

**Analysis of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* under the
arena of Ecofeminism**

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is a prominent woman writer and her novels include the element of subjugation that originates from the exploitation due to poverty, caste system and the conflict among values of the people of the East and the West. She has trenchantly presented the issues of women in relation to the environment in her marvelous work *Nectar in a Sieve*. The manner in which women are sidelined in a male dominated society has been illustrated by her. She identifies nature with the body of a woman and guides the readers to believe that nature, in the same way as woman, is marauded by societies governed by male oriented ideology. In such societies, nature and women, both are treated in an inferior way contrasting the fact that both have an ability to give birth and nourish. This mistreatment has made women conscious of the callousness of the male dominated world towards nature. So, women have come together against this exploitation of nature from time to time as they can relate to nature's agony.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Subjugation

Introduction

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Kamala Markandaya manages exceptionally well to deal with the problems of nature and women, particularly from the working class. Rukmani, the protagonist, Ira, the daughter of Rukmani and the environment in which they live, all have been shown as victims of the patriarchal system, zamindari and imminent industrialization. Rukmani works as a labourer in a garden and is truly devoted to her work which suggests her deep connection with the nature. Her happiness increases when she observes the fields flourishing. The connection becomes more prominent when she asserts, “our freedom to work in the forest and to farm is very important” (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* 241). Despite her hard work, the labour performed by her at home is not given any importance at all. The story is framed around the different phases of Rukmani’s life, her discovery of herself and her mental situation at those different stages. These include marriage at the age of 12, her being a wife and then a mother. Through all these stages, her connection with the land is emphasized that reiterates the ecofeminist analysis. These bonds include spiritual as well as physical elements. The title of the novel has been extracted from Coleridge and appears in the epigraph: “Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live” (qtd. in Iyengar 438).

The above couplet is aptly used by Kamala Markandaya as these lines perfectly express the essence of the novel. If efforts made by a person yield no results, it becomes as fruitless as attempting to contain *Nectar in a Sieve*. The same applies to life, if there is no objective then life also becomes fruitless. The author has shown that for a farmer, agrarian work is his life. He has no other goal or hope and if he is alienated from his work due to any reason then he ultimately suffers from hunger, poverty and even death. The novelist compares the short term happiness of the farmer to *Nectar in a Sieve*. According to M.K. Bhatnagar in his article, “Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-Outsider”,

Markandaya’s first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist– narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve. (Bhatnagar 3)

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This novel highlights the difficulties faced by the Indian people due to changes in policies related to land, rehabilitation, labour, industrialization and so on. The plot is initiated with the marriage of young Rukmani to Nathan who is a tenant peasant. Rukmani's three elder sisters have been married in wealthy families which gave the villagers an issue to gossip. Rukmani's father is a headman of the village who once had authority over village matters but due to the change in rule, his stature was greatly diminished which forced him to initiate this mismatched alliance. This becomes clear by the words of Rukmani's elder brother: "The headman is no longer of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; not to the headman" (Markandaya, *NIS* 4). These words are rather hard for Rukmani to endure: "It was as though a prop on which I inclined had been generally kicked away" (Markandaya, *NIS* 4). Markandaya in this way deliberately inflects the peace of Rukmani's initial life with qualms that anticipate the forthcoming unpleasant moments. Throughout the novel, the author succeeds in hinging the reader on a hope that there are chances of improvement in the situation. Clues like the able physique of Nathan that promises higher work output make the readers optimistic till the end. In an incident, Nathan, at his village that is far flung from Rukmani's home, is desirous of proving himself. He promises Rukmani holding grain in his hands: "With such harvests as this, you shall not want for anything" (Markandaya, *NIS* 6). Even if the readers assume that everything will be fine soon, Markandaya has interwoven the element of suspicion that things can go awry any moment and the novel keeps dangling between hope and sadness.

The farm, on which Nathan works, soon become the second home for Rukmani and she starts enjoying tending the farm. Susheela Rao finds Rukmani's unique association with nature in her "heightened awareness of nature's beauty" (42). Rao gives accounts of numerous sections of the novel in which Rukmani is aware of the cycles of the seasons and remarks on the tasteful and climatic excellence of the scene. There are many instances that substantiate her bonding with nature. If considered carefully, it can be said that her work in the garden helps her to bond with the earth in a physical way. In her life, the garden holds a high place. Having got married at the

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age of twelve Rukmani is immature and her physical, mental and emotional growth goes along with her work in the garden and the growth of vegetables. She recalls:

“I was young and fanciful then,” she recounts, “and it seemed to me not that they grew as I did, unconsciously, but that each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf” (Markandaya, *NIS* 13).

Her first plantation in the garden is a pumpkin and she is greatly influenced by it. The growth of pumpkins gives an unmatched pleasure to her which can be inferred from the passage:

Pumpkins began to form, which, fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled daily larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until at last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration... “One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before,” I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping my eyes down. “Not from our land,” said Nathan. “Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman.” I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be offhand. I put the pumpkin away. But pleasure was making my pulse beat; the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to my face. (Markandaya, *NIS* 10)

Despite the fact that the novel was published before the introduction of the concept of ecofeminism as a theory, a few reviewers who have analyzed *Nectar in a Sieve* consider Rukmani’s association with the nature through the lens of ecofeminism. For instance, Rukmani’s rumination:

when the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?. (Markandaya, *NIS* 8)

This much cited paragraph from the novel idealizes the connection of Rukmani with her fields and nature. The passage accentuates that happiness for a simple woman includes just minimal requirements such as shelter, clothes, food and the scenic charm of landscape. The sun

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and the greenery of the fields are a source of joy for her. Along with that, the sexuality of a woman is put as symbiotically equal to the seeding of crops.

The novel recognizes the seeds as a sign of new life. It is clear from the incident when Rukmani takes the seeds of pumpkin in her hands in order to plant them, she looks at the seeds and marvels at the fact that the little seeds hold a life in them and thinks:

their growth to me was constant wonder—from the time the seed split and the first green shoots broke through, to the time when the young buds and fruit began to form. ...it seemed to me that...each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf for safekeeping, fragile, vanishing with the first touch or sight. With each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous. (Markandaya, *NIS* 17)

The discussion of tannery, that changes the dead bodies of animals into leather, is important because it is not only shown to cause disturbance to wild animals, it is considered as a killing machine by Rukmani:

Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in—thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins — and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities — or that so many animals existed — but so it was, incredibly. (Markandaya, *NIS* 47)

Rukmani feels that the installation of tannery has caused another negative impact which is the significant rise in the prices of articles in local shops. She believes that this is a reason for the increased difference in classes of people that includes peasants, moneylenders and landowners. Biswas, who is a moneylender, takes more amount of goods as a token against money due to which Rukmani gets lower price from him in return for her vegetables. She indicates, “we no longer had milk in the house...curds and butter were beyond our means except for rare occasions . . . and no sugar or dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came”

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(Markandaya, *NIS* 28). This hike in price wreaks havoc in the lives of lower class workers such as Rukmani and causes the onset of several social ailments. Due to the poverty and hunger thus generated, the body of a woman is transformed into a commodity giving rise to prostitution. This grieving situation takes its toll on Rukmani as well as Ira. She has to take to prostitution as last resort in order to keep her family and her brother Kuti out of the claws of starvation. Ira has to take this dire decision due to the transformation going “under the impact of modernity and industrialism [where] she thinks the preservation of life more pious than the observations of so-called moral values which fail to feed her family” (Razia 26). M.K. Bhatnagar sees the decision of Ira as “a bold rejection of the innate institution of marriage” (Bhatnagar 2). Ira’s decision is contrastingly put together with Kunthi’s decision that chooses prostitution for the betterment of herself rather than for the support of her family needs. This articulates the individualism that follows up with the decay of “the time honoured peasant-code...with no substitute” (Chadha 55).

Nonetheless, it is essential to point out here that Markandaya is not totally restricting tradition nor is she demonstrating the superiority of the western innovation to be predominant. Hence, the above analysis depicts Rukmani’s profound apprehension and love for land, natural environment and for the indigenous customs. There is such a sturdy alliance that Rukmani creates with nature that no one can break it- neither in the rural nor in the urban phase of her journey. Despite the immense adversities that she struggles against, at both the village and the city, she emerges out as a sole companion of nature.

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