

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of Kamala Markandaya's "*Nectar in a Sieve*" through the lens of Ecocriticism

Alina Sajan, Independent Researcher

Abstract

Culture evolved and developed in close relation with the environment of which it was part of. Literature which reflects life has never failed to throw light on the dependence of mankind on nature for survival. It is at this point of clash between man's endless greed resulting in environmental destruction on one end and the insight for protecting and preserving natural resources on the other that the importance of the discipline of Ecocriticism arises. Ecocriticism studies literature and nature from an interdisciplinary point of view. It analyses the intricacy with which literature represents nature and environment. Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* portrays rural India during the period of the onset of industrialization. Through the ordeals faced by a tenant farmer Rukmini and her family, light is shed upon the miserable plight of a multitude that becomes voiceless in the face of industrial revolution in India.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Industrialization, Nature, Depletion, Urbanisation

Today, we live in the modern age of scientific and technological advancements. The very increase in human dependence on machinery in the course of the twentieth century has resulted in environmental destruction to an indiscernible extent. Literature, the mirror that reflects life did not fail to represent the aftermath that followed industrialization. It is at this critical juncture that the necessity has arisen to conduct an interdisciplinary research into the study of literature and environment. India, a largely agricultural community had entered the phase of industrial revolution, way back in 1854 when the first steam-powered cotton mill was started

in Bombay. It is striking that Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* was published in 1954; a century after industrialization paved its way in. This paper analyses how Rukmini, the protagonist of Markandaya's novel clings to her idyllic village as the clutching claws of urbanization began to tear her life apart.

It is at this point of clash between man's endless greed resulting in environmental destruction on one end and the insight for protecting and preserving natural resources on the other that the importance of the discipline of Ecocriticism arises. The term "Ecocriticism" has its origins in the 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert. 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 nonhuman 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)

Culture and environment, since the dawn of civilization, have been woven intricately. It is in close connection with the habitat that culture

RESEARCH ARTICLE

develops and thrives. 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 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.

Ecocriticism Reader by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm is one among the pioneering works of Ecocriticism. It was the influence of Glotfelty that led to the development of an ecological approach to literature,

It is in the context of the intricacy between man and nature that we should approach the character of Rukmini. She represents an ordinary housewife of rural India who finds happiness 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 love for earth. Even as a 12 years old young bride, she had in herself the zeal to learn anew. 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. Her first small success in obtaining a yield made her “ten times more zealous.” It was with renewed enthusiasm that she continued to focus on honing her farming skills. As a child, burdened with the responsibilities of a married life, Rukmini failed to notice the gnawing cancer of industrialization affecting her nation, until it became too obvious. Even as rural villages got molded into townships, Rukmini, who symbolized women caught in similar plights, 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 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).

Here we can see the slow destruction of a rustic village, the depletion of natural resources and how Rukmini found it impossible to embrace the shift. She says, “It will not gladden me. Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us” (31). It is interesting to note how Markandaya builds up the rising tension in the novel. It reminds us of the beating of the tom-tom in Eugene O’Neil’s expressionist play *Emperor Jones*. Just as the tom-tom heralds the terrors of Jones, the growth

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and development of the tannery foreboded the disasters that were to follow. Even 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 fights 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 much reliant on nature that even minute changes in the climate had a deep impact on them. If such was their plight, the effects that

environmental disasters would have on them are simply unfathomable. Ramachandra Guha, the Environmental Historian, has delved deep into the effects that environment changes had on men, especially in the backdrop of the Chipko Movement in India during the 1980s in his book *The Unquiet Woods*. Nathan's family experienced the greatest loss when they realize that the land has been sold to the tannery. Even when forced to move to the city, in search of their son Murugan, Rukmini's heart craved to embrace the land that had enabled them to survive. It is this passion that finally made Rukmini to go back to her village, taking young Puli with her. The final return emphasizes her hopes for a better future, in the very same land that had nourished her.

REFERENCES

- [1]Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: Georgia UP, 1996.
- [2]Heise, Ursula K. "Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism." *PMLA* 128.3, 2013, pp. 636-642.
- [3]Markandaya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin Books, 2009.