

AN ECOCRITICAL CONCERNS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN SIEVE

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya occupies unique place in Indian English novelists. She wrote more than half a dozen novels. Her novels include Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice, The Nowhere Man, The Coffey Dams, A Silence of Desire, Possession, Some Inner Fury, The Golden Honeycomb, Bombay Tiger etc.

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INTRODUCTION

Kamala Markandaya occupies unique place in Indian English novelists. She wrote more than half a dozen novels. Her novels include *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Nowhere Man*, *The Coffey Dams*, *A Silence of Desire*, *Possession*, *Some Inner Fury*, *The Golden Honeycomb*, *Bombay Tiger* etc. Kamala Markandaya is known for her depiction of realist social problems like oppression of woman in patriarchal society, environmental issues, exploitation of peasants by rich landlords, east-west encounter, quest for identity in modern society, rural and urban life, poverty, sexuality and gender. She has been very sensitive regarding nature and her exploitation by human being. She attempts to portray events realistically. *Nectar in a Sieve* is first novel published in 1954 in which Kamala Markandaya depicts exploitation of nature and environment in the name of development and tourists. The present research paper is modest attempt to throw light on Kamala Markandaya's depiction of relationship between nature and human being. In order to understand this relationship, it is imperative to study ecocriticism in general and Indian concept of ecocriticism in particular.

DEFINING ECOCRITICISM

William Rueckert was the first critic to use the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978. He used the term 'ecocriticism' in his essay "Literature and Ecology" to refer to "experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (William Rueckert 107). Later Cheryl Glotfelty and Glen A. Love discussed "ecological criticism" in Western Literature Association Meeting in 1989. Later in 1996 Glotfelty and Harold Fromm published an edited anthology entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader*. They defined the term 'ecocriticism' for the first time in 'an introduction' to *The Ecocriticism Reader* as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm, xviii). The critics have defined the term in various ways after the definition. Greg Garrard has made further addition to the definition

given by Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and defined it as “the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself”(Greg Garrard 5). The relationship between human and non-human gives rise to another issue like what does it mean by ‘human’. The westerners refused to treat people from former colonies as savages and animals. Hence, from postcolonial point of view, the use of term like human has some problems. Postcolonialism sees the intersection of postcolonial and environmental problems as basic to ecocriticism. The relationship between environment and culture is also focal point for ecocritical thought. But the problem is that culture involves both human and nature. Environment is combination of human and non-human, culture and nature and animate and inanimate. Hence it is difficult to define human. As a result it is also difficult to define human in relation with non-human. In fact, human is a part of nature. And hence, the study of relationship between human and nature would not help to understand ecocriticism. Human being can not be separated from nature and culture or vice versa. However, there are critics who attempted to place nature in relationship with human being. The human behaviours and their influence on nature and environment is most important for ecocriticism. Since, human is inextricable part of nature, it is essential to study the relationship between human and nature.

Ecocriticism combines environmental philosophy and ecological theory with literature and literary criticism. Environmental philosophy believes in betterment of human being while insisting on value of environment whereas ecological theory believes in values of ecological system. Ecocriticism addresses both the problems of human being and environmental issues and the influence of ecological theory on human being and vice versa. Ecocriticism explores the relationship between the author, texts and the whole world including entire ecosphere. It is Glotfelty who has brought entire ecosphere into the whole world. A particular view of nature is accepted in ecocriticism. The healthy relationship between humans and the earth is at the centre of ecocriticism. Schlenz writes about ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism ... cannot be productively approached as simply another species of criticism competing for survival in the rarified habitat of academe. Rather, ecocritics should seek to transform academe by bringing it back into dynamic interconnection with world we all live in - inescapably social and material world in which is issues of race, class, gender inevitably intersect in complex and multi-faceted way with issues of natural resource exploitation are invariably linked through various competing ideas of nature. In literary studies, the ecocritic’s task should involve articulation and critical examination of these linkages as revealed in and by linguistic and textual practices (Schlenz <http://www.asle.umn.edu>)

Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism in different way and emphasizes on the close relationship between nature and literature. He writes “Ecocriticism might succinctly be defined as study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental praxis” (Buell 11). The representation of nature in literature is most important part of Buell’s definition of ecocriticism. Buell emphasizes human being’s intimate relationship with nature.

Indian social workers and politicians attempted to create awareness about the importance of nature and environment. Megha Patkar, Baba Adhav, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and many more raised voice against government for its attempt to destroy nature in the name of development. Indian women novelists attempted to depict this issue in their respective novels. Kamala Markandaya is one of Indian woman novelists who throws light on woman and nature as oppressed and exploited in her debut novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. Kamala Markandaya has explored the so called image of nature as pastoral, apocalypse and place.

ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Kamala Markandaya was one of the most prominent Indian women novelists who wrote on almost all issues faced by then contemporary India. She has portrayed India of immediately post-independence. The developmental challenges faced by newly independent India, industrial development during Nehruvian period, the modernization giving birth to many problems to natives in both rural and urban area, and its effect on local people and environment are the major concerns of Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. The protagonist of the novel, Rukmini has faced challenges and problems resulted from industrialization and the novel has provided resolution to the problems at the end of the novel. The novel chosen for the study is significant in environmental context. In this context Huggan writes: "Apart from foregrounding Indian women writers, the novels in question also call for a carefully case-based, historically contextualised analysis of contemporary social and environmental problems (Huggan 703). At the same time, the novel also draws attention to status of woman in male dominated society, gender issues and presents novel as a site of resistance to practices and attitudes against environment. The relationship of woman with the land and soil and urban development is the major concern of *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Rukmini is most important character in the novel who attempt to survive even in odd circumstances resulted due to urbanization and industrialism. Industrialization brings lot of changes in the lives of both rural and urban residents. The idyllic village life has been disturbed due to tannery and other developments. In fact, Rukmini was quite happy with her husband. They were cultivating the land of rich people and led happy life though sometime rainfall was low. Even during famine, she worked hard and helped her husband to cultivate the land. Rukmini's day-to-day's life seems very realistic and authentic. The beautiful life of Rukmini and her family in an isolated land comes to an end with the famine. Rukmini and her family members are starved though her husband attempts to earn money and bread and butter. The novelist has presented harsh realities beneath the beautiful life of peasant and labours. During the early period of her married life, Rukmini was happy with her husband. Rukmini remembers:

When 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? (Markandaya, 8)

Rukmini married a landless and poor farmer called Nathan because her father was not able to pay dowry. Rukmini was happy and satisfied in her married life and worked hard to help her husband to run the house. Nathan wanted his sons to work on the land. But his sons like Thambi and Arjun refused to work and help their father and joined tannery work to earn more money. Thambi explained his inability to work in the field: "if it were your land, or mine, I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice" (Markandaya, 52). In the beginning, Rukmini was also proud of her sons to earn more money from tannery.

With their money we began once again to live well. In the granary, unused for so long, I stored away half a bag of rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chillies. Hitherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay rent of the land; now we were enabled to keep some of our produce. (Markandaya, 53-54)

But with the passing of time, her joys were also vanished as Thambi's joining tannery has brought problems in the peaceful life Rukmini. Her daughter Ira becomes whore only because of tannery. Due to tannery and other industries, people from various castes and religions gathered around the tanneries in search of jobs. As a result, the prices of goods

sour high and labours were not able to meet daily expenses. Ira's decision to opt prostitution results from the changes brought by the tanneries in the village. She thinks that preservation of life is more pious than the observation of moral values because moral values do not feed her family.

Rukmini's happy and blissful married life comes to an end with the arrival of tanneries in the rural area. Poverty, hunger and starvation become inevitable part of life of Rukmini and her family. The impact of tannery factories in the villages and urban places destroys the peaceful life of Rukmini. Her husband has been asked to vacate the land by the landlord without any fault. Kamala Markandaya has presented stark reality of impact of industrialization on the lives of rural and urban area:

... the impact of industrialisation from the points of view of the peasants, members of the lower middle-class in the city, the tribal and other common people....and the economic threat of starvation which forces people to accept working conditions which they otherwise would not accept (Rao and Menon, 15).

Being everywoman, Rukmini was not able to cope up with the arrival of new industries like tannery factories. She has to face economic hardships due to impact of industrialization. Indira Ganeshan also writes about the hardships faced by Rukmini in an introductory part of the novel: "by giving voice to Rukmani, Markandaya gives us a woman who affects us deeply through not only the burden of rural life, but also the burden of being a woman" (Kamala Markandaya, xii). Rukmini remembers her past life with her parents and initial years with her husband. Her present life with her old husband is very difficult. Her children also prove spendthrift and good for nothing. She struggles hard to help her husband and family but the destiny is working against her. She has forced to leave the land which she used to tilt and earn bread and butter. Her crisis for identity begins with her leaving land. Jasbir Jain elucidates that identity or selfhood has to work through the body (Jasbir Jain 102). Since the modern society has neglected towards environment around the school and village and farming and open places replaced by tanneries and other industries, the local people including peasants and labours suffered a lot. The human greed for money and development is responsible for poor rainfall. Rukmini refuses to be associated with the land too and this refusal on the part of Rukmini is also responsible for her suffering and plight. The critics and scholars view Rukmini's dissociation with the land as something responsible for her suffering of her family.

Rukmini's husband was died and she is left with husbandless and landless. Her efforts to find her sons also are also futile. Rukmani strongly opposed to the construction of the tannery and everything that it stands for in the beginning of the novel. In a serious mood, Rukmani says that "somehow I had always felt that the tannery would eventually be our undoing" (Markandaya, 131). Rukmini's fear about the devastating effect of industrialization on her life and land and nature becomes true. Due to the arrival of tannery in the village, birds stopped to sing, "sing...and ultimately the birds came no more, for the tannery lay close" (Markandaya, 69). Markandaya stressed that the peaceful life in rural areas was destroyed by the industrialization: "slow, calm beauty of the village had wilted in the blast from town" (Markandaya 62).

CONCLUSION

In short, Kamala Markandaya succeeds in capturing the effect of modernization and industrialization on the peaceful life of rural peasants and labours. Rukmini and Nathan were happy in their married life before the arrival of tannery in the village. However, the arrival of tannery has brought number of changes in their lives. Though the novel does not address the environmental issues directly, the industrialization and modernization has its effect on the lives of common labours and peasants. The denial of tilting the land and living on the land is very serious for Nathan and Rukmini. Both left the village

in search of their sons but Nathan died and Rukmini returned back to her daughter. She reconciles with the situation and started to work with her daughter at the end of the novel. Famines stemming from industrialization and encroachment of open spaces in villages and conflicts over material resources like tannery are responsible for the destruction of environment. Rukmini and Nathan become prey to the famines and industrialization. Due to industrialization and tanneries, the villagers face number of health problems also. They also contributed to famines and conflict between landowners and peasants and labours.

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