

An Ecocritical Reading of Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract:

Ecocriticism emerges as a literary theory towards the end of the 20th century and at the dawn of the first decade of the 21st century. Ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between nature and literature. According to ecocritics, nature indicates the entirety of the physical environment that consists of humans and non-humans. In today's world, the degradation of the ecosystem caused by humans is a global, ongoing problem. Mother earth is confronted with an ecological catastrophe. The life support systems of the planet are under stress. To fight environmental issues, various ecological movements have been taken place. Literature, which is a mirror of human society, also participates in this movement by shifting its focus on ecological matters. Literature begins to take into account the relation between man and nature. Therefore ecocriticism appears as a worldwide emergent movement that attracts readers' attention to issues human beings need to be thinking about. This paper aims to study Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* in the light of ecocriticism. Furthermore, this paper attempts to understand the concept of ecocriticism and analyze the importance of ecocriticism in literature. It would shed ample light on how Markandaya portrays the interdependence of man and nature in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Markandaya raises her voice against the exploitation of nature due to industrialization through her protagonist Rukmani.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Industrialization, Interdependence of man and nature.

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Apart from modern literary theories and cultural theories, ecocriticism is a new critical discipline that emerged in 1990. It studies and explores the relationship between the environment and literature. The human being is the most essential element of nature. Literature and art influence human life, and as a consequent reaction, it also influences art and literature. As a newly emerged discipline, Ecocriticism examines the origins of the ecological crisis in society's interaction with nature and analyses the connection between environment and literature.

Ecocriticism has become an articulate and structured literary criticism in the nineties. Two seminal books published in 1996, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, are breakthroughs in ecological criticism. Though Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, is considered to be the most crucial book sowing the seeds of the movement of ecocriticism. William Rueckert coined the term ecocriticism in 1978 in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". The term ecocriticism derives from Greek 'Oikos' Latinized as 'Eco', a short form of ecology.

In his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," William Rueckert (1996, p. 107) defines ecocriticism as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world". Ecocriticism, as defined here, aims to find a common basis for the co-existence of human and non-human beings because environmental issues have become an essential part of human existence.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*

What...is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (1996, p. xviii)

As defined above by Cheryll Glotfelty, the concept of ecocriticism focuses on the interaction between the physical environment and human culture and the "interrelationships", especially the arts and culture of language and literature (p. xix).

As Glotfelty points out, ecocritics generally ask and answers such questions as:

"How nature is presented in this sonnet?, What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel?, Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom?, what way literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world", etc. (1996, p.xix)

Therefore, it can be noted that ecocriticism is different from other theories because it focuses on the entire ecosphere. According to ecocritics, nature indicates the entirety of the physical environment that consists of humans and non-humans.

While discussing ecology, Barry Commoner says that “Everything is connected to everything else”, so it goes without saying that literature is not beyond life. It plays a significant role in the environmental movement. It cannot be denied that, until very recently, there has been no literary text, no article, no academic conference to increase awareness about the environmental crisis. Literary scholarship of the early twentieth century paid no attention to ecological problems. Literary studies did not address environmental issues, although, since the 1970s, other disciplines such as law, history, philosophy have begun to deal with it. Race, gender, and class have been important topics of literature. It is in the early nineties that critics started taking environmental viewpoint to literature.

Although literature started greening, Modern Indian English fiction writers have not demonstrated environmental issues for a long time. This prolonged absence of nature in Indian English fiction is mainly triggered by Indian life being heavily concerned with financial, social, and cultural issues. Kamala Markandaya has developed an exemplary place in Indian English literature by incorporating nature and natural elements as essential features of her novels. She highlights the active roles of nature in her characters' lives, the best example of which can be found in her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The novel's subtitle “A Novel of Rural India” suggests that this novel is about rural India, not about any particular character or village, but about all those Indians who live in villages. As the title suggests, this novel narrates the story of poor peasants who fail to collect the Nectar of their lives-joy and comfort- because it passes through the sieve of their poverty.

Rukmini narrates the story of the novel. In a flashback, Rukmini recalls her life experiences. Her experiences make readers aware of the poverty-stricken life that the poor Indians live. She remembers her life with Nathan and her children. She narrates how she and her family and the villagers went through difficulties and challenges to make their livelihood. Yet, they were content with their lot amid all of these until the tannery was introduced to their village, severely changing their lives. They were deprived of their land's comfort by the tannery, which led them to the brink of ruin. Rukmini lost her three sons and her husband later on.

Readers learn from her story that nature always has been an integral part of Rukmini's life. Markandaya depicts the close connection between nature and human beings in the novel through her mouthpiece Rukmani. Rukmani always feels a concord with nature. She remembers those happy days of her life when she was close to nature:

while 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? (p.8)

Nature always attracts Rukmini. Just after her marriage, when she comes to her husband's house, her mind is drawn towards the scenic beauty of that place; she says

The air was full of the sound of the bells, and of birds, sparrows and bulbuls mainly, and sometimes the cry of an eagle, but when we passed a grove, green and leafy, I could hear mynahs and parrots. It was warm, unused to so long a jolting, I fell asleep. (p.5)

Rukmani values nature so much that, because water is "precious" to her, she names her daughter Irrawaddy, which is one of the greatest rivers of Asia,

The frequent presence of nature can be seen in the dialogues of the characters. Praising her daughter, Rukmani says that she is "a maiden (who is) like a flower" (p.51). Nathan compares his state with that of wandering jackals when he knows that he will lose his house. Markandaya compares her characters with flora and fauna to make a close association between nature and humans. When Rukamani criticizes the foundation of the tannery in the village, her husband Nathan advises her to "bend like the grass, that you do not break" (p.43). Rukmini indeed is like the grass, which may bend in the wake of a storm but cannot be uprooted. Critic Balaram Gupta in his book *Indian English Literature* compares Rukmini with 'Mother Earth' and says:

Rukmini, the mother figure, symbolizes the mother earth, is the source, the origin, the well-spring, the life-giver, the supporter, the sustainer, the nourisher, and even more, the last resort, the consoler, the healer on the brink of collapse. (2011, p.92)

Rukmini believes villagers are more blessed than those living in the cities because nature bestows her favour upon them. The people in the villages enjoy the "passing of the seasons", nature gives its "muted messages" to them (p.117). But Rukmini perceives nature's scenic beauty gradually changes with the construction of the tannery in her village. Nature slowly crumbles as the tannery is built there. The village's serenity is replaced by the chaotic life of the technologically advanced society of the town. Rukmini observes, "Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us" (p.30). Flowers stop spreading their fragrance, the air becomes contaminated, the quiet green fields change their colour.

The novel's ecocritical interpretation illuminates the effects of the tannery on the villagers and their ecosystem; one consequence is the expulsion of the native creatures and the disruptive noise that endangers both people and animals. The establishment of the tannery in that small village marks

India's small village colonization by outside peoples. One white man who also comes to the tannery is notable of all the new men in that village. When the tannery labourers work under the expert's supervision, the villagers watch with dumbfounded bemusement. After a little while, the white man comes to the scene and talks to the overseer. When the overseers ask the villagers to depart immediately, it becomes clear that the white man is powerful, as the overseer allowed the villagers to watch freely until the white man came and spoke to him.

The tannery is constructed on fertile, cultivable lands. The houses around the maidan are pulled down to build the tannery. The people who were working on lands now become a labourer in the tannery. The building of the tannery has financially and socially shaken the village. Economic growth becomes the be-all and end-all of the technologically developed society. Some people are sceptical about the tannery. They realized that it is pushing people out of their land and disrupting the agricultural village, as Rukmini claims. Rukmini understands that the tannery would do more damage to the village than it helped. Some like kunthi see this as an opportunity of getting employment. They think the factory will give the small townspeople a better market, bringing more capital into the area. The situation ultimately makes Kunthi a prostitute, and this new identity ultimately kills her like it did many villagers. The price of commodities rises as the tannery workers can expend more than the peasants may afford. This was favourable for those who traded their products but undesirable for those who had to purchase them. The larger shopkeepers who appeared in the village after the opening of the tannery keep small village shopkeepers out of business. Therefore, the villagers become victims of economic exploitation.

The farming culture is devastated by Industrialization. The natural world is replaced by built-up surroundings. Markandaya unveils how with technological development, man has been detached from nature, bringing into doubt his own existence. The tannery penetrates the everyday lives of villagers with its disturbances. Before establishing the tannery, the villagers like Rukmini depended on nature for their livelihood and spiritual happiness. The source of their wealth, health, cheerfulness was nature. Although they did not have ample money, they lived with some contentment and peace. They were supportive of each other. Members of a family helped each other and worked together in the fields. Therefore, the close connection between the villagers was strengthened by their relationship with nature. The hearts of the villagers beat with the rhythm of nature. Abundance in nature gives them prosperity in life. But the tannery creates a physical and mental distance between human beings and nature. There are no vestiges of nature in such a society.

Not just the villagers but even the animals are affected by noise, pollution, hubbub, construction. The harmful effects of the factory scare away the native animals. There are frequent references to deafening noise coming from the factory, which Rukmini calls "clamour". This novel illustrates how

loud sounds from the tannery are intolerable to the inhabitant of the area. Still, its significant adverse impact on the animals who live in that place is not explored in this novel. Most of the animals have sensitive hearing, so it harms the animals more. Many female animals cannot detect males' vocal displays in such noise polluted areas (Kight et al, 1989). As a consequence, there is a chance for fewer male and female birds to breed. Animals can often be deaf to constant or extreme noise exposure. Hearing is a survival instinct for many animals. The deaf animals become vulnerable prey for not being able to perceive potential enemies

Conclusion:

Nectar in a Sieve illuminates how man's neglectful treatment of nature changes their lives drastically. Industrialization contributes to environmental degradation. It facilitates the depletion of natural resources. It causes emissions, primarily air, water, and soil pollution. Today's most burning problems- global warming and climate change are the most significant threats of industrialization. It cannot be denied that industrialization plays a crucial role in boosting a nation's monetary growth. It offers prospects for jobs and thus encourages the accumulation of capital. So it's always welcome for the progress of a nation. In the end, only it can be said that human beings are rational of all the species. Human beings can think. So a man should always be conscious of the ecological problems and take necessary steps to resolve them. Ecocriticism has a strong involvement in developing human interactions with co-beings. It puts emphasis on the interconnectedness of human beings and nature. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a phenomenal book contributing to rising environmental consciousness's vital process. It beautifully establishes that human beings' survival depends on nature, so we should improve our ways to avoid global catastrophe. Markandaya's views on nature and her treatment of nature have promoted her position as a significant emblem of ecocritical studies.

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