



## Materialist Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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### ABSTRACT

Through the lens of materialist ecofeminism, this paper examines the novel *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya. This framework explores the ways through which the protagonist Rukmani undergoes changes both bodily and inwardly and her struggle to withstand the challenges which occur as a result of the changes in the environmental atmosphere. Kamala Markandaya through her novel *Nectar in a Sieve* has poignantly described the destruction of womenkind and environment and also analyses how women and nature are viewed from men perspective. The author has marvelously exemplified the ways how women and the environment are looted which clearly briefs their value indirectly. This paper surveys the ways through which a piece of land and woman in general is viewed from a materialistic perspective without knowing the importance to be adored and praised and the ways all problems surrounding people has an adverse effect on women in general.

Keywords: Urbanization, Women, Tannery, Nature, Ecological feminism, Modernity, Resources, Degradation.

Materialist ecofeminism is a comparatively emerging idea which focuses on the significance of interconnection which womenkind in the emerging nations possess with the environment. This association is mainly because of the reliance on nature for their survival and subsistence. Such dependance and attachment is an approach which women can implement to voice out the importance to save their farms and exhibit how development in means of capitalism affect their means of existence along with the destruction of environment by seizing their properties. Materialist ecofeminism explores and acknowledges such destruction of environment along with the ways womenkind are suppressed and controlled by the so-called identity and origin. Materialist ecofeminism explains the material connection of imbalance amidst the controlling mankind and the inferior womankind too. In the essay "Globalization and Ecofeminism in the South: Keeping the 'Third World' Alive," Pandey (2013) puts forth the paths through which ecofeminists fight against the impacts of industrialization and capitalism. Materialist ecofeminism states that:

That feminist social justice cannot be achieved without addressing environmental issues in the South by on the capitalist patriarchy, highlighting the devastating impact of capitalist structures on nature and, as it follows, the lives and livelihoods of poor women across the planet. (Pandey 347).

The advent of tannery in the village though marks a significant change in the lives of townspeople who had travelled miles and miles, it eventually led to destruction in the lives of village people who were dependent on their lands for food and income. One such family is Nathan and Rukmani whose story clearly portrays the struggles they face because of industrialization. The beginning of the chaos is explained by the following lines told by Arjun, the first boy in their family after Irawaddy. He says: "Hundreds of men," he gasped. "They are pulling down houses around the maidan and there is a long line of bullock carts carrying bricks (27)." These lines distinctly state how other houses around the maidan have to be forcibly pulled down for the construction of tannery in an indirect way. Because of their arrival, many villagers were trying their level best to seek profit within the shortest period they could ever do. Women spun ropes endlessly, traders on the other hand sold their products for exorbitant amount. But once the work was done, the workers left the village leaving behind the abandoned thatched huts. This was a great loss for the traders as they relied on those workers for their commerce by increasing the cost of goods they sold. But Rukmani wasn't remorseful for their departure rather was enraged by their act of invasion by capturing the maidan where once the children of the village played. Their departure didn't take those noisy disturbances they brought but instead left them forever even after their desertion. Such happenings led to soaring prices of the groceries and the necessary goods. This was

never an ending rather a beginning for their upcoming ill-fated life.

Nathan, just like other village people had the mindset to live amidst all such occurrences hoping for the best. Nathan was ready to accept the changes happening in the society having a misconception that it won't affect his personal life. This mentality states that he wasn't concerned about the environment or the society and was fortunate that such changes didn't affect his daily routine and his personal life. This won't be evident to Nathan until the hardships which he is about to face to retain his land. Such incident would happen which is purely because of his way of trying to find contentment with the present life and having less concern for the nature and the milieu as a result of which the future disastrous happenings are awaiting to occur. This can be clearly explained from the following lines said by Nathan. He says: "And did you not benefit from their stay, selling your pumpkins and plantations for better prices than you did before?", "Nevertheless," said Nathan, "they will be back; for you may be sure they did not take so much trouble only to leave a shell in or midst. Therefore, it is as well to accept things (30)."

Rukmani on the other hand ultimately expresses her inner cries in the following lines. She says:

Never, never,' I cried. 'They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend on it, and we see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things. Now that they have gone let us forget them and return to our ways. (30)

These lines distinctively describe how Rukmani analyses every single occurrence from the perspective of the peasants and how all such incidents are reflective only because of their consequences and would affect them as well as their future generation. This single reference from the novel vividly portrays how Rukmani's thinking differs from that of Nathan with a futuristic perspective. But Nathan simply remarks: "Foolish woman," "There is no going back (30)."

As Nathan mentioned earlier, the men came back. But Rukmani was grateful that there is some fair distance from that of the tannery and their household. But the scent of beer and drinks was always present in the atmosphere. For which, Kunthi, her neighbour remarks:

You are a queer being,' [states that] 'Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and tea stalls, and even a bioscope, such as I have been to before I was married. You will see. (31)

Even though Kunthi, along with other women like Kali and Janaki welcomed the tannery and restored friendly stating that, it has a lot of benefits for every single family in the village and is a blessing. Kali remarked, she had finally found a way to send her sons to work in the tannery; Kali was enthusiastic about the new people as they could be listeners for her narrations. Rukmani on the other hand was the odd one who wasn't able to throw away the past, just like her neighbours did because, agriculture is considered to be a part of their livelihood and tradition felt hard to give up on her beliefs all of a sudden. Rukmani even states that: "Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us (31)."

Through this line Rukmani establishes how much the tannery has an adverse effect on nature and the way she truly adores and praises nature because of its importance and being the soul provider for almost every single family in the village for almost their lifetime.

Tannery had other negative effects in the lives of Rukmani and Nathan and one such thing is Ira getting into adultery. Even though adultery was practiced by Kunthi, there lies a huge difference in it. Kunthi was a materialistic woman, who relied on adultery to fulfill her personal needs and to lead an exorbitant life. She even exercised adultery by threatening men around her and Nathan was one among them. Nathan, before Rukmani's arrival into his life had an illicit relationship with Kunthi who got drawn after her beauty. Kunthi's attire was evident in such a way that both men and women gossiped around. Men used to come after her even during bright light. Whereas, in the case of Irawaddy there lied three prominent reasons which made Ira venture into adultery. The first reason is agony which resulted because of her ex-husband who branded her a barren woman and left her behind at her mother's house and married another woman to bare sons. The second reason is specifically about the need to feed Kuti who was extremely malnourished and her family members. The inner motherhood of Ira triggered her and wasn't able to put up with the sufferings Nathan and Rukmani was undergoing every single day to feed the family because of the drought and the increase in price of the goods. Ira says: "Tonight and tomorrow and

every night, so long as there is no need. I will not hunger any more (102).” The third reason is about her mentality of being a burden for her parents. In order to escape from all such thoughts Ira chose adultery as the best and easiest option to seek earning and healing. But Nathan was against her decision and was furious about her actions. For which Rukmani says: “so we got used to coming and goings, as we had got used to so much else (103).”

The most disastrous event happened once Sivaji, who acted for the zamindar came to visit Nathan and Rukmani to inform about the zamindar who had decided to sell the land for the tannery holders. This is the turning point in the novel which evidently states how material ecofeminism is expressed through such an act. With the idea of yielding profit, the zamindar failed to think upon the lives of the innocent peasants who ran most of their generations working in the fields for their survival. This occurrence made Rukmani immediately say: “It is our land; we have been here thirty years (13).” Rukmani lost hope she heard the land is ought to be sold. Rukmani says: “Still, while there was land there was hope. Nothing now, nothing whatever. My being was full of the husks of despair, dry, lifeless (137).” Nathan and Rukmani’s idea of reaching Murugan for their shelter wasn’t an easy task. They lost their belongings in the temple premises, even got robbed while sleeping at night and the struggle for seeking food wasn’t an easy go. All such struggles were mainly because of the competition which resulted out of urbanization in the villages and the forced abandonment laid by the people in power. As a result of which Nathan and Rukmani struggled for the most part in the city by working in the stone quarry until Nathan’s death. Rukmani’s act of adopting Puli at the end is seen as an act of restoring hope as she neither have land nor her husband to rely on. Rukmani’s act of planning for the future can also be seen through the promise which she made to save Puli from Leprosy in the village hospital constructed by Kenny. It is also a way of hoping for the best and is just like the way she planned for every single happening in her life right from the beginning.

The paper has clearly portrayed the ways through which materialistic ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* had an adverse effect in the lives of the village people, especially Rukmani. The work has brought in the fact that Rukmani, being a woman with the connection she had with the land, respected nature and was able to bring in the effects how urbanization would result in destruction and degradation in her life as well as in the lives of her family members and the village people. Rukmani is the only woman who raised her voice against the emergence of tannery in the village stating, it is going to have a negative effect as a whole. This clearly explains how owning a land makes people from the global South feel content and is seen as a hope in their lives. But once the land was encroached, both Nathan and Rukmani is seen restless and hopeless. It was difficult for Rukmani to accept the fate and move on as the life set way. Even when Rukmani and her family wasn’t able to retain the land after the drought they didn’t dare to move. Rather fought with hope in starvation to earn a profit at least in the next season. For her land is somewhere both life and heart dwells irrespective of all the hurdles she ever faced. Even after the aftermath of such destructions, Rukmani has returned again to her village with lots of hope to start a new life.

#### Works Cited

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