

## Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*: The Picture of Ecological Consciousness

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This paper investigates how the Indian English novel adds a new dimension to ecofeminist discourse finds in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Today ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. The word 'Eco-criticism' first appeared in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Eco-criticism" in 1978. Ecocriticism is the study of the environment's relationship to human beings in literature.

Kamala Markandaya's first novel-*Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) - is a classical pastoral. In her novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' Markandaya includes Nature as an integral part of the human life of the story. She is one of the greatest Indian novelists in English who used Nature and natural elements for her effective and flawless expressions and descriptions of view. She considers Nature as a wild animal. She thinks Nature a destroyer and preserver both. Her well-known novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' is the fine example of the depiction and use of nature imagery.

The disillusionment sets in when forces of New-colonialism-as Markandaya's romantic bias makes it aptly clear start being active. A mania for transforming the villages into townships grips the administrators and in a bid to modernize, they overtook India's basic reality that resides in the villages. Priorities are wrongly fixed, wrong choices made and the village is invaded by the city-wallahs beguiling the land lords, they annex the cultivable land and start building a tannery on it. As a result the tenanted labourers are rendered jobless. Their lands are taken away and they have to work necessarily in the factories. All the people in the novel are affected by this change.

'Nectar in a Sieve' is Kamala Markandaya's first novel published in 1954. The novel takes its title from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Sonnet 'Work without Hope'.

Work without hope draws Nectar in a Sieve,  
And hope without an object cannot live.

There are three different kinds of conflicts in this novel. The most obvious is conflict between man and man, man with himself and man against the forces of Nature.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the bullock is one animal that acts as a metaphor for Rukmani's struggles. On their journey to find their son, Rukmani and Nathan seek the help of a carter. He seats the two among the many stacks of skins already occupying his full cart. When the cart makes its first stop, Rukmani notices the bullocks that are pulling it. She sees a serious injury on one of the bullocks, but it obediently continues to pull the cart. The injury reaches its peak when Rukmani and Nathan finally arrive at the city. She notices that the wound had become infected: "more skin had been eaten away and trickles of blood were running down the edges". The poor animal had been struggling the entire journey, but keeps pulling the cart. Under ecocritical theory, the bullock stands as a symbol for Rukmani's festering sorrows that haunt her throughout the novel.

During one of the many times Rukmani and Nathan admire their land, Rukmani takes particular notice of the birds that inhabit it freely, happily, with little to no human interaction. She remembers the kingfishers, flamingoes, and paddy birds that once inhabited the water. These birds symbolize Rukmani's life before the tannery, bright, healthy birds living as one with the land. The tannery's effects range far and wide. Soon the only animals at the rice paddies are "crows and kites and such scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal". The tannery brought the same change in Rukmani and Nathan that it brought in the birds.

Along with the bullock, the fish, and the birds, the cobra in Rukmani's garden can be analyzed with an ecocritical view by examining the circumstances of its death. While

Rukmani is tending to her vegetable garden, she hears a small rustling in the leaves. She parts the foliage and accidentally touches the snake, which surprisingly does not strike at her. Nathan comes rushing to her aid and kills the snake, mutilating its body into little pieces. It is a pity also because snakes are very efficient and helpful for rice-farming by killing the rodents and mice that the rice attracts. By killing the snake, Nathan is essentially perpetuating the problem of pests eating the rice. The family is also going against Hindu practices by killing another living thing. Nathan kills the snake for the sole reason of it being in their garden. The snake did not cause Rukmani or Nathan any harm, yet it is wrongfully murdered.

An ecocritical reading of the novel highlights the tannery and its effects on the village people and their environment; these effects include the elimination of the land's native creatures and the destructive noise that harms both the people and the animals.

Fossil fuels, agrochemical requirements, and "the methane emission associated with the fermentation of organic material in the flooded rice fields" result in additional harmful impacts to the land. The fossil fuels and agrochemical requirements may not relate directly to *Nectar in a Sieve*, but the methane emissions most likely happened in Nathan and Rukmani's rice paddies. According to one study, "Rice-paddies are one of the largest anthropogenic sources of atmospheric methane". Nowhere in the novel does Markandaya mention any harmful effects of rice farming or even reference the most prominent problem of methane emission. Growing one plant over such a large expanse of land is not beneficial to the ground. It is simply not how nature works; an ecosystem must have diversity to survive.

Rice farming is extremely water-intensive and draws on the ecosystem. The amount of water used is one of the most damaging aspects of the practice. When the drought hits, it proves how dependent both the family and the ecosystem are on ample water availability. The family had little food because of the dried up, dead rice paddies and little to no water. Rukmani was forced to travel to the town water reservoir to collect a

small serving of drinking water for her and her family. Even the “plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water”. The trapping of so much natural water for the rice paddies eliminates possible sources of water for drinking, irrigation, bathing, and washing purposes.

It is a tragedy engineered by the introduction of industry and modern technology in the idyllic rural life of India. Due to establishment of tannery in the village, the lives of village people, especially women, get disrupted and pastoral land is destroyed. Markandaya tries to unfold the truth of man and nature’s inseparable relationship. Nature is not only the backdrop but also a major character in the novel. Let us examine the representation of ecofeminist concerns in the novel by critiquing the interrelated oppression stemming from modern economic theory and practice, which, as per ecofeminist arguments, is an outcome of patriarchy. This concept is manifested in the novel through the establishment of tannery in a village that hitherto consisted in pristine and serene wilderness.

*Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) exhibits the patriarchal attitude in the form of tannery, depicted as the root cause of exploitation of women and nature by encroaching on cultivated land and the age-old agrarian culture.

The construction of the tannery starts under the supervision of the overseer and the white men. Markandaya’s purpose is to depict the idyllic life of the village which is desecrated by the introduction of the tannery. Before the introduction of the tannery, the village was calm and serene, with bountiful flora and fauna, and the major occupation of the villagers was agriculture. Over the two-month period of tannery construction, there is a continuous overflow of bullock-carts laden with bricks, stones, cement, sheets of tin, corrugated iron, coils of rope and hemp. Further, the kilns in neighboring villages which keep burning the bricks are unable to meet the demand of the construction of the tannery.

As the “evil” of development is introduced into the village by disturbing its agrarian culture, the villagers are forced to work on the project of the construction of the tannery. In excitement over the new construction, the young boy Arjun aptly suggests, “They are pulling down houses around the maiden and there is a long line of bullock carts carrying bricks”

The Most important feature of patriarchy is represented by the landowning Zamindari, portrayed in the novel through Sivaji, the proprietor who leases his land to peasants Rukmani and Nathan, who are the tillers of the Shivaji’s land. Though Sivaji accompanies Nathan and Rukmani in their rough phases, he sells the land to the tannery for a profitable price. He is thus not bothered over the livelihood of Nathan and Rukmani, who have worked on the land for more than thirty years. The villagers are struggling hard to survive. The fields have consumed all their labor, and all that lies before them in the end are worthless heaps of dried hay on account of nature’s fury. The pathetic condition of landless people is that they received no concessions in paying their dues to their landowner and are left with nothing; their only hope is to wait for another crop. This shows that patriarchal culture mars agrarian culture, which is represented by third world peasants like Rukmani. Regardless of more than thirty years’ association with the land as their own child, everything that Rukmani and Nathan held is effaced by Sivaji. The landowner appears one day and declares that the land is to be sold to the tannery and has to be vacated within two weeks; this inhuman patriarchal attitude is received as follows by Nathan, “The land is to be sold. We are to move. Sivaji came this morning. He says there is nothing to be done. The tannery owners are buying the land. They pay good prices” The tannery not only grabs the livelihood of the people, but also mars the ecology and environment of the village. Nevertheless, the introduction of the tannery impacts on the villagers’ lives at different levels. First, bazaar prices of daily commodities soar very high, with common people being unable to afford their daily needs. Secondly, the small scale businessmen are

wiped out because of the bigger shops the agrarian culture and the small scale shopkeepers' condition steadily and gradually deteriorate by the slow sprawl and spread of the flourishing tentacles of the tannery, which in the end shallows the serene pastoral land of the village.

The tannery goes on working day and night. Markandaya states, "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". Further, the pastoral land is encroached by the construction of a little colony for the higher officers and workers, in between the town and the open country, of "brick cottages with whitewashed walls and red-tiled roofs". As such, Markandaya probes two contrasting types of lifestyle. On the one hand, the introduction of the concrete buildings in a serene landscape and, on the other hand, constructions meant for peasants, typical huts with thatched roofs and mudwalls.

Due to hunger and loss of traditional modes of work, many of the peasant women are compelled to take up prostitution. Kunthi, Rukmani's neighbor, for example, starts the business of prostitution to fulfil the hunger of her belly as well as that of her family.

The novel confirms the viewpoints of most of the renowned ecofeminists that women are invested with a mission to save and nurture nature. Chris Cuomo, an American ecofeminist, observes, "Environmental ethics can benefit by incorporating feminist insights on the limitations of traditional philosophical conceptions of ethics". This key feature of ecofeminism can be studied through Rukmani, the principal protagonist of the novel who, as representative of the third world woman peasant, is very much associated with nature.

The novel centers on Rukmani; she marries Nathan, a tenant farmer, poor in a material sense but rich in love and care. In the novel, Rukmani is strongly associated with nature; she nurtures and cares the field like her own child. The tannery, in her experience, is a catastrophe that falls upon the village, not only disturbing the simple,

primitive, traditional, agrarian oriented families, but also the pastoral land of the village.

Rukmani's intimate and intricate relationship with nature is portrayed through her labor in the fields, which represents her affection for nature. The entire novel is the epitome of an ecofeminist stance. Indeed, Rukmani prays continuously for the betterment of her land and crops, fruits and harvest; she shows divine integrity between herself and nature.

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