

# An Ecofeminist Reading of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

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## Abstract

Ecofeminism, originally postulated in the west is formed from combining feminism with eco, the shortened form of ecology. Whereas feminism deals with social, psychological, physical oppression of women in the male dominated patriarchal society, ecofeminism vividly presents the oppression and suffering of women and nature in the hands of masculine forces. Nature is often identified with mother figure for the qualities of being tender, submissive and nurturing persona. Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* minutely describes both the gender problem and ecological crisis. Rukmani, the protagonist is the worst sufferer. Nature too suffers in the hands of science and technology. The novel focuses on the sorrows and sufferings, worries and anxieties of village people with the advent of industrialism in the small village. The simple idyllic pastoral life of the village, specially the life of Rukmani turns into a hell with the introduction of a tannery in the village. The paper examines the two major ecofeminist concerns here: on the one hand patriarchal notion of modern technology as the main cause of exploitation of both women and nature and on the other hand portrayal of women characters as the saviours of nature due to a correlation existing between them.

## Keywords

Nature, Culture, Ecofeminism, Exploitation, Feminism, Assimilation, Degradation

## Introduction:

Human life forms an integral part of nature. Without nature we cannot even think of a minute. Human beings are greedy and to satisfy their greed they are causing harms to nature. Industrialism led to destruction of rural areas, there was major exploitation of nature. The industrial and chemical pollution of the biosphere, the obliteration of natural resources, and the explosion of human population beyond the capacity of earth lead to environmental hazards and ecological imbalance and due to all these the earth is in a state of crisis. There arises so many movements, protests and activities against such ecological crises. Many books are also written for increasing environmental awareness. Books that are important include Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, Raymond William's *The Country and the City*, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: the technology and the pastoral ideal in America*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* etc. Finally all these movements, protests and activities against ecological crises paved the path for the emergence of so many theories like ecocriticism, ecofeminism, deep ecology etc. The purpose of ecofeminism as a theory is to ensure the safety of women and to increase environmental consciousness. Ecofeminism, the neologism, was coined by Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974 in her epoch making book *Le Feminisme Ou La Mort*. Both ecofeminism and cyber feminism belong to the third wave feminism. To analyze ecofeminism, it is first important to understand the pregnant notion of feminism. As the term ecofeminism itself indicates, it is the combination of two theoretical enterprises- Feminism and Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism explores relation between literature and physical and biological environment conducted for the purpose of increasing environmental awareness. Feminism does not simply focus on the exploitation of women by men but, as the major ecofeminists posit, it includes how women are the firsthand victims of environmental degradation because women are closely related to nature. The term ecofeminism establishes the connection between women and nature. The first hand victim of environmental degradation is woman in the name of science and technology. Francois d' Eaubonne claims

that the root cause of domination of women and nature is patriarchy. Ynestra King, a North American ecofeminist established a link between woman and nature. According to her women are considered to be inferior in the male-dominated society and all social practices are at the root of ecological destruction. Mary Daly, an American radical lesbian feminist, has given her remarkable contribution to the field of ecofeminism by her major work *Gyn/Ecolgy*, defending that male connection with culture is generally considered as superior to that of women's connection with nature. She herself rejects this belief and points out that the female/nature connection is more of a strength than a weakness. According to Karen J. Warren, the root cause of domination is to be found in all types of isms like feminism, racism, classicism, heterosexism, militarism, and naturism, which are unjustified systems of exploitation and subordination. Susan Griffin targets the androcentric attitude. As all humans and non humans consume the same sunlight, air and water, they have equal rights to survive. In this way she expresses her concern regarding the exploitation of women and nature. Vandana Shiva, a prominent Indian thinker, has remarkable contributions in the field of ecofeminism. Through her works such as *Ecofeminism, The Violence of the Green Revolution, Biopiracy* she has tried to point out that there is an intimate relationship between women and nature. She has also pointed out that an androcentric attitude is the main cause of exploitation, degradation and domination of both woman and nature. She further states that degradation of woman and nature is due to the emergence of science and technology based new world order. Human greed is responsible for environmental degradation and ecological imbalance. Humans want economic gain which is solely based on the industrial and scientific development. They think that natural resources are in plenty. This attitude leads to the destruction of 'Prakrati'. The peasants and farmers are evicted of their land because of the introduction of new technologies. Trees are being mercilessly cut down due to industrial purpose. Due to the excessive exploitation of nature women are deprived of their main activity, inspiration for creativity and sanctity of life, and they try their level best to protect natural resources. In this context Shiva gives the examples of Chipko movement in which the women of Garhwal district protested against the commercial felling of trees by embracing the trees. According to Agarwal women in poor rural household are victims of environmental degradation in quite gender specific ways and they have been active agents in movements of environmental protection and regeneration. In this context she coins the term feminist environmentalism. She also say that gender and class determine division of labour, distribution of power and property. Chhaya Datar in her work entitled *Ecofeminism Revisited* focuses on the problems of rural women. The rural women are too poor to continue their livelihood smoothly. They have to depend on natural resources. Kamala Markandaya is undoubtedly one of the most prolific Indian woman novelists. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a novel that basically deals with connection between woman and nature. The novel mainly focuses on the suffering of Rukmani and Nathan. The subtitle of the novel is *A Novel of Rural India*. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a classical pastoral. In this novel all the female characters suffer greatly. Nature too suffers here. The novel is a great tragedy engineered by the introduction of tannery in the village. The paper aims at presenting Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* as an ecofeminist text and secondly it focuses on Kamala Markandaya's urge to add a new meaning to the ecofeminist discourse through an Indian novel.

### **Patriarchal attitude: Impact on women**

If feminism deals with the sorrows and sufferings of woman in the male dominated patriarchal society, *Nectar in a Sieve*, a classical pastoral portrays the sorrows and sufferings of so many female characters like Rukmani, Kunthi, Ira etc. Rukmani, the central character of the novel suffers a lot. Though she often dreamt of a grand wedding, her dream does not come true. Being the fourth daughter when her turn came nothing was left to her parents. So finally she was married to a tenant farmer Nathan. Rukmani accepts her lot with stoic resignation. When her first child Ira was born all became unhappy. In the patriarchal society the birth of a girl child was considered to be ominous. Female foeticide is very common nowadays. The condition of women is deteriorating day by day in the name of rape, dowry, sexual harassment, eve teasing etc. This type of concept also exists in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Rukmani, the protagonist of the novel is married at the early age of twelve as 'marriage and motherhood are considered essential for the salvation of

women.’[Apte] She is deprived of higher education, though her father wanted her to read and write. In the male dominated patriarchal society the education of a girl child is treated with negativity and severe contempt. When Rukmani’s father taught her, her mother opposed it. Rukmani grew vegetables and fruit and Nathan encouraged her. Nathan expected his first child to be a son to continue his line. When Ira was born he did not pay any attention to her. As soon as Ira grows up, she becomes very good looking. Both her parents started loving her. *Nectar in a Sieve* strikes similarity with Pearl S Buck’s Nobel prize winning novel *The Good Earth* and Alan Paton’s *Cry the beloved Country*. Rukmani and Nathan are evicted from their land. Nathan’s infidelity shocks Rukmani. Ira becomes a prostitute to save the family from starvation. Ira, the eldest daughter of Rukmani and Nathan, is named after one of the grand rivers of Asia. She is married at the age of fourteen. Everyone praises the couple when she is married. Nobody understood the misfortunes awaiting her. As she was unable to bear his husband a child, she was abandoned by her husband. Though Ira was with her husband for five years, he had no responsibility to her. Giving birth to a child is only the fundamental thing for him. Even though Rukmani tried to argue with his son-in-law pointing out that Ira may conceive later, Nathan supported him. Ira accepts her lot without any complaint or anger towards her husband. She stood by the family when they are dying of starvation. She takes to prostitution to feed her ailing brother Kuti, who dies later. When an albino child Sacrabani is born to her out of wedlock through a chance encounter with one of her clients, everyone goes on insulting her. She courageously faces all the charges and dotes on Sacrabani. Sacrabani is called a bastard and Ira is grief stricken. There is a striking contrast between Ira and Kunthi. Kunthi is immoral and wicked. Whereas Kunthi is a temptress and she becomes a prostitute to satisfy her lust and attract others, Ira takes to prostitution to ward off starvation. Old Granny emerges as the most pathetic character in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*. She has to face death in the street where she lived and worked all her life. She is a vegetable seller in the village. Rukmani sells the product of her garden to old Granny but when she needs more money, she sells it to Mr. Biswas. Old Granny understands Rukmani’s situation. She does not become angry at this. She blames herself for Ira’s misfortunes though Rukmani does not blame her because Rukmani thinks it is Ira’s fate and fate cannot be altered. When Ira’s illegitimate child Sacrabani is born, she offers Ira a rupee coin as if to atone for her sin of finding a wrong match for her. The kind, old lady dies helplessly for lack of bread. She was born and brought up in the road and the road becomes her final destination. There was nobody to look after her when she dies pathetically in the road.

### Impact of tannery on agrarian culture

The charm of the simple pastoral life is lost with the introduction of a tannery in the village. Though the tannery initially proves beneficial to the village people in giving them employment, it casts its evil influence upon the tranquil village. Though all other characters in the novel including Nathan praised the tannery, Rukmani was very sceptical of it from the very beginning. She does not like the tannery at all. She gives a graphic description of the negative aspects of setting up the tannery in the village:

*It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew, and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody’s land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day the tanning went on. A never ending lines of cart 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.*

The tannery spoils the innocence and simplicity of life. It vitiates the beauty of nature, expands ugliness all around. It destroys the idyllic charms of the village by filling the village with filth and dirt, din and noise. The traditional agriculture bound society is transformed into an Urban industrial society. In *Nectar in a Sieve* there is a clash between tradition and modernity, between agriculture and industry. Prices rise, and unsocial and anti-social elements invade the idyllic life. Rukmani’s two eldest sons, Arjun and Thambi started working in the tannery. But soon they are accused of fomenting labour trouble in the tannery. They set out for Ceylon in search of job. Rukmani’s other son Raja is caught while stealing from the tannery and is beaten to death. The land that Nathan is tilling for years is taken away from him

because of the tannery. They are unable to pay the rent and the landlord sells their land to the tannery at high cost. The tannery is set up in the place of rural fields. The common village people lost their lands. The local cobbler Kannan's job is taken away and Janaki abandons the village with her family. According to Rukmani the tannery is the root cause of their misery and troubles: 'My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness.' Due to the establishment of tannery the environment becomes polluted. Science, technology, and capitalism are the symbols of social progress but these are also motives for environmental degradation and ecological imbalance. Having lost the land Rukmani and Nathan set out for the town in search of Murugan. Wherever they go, misfortunes follow them. Though Nathan felt that all his sons would support him in tilling the land, none of his sons paid any attention to agriculture. He is compelled to leave the village. When they reached the town, they learnt to their utmost despair that Murugan has disappeared leaving his wife alone. To return to their village they have no money left with them. They started working as stone breakers. They tried to save as much money as they could. But before they return to their village Nathan dies, leaving Rukmani alone. Markandaya has taken the title of her debut novel from Coleridge's poem *Work Without Hope* which runs as follows:

Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve

And hope without an object cannot live

Hope, aspirations, sweet moments of life can be very difficult to carry in a sieve. The village people have to struggle for existence living far from the madding crowds of a city. Their happiness is impermanent, it is like nectar filtering through a sieve flowing out drop by drop. It is very difficult to carry nectar in a sieve. Their crops depend on the vagaries of nature like droughts and floods. Their life is as hopeless as holding nectar in a sieve. The span of their lives is disturbed by starvation, sickness and death. According to Srinivas Iyenger, 'Markandaya writes that fear, hunger, and despair are the constant companions of the peasant- fear of the dark future, fear of the sharpness of hunger, fear of the blackness of death.' Men are the symbols of modernization and development. The structure of the tannery begins under the supervision of the white men. The rural people neglect their traditional profession of agriculture and start working under the tannery. The tannery spoils the mentality of the common people. Due to establishment of the tannery the virginity of the village girls is lost. Kunthi becomes a street walker. Ira was once a decent girl but she, too, becomes a prostitute to save her sick brother, Kuti. The second feature of patriarchal dominance is elaborated by the landowning Zamindari, portrayed in the novel through the character of Sivaji. Sivaji takes away the land from Nathan and sells it to the tannery people. This shows that patriarchal culture mars agrarian culture. Villagers are cheated during the hard times by moneylenders such as Hanumanta and Biswas. Bazaar prices soar very high with common people unable to buy their daily needs. The tannery not only ruins the livelihood of the village people but also spoils the ecology and environment of the village.

### **Woman as saviour of nature**

The main feature of ecofeminism can be studied through Rukmani, the principal protagonist of the novel. Rukmani is closely associated with nature. In the novel she emerges as the saviour of nature. She nurtures and cares for her land as if her own child. She loves the songs of mynahs and that of many other birds. With lot of energy and enthusiasm she plants seeds and nurtures plants. She waters the plants in proper time. She grows pumpkin, beans, sweet potatoes, brinjals and chillies. Her affection for nature is seen through her labour in the field. She does not curse nature or the field when her family lost crops due to the fury of nature like drought or flood. We can also find Rukmani's sympathetic attitude to the animals. Whenever the bullock gets hurt it leaves a deep impact upon her mind. Whereas the cart driver complains about the bullock saying that the animal will soon be good for nothing, Rukmani loves the bullock very much. This clearly shows that women have greater concern for animals than men. When Nathan kills a

snake to save his wife Rukmani, Kali, one of Rukmani's neighbour took pity on it. Markandaya says in this context, 'Women can sometimes be more soothing than men.'

## Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* not only portrays anthropomorphic, patriarchal and capitalist attitude towards women and nature but also highlights women's awakening consciousness and their confrontation against tradition oriented society. The setting of a tannery in the quite, tranquil village disrupts life, leading to moral degradation and disintegration of the family like Rukmani's. Rukmani, the main female character of the novel has to face many difficulties in life and she overcomes them with tremendous patience. She never breaks up the marriage bond. She shows extraordinary patience. She is an ideal Indian wife and Indian women get 'a great respect for motherhood and inviolability of marriage'. [ Vivekananda 198] Lakshmi Kumari Sharma rightly says that 'Markandaya's women also emerge out of darkness, throwing off their legacy of humiliation, dependence, and resignation and reaching out for an equitable share of man's worldly and spiritual goods'. [ The Position of Women in Kamala Markandaya's Novels, P-132]. In reading Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* one gains the ecofeminist wisdom that both women and nature should be respected.

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