

Ecofeminism and Marginalization of Women as Two Parallel Entities in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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ABSTRACT

“Ecofeminism is a unique feminist lens on the very real relationship between Gender and Environmental issues”- Bustle

Kamala Markandaya, an Indian woman writer exposes the issue of ecofeminism in her exceptional work “*Nectar in a Sieve*”. This debut work is considered one of the best works of her career. This book also became the “Book-of-the-Month Club” main selection in the United States apart from that it was translated into seventeen languages and was named a Notable Book of 1955 by the American Library Association. The novel reflects the idea of ecofeminism, which was first proposed in the West (1954). This paper also explores how women are marginalized and devalued on a large scale in male chauvinistic societies. Similarly, another oppressed non-human body, the environment has also been degraded, devalued, and mistreated by the local domination of masculine regimes. The researcher intends to examine the nuances of ecofeminism within this context before analyzing the chosen Indian English novel in light of Markandaya's understanding of ecofeminism. The relationship between women and nature are examined and explored in this paper. It also looks at Markandaya's conception of women and the environment as two parallel but independent entities, even from a complex environmental perspective; on the other hand, women struggle to establish not only their worth but also to assign value to nature, and the environment.

Keywords: ecofeminism, nature, environment, Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Introduction:

Kamala Markandaya addresses the inequality, hardship, and situation of women, particularly those from working-class backgrounds and another victimized group: the environment. She shows how poverty, women's close ties to nature, and industrialists' abuse of nature result in a society's women being completely degraded.

Kamala Markandaya depicts the main character Rukmani, Ira, and the environment as beings under oppression. Rukmani's labour-intensive effort in the garden and complete reliance on this resource shows her deep connection to nature. She finds it enjoyable to witness the growth of her field. It's evident when she says, "Our freedom to work in the forest and to farm is very important" (Markandaya, K. 2010, p. 241). It is tragically crucial to emphasize that in this rural, male-chauvinistic environment, her domestic work and reproductive labour are not valued.

The line-by-line chronological narrative of this book, *Nectar in a Sieve*, traces the protagonist Rukmani's stages of self-discovery from a little girl of twelve years old to a married lady, then to a mother, with her own life and various relationships. The argument made by ecofeminism that a young woman's connection to the land is intimately tied to her body and spirituality is echoed by the young woman's identification as a child bride.

"According to ecofeminism, the environment and women are both distinct and independent oppressed entities. It suggests a special synthesis of literary and cultural perspectives that gives literary and cultural critics a particular lens through which they can examine how nature is portrayed in literature and connected with representations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. As a combination of ecology or environmentalism and feminism" (Legler, G. 1997). Numerous viewpoints that have their origins in various feminist practices and ideas are collectively referred to as eco-feminism.

"These many viewpoints represent not only various feminist viewpoints but also various conceptions of nature and approach to solving urgent environmental issues" (Warren, 1993). They contend that the tight bond between women and nature stems from their shared experience of being oppressed by male dominance. Additionally, they contend that traditional and traditional male-centered viewpoints are reflected in male-centered speech and practices about the environment.

Similar to how conventional depictions frequently regard the land as innocent, female, and amenable to exploitation, eco-feminism literary criticism is concerned with how nature is

portrayed., the four interconnected pillars of a patriarchal society are sexism, racism, class exploitation, and environmental damage. According to this ecofeminist's analysis, nature and oppressed groups of people are linked in a way that extends beyond just women.

“This phrase or word originates from Francoise d Ebonee’s 1974 book *Feminism or Death* (Feminism or Death), which was translated into English in 1989” (Wagner,2008). Moreover, “Ecofeminism (a combination and connection of environment and women) is a political investigation that explores the relationship between centrism (men as the center of power and authority) and environmental exploitation and mistreatment. It is a value system, a social movement, an interdisciplinary approach, and now a practice” (Birkland, 1993).

“The concept of hierarchical dualism is another topic covered by eco-feminists. In this theory, masculine is given all elevated, prestigious, and delicate features whereas femininity is not. Eco-feminists believe that this logic is based on dominance in a relationship of value hierarchical dualistic thinking, which maintains and justifies the strength and dominance of both women and nature” (Warren, 1990). We might say that for ecofeminists, ideology represents a critical turning point in their thinking on the role of ideology in a world where women and nature are viewed as dominant. “Eco-feminists contend that to bring about this utopia, the ideologies of equality, nonviolence, and non-hierarchical structures must be promoted. Additionally, nature and all other living things, whether human or not, must be held in the highest esteem, according to eco feminists”. (Kirk, G. 1997).

Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*:

No other Indian female author has been mentioned in the context of ecofeminism, except Arundhati Roy. Still, we cannot ignore that earlier feminist authors like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai also wrote about women and the environment before the spectacular success of Roy's novel. While writing on the particular and private lives of women, Markandaya also makes overtly political claims about societal issues and Indian culture as a whole.

The emphasis on the particular and the personal is one reason why Markandaya from this category is frequently disregarded and not taken seriously. The darker hues of nature are depicted in Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* along with the darker sides of the women who are the subject of the story. The unpredictability of nature and drought in Markandaya's book nearly cause Rukmani and her family to go hungry. Rukmini accepts the lot that has been dealt to her, but Ira drove into prostitution because of their severe financial situation.

Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya effectively compares women to nature. The novel shows how male-oriented ideology rules over both women and nature. In this novel, nature is given recognition alongside a woman's body. The protagonist that the author chose for this book is a working-class woman from a rural area, which fits very nicely with the ecofeminist theme of the book. Even though the novel was published before the idea and theory of ecofeminism, it anticipated the latter. Three decades before the original idea received the right attention in the West, the theory of ecofeminism was put into practice in the portrayal of Rukmani, the female protagonist of the book. Rukmani's connection to nature serves as the foundation for the novel's interpretation as an ecofeminist work. The novel draws a comparison between the hardships of gender and the environment using an ecofeminist lens.

Just as women struggle to be separated from their marginal status both within the family and in society, nature is also struggling to recover its former form due to distortion. The source of these issues is a male-oriented society. Despite being the mother of all things, capable of giving birth and nourishment, both women and nature suffer from torture and various forms of maltreatment. For the helpful role they perform for humanity on our planet, they do not receive the recognition they deserve.

The story explores the negative effects of industrialization, zamindari, and patriarchy, which together create an atmosphere that is unfit for both women and nature. The ladies in Rukmani's family, as well as all the women in the village, are the victims of such a system and policy, and nature is not spared from its negative effects. Rukmani, the story's narrator and protagonist, serves as the hub around which all of the action transpires.

The narrative details many phases of Rukmani's life, including her early marriage at the age of twelve, her subsequent role as the wife of a farmer named Nathan, and her eventual role as the mother of a daughter named Ira and six sons. Her deep link with nature throughout all of these periods, in both happy and tragic circumstances, is emphasized. This can be examined from both a spiritual and a physical angle.

Rukmani and Nathan's marriage is depicted in the novel's opening pages. Because Rukmani was given marriage to an ordinary peasant, as opposed to all three of her older sisters who were married off to wealthy men, this union has given rise to rumour among the locals.

Rukmani's father had possessed great power and status as the local headman, and all of his earlier daughters were married off to affluent and prosperous families. But when the collector

arrived, everything changed. The headman's position of authority was replaced by the collector, who, according to Rukmani's older brother, "comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints: not to the headman." (Markandaya 4).

Still, Rukmani's love of the outdoors and the natural world helps her cope with the challenging circumstances that come up in her life. The farm where Nathan works quickly becomes an integral part of her life. Her favourite activity becomes caring for the farm. Susheela Rao considers Rukmani's connection to nature to be special and the phrase "heightened awareness of nature's beauty" is rare. (Rao42)

Numerous allusions in the book make it abundantly evident that Rukmani's existence is pointless if she is not connected to nature. She exhibits active awareness of the seasonal changes, an ecstatic disposition, and a temper in response to the shifting atmospheric beauty, intense concentration, and a loss of human identity as she melds with non-human entities in nature. Her best teacher today is nature, which renews her life and gives it better philosophy. She develops a deeper inner perception to perceive and comprehend the intricate and hidden design of nature. She is filled with deep, mature philosophy from nature, and she notices the difference between her past self and the present: She recalls,

"I was young and fanciful then, and it seemed to me that each of the dry, hard pellets I clutched in my palm carried inside it the very secret of life itself, curled snugly within under the protective leaf, not that they grew as I did, unintentionally". (Markandaya 13)

When her first plantation, a pumpkin, bore fruit, she was ecstatic:

"When the pumpkins were finally ready to be eaten, I sliced one open and bit into it. The pumpkins had started to develop and were growing fat from the soil, sun, and water. When Nathan first saw it, he was in awe. Despite being delighted with him and myself, I said, "One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before," while keeping my gaze downward. "Not from our land," Nathan remarked. Consequently, it is valuable, and you, Ruku, are a wise woman. I tried not to be arrogant. I attempted to sound casual. I stored the pumpkin. However, enjoyment was raising my heart rate, and unexpectedly, hot, rushing blood rushed to my face". (Markandaya 10)

Through the following passage, it is easy to understand how Rukmani is connected to nature:

"When the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you that 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 8)

The paragraph gives the book an ecofeminist touch by demonstrating the close connection between a woman and the environment and creating an unbreakable bond between the two. The text is an honest admission of a woman's meagre needs, which combine food, clothing, shelter, and the allure of a beautiful environment to provide them self-satisfaction beyond which they have no ambition. When the sexuality of women is examined in seed germination, the woman-nature interface adds another significant element to the story. Rukmani, who is holding the pumpkin seeds, compares the seeds' potential for germination to that of a woman's capacity for childbearing, and she experiences this as a wonderful, exhilarating experience:

“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 17)

The novel examines the parallels between the connections between women and the environment while also highlighting the negative effects of industrialization, zamindari, and the patriarchal system. The novel's later sections depict the exact reverse of what it does at the beginning. It shifts its direction. It shows a self-centered, male-dominated ideology that is overstepping its bounds through zamindari and industrialization, making nature and women helpless victims.

Similar to how the lovely liquid Nectar, which serves as the book's title, drains away when put through a sieve, Rukmani and her family, the villagers, and nature as a whole are in danger of losing their beauty and vitality with the construction of a tannery that turns animal corpses into leather. The building of a tannery disturbs the entire area and turns the formerly well-organized community into a shambolic place populated by egotistical individuals. It is evident from Rukmani's remarks that she views the tanning industry as a murdering machine:

“Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, and 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 47)

Men are drawn into a trap of easy money, which fuels their greed and immoral behaviour. The local economy has collapsed. Industrialized fields have replaced farms. Families are also negatively impacted by it. Families are falling apart. Two of Rukmani's sons join a tannery, going against their father's eagerly anticipated ambition for farming. The situation starts to deteriorate. While this is going on, nature, which had been blessing the villages, becomes incensed at the men's hasty and foolish actions and exacts retribution on them in the shape of drought and flooding. The entire town is plagued by death and starvation:

“It was as if nothing had even been but rain...Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while waters rose and rose, and the tender green of paddy field sank under and was lost...There will be little eating done this year.” (Markandaya 43-44)

With time passing, things became worse:

“Day after Day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until it splits and great irregular fissures gaped in the field. Plants died and grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water.” (Markandaya 81)

The challenges of life cause people to degrade themselves. Ira, the family's daughter, is compelled to live on the streets and give birth to an illegitimate albino child to support her family. Raja, a suspected burglar, is compelled to take part in the leather theft. Even the locals must abandon their homes to survive. They move to cities yet are unable to adjust to their new environment. One thing stands out amid all of these circumstances, and that is Rukmani's unadulterated and unshakeable connection to nature. Rukmani never abandons the tie she has formed with nature, which she has worked hard to develop through her unwavering faith in it. Miraculously, no one in Rukmani's family perishes during the famine period.

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* demonstrates Vandana Shiva's concept that the world is controlled and managed by the dialectical play of creation and obliteration, cohesiveness and dissolution from the part of natural law, in line with the inherent dualistic role of nature—productive as well as destructive. The novel does a good job of proving the truth. At the beginning of the novel, nature, which is the ultimate dominant power, is passive towards human

action as long as it is controlled and kept within reasonable bounds. However, when human action exceeds reasonable bounds, nature adopts a violent shape and exacerbates the problem. Because of the tannery's installation, nature is compelled to emerge on its own. Famine-related hunger and starvation cause a severe toll on human life. Animal and human worlds are both severely impacted. The peasants are subject to severe punishment for violating the natural order and law. Because of nature's change in mood and temperament, the scenario that was formerly well suited to life and circumstance becomes cruel to human action, giving birth to existential issues in the novel. The work also demonstrates another aspect of Vandana Shiva's argument that growth often takes the shape of mal(e)development and wreaks havoc on human life.

The evolution that takes place in the form of the tannery in the text results in environmental destruction and poses a threat to the poor peasants' way of life, hurting human activities and life, particularly to women and the surrounding environment. All of these and numerous other allusions to how nature and humankind interact in the narrative lend Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* an appealing ecofeminist quality.

Marginalization of Women in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in Sieve*:

the present paper aims to situate the marginalization of women in Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). The oppression of women is a major issue in English-language novels written by Indian authors. By including female topics, they shifted the perception of women in society and aimed to improve the status of oppressed Indian women there. They attempted to depict the advantages and disadvantages, pleasures and pains, blessings and curses and established a turning point in the representation of the feminine world. The name Kamala Markandaya is well-known in Indian literature. Almost all of her novels tackle female identities, the crisis of identity, identity creation, and identity reformation.

In her first book, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya discusses the difficulties faced by rural women. The novelist explores a variety of subjects, including female servitude, gender discrimination, and poverty. The novelist addresses the marginalization of women as a crucial problem in the book. Because of this, the book can be critically analyzed in the context of subaltern studies, with a focus on female subalternity. The novel examines how patriarchy and gender inequality cause a female to have an identity crisis in the household and social sphere. Due to some negative views of society towards them, women in society are forced to give up their traditional identities as spouses and mothers. In her book, Markandaya examines how

patriarchal grips threaten the very life of women in their families and in society, but she also tries to highlight the resilience of Indian women who never give up and fight tooth and nail for their rights. The two primary female characters in the book are Rukmani and Ira.

The conventional Hindu woman who suffers from child marriage is named Rukmani. Again, when she doesn't have a child shortly after getting married, her very identity as a traditional Indian woman is put in jeopardy. In *Markandaya*, it is examined how women in India struggle to achieve self-hood because of infertility or barrenness. In the book, Ira, Rukmani's daughter, is tortured since it is thought that she is infertile. Her husband dismisses her as superfluous because he lacks the patience to wait. His voice conveys male dominance: "She has not borne in her first blooming, who can say she will conceive later? I need sons (*Markandaya* 52)".

Through his remarks, male dominance and female servitude are mirrored. Women have occasionally been viewed as childbearing machines in Indian society. Even the women are powerless to speak out against it; instead, they silently observe it and join in on the singing with the guys. The same treatment is given to Ira by her husband. She endures suffering because of the cruel unwritten social customs. Even her mother Rukmani does not object because she is aware of societal conventions; rather, she says:

"I do not blame him-he is justified, for a man needs children. He has been patient" (*Markandaya* 52).

Additionally, when Rukmani brings Ira to her husband after receiving therapy to end her barrenness, up until that point, he had already married another woman, and his scathing remarks leave them speechless: "For she was a good wife to me, and a comely one, but I have waited long and now I've taken another woman" (*Markandaya* 63). Ira loses her intelligence and falls under the tyranny of tradition. Due to the fact that she is a woman, she loses her voice.

The patriarchal attitude towards infertile women makes it difficult for them to achieve stability in both their personal and social lives. From the perspective of society, she becomes the "other" and a "deserted" woman. Later, she is viewed by society as a "fallen woman." Society, which branded her as a "prostitute," never counts her sacrifices. It will be helpful to use Dubey's observation in this context:

"The infertility of a woman was considered a curse; in patrilineal groups, she is expected to produce a son to continue the line. In matrilineal societies, this was not considered necessary,

though it was desirable. But even among them, as in patrilineal societies, procreation is a social necessity and a value” (Dubey 112).

Ira sees infertility as a curse. Her life is filled with a lot of uncertainty. Her goals for becoming a wife are dispersed. She must defy society's norms because of the extreme poverty in her parents' home. To prevent her brother Kuti from being hungry, she turns to prostitution. In this instance, the voiceless subaltern raises her head, objects, and becomes a "new" subaltern. Ira, who was before quite insecure, gains a lot of self-assurance as seen by her father's order forbidding her from going out at night:

“Tonight, tomorrow, and every night, so long as there is a need. I will not hunger anymore” (Markandaya 103).

Although it is wrong, she is sacrificing most of herself to save her brother Kuti from famine. She builds up tremendous power resembling a "new subaltern" in order to give birth to the albino child she conceives outside of marriage. She firmly supports a cause, despite the fact that doing so required disobeying her parents and the accepted morality of a traditional Indian society. Ira is not only a striking example of the "new" woman, but also shines bright as a rebellious "new subaltern" who teaches a new lesson to society by sacrificing her so-called "traditional morality." Her indomitable spirit and willpower give her a new identity to lead and live her life.

In the case of Rukmani, we observe that despite the many difficulties of life, her husband does not torture her and they lead happy lives. She is also a victim of patriarchy, which rules over her in the form of social structures like child marriage and dowry. She falls prey to these two heinous social structures. She first meekly accepts her parents' plan to marry her off at the young age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer who provided a meager dowry. Rukmani notes:

“My three sisters were married long before I was. Shanta first, a big wedding this lasted for many days, plenty of gifts and feasts, diamond earrings, and a gold necklace, as befitted the daughter of the village headman. Padmini next, and she too made a good match and was married fittingly taking jewels and dowry with her; but when it came to Thangam, only relations from our own village came to the wedding and not from the surrounding districts as they had done before, and the only jewel she had was diamond more-screw”. (Markandaya 1-2)

However, it becomes challenging to give dowry in the case of Rukmani. As a result, she marries a struggling farmer, and her future prospects are dim. severely constrained. Rukhmani muses: "By the time, I came to womanhood. Even I had to acknowledge his prestige was much diminished. Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve". (Markandaya 4).

Child marriage causes numerous pregnancies as well as health risks. Rukmani's life is impacted because she has too many children, which is a direct cause of their misery in life. The daughter is treated as a "mute" and "voiceless" subaltern in the domestic periphery just because Rukmani was made to agree to a child marriage against her will and she is given in marriage to an economic moth-eaten farmer named "Nathan."

Once more before the birth of her first son, she was about to drop weight as a wife, if only temporarily. She is in a dangerous situation. When she gives birth to a girl as her firstborn, the situation. Since male children are generally given more importance in Indian society and female children are always viewed as a duty, it is normal to see male children being despised and female children being worshipped. Parents desire a son to carry on the family tradition. It's also thought that only the parents will enter heaven if the son officiates at their funeral.

Even now, when a girl kid is born into a family, there is no joy or celebration. Some people go so far as to commit female feticide in order to avoid having to pay a dowry when their daughters get married. On the other hand, when a son is born in a family, a large feast is held for all the family members and friends. The novel Nectar in a Sieve describes this long-standing custom. In the book, Rukmani is initially disappointed at the birth of a girl child. As a result of her deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset, she reacts negatively and angrily when a baby girl is placed in her arms:

They placed it in my arms when I had recovered a little from the birth, in silence. I uncovered the small form, beautiful, strong, but quite plain, a girl's body. I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her firstborn? (Markandaya 16)

The traditional attitude of Indians towards a female at her birth is revealed through Rukmani's voice. Due to his discontent with having a daughter as his first child, her husband Nathan does not give the child much attention. In contrast to a tugging new born who would take her dowry

with her and leave nothing but a memory behind, he had desired a son to carry on his line and travel alongside him on the land. He appears ecstatic about the arrival of their first son, though. Rukmani claims—

“My husband was overjoyed at the arrival of a son; not less so, my father. He came, an old man, all those miles by cart from our village, to hold his grandson (Markandaya 5)”.

Here, Rukmani demonstrates her situational subaltern status. She does have a lot of guts, though, in elevating her inferior position. She quietly undergoes her therapy close to Dr. Kenny when her first kid fails to conceive, and she subsequently becomes the proud mother of six male children. She also succeeds in reclaiming or changing her lost identity as a wife and mother. When she tolerates her husband's adultery, she demonstrates once more that she is a situational subaltern. When she learns of her husband's adultery after a lengthy marriage, she initially loses her ability to speak before eventually bursting into speech.

“Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain to find out after so many years, in such a cruel way. At last, I made an effort and roused myself: It is as you say a long time ago, I said wearily, 'That she is evil and powerful I know myself, let it rest’ (Markandaya 90).

Rukmani clearly suffered a difficult stroke, but she perseveres, remains devoted to her husband, and restores the marriage's harmony. Through Rukmani, the author illuminates the significance of marriage to Indian women. Despite being considered subalterns, Rukmani and Ira possess the fortitude to confront life's challenges head-on. They are aware of how to find happiness and significance in life. Their deep understanding of life gives them the drive to live their lives according to their own unique standards. They are the new breed of women, equipped with intelligence and the capacity to adapt to shifting conditions and pursue their own identities. They never lose their composure, accept what life has to offer, and never try to flee its dangers. Instead, they always hold onto hope for a better future.

Conclusion:

This paper has demonstrated how the female protagonist's identity conflicts in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* are resolved through her ambivalence towards nature and locations, including the rural and urban environment, human nature, and societal conventions. These are typical of the postcolonial setting in which the protagonists operate in order to prosper in their choices and maintain their material well-being. In the narrative, the land serves as a mediator between the women's identity conflicts.

Research paper

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We shall clearly see how nature and women are tied to one another through this novel, two autonomous but interdependent creatures. This essay reveals to us how lovely—and even painful—the link between women and nature is. We will also comprehend the direct and indirect suppression of women and nature in male-chauvinistic cultures. Through the characters of Rukhmani and Ira, we shall comprehend how mercilessly undervalued women are in these civilizations that are dominated by men.

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