



Women, Nature, and Resilience: Kamala Markandaya's Vision in 'Nectar in a Sieve'

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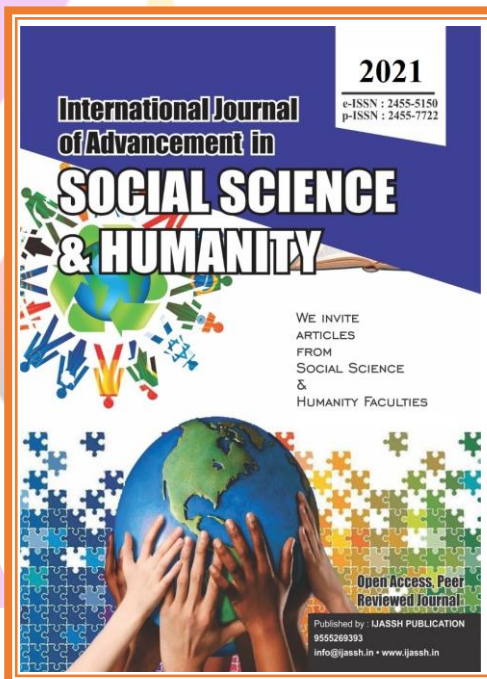
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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya is a notable female author whose books incorporate themes of oppression resulting from the exploitation caused by poverty, the caste system, and the clash of values between Eastern and Western societies. In her remarkable literary work titled *Nectar in a Sieve*, the author adeptly addresses the complex intersection between women and the environment, offering a trenchant analysis of the associated difficulties. The author has depicted the marginalisation of women inside a patriarchal culture. The author establishes a parallel between nature and the female body, suggesting that both are subject to exploitation by cultures influenced by male-centric ideologies. In civilizations of this sort, both women and the natural world are subjected to inferior treatment, despite their shared capacity for childbirth and nurturing. The mistreatment experienced by women has heightened their awareness of the indifference displayed by the male-dominated society towards the environment. Throughout history, women have frequently united in opposition to the exploitation of nature, driven by their ability to empathise with the suffering endured by the natural world. This article delves into the struggles and challenges that women face in the patriarchal society while Markandaya proposes to give solutions to the struggles of women through the novel.

Keywords: *women; environment; patriarchal culture; male-centric ideologies; oppression of women*

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya adeptly addresses the challenges pertaining to both the natural environment and women, with a particular focus on those belonging to the working class in her novel *The Nectar in a Sieve* (1954).

Nectar in a Sieve is a novel written by Kamala Markandaya that tells the story of a rural Indian woman named Rukmani and her struggles as she faces the challenges of

poverty, changing times, and the harsh realities of life in a small village. Set against the backdrop of post-independence India, the novel portrays the harshness of rural life, particularly for women. Rukmani's life begins with hope and love as she marries a simple farmer, Nathan, and moves to his remote village. However, their lives take a turn for the worse as they battle poverty, famine, and the loss of their children. The novel explores their resilience and their

ability to find solace in each other amidst the harsh circumstances.

Rukmani's relationships with her neighbours, particularly with Kunthi, a woman of cunning and ambition, add complexity to the story. The novel delves into the complexities of human nature and the different ways people respond to adversity. Throughout the novel, Rukmani's narrative provides insight into the struggles of rural life and the effects of industrialization and economic change on agrarian communities. It's a poignant story of love, loss, and the indomitable human spirit as Rukmani and Nathan strive to find "nectar" (happiness) amid life's many challenges, which is as elusive as trying to sieve it from the chaos of their existence. *Nectar in a Sieve* is a compelling portrayal of the human condition and the enduring strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity

The novel portrays Rukmani, the central character, together with her daughter Ira, as well as the surrounding environment, as individuals who experience the adverse effects of the patriarchal system, the institution of zamindari, and the impending process of industrialisation. Rukmani is employed as a labour in a garden and has a profound dedication to her occupation, indicative of her profound affinity for the natural world. She experiences an elevation

in her level of enjoyment upon witnessing the thriving state of the fields. The correlation gets more pronounced when the author argues, "the significance of our ability to engage in forestry and agriculture cannot be overstated" (Markandaya 241). Despite her diligent efforts, the domestic labour she performs is consistently undervalued. The narrative is structured around the various stages of Rukmani's life, encompassing her self-discovery and her psychological state during each of these distinct periods. These practises encompass the act of entering into matrimony at the tender age of twelve, assuming the roles of both a spouse and afterwards a parent. Throughout these stages, the emphasis on her connection with the land serves to reinforce the ecofeminist viewpoint. These relationships encompass both spiritual and physical components. The novel's title is derived from Coleridge and is referenced in the epigraph as follows:

"Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live" (as cited in Iyengar 438).

The aforementioned couplet is well employed by Kamala Markandaya, as these verses adequately convey the fundamental idea of the narrative. When an individual's endeavours do not produce any outcomes, they can be likened to the futility of trying

to confine *Nectar in a Sieve*. Similarly, in the context of life, the absence of an objective renders life devoid of purpose. The author has demonstrated that agricultural labour constitutes the essence of a farmer's existence. If an individual becomes disconnected from their work for any reason, they may experience adverse consequences such as hunger, poverty, and even mortality, as they lack alternative objectives or aspirations. The author draws a comparison between the transient contentment experienced by the farmer and the metaphorical representation of nectar in a sieve in the narrative. In his article titled "Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-Outsider," M.K. Bhatnagar (2002) asserts that Markandaya's debut novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, encompasses her fundamental concerns. These include the portrayal of Rukmani, the protagonist and narrator, who finds herself entangled in the arduous existence of a peasant. The novel also explores the unpredictable forces of nature, the detrimental effects of modern civilization, exemplified by the presence of a tannery, and the compelled urban migration experienced by the characters. Through these themes, Markandaya elucidates the concept that engaging in labour without hope is akin to attempting to collect nectar in a sieve. (3)

This literary work sheds light on the challenges encountered by the Indian

populace as a result of shifts in policies pertaining to land, rehabilitation, labour, industrialization, and other related aspects. The narrative commences with the union of a youthful Rukmani and Nathan, a tenant farmer. Rukmani's three older sisters have entered into matrimonial alliances with affluent households, so providing the villagers with a subject of discussion and speculation. Rukmani's father holds the position of a village headman, which once granted him influence over village affairs. However, as a result of a change in governance, his status was significantly decreased, compelling him to establish this incongruous partnership. This assertion is elucidated through the statement made by Rukmani's elder brother, wherein he expresses that the headman has lost his significance.

The character known as the Collector is shown as a figure of authority who visits the villages on an annual basis. It is the Collector who possesses the power in these villages, and he has the ability to assign individuals to positions of authority, rather than the headman. (Markandaya 4). The protagonist, Rukmani, finds the phrases challenging to bear, since they convey a sense of losing support and stability in her life (Markandaya 4). Markandaya purposefully introduces elements that disrupt the tranquilly of Rukmani's early upbringing, foreshadowing the future

hardships she would face. The author effectively engenders a sense of anticipation within the reader, fostering the belief that there exist opportunities for amelioration within the given circumstances. The readers maintain a sense of optimism throughout the text due to the presence of clues, such as Nathan's physically capable stature, which suggests a higher level of productivity. In a particular occurrence, Nathan, residing in a remote village distant from Rukmani's residence, had a strong inclination to establish his worth. In the novel, Rukmani is depicted as clutching grain in her hands while the character of Nathan makes a promise, stating that with bountiful harvests like the one she is currently witnessing, she will not experience any form of deprivation or lack (Markandaya 6). Despite the readers' inclination to anticipate a positive resolution, Markandaya skilfully incorporates an undercurrent of doubt, suggesting that circumstances may take a turn for the worst at any given moment. Consequently, the story oscillates between themes of optimism and melancholy.

Rukmani develops a fondness for the farm where Nathan is employed, considering it as her secondary dwelling, and derives pleasure from engaging in agricultural activities. According to Susheela Rao, Rukmani has a distinctive connection with nature through her heightened perception of its beauty (Rao 42). Rao provides

descriptions of many segments throughout the narrative where Rukmani demonstrates her awareness of the seasonal cycles and expresses admiration for the aesthetic and climatic beauty of the surroundings. There are numerous examples that support her connection with the natural world. Upon thorough consideration, one might assert that her engagement in gardening facilitates a physical connection with the ground.

The garden occupies a prominent position in her life. Rukmani's marriage at the age of twelve indicates her immaturity, which is reflected in her physical, mental, and emotional development that coincides with her labour in the garden and the cultivation of vegetables. The narrator reflects on her past experiences, stating,

"During my youth, I possessed a whimsical nature, and it appeared to me that the growth of these entities was not a result of my conscious efforts, but rather, each of the desiccated and rigid pellets that I grasped in my hand contained within it the profound essence of existence, tightly coiled beneath numerous layers of shielding foliage" (Markandaya 13).

The initial cultivation undertaken by the individual in question involves the establishment of a pumpkin plantation within her garden, which exerts a significant

impact over her. The text implies that she derives unparalleled satisfaction from the cultivation of pumpkins.

The growth of pumpkins commenced as they absorbed nutrients from the soil, sunlight, and water, resulting in their gradual enlargement and maturation into yellow and crimson hues. Eventually, they reached a state of readiness for consumption, prompting me to harvest one and bring it within. Upon witnessing the sight, Nathan was overwhelmed with a profound sense of admiration.

I expressed my surprise at the individual's apparent unfamiliarity with pumpkins, while maintaining a sense of satisfaction in both their response and my own demeanour, as I averted my gaze downward. Nathan expressed that the origin of the subject in question is not from our territory. Hence, it holds significant value, and you, Ruku, are undeniably an astute individual. I made an effort to conceal my sense of pride. I attempted to adopt a casual demeanour. I stored the pumpkin. However, the sensation of pleasure was causing my pulse to quicken; the blood, without conscious control, flowed rapidly and heatedly to my face. (Markandaya 10)

Although *Nectar in a Sieve* was released prior to the formalisation of ecofeminism as a theoretical framework, some reviewers have examined Rukmani's connection with nature from an ecofeminist perspective. As exemplified by Rukmani's contemplation, she reflects upon the moments when the radiant sun illuminates her surroundings, rendering the fields verdant and aesthetically pleasing. During these instances, her husband perceives a beauty within her that has remained unseen by others. Additionally, she possesses an ample reserve of grain, safeguarding her against future hardships. With a secure shelter and a delightful sensation within her being, Rukmani ponders what more a woman could possibly desire. (Markandaya 8)

This frequently referenced passage from the novel idealises the profound connection between Rukmani and her agricultural fields, as well as her affinity for nature. The lines emphasises that the concept of happiness for a modest lady encompasses only basic necessities, such as shelter, clothing, sustenance, and the aesthetic allure of natural surroundings. (Verma 2002) The radiant sun and lush greenery of the fields elicit a profound sense of excitement within her. Furthermore, the sexuality of women is metaphorically equated to the process of sowing crops in a symbiotic manner.

The narrative acknowledges the seeds as a symbol of rejuvenation and the beginning of a new existence. The incident in which Rukmani holds the pumpkin seeds in her hands with the intention of planting them reveals her contemplation on the remarkable nature of these small seeds, which contain the potential for life. Rukmani expresses her awe at the continuous marvel of their growth, starting from the moment the seed splits and the initial green shoots emerge, all the way to the stage when young buds and fruit begin to develop.

In my perception, it appeared that every arid and rigid pellet I grasped within my hand had the inherent essence of existence, securely coiled within, shielded by successive layers of foliage for preservation, delicate and ephemeral, susceptible to dissipation upon initial contact or observation.

As I observed the gradual unfolding of every delicate little plant, revealing its modest verdant leaf, a sense of anticipation would steadily build inside me, evoking a profound and awe-inspiring sensation. (Markandaya 17)

The examination of tannery, which involves the transformation of deceased animal remains into leather, holds significance due to its demonstrated impact on wildlife

disturbance. Furthermore, Rukmani perceives it as a mechanism responsible for animal mortality.

Hardly a month passed without the occurrence of land being engulfed and the emergence of a new structure. The process of tanning occurred continuously throughout the day and night. An uninterrupted procession of carts transported vast quantities of raw materials, including numerous skins sourced from goats, calves, lizards, and snakes. These skins were subsequently retrieved after undergoing the processes of tanning, dyeing, and finishing. The existence of such vast quantities of animals and the ability to find marketplaces for them appeared implausible, yet astonishingly, it was indeed the case. (Markandaya 47)

Rukmani perceives that the establishment of the tannery has resulted in an additional adverse consequence, namely a substantial increase in the pricing of goods available in local retail establishments. The author posits that this factor contributes to the growing disparity among social classes, encompassing individuals from the peasant, moneylender, and landowner groups. Biswas, a financial lender, requests a greater quantity of commodities as collateral for outstanding debts, resulting in Rukmani receiving a reduced price for her vegetables

in exchange. She says that there was a lack of milk in the household.

According to Markandaya (28), the consumption of curds and butter was financially unattainable for us, except on rare occasions. Furthermore, we have not had the opportunity to taste sugar, dhal, or ghee since their arrival. The increase in price has significant negative consequences for individuals belonging to the lower socioeconomic class, such as Rukmani, and leads to the emergence of many social issues. The presence of poverty and hunger leads to the transformation of a woman's body into a commodity, resulting in the emergence of the practise of prostitution. The current state of mourning has a significant impact on both Rukmani and Ira. In a desperate measure to ensure the survival of her family and protect her brother Kuti from the dire consequences of malnutrition, she reluctantly turns to engaging in prostitution as a final option. Ira is compelled to make this significant decision as a result of the changes brought about by modernity and industrialism. She believes that prioritising the preservation of life is more virtuous than adhering to moral standards that do not provide sustenance for her family. According to M.K. Bhatnagar (2002), Ira's decision might be interpreted as a courageous refusal to conform to the traditional concept of marriage (2). The option made by Ira stands in stark contrast

to Kunthi's decision, as the former prioritises the betterment of herself, while the latter chooses prostitution as a means to meet her family's financial demands. This passage elucidates the concept of individualism that arises in conjunction with the erosion of the traditional peasant code, which lacks a suitable replacement (5). However, it is important to note that Markandaya does not completely reject tradition, nor does she assert the dominance of Western invention.

Therefore, the aforementioned analysis illustrates Rukmani's deep concern and affection for the land, natural surroundings, and indigenous traditions. Rukmani establishes a resilient bond with nature that remains unbreakable throughout both the rural and urban phases of her journey. Despite encountering significant challenges in both rural and urban environments, she ultimately emerges as a solitary ally of the natural world.

ECOFEMINISM IN *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

"Ecofeminism" in *Nectar in a Sieve* is subtly woven into the novel's narrative, reflecting the interconnectedness of the female experience and the environment in a rural Indian setting. Rukmani's life as a woman in a patriarchal society is intrinsically tied to her experiences as an agrarian labourer and the impact of environmental changes on her

community. Through Rukmani's character and her experiences, ecofeminist themes emerge.

Rukmani, as a female character, embodies the close relationship between women and the land they cultivate. Her daily life revolves around working the fields, growing food, and bearing the brunt of environmental challenges, such as droughts and crop failures. These experiences underscore the ecofeminist perspective, which highlights how women often bear the disproportionate burden of environmental degradation and resource scarcity. (Dodiya 2000) The novel also portrays the impact of industrialization on rural communities, as more land is converted for factory use, and traditional agricultural practices are disrupted. This transformation, driven primarily by male economic interests, negatively affects the environment and the

traditional roles of women, who are often the primary caregivers and farmers.

Furthermore, the character of Kunthi, who represents a more destructive and exploitative relationship with the land, stands in contrast to Rukmani's connection to the earth and the environment. Kunthi's manipulative behaviour, reflecting human greed and ambition, leads to environmental exploitation and the depletion of natural resources, adding a dimension of ecofeminist critique. In *Nectar in a Sieve*, ecofeminism is subtly present, as the story highlights the intersection of gender, environmentalism, and social issues in a rural Indian context. Rukmani's experiences, her connection to the land, and the evolving environmental challenges serve as a lens through which readers can examine the interconnected struggles of women and the environment in a rapidly changing world.

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