism encourages us to recognise voices and experiences that dominant systems have traditionally marginalised, including those associated with the natural world. The trees' presence challenges the boundaries established by human beings between the domestic space and the natural environment.

Fourth stanza

Lines 25–26:

My head is full of whispers
which tomorrow will be silent.

Ecocritical interpretation:

The whispers may represent the sounds and movements of nature during its struggle for freedom. The anticipation of silence suggests that the natural atmosphere of the house is about to disappear as the trees complete their departure. These lines also create a sense of urgency. The speaker recognises that something important is happening, but its presence may soon be lost.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The whispers can symbolise voices that have remained unheard for a long time. Their anticipated silence may suggest the suppression of those who struggle against established systems of control. However, the trees' movement towards freedom offers a possibility of resistance rather than permanent submission.

Lines 27–28:

Listen. The glass is breaking.
The trees are stumbling forward

Ecocritical interpretation:

The breaking glass represents the destruction of the artificial barriers separating the trees from their natural environment. The trees are no longer remaining within the restricted space created by human beings. Their movement signifies a rejection of human control over nature. The command Listen is important because it demands attention. The poet invites readers to recognise nature's struggle rather than remain indifferent to it.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The breaking glass can symbolise the breaking of restrictive structures that prevent freedom and independence. From an ecofeminist perspective, this image can be associated with resistance against patriarchal domination and the restrictions imposed upon both women and nature. The trees' movement is therefore not merely physical; it represents a symbolic struggle for autonomy.

Lines 29–30:

into the night. Winds rush to meet them.

Ecocritical interpretation:

The wind welcomes the trees as they return to their natural surroundings. This suggests that the natural world is interconnected. Trees and wind are not isolated elements but parts of a larger ecological system. The image also conveys a sense of restoration. Nature appears to welcome its returning members.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The welcoming wind can symbolise solidarity and freedom. The trees are no longer isolated within an artificial environment; they are returning to a larger natural community. This can be interpreted as an image of collective liberation, in which freedom is achieved through a return to a supportive and interconnected environment.

Lines 31–33:

The moon is broken like a mirror,
its pieces flash now in the crown
of the tallest oak.

Ecocritical interpretation:

At the beginning of the third stanza, the moon is described as whole and shining in the open sky. At the end, it appears broken like a mirror. This transformation coincides with the movement of the trees and the breaking of the glass. The moonlight is now reflected in the crown of the tallest oak. This image symbolically reconnects the celestial and terrestrial worlds. The oak becomes a significant part of the natural landscape, demonstrating the importance of trees within the larger ecological order. The image may also suggest that nature's beauty is not destroyed by the apparent breaking of the moon; rather, it is reflected through the trees.

Ecofeminist interpretation:

The broken mirror can be interpreted as the breaking of established structures and boundaries. The oak, standing prominently in the final image, represents the recovery of natural freedom and independence. The ending can therefore be read as a symbolic rejection of domination. Nature is no longer confined within the domestic space but occupies its rightful place in the larger environment.

Major ecocritical findings in the poem

The following are the most important ecological arguments that can be developed from the poem.

1. Nature possesses an independent existence: Trees are not merely decorative objects meant to beautify human spaces. They have their own natural requirements and significance.

2. Human interference disrupts ecological balance: Placing trees within artificial surroundings separates them from their natural habitat and affects their ecological relationships.

3. Nature is interconnected: The references to birds, insects, sunlight, leaves, lichen, wind and the moon demonstrate the interdependence of different natural elements.

4. Nature is an active presence: Through personification, Rich gives the trees the ability to struggle, move and reclaim their natural space.

5. Nature resists human domination: The trees' departure symbolises the possibility of nature reclaiming the environment from which it has been displaced.

6. Environmental awareness requires human recognition: The command Listen encourages readers to pay attention to nature and recognise its existence beyond human interests.

Major ecofeminist interpretations

The ecofeminist reading brings another dimension to the poem.

1. Confinement and oppression: The trees' confinement within the house can symbolically represent the restrictions imposed upon women within patriarchal structures.

2. Resistance against domination: The movement of the trees represents the struggle for freedom and independence.

3. Rejection of possession and control: The poem questions the human tendency to treat nature as something that can be possessed, controlled and used according to human convenience.

4. Recovery of autonomy: The trees' return to the forest symbolises the recovery of their natural identity and freedom.

5. Interconnectedness and solidarity: The welcoming wind and the larger forest suggest the importance of relationships and collective existence rather than isolation and domination.

6. Challenging hierarchical thinking: The poem questions the assumption that human beings occupy a superior position and possess the authority to control other forms of life.

An important theoretical point for your research: Ecofeminism should not be reduced to the idea that trees simply represent women. Its deeper concern is the interconnected logic of domination through which both nature and women can be treated as subordinate. This distinction will make your analysis more academically convincing.

Deforestation and the destruction of natural habitats

Today, forests are increasingly affected by urban expansion, industrial development, infrastructure projects and other human activities.

Rich's image of an empty forest reflects the consequences of removing trees from their natural surroundings. The references to birds and insects are particularly relevant because deforestation affects not only trees but also the habitats of numerous living organisms.

Contemporary relevance: The poem reminds readers that protecting forests means protecting entire ecosystems, including the diverse species that depend upon them.

Urbanisation and the artificial treatment of nature

One of the most significant aspects of the poem is the presence of trees inside a house.

In contemporary urban environments, trees are frequently incorporated into buildings, gardens, parks and decorative spaces. Although such practices can contribute to greenery, they cannot replace the ecological functions of natural forests.

The poem questions the tendency to treat nature as an object of decoration rather than recognising its independent existence.

Contemporary relevance: It encourages sustainable urban planning that protects existing trees, natural habitats and ecological spaces instead of treating greenery merely as an architectural feature.

Climate change and ecological imbalance

Trees play an important role in maintaining ecological balance. Their destruction contributes to biodiversity loss and weakens the natural systems that help regulate the environment.

The poem's image of a forest without trees reminds contemporary readers of the consequences of environmental degradation.

Contemporary relevance: The poem encourages environmental responsibility and reminds humanity that its survival is closely connected with the health of the natural world.

Biodiversity conservation

The poet mentions birds, insects, trees and other natural elements to demonstrate their interconnected existence.

This is particularly important today because biodiversity conservation has become a major environmental concern.

Contemporary relevance: The poem teaches that every living organism has significance within the ecosystem. Protecting trees also means protecting the countless forms of life that depend upon them.

Ecofeminism and the struggle against domination

The ecofeminist interpretation remains relevant because the exploitation of natural resources and the marginalisation of vulnerable groups continue to raise questions about power, inequality and domination. The trees' struggle to escape confinement can symbolically represent the struggle for autonomy and freedom.

Contemporary relevance: The poem encourages readers to question hierarchical attitudes that justify controlling nature and subordinating other forms of life.

Language, Imagery, and Form

Rich's language is plain, but its imagery is dense with symbolic force.

Device	**Effect in the poem**
Personification	Trees acquire intention, effort, and agency; they "move out," struggle, and escape.
Extended metaphor	Trees represent women and other confined beings seeking freedom.
Imagery of roots and branches	Roots suggest buried identity and history; branches reaching through glass suggest growth against restriction.
House/forest opposition	The house signifies confinement and artificial control; the forest signifies ecological and personal freedom.
Night-to-morning structure	Liberation occurs quietly but inevitably, ending in renewal and restoration.

The poem's free-verse form reinforces its meaning. The trees do not remain within a fixed, ornamental pattern; likewise, the poem's flexible lines enact movement away from containment.

Conclusion

"The Trees" is deceptively simple: trees leave a house and enter a forest. Yet through ecocriticism, it becomes a critique of deforestation, domestication, and anthropocentric control; through ecofeminism, it

becomes a powerful allegory of women breaking out of patriarchal confinement. Although Adrienne Rich wrote the poem decades ago, its ecological and social concerns remain highly relevant in the contemporary world. The poem can be connected to several present-day environmental issues. The central message of the poem is that nature cannot remain permanently confined within spaces designed and controlled by human beings. Through the symbolic movement of trees from the house towards the forest, Rich questions the human tendency to dominate and appropriate the natural environment. The trees' struggle represents their desire to return to their natural habitat, where they can exist freely and maintain their ecological relationships. From an ecocritical perspective, the poem establishes the independent value of nature and highlights the interconnectedness of all living organisms. From an ecofeminist perspective, the trees' confinement and eventual liberation can be interpreted as symbolic resistance against structures of domination and control. The poem thus invites readers to reconsider their attitudes towards both nature and freedom.Rich's enduring achievement is to make ecological freedom and gender freedom appear not as separate causes, but as parts of one struggle for a more just and living world.Ultimately, Rich suggests that human beings must recognise that they are not the masters of the natural world but participants in a larger interconnected existence.

Works Cited

"Adrienne Rich's 'The Trees': A Poem About Nature, Freedom and Feminist Awakening." *Owlcation*, 23 June 2026, owlcation.com/humanities/adrienne-richs-the-trees-a-poem-about-nature-freedom-and-feminist-awakening.

Academy of American Poets. "About Adrienne Rich." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 30 June 2026, poets.org/poet/adrienne-rich.

"Adrienne Rich." *The Bollingen Prize for Poetry*, Yale University, 2025, bollingen.yale.edu/poet/adrienne-rich.

"Adrienne Rich." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., www.britannica.com/biography/Adrienne-Rich. Accessed 29 Oct. 2026.

"Adrienne Rich." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adrienne_Rich. Accessed 29 Oct. 2026.

"Ecocriticism." *Oxford Bibliographies*, Oxford University Press, 2017, www.oxfordblogs.co.uk/reference/62382/reference-article-abstract/555035336.

"Ecocriticism." *Climate in Arts and History*, Smith College, www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/ecocriticism/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2026.

"Mapping Common Ground: Ecocriticism, Environmental History, and the Environmental Humanities." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2014, pp. 261–76, read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/5/1/261/8152.

"Poem – The Trees." *SATHEE*, IIT Kanpur, sathee.iitk.ac.in/ncert-books/class-10/nb-english/first-flight/poem-the-tress/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2026.

"Poem – The Trees | First Flight." *SATHEE*, IIT Kanpur, sathee.iitk.ac.in/sathee-ssc/student-corner/ncert-books/class-10/nb-english/first-flight/poem-the-tress/. Accessed 29 Oct. 2026.

Rich, Adrienne. "The Trees." *First Flight: Textbook in English for Class X*, NCERT, ch. 7.

Shivani Karn, and Niraj Dang. "An Ecofeminist Approach to Adrienne Rich's Poem, *The Trees*." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 2025.

"Explanation of Stanza 1." *YaClass*, 23 May 2022, www.yaclass.in/p/english-language-cbse/class-10/poem-14339/the-trees-15018/re-3d3a3597-9e38-42d8-aa7e-bfef2d0962b9.

"Explanation." *YaClass*, 29 May 2022, www.yaclass.in/p/english-language-cbse/class-10/poem-14339/the-trees-15018/re-e88079fb-1cc5-4bd3-aa7e-bfef2d0962b9.

The Trees Can There Be a Forest Without Trees? Where Are the Trees in This Poem, and Where Do They Go? https://nvseng10.weebly.com/uploads/2/4/6/8/24686000/08._the_trees.pdf. Accessed 9 Nov. 2026.

"The Trees Poem | Summary, Meaning & Analysis." *Allen*, 27 Feb. 2025, allen.in/english/trees.

"The Nature and Identity in Rich's Poem." *REST Journal on Emerging Trends in Modelling and Manufacturing*, vol. 2020, no. 11, 2020, restpublisher.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-The-Nature-and-Identity-in-Richs-Poem.pdf.