

**SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT AND ECOFEMINISM: A STUDY THROUGH THE
LENS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE***

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The post-modern era is an age of tremendous scientific and technological advancements. The enormous human dependence on machinery in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has led to extreme environmental destruction. Rapid industrialization and extensive human activities have disrupted the ecosystem's homeostasis, posing a significant threat to the living world within the environment. Man's craving for materialism, increased sense of gender hierarchies, and patriarchal religions have led to the denial of inherent divinity, the sense of identity, and other dualisms, the innate domination of ethics, capitalism, and the intrinsic need to refrain from exploitation of animals, plants, people, and Earth. This has landed us in a state which ecofeminists perceive as a "separation between nature and culture" that is considered by them as the primary source of our planetary ills. (Gaard and Gruen 1993)

Therefore, a dire need arose to develop eco-consciousness in order to attain a sustainable environment. The implementation of scientific or technological advancements would not be sufficient to arouse genuine, spontaneous, and profound eco-consciousness among *Homo sapiens*. Rather, it would pull them away from sustainable coexistence, giving way to imbalanced, and detrimental survival. Owing to the gravity of the situation, not only environmentalists and social activists, but also litterateurs and authors contribute to the social awakening through their works. It is at this critical juncture that the necessity to conduct an interdisciplinary research integrating environment and literature arose. Literature that acted as the mirror of life and society did not fail to represent the aftermath that followed nature depletion. A deeper ecocritical insight further helped to eradicate the callous attitude of Post Modern man and led to a profound understanding of the intrinsic interconnectedness between literature and the obstacles related to eco-consciousness, planetary crisis, and the active role of gender.

Ecocriticism played a vital role in this regard. Profound ecocritical studies represent literature and nature from a multifarious perspective. It explores the intricacy with which literature reflects nature and environment. As ecocriticism dealt with the interconnections between nature, culture, and the anthropocene, or, to be more specific, the cultural artifacts of language and also literature, the importance and presence of ecocritical study in literature was tremendously felt when man's endless greed resulted in environmental destruction on one end and the insight for protecting and preserving natural resources on the other. Ursula K. Heise, in her paper "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism," states:

The Ecocritical perspective has always distinguished itself by its interest in how the non-human interacts with human culture: how ecological conditions shape cultural expression and, conversely, how culture shapes the perception and uses of natural environments; how cultural communities structure and give meaning to human's relations with other species; and how scenarios, crises, and disasters amplify or reduce sociocultural differences, define community boundaries, and change cultural practices. (638)

Since the dawn of civilization, society, culture, and environment have been delicately interwoven. It delineates a close connection with the habitat in which culture develops and thrives. Ecocriticism studies demonstrated the alliance between literature and the natural habitat reflected in "Earth-centered approach to literary studies" and how human evaluation as a society is largely dependent on natural forces. (Glotfelty 7)

Further, ecocriticism emphasizes how the world in which we exist, not only comprises language and other elements related to social, but also nature, which is the driving force behind all these things. Thus, it can be said that human existence and societal growth and development are greatly dependent on nature and that any alteration in nature's ecosystem absolutely affects human life. Cheryll Glotfelty, in the book 'Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology,' sheds light upon this connecting link:

An ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to an informed Ecocriticism. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and non-human. (xix)

The usage of the term relationship between nature, human beings, and literature, imperatively, brings in the concept of gender roles. Ecofeminist thinkers drew on the notion of gender to study the intertwined relationship between homasapiens and the environment. The term was first used in the book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne, published in 1974. (Merchant 184) Ecofeminist enquiry traverses the relationship between women and the environment as found in cultural paradigms, religion, politics, economy, and literature. Ecofeminism deals with the basic precepts of gender equality, reappraisal of non-patriarchal structures, and the worldview that gives importance to organic processes. Selfless commitment to the vulnerable environment and the relationship built between women and nature also form a crucial part of ecofeminist tenets. To be more specific, this theory focuses on the way in which both nature and women are treated by a male-governed society. It addresses the comparison drawn between the oppressive subjugation of nature and that of the similar condition of women.

Nature is mostly ascribed with feminine or maternal traits of being tender, submissive, repressive, retaliating, and nurturing. This foundational precept gave rise to the philosophy of Ecofeminism, the concept of linking feminism with that of ecology. These parallels drawn endeavour to include but not to limit the portrayal of women and nature as commodities or view men as the custodians of social culture and women as the stewards of nature, and further delineate how men oppress women and humans invariably dominate nature. However, Ecofeminism lays emphasis on the idea that both women and nature should be treasured. (Adams 1-8) The role of Ecofeminists is to examine the consequences of gender groups critically and show the ways in which society's established way is to exert undue dominance over nature and women. Ecofeminism highlights how those unjust customs give rise to an incomplete worldview, and how eco-conscious exponents advocate values that will give rise to a sacred natural world embracing all life equally valuable.

Francois d'Eaubonne, the proponent of Ecofeminism, has given deliberations about the interconnectedness of nature and how its aggressive exploitation can be correlated with the subjugation of women. It is crucial in ecofeminism study to understand that the vision of culture and nature dualism of western culture is mostly gender biased. In other words, to say, men and masculinity are commonly related to culture and thus, culture is considered precious, while women and femininity are connected with nature, which is underrated. This integrated evaluation led to hierarchy and helped to justify the interconnection of dominations of nature and women.

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* intensely represents ecofeministic hierarchy and portrays the destruction and suffering of not only nature, but also women in the hands of dominant masculine forces. Kamala Markandaya, an eminent woman writer, has portrayed various facets of subjugation in her writings that begin with the mistreatment due to poverty, racial discrimination, casteism, and the lack of moral values of the people. In her most celebrated novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, she acrimoniously presents the predicament of women in relation to the natural milieu. She has gone a step to vividly describe the detrimental and suffering state of nature, as well as women, by the male forces, and further, how women have been cast aside in a male-dominated society. It has also been shown that in such societies, nature and women are given less priority in contradiction to the fact that both have blessed potential to give birth, nurture, and nourish. So, time and again, women have joined hands to fight against the misuse of nature, as they can closely relate to nature's suffering.

Interestingly, the title of the novel has been obtained from S.T. Coleridge's poem "Work Without Hope", which is seen in the epigraph:

Work without Hope draws Nectar in a sieve,

Moreover, Hope without an object cannot live. (Poetry Foundation)

This couplet is and has been very poignantly used by Kamala Markandaya as it pristinely expresses the true essence of the novel, which imparts a social message that, if diligent toil made by a person gives no outcome, then it becomes fruitless just as trying to hold Nectar in a Sieve. Drawing parallels with the same concept in life as well, it can be said that without an objective, life too becomes fruitless. As per the words of the author, for a farmer, agriculture is his life. His entire Hope or goal is to labour hard on his land and produce fruit. However, if his land is snatched away from him for any reason, then he eventually suffers from severe poverty, hunger, and the situation

worsens to the point that he even embraces death. The protagonist Rukmini dedicates her entire life as a farmer to the land and as a mother to her family. However, her years of hard work and efforts are blown away within a fraction when industrialization creeps into her village, just as chaff is driven when the wind blows.

Rukmani's close association with nature can be lucidly viewed through the lens of Ecofeminism, despite the fact that the novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, was published much before the time when Ecofeminism was introduced as a theory. The novelist has enchantingly entailed the sensitive and emotional relationship of women with nature. A woman, as a special creation of God, is bestowed with special qualities as well. Her sense of dedication, belongingness, hard work, and capacity to love and nurture unconditionally make her remarkable. She not only loves and cares for her family but also every other living creature around her. She draws pure joy from the beauty and serenity of nature. Her enraptured dedication towards its production, cultivation, and protection is something that elevates the novel to a different level.

It is fascinating to analyse how Rukmini, the protagonist of Markandaya's novel, clings to her idyllic village as the clutching claws of urbanization begin to tear her life apart. Rukmani, an educated daughter of a village headman, is given in marriage at the tender age of twelve, and her life is limited to her husband, family, and agriculture. After marriage, her entire focus shifts to adapting to her new life and learn to do all household chores. She represents an ordinary housewife of rural India who finds happiness in being in harmony with nature. Though she is left with no other option but to toil in the fields with her husband Nathan, a tenant farmer, her hardships fail to deprive her of her love for her family and nature. Even as a 12-year-old young bride, she had the zeal to learn new things. Her joy overflows when she catches a glimpse of the fields flourishing. The beautiful connection with nature becomes more evident when she asserts that it is genuinely her choice to farm and work in the jungle as a mandate. For instance, Rukmani's contemplation: "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?" These lines highlight the fact that happiness for a woman leading a simple life encompasses just minimal requirements of food, shelter, clothes, and inevitably the scenic beauty of the landscape. The sun that shines bright and the lush greenery of the fields are a source of inexplicable joy for her. Further, Markandaya voices the thoughts of the naïve and innocent Rukmini as she states:

I know, for I was ignorant of the simplest things...Kali and Janaki, between them, had to show me how to milk the goat, how to plant seed, how to churn butter from milk, and how to hull rice...I had planted, in the flat patch of ground behind the hut, a few pumpkin seeds. The soil here was rich, never having yielded before, and loose so that it did not require much digging. The seeds sprouted quickly, sending up delicate green shoots that I kept carefully watered, going several times to the well nearby for the purpose. Soon they were not delicate but sprawling vigorously over the Earth, and pumpkins began to form, which, fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled daily larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until at last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in. (10)

It is evident that Rukmini gave immense care while she dealt with the soil. She nurtured the seeds as if they were her own children. Beth Zeleny has aptly pointed out, "Markandaya implicitly connects women and landscapes through her recurring use of seed imagery....As giver and nurturer and endurer of life, women participate as seed, then seedling, which ultimately

becomes part of the soil that supports future seeds.” Here, the female’s biological aspect of reproduction is intimately connected with Rukmani, land, and seeds, as nature also participates in the process of procreation. Procreation is considered to be a mandatory assignment for a woman as soon as she gets married in Rukmani’s society. A woman who does not conceive immediately after marriage can be tortured and abandoned by her husband, as we find a similar situation in Ira’s life in the later part of the novel. Here, the claim that women are similar and closer to nature is based on the fact that women can bring forth life from their bodies by experiencing the simple joys and excruciating pains of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing. Considering the social aspect too, bringing a baby into the world and domestic caretaking have kept women close to the Earth and thus closer to nature.

Rukmini’s feminine potential is revealed as she bears a beautiful daughter, Ira, within a year, and also contributes to farming with her husband, which yields good rice harvests. Point to be noted over here is that she leads a troubled life as she does not conceive in the next six years, and that too to bear a son. Bearing a son is given utmost priority in a traditional Indian society, and that too, the first child born after marriage should be a boy. Here, a typical patriarchal mindset is revealed, where society gives priority to males as custodians and protectors. Rukmani feels the constant pressure to bear a boy child in the family. A point comes when she considers her inability to bear a male child as a lacuna in her. Thus, when she visits her ill mother, she meets Dr. Kennington, addressed as "Kenny", an itinerant English doctor to be treated without Nathan's knowledge. Soon after the treatment, she bore five sons, one after the other. Now the family expands, and so does the struggle to meet both ends begin. While her struggle to feed the family is on, the opening of the tannery near the village makes the situation worse for her and also for the community of farmers as a whole. The limitless expansion of science and technology leads to the ruthless cutting of trees, destruction of land and forests, thus pushing the habitat into a life-risking state. The growing industrialization leads to climate change. Heavy, unexpected monsoon rains soon destroy the crops, and the plight of Rukmini becomes miserable.

On close observation, one can lucidly see all through the novel that Rukmini has to face misery, torments of inability to bear a son, scarcity of food, desertion, and many more. Although she suffers so much, she bears all the problems very tolerantly in a way just like Mother Nature, who, though tormented, embraces her children adorably every day without keeping any expectation. Kamala Markandaya has done really well in subtly portraying the problems of nature and women, that too, predominantly from the perspective of the working class. In this light, one can remarkably notice the hardships of Rukmani, Ira, her daughter, and also the natural habitat in which they live, which has been portrayed as victims of the patriarchy, zamindari system, and impending heavy industrialization. Son bearing as a typical demand of patriarchal society has been noticed in Ira's life as well. Ira, after a year of her marriage, is sent back to her parents' house due to being barren. Rukmini once again meets Dr. Kenny to get her daughter treated for her barrenness. Ira, when sent back to her husband, finds that he is married to another woman. This is the case of another typical plight of an Indian woman when she is unable to bear a child. Infertility in women is something that is crudely viewed in a male-dominated society. Male is seldom accused of barrenness. Apart from the portrayal of women as victims of patriarchy, this novel also highlights the difficulties faced by Indian farmers and other socially vulnerable people due to changes in policies regarding land, labour, industrialization, rehabilitation, and so on.

Markandaya's novel beautifully portrays rural India suffering during the period of the onset of industrialization. Literature that reflects life has never failed to throw light on the perennial dependence of mankind on nature for survival. Heavy industrialization interrupts humans' pure relationship with nature. Through the ordeals faced by a tenant farmer, Rukmini and her family, light is shed upon the miserable plight of multitudes that become voiceless in the face of the industrial revolution in India. The clash between man's endless greed resulting in environmental destruction on one end and the insight for protecting and preserving the natural resources on the other led to the suffering of the innocent farmers like Rukmini and her husband Nathan. Their miseries extend to a point where even survival becomes a challenge. What remarkably draws our attention in Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* is that it was published in 1954; that is, a century after industrialization had paved its way in. India, a predominantly agrarian community, had entered the phase of industrial revolution in 1854, when the first steam-powered cotton mill started in Bombay, now known as Mumbai. Since then, industries and technology have made tremendous growth by pushing the marginalized into dungeons of obscurity and suffering. It is evidently known that land holds a very important place in the life of a farmer. But if a land is snatched away from him, then his state of being and existence does not go well. The setting up of industries on the fertile land of farmers makes them displaced and destitute.

The onset of industrialization in the village leaves many farmers landless. Rukmini and Nathan, as tenant farmers, were already struggling with crop failure due to incessant rainfalls and even with some years of drought. Now being landless, they are left with no other option. A drastic change occurred in Rukmini's life when she failed to notice the gnawing cancer of industrialization affecting her nation. As rural villages got molded into townships, Rukmini, who symbolized women caught in such a plight, continued her chores until "the change that now came into my life, into all our lives, blasting its way into our village, seemed wrought in the twinkling of an eye" (27). This change that was to later capsize the life of Rukmini came in the form of the construction of a new tannery. The change, though gradual, ushered in a lot of developments. The workers started settling down in the village in large numbers, "bringing their wives and children with them, or dotting the maidan even more thickly with the huts they built for themselves and their families" (31). The slow destruction of a rustic village, the depletion of natural resources, and how Rukmini found it impossible to embrace the shift grip the attention.

Time has proved that when ecological balance is distorted, nature retaliates violently. In the novel, too, nature retaliated against the urbanization that was creeping in like a pair of hungry talons. The wrath of nature is captured by Markandaya as Rukmini and Nathan fight hard to hide their anguish:

It rained so hard, so long, and so incessantly that the thought of a period of rain provoked a mild wonder. It was as if nothing had ever been but rain, and the water pitilessly found every hole in the thatched roof to come in, dripping onto the already damp floor. If we had not built on high ground, the very walls would have melted in that moisture. I brought out as many pots and pans as I had and we laid them about to catch the drips, but soon there were more leaks than we had vessels...but Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while the waters rose and rose and the tender green of the paddy field sank under and was lost. (41)

Ordinary tenant farmers like Nathan and Rukmini were so reliant on nature that even minute changes in the climate had a deep impact on them. The landlessness and hunger pangs

forced the agrarian society to leave their village and change their occupation as well. However, Rukmini's strong determination and genuine love for nature bring her back to the village. In Uttaranchal, similarly, Ramachandra Guha, the Environmental Historian, has delved deep to study the effects that environmental changes had on women, especially in the backdrop of the Chipko Movement in India during the 1980s, in his book *The Unquiet Woods*. The Movement was highly successful in creating environmental consciousness right from the grassroot level. The Movement of hugging trees started in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal after that area faced massive deforestation, and the year 1970 witnessed major displacement, devastating floods, and massive landslides.

Nathan's family experienced the greatest loss when they realized that the land had been sold to the tannery. The family was forced to move to the city for survival. The family went in search of their son, Murugan, who had left the village earlier as his occupation was taken away from him. Even though Rukmini went to the city, her heart craved to embrace the nature in her village, especially the land that had enabled them to survive for many years. Even in the city, survival becomes arduous. Due to starvation and scarcity, the woman is pushed into the dungeon of prostitution, where her body is transformed into a commodity to be consumed by scavengers. Sadly, this ravaged state affects not only Rukmani but also her daughter, Ira. With a focus on keeping her family and her brother safe from the clutches of starvation, she picks up prostitution as her last resort. The drastic change under the garb of industrialization and modernity forces Ira to take this awful decision in her life. M.K. Bhatnagar notes the decision of Ira as "a bold rejection of the innate institution of marriage". Ira's decision acts in contrast with that of Kunthi's decision, who chooses prostitution for self-sustenance rather than thinking about providing for her family. The displacement from rural to urban areas depicts that Ecofeminism isn't a theory to be confined to countryside landscapes alone. A sense of urban madness and paranoia in order to compete and cope with the mounting pressure of globalization and development can be felt in the novel. Markandaya lucidly portrays that the urban milieu can be an expanse for both creation and destruction.

However, it is important to point out that the novelist is neither intending to limit tradition nor is she striving to portray the superiority of Western innovation. Rather, she delineates Rukmani's profound love for the land that she tills, her connection with her natural environment, and the role a woman plays for the survival of her family by adhering to her native customs and expectations. Rukmani generates a tough alliance with nature that no one can disrupt, either in the rural belt or in the urban segment of her journey. Despite the umpteen numbers of adversities faced by her both in the village and the city as well, she is heralded as a lone genuine companion of nature. Her love for nature is evident as she dearly misses her organic and idyllic form of living, from which she is separated. Her troubles in getting food for her starving family, grappling with infertility, sliding into prostitution, and then, finally, getting back to preferring her organic company to get the pleasure of life echo the ethos of Ecofeminism. Markandaya has illustrated a real picture of rural life, where Rukmani, Ira, and Nathan are not typically fictional characters, but they represent the whole rural agrarian community, where women, in spite of all their efforts and dedication, are undervalued and exploited as entities. Praiseworthy fact to be noted is that Rukmani's efforts seem to be dominant over all her misfortunes that she faces in the whole novel.

It is this passion that finally made Rukmini go back to her village. The final return emphasizes her hopes for a better future, in the very same land that had nourished her. In this

regard, women and land are portrayed as agents who never give up till the end. Both nature and woman can be producers and nurturers, no matter whether the land on which they farm is fertile or infertile for cultivation. Rukmini had worked hard as a nurturer both in the sense of a farmer and a mother. Yet, her hard work goes unnoticed by her family, and she is not given the importance and recognition she deserves. The plot in the novel revolves around different phases of Rukmani's life. It depicts the protagonist's struggle to find her identity and also her emotional stance at those varying stages. These stages include her marriage at a very early age, then being a wife, and after that, as a mother and a tenant farmer during the time of industrialization. Overall, these stages enhance her deep connection with the land, thus accentuating ecofeminist analysis. It reflects that land and women are considered to be submissive and productive objects that are meant to be used and farmed by men. Critical ecofeminist analysis enables us to view the conclusion of the novel in the light of materialistic Ecofeminism, which also delineates varied power play, property, and labor as the source of imposing authority over vulnerable nature and women. Such an intertwined connection is clearly observed and understood from the life of Rukmani and her daughter, Ira, who fall as easy prey to production and reproduction as defined in terms of materialistic Ecofeminism.

According to Huggan and Tiffin, Markandya's novel seemingly begins with an anti-developmental attitude, but later it changes to being counter-developmental, or in other words, she endeavours to point out that development is ultimately a contradictory process. This is quite apparent by the time the novel sets its foot on conclusion. (22) Intriguingly, it has been noticed that some of the other novels depict the present circumstances where globalization cannot aid thorough development, but in contrast produce uneven development which simply cannot be done away with completely. Many Indian female novelists have explored women's subjectivity in society in order to discover an identity that is not thrust upon by a male-governed society. Especially, from the twentieth century onwards, it has been evident that women and women writers are a powerful channel of a blended form of feminism and modernism. Indian women writers in English, such as Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, have brought laurels by earning the most acclaimed awards like the Booker Prize. Indian Feminists in the present milieu have been bold enough to voice their opinions and concerns on the adverse effects of globalization in India, not only on gender and family relations, but also on the environment as comprehended in the wider sense.

Ecofeminism brings forth important issues related to the philosophical inceptions of the self, facts, reasoning, rationality, and hoard of polarities that build the base of philosophical conception and imagination. The challenge to the study of Philosophy is to replace conceptual theories, their arrangements, and practices that currently naturalize women and feminize nature, with those that do not harm. Therefore, ecofeminists always stress the requirement of eco-conscious philosophical tenets in feminism, environmental philosophy, environmentalism, and way of life. Ecofeminism, which has emerged out of Anarcha-feminist, deals with uprooting all kinds of dominion and also focuses on the oppressive nature of humans' relationship with the natural world (Tuana 327–9). Sustainable environments and interspecies ecologies refer to a novel way of taking the relationship between human beings and the natural world to a level where the emphasis will be on the interconnectedness of all living and non-living, and also the need for a sustainable approach to manage and utilize resources. This approach recognizes that human actions and pursuits have a direct effect on the environment and that the health of the planet depends on the robustness of its ecosystems and the species that inhabit them. But scientific discourse alone will not suffice. This can be achieved only through reaching the masses. This is where literature,

creativity, theory, and praxis all play an intricate and essential role in understanding and promoting sustainable environments and interspecies ecologies.

Literature does not need specialized jargon to put across the point; stories and narratives touch the heart and stimulate the brain. On the other hand, creative expression not only allows us to celebrate the beauty and diversity of life on Earth, reminding us of the interconnectedness of all living beings, but also helps in reinventing strategies to mitigate the problems associated with attaining sustainable environments. Both literature and creative expression allow us to explore and articulate the complexities of these relationships, connecting us with the natural world and inspiring us to take action. Writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Barbara Kingsolver, Richard Powers, and Amitav Ghosh et. al have used this channel to voice their concern for the environment. Praxis through personal and collective actions brings forth change not only at the national and international spheres, but also prioritizes the well-being by advocating sustainable environments and viable interspecies ecologies. Literature, creativity, theory, and praxis all have a dominant and indispensable role to play in understanding, promoting, and implementing sustainable environmental policies and practices, and in fostering a deeper connection between humans and the non-human natural world.

Therefore, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm edited a book, "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism 1996, originally written by William Rueckert, who first used the word ecocriticism, pointed out that the basic perturbing concern of an ecocritic is to...

"To find the grounds upon which the two communities - the human, the natural - can coexist, cooperate and flourish in the biosphere."(Asha Dhedhi)

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