

**Capitalism's Effects on Development and Displacement in Kamala  
Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve***

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**Article Received:** 20/03/2023

**Article Accepted:** 29/04/2023

**Published Online:** 30/04/2023

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.04.202

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**Abstract:**

This article explores the profound impact of capitalism on hinterland regions, unravelling the heightened insecurity stemming from extensive environmental, climate, and soil transformations with catastrophic consequences. The focus is on ecological depletion, shifts in human-nature dynamics, and resource exploitation in peripheral areas, depicting a vulnerable state for individuals termed "ecosystem people." These individuals grapple with the dual pressures of industrial activities and unpredictable natural forces. The prevailing pro-capitalist rhetoric, promoting free trade and corporate liberalism, advocates for the unexamined adoption of Western capitalist systems within the operational contexts of Third World boundaries. As our understanding of capitalism's influence on Third World ecologies grows, portraying humanity as a uniform contributor to the contemporary climate crisis becomes increasingly challenging. This article aims to shed light on the intricate web of relationships between capitalism and hinterland vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for nuanced perspectives in addressing the complex interplay of socio-economic and environmental factors.

**Keywords:** capitalism, hinterland, ecological depletion, human-nature interactions, resource exploitation, ecosystem people, climate crisis, pro-capitalist rhetoric, Third World, environmental insecurity.

In his work, Jason W. Moore (2015) demonstrates how capitalism has historically marginalised certain groups, such as the Jews, Irish, aboriginals, women, and people of colour, in a manner that contradicts the fundamental principles of the Anthropocene. The documentation of capitalist progress can be enhanced through the implementation of a novel legal framework known as the "law of Cheap Nature" (12). This statement highlights the effective utilisation of state, capital, and scientific capabilities by capitalism to exploit unpaid labour and resources from the non-capitalized "Nature" of postcolonial hinterlands.

The dichotomy between "Society" and "Nature" in Cartesian philosophy plays a pivotal role in facilitating the capitalist exploitation of resources and labour from

marginalised regions at a reduced expense. The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandeya has Rukmini as its key character, who resides in an India undergoing significant transformations such as the consolidation of power, heightened economic engagement, and the process of urbanisation. The advent of industrial establishments, such as the tanneries referenced in the literary work, had a devastating impact on the predominantly agrarian populace of rural South India. In the narrative, the protagonists experience a loss of their conventional jobs and are subjected to involuntary displacement from their areas. The advent of capitalism in post-independent India brought about enormous changes in Rukmini's economics, land, sense of identity, and ecology. The combination of climate change and the unpreparedness of the business to meet economic demands significantly impacts the well-being of Rukmini's family, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. The southern region of India emerged as a prominent destination for cost-effective natural resources within the framework of capitalist India, but individuals were marginalised and overlooked in the formulation of the nation's development strategies. Rukmini's work and ecological contributions hold significant value inside the capitalist business; nonetheless, her life is ultimately perceived as lacking sufficient worth when evaluated via a capitalistic lens. The concept of "slow violence" as described by Nixon (2011) is evident in the detrimental impact imposed upon her life and immediate environment. This form of violence effectively suppresses her ability to exercise agency and express her voice, hence rendering her grievances inconspicuous within the influential spheres of power within a capitalist India. (2)

### **Capitalism and Urbanisation**

The proliferation of capitalism in developing nations has presented novel obstacles as it endeavours to dismantle geographical boundaries and construct a worldwide marketplace. The urban hinterlands, once regarded as areas that provided resources to core cities, are currently exhibiting a diminished level of differentiation within a city's industrial network. The dispersion of commercial operations, including manufacturing, processing, and logistics, throughout the hinterlands, has resulted in the blurring of conventional boundaries. This phenomenon has the potential to result in the conversion of rural regions into industrialised zones, hence giving rise to various environmental and societal consequences. The expansion of capitalism can also lead to the utilisation of natural resources in a manner that exploits them and causes the displacement of indigenous communities. With the erosion of conventional demarcations, the differentiation between urban and rural regions becomes progressively challenging, and the ramifications of industrialization are experienced over a broader expanse. This phenomenon has the potential to give rise to disputes about the utilisation of land and allocation of resources, alongside inducing social and economic transformations.

The proliferation of capitalism in geographically distant regions is propelled by the accessibility of cost-effective sources of energy, labour, raw materials, and sustenance. In his scholarly article titled "The Emergence of Affordable Natural Resources," Jason W. Moore (2015) elucidates that the pursuit of inexpensive and abundant natural resources by capitalism is primarily motivated by its reliance on low-cost and efficient labour (12). The

creation of items for the global market necessitates affordable thermal energy, while inexpensive food helps maintain low labour costs, and the availability of low-cost raw materials supports the expansion of commodity production. The pursuit of inexpensive natural resources can lead to the exploitation of these resources and the displacement of indigenous communities. The expansionist objective of capitalism frequently entails the establishment of fresh frontiers characterised by inexpensive natural resources, wherein the well-being and ecological balance of the residents are often disregarded by entrepreneurs. The labour exerted by individuals and the raw resources extracted from their surroundings are solely assessed based on their capacity to generate output for the industrial sector. The above-mentioned phenomenon has the potential to result in environmental deterioration, persistent contamination, and alterations in climate patterns, with societal and economic transformations that may yield significant ramifications.

The concept of planetary urbanisation pertains to the notion that urbanisation has attained a worldwide magnitude, resulting in the progressive blurring of distinctions between urban and rural regions. The aforementioned process is propelled by the proliferation of capitalism, which endeavours to eradicate territorial boundaries and develop a worldwide marketplace. The urban hinterlands, once perceived as areas that provided resources to core cities, are currently exhibiting a reduced level of distinctiveness within a city's industrial network. The dispersion of commercial operations, including manufacturing, processing, and logistics, across hinterlands has led to the gradual erosion of conventional boundaries. The expansion of capitalism on a global scale has had a significant and detrimental effect on the natural habitats found in underdeveloped regions of the world. The depletion of resources is occurring on a significant scale, and within the capitalist system, accountability can be evaded as the boundaries between hinterlands become less discernible. The residents of these remote regions are experiencing the effects of an ecology that is deteriorating due to the pressures imposed by contemporary colonial-style development. In the context of postcolonial states such as India, the aforementioned transformation is evident through the occurrence of deforestation and climate change. The disruption of traditional patterns of life frequently results in the exploitation of marginalised populations for inexpensive labour.

In their book titled *Ecology and Equity*, Gadgil and Guha (1995) highlight the significant reliance of rural populations on their immediate natural surroundings to fulfil their fundamental necessities. The individuals who are closely associated with ecosystems are significantly impacted by alterations in climate or ecology. The economy of the aforementioned society is reliant on the natural environment, and any alterations to their ecological surroundings directly influence their overall quality of life (5). Capitalism, characterised by its differentiation between the realms of nature and society, instigates a pervasive process of appropriating the borders located outside the central hubs of commerce. These regions function based on the premise of generating and utilising inexpensive resources. The urban areas that derive advantages from these frontiers often tend to disregard or downplay the negative outcomes resulting from these extractive activities. The elements comprising raw materials, labour, energy, and human lives that facilitate the functioning of

the capitalist economy are commonly referred to as "cheap nature." Metropolitan areas with capital status constitute a minor part of the global urban landscape. Numerous individuals, such as indigenous populations, enslaved Africans, a significant majority of women, and even certain white individuals (including Slavs, Jews, and the Irish), exist beyond the boundaries of this particular sphere (Moore 79). The populations in question were perceived by capitalists and imperialists not as human beings, but rather as entities integrated within the natural environment, leading to corresponding treatment. The labour and materials derived from these surroundings play a key role in the functioning of capitalist machinery, although they are acquired without charge or at minimal expense. The utilisation of cost-effective natural resources is a fundamental strategy driving the expansion of capitalism in contemporary society.

Kamala Markandaya's inaugural literary work, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), presents a painful depiction of the consequences of industrialization on the agrarian existence in India. The introduction of a tannery in the hamlet has a profound impact on the local community, notably the female population, and leads to the degradation of the scenic rural environment. Markandaya explores the intricate connection between humanity and the natural world, wherein nature assumes a significant position inside the story. The intentional division between Nature and Society, as elucidated by Moore in his essay titled "The Rise of Cheap Nature," played a pivotal role in the capitalist agenda pursued during the development initiatives of post-independence India. The advent of colonialist capitalism in India initiated the process of modernization through the systematic exploitation of the land and the displacement of indigenous populations. Within the framework of capitalist endeavours aimed at generating a fresh reservoir of resources, individuals were regarded as dispensable, leading to the exploitation of Dalits and other marginalised communities to obtain inexpensive labour. The story portrays the challenges faced by the peasants in their efforts to acclimatise to the transformations resulting from industrialization while emphasising the profound repercussions it inflicts on both their livelihoods and the natural surroundings.

Rukmani, the primary protagonist of the literary work titled *Nectar in a Sieve*, assumes the role of a juvenile bride at the tender age of twelve. The individual in question enjoys a harmonious marital relationship with Nathan, a tenant farmer residing in a rural village located in South India. Nathan harbours a strong preference for male offspring, although Rukmani ultimately delivers a female child whom they name Ira. With the assistance of Kenny, an English physician practising in a rural setting, she gives birth to several additional male offspring, namely Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja, and Kuti. On a particular day, a group of individuals from the local community arrives to establish a tannery near the hamlet. Rukmani exhibits a steadfast opposition to the abrupt process of industrialization and modernization within the context of rural existence. The individual in question exhibits a notable resilience towards various alterations, expressing satisfaction as long as the tannery operations do not detrimentally influence her familial unit. In the interim, Ira has entered into matrimony with a youthful agriculturist residing within the vicinity, thereby encountering challenges within the context of her marital relationship. The female

partner is experiencing infertility, leading to a significant burden on their romantic partnership. Ira's marital union concludes as a consequence of her husband's decision to terminate the relationship due to her inability to conceive. The economic condition of the family deteriorates as the region undergoes a period of hunger resulting from crop failure attributed to insufficient precipitation. The male members of the household are compelled to pursue employment opportunities in the tannery, despite Nathan and Rukmini's strong aversion to its establishment within their community. The establishment of the tannery signifies a noteworthy departure from the customary lifestyle inside the hamlet, and its ramifications on both the familial and communal spheres are intricate and extensive. The establishment of the tannery in the village introduces a significant disturbance to the normally tranquil existence of the local inhabitants. The predicament faced by the young individuals in the hamlet serves as a manifestation of the intricate workings of the capitalist system, wherein labour and human capabilities are commodified and evaluated based on their role in fostering industrial development.

Following their employment at the tannery, Arjun and Thambi were subsequently terminated due to their involvement in disruptive behaviour, prompting their departure for Ceylon. In the context of his professional obligations, Murugan frequently undertakes journeys to the urban area. Upon the occurrence of a novel drought, Raja succumbs to mortality while Kuti experiences a decline in health. To support Kuti, Ira engages in prostitution and subsequently gives birth to a child born out of wedlock. Kuti then succumbs to malnutrition, following the demise of the elderly mother. Rukmani and Nathan decide to migrate to Murugan's flat in the urban area, while Selvam, Ira, and their infant child opt to remain in the rural countryside to provide support to Kenny, following the Zamindar's coercion of Nathan into relinquishing his property. Nevertheless, their attempts to find Murugan within the urban area prove futile, leading them to be compelled by philanthropic individuals to engage in low-skilled labour. The group is under the guidance of a juvenile male named Puli, however, Nathan soon succumbs to a severe illness and passes away. Rukmani returns to her place of origin.

The tanning industry capitalises on both human exploitation and environmental degradation to generate profits. The establishment of the tannery has resulted in an augmentation in the villagers' remuneration; nonetheless, it has concurrently exacerbated the prevalence of starvation and famine. In this literary work, Markandaya endeavours to establish a connection between the introduction of the tannery in the village and two distinct groups of individuals originating from different backgrounds. The first group comprises overseers, foremen, and workers associated with the tannery, while the second group consists of landowners, exemplified by figures like Shivaji, and various merchants, traders, shopkeepers, and moneylenders collectively referred to as the Savakari. Notable representatives of the Savakari include the moneylender Biswas and the grocer Hanumant. The primary objective of Markandaya's work is to portray the serene and harmonious existence of the village, which is subsequently disrupted by the establishment of the tannery. Before the establishment of the tannery, the village had a tranquil and peaceful atmosphere,

characterised by abundant vegetation and wildlife. The primary livelihood pursued by the residents was agriculture. During the two-month duration of tannery construction, the town underwent a notable metamorphosis, evolving into a vibrant hub of industrial operations. The community has a constant influx of bullock carts carrying various construction materials such as bricks, stones, cement, tin sheets, corrugated iron, as well as coils of rope and hemp. Due to the insufficient capacity of kilns in the surrounding villages to meet the demand for bricks required for the construction of the tannery, the practice of brick production gradually expanded to encompass Rukmini's village as well. The land is acquired and vegetation is cleared to fulfil this objective. The local inhabitants are compelled to engage in the construction endeavour of the tannery, inducing a significant alteration in the village's landscape and its customary socio-cultural practises. Arjun, a small kid, enthusiastically observes the ongoing building activities and accurately remarks, "Houses in the vicinity of the maiden are being demolished, while a procession of bullock carts is transporting bricks" (Markandaya 27).

The process of industrialization has the potential to both generate and restrict employment prospects. The implementation of a tannery had a significant influence on the options available to Rukmini's family. The capitalist system resulted in the degradation of their land and environment. Due to the absence of choices, the tannery compelled Rukmini's family to endure a state of internal deterioration. Rukmani provides clarification:

In actuality, people can adjust to almost any circumstance. I quickly got used to the odour and loudness. I was no longer influenced by the years of sadness I had experienced as my hopes for a child from the tannery faded with each passing year. I was able to accept Lra's fate and the future after seeing the tranquil beauty of our hamlet erode in the face of the town's assault. I had lost my resolve; I had become suddenly aggressive, agitated, and troubled (Markandaya 64).

Rukmani's statement highlights the transformative impact of industrialization through the establishment of a tannery, which disrupts the prevailing dynamics and diminishes the sense of security and advantages she once gained from her property. The primary objective of the tannery is to transform animal hides into leather intended for consumer products. However, this industrial operation inadvertently causes disturbances to the surrounding fauna. The process of commodification occurs as the tannery encroaches upon the land and its residents. The proprietor of the tannery acquires additional land to increase his enterprise, therefore depriving farmers of arable land. Nathan is compelled to vacate his property within a fortnight when his land is acquired by the industrial sector, necessitating his family's relocation to the urban area in search of employment after the loss of their agricultural land. The advent of the Industrial Revolution has resulted in the subjugation of various aspects, such as the environment, the quality of air, and even human existence, to a state akin to enslavement. In the literary work titled *Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, Markandaya portrays the adverse consequences resulting from the notion of development and civilization. The author highlights the harshness of capitalism and illustrates the detrimental effects of the tannery's establishment on the surrounding ecosystem, resulting in pollution and physical

deformities. As the tannery gains prominence, its growth accelerates, depleting natural resources as inputs in a way akin to the expansion of capital. Rukmani characterises capitalist industry as a lethal apparatus that consumes all entities encountered along its trajectory. In the rural community, there is a frequent occurrence of new constructions being established every month, while industrial activities relentlessly pursue abstract goals, resulting in a continued deterioration of the natural environment.

The novel *Nectar in a Sieve* illustrates the tendency for individuals to be marginalised in the realm of policy formation, and the limited regard given to their lives during the pursuit of national development. Rukmani endeavours to correspond through written communication to secure financial resources, although her efforts yield solely in the acquisition of sustenance. Puli engages the services of Rukmani and Nathan for employment in quarries to augment their financial resources. However, Nathan's physical well-being is compromised as a result of the strenuous labour involved in stone-breaking activities. Their aspirations of attaining a satisfactory income in the urban area are thwarted. The rising demand for goods and services has resulted in a notable increase in prices, hence rendering essential commodities and services more costly. Furthermore, within a monetized urban environment, individuals are often dehumanised and commodified, being treated as mere things or even likened to animals. Despite exerting their utmost efforts, the couple's endeavours finally prove unsuccessful. Urban residents are depicted as enduring a meagre existence, subsisting on meagre resources, until they realise that urban living is incompatible with their preferences, prompting their eventual return to rural areas. Rukmani's son, Raja, meets his demise as a consequence of his involvement in the theft of calfskin from a tannery. In the face of the villagers' dehumanising reaction, Rukmani and her husband find themselves devoid of authority or influence.

The responsibility for Raja's demise is attributed to the tannery workers on a fracture and subsequent loss of assets. The prevalence of profit-oriented ideas undermines the intrinsic value and disposability of human life. The endeavours made by Rukmani to seek reparation for her incurred losses, as well as the anguish endured by Nathan and his subsequent demise in the quarry, serve as poignant examples of the dehumanising exploitation of labour. The authorities prioritise solely the result of labour, disregarding the significance of a worker's demise. The mourning of a solitary bovine hide is regarded as a significant tragedy, yet the justification of human casualties is done with indifference. The authorised personnel displays a smile for the successful resolution of the matter. The significance of physical health and well-being is diminished within a capitalist framework that places greater emphasis on productive labour at the expense of worker welfare. Capitalist systems tend to exploit natural resources for production, often neglecting the potential consequences of deforestation, pollution, food contamination, and erosion.

According to **Rob Nixon (2011)**, the concept of "slow violence" pertains to the gradual and inconspicuous occurrence of harm and damage within postcolonial ecologies, which can be attributed to the spread of capitalism. The phenomenon under consideration spans numerous years or even multiple generations, exhibiting a gradual and cumulative nature. This stands in contrast to alternative manifestations of violence, which are

characterised by their instantaneous and dramatic nature (2). The phenomenon of slow violence frequently occurs in postcolonial regions through the processes of environmental degradation, persistent pollution, and the impacts of climate change. The consequences arising from the encroachment of capitalism systems on the environment and societies of postcolonial nations are frequently concealed and unacknowledged, resulting in a dearth of reparation or mitigation measures. Capitalist industries engage in the exploitation of ecologies in third-world countries, resulting in the emergence of individuals who are displaced due to the adverse effects on their development. In his scholarly work, Rob Nixon delves into the intricate issues surrounding environmental refugeeism and stationary displacement within the framework of capitalist slow violence. *Nectar in a Sieve* incorporates the themes of environmental refugeeism and "displacement without movement" to illustrate the adverse effects of capitalist industrialization on native areas, rendering them uninhabitable. These invasions compel the residents to choose between abandoning their accustomed habitat in pursuit of sustenance or enduring a hostile environment while struggling against relentless exploitation by industrial entities. The novel's portrayal of people such as Rukmini and Nathan, who find themselves in a state of desperate entrapment and subsequently embark on a journey to escape their circumstances, prompts an examination of the concept of environmental justice.

### **Slow Violence**

The notion of "slow violence" applies to the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, since it portrays a gradual process in which the indigenous fauna, the environment, the local populace, and the agricultural workers are progressively disrupted, commodified, and displaced by the proprietor of the tannery. Rukmani's utterances convey her profound anguish about the gradual erosion of her land and cultural heritage.

It is true, that one gets used to anything. I had gotten used to the noise and smell of the tannery; they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from town, and I grieved no more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it, and thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak, or in sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting and no longer calm ( Markandeya 62)

The advent of the Industrial Revolution has resulted in the subjugation of various aspects, such as the environment, atmospheric quality, and even human existence, to a state akin to servitude. The occurrence of droughts and the consequent loss of land have significantly eroded the remaining semblance of optimism in the lives of individuals. The individuals' efforts to revitalise their lives through the adoption of urban concepts of expansion have proven to be highly unsuccessful, resulting in a state of uncertainty over the appropriate course of action for future progress.

The challenges faced by Rukmani's family in post-independence India serve as a vivid depiction of the harsh reality experienced in industrial countries. These societies, driven by capitalist systems that prioritise economic growth above all else, often demonstrate a lack of care for the well-being of individuals who are adversely affected by their activities. The



prioritisation of financial gain and the lack of consideration for the well-being of individuals impacted by industrial activities give rise to a division between the business sector and the indigenous community.

The problems faced by Rukmani serve as an illustration of the concept of "ecological distribution conflict" as defined by Juan Martinez Alier and Martin O'Connor (34). This term refers to disputes that develop as a result of the unequal allocation of environmental advantages and disadvantages. The term "ecological distribution conflict" pertains to the societal disputes that arise as a result of the inequitable allocation of ecological advantages, ecosystem services, and environmental costs within underdeveloped regions of the world. These conflicts arise when capitalist industries engage in the exploitation of natural resources and ecosystems, leading to adverse consequences for both local communities and the environment. Rukmini and her family do not get any form of compensation for the deprivation of their land and means of subsistence and fail to fulfil their financial obligations and experience the extraction of their resources, yet they are not deemed deserving within the framework of capitalist principles. The occurrence of ecological conflicts frequently results in the people being placed in a position of disadvantage, with their marginalisation being closely associated with their limited political visibility. The underrepresented challenges and requirements faced by individuals residing in economically disadvantaged areas are hardly portrayed in the media or taken into account in policy formulation. Rukmani and her hamlet emerge as a locus of ecological distribution issues, serving as a symbolic representation of marginalised individuals inside postcolonial India.

The narrative of Rukmani's family not only illuminates the challenges faced in post-independence India but also serves as a microcosm of the global phenomenon known as "ecological distribution conflict." This term encapsulates the imbalances and disputes stemming from the unequal distribution of environmental advantages and disadvantages, particularly in regions influenced by capitalist systems prioritizing economic growth. Rukmani's struggles underscore the repercussions of exploitative industrial activities, where marginalized communities bear the environmental costs without commensurate compensation or acknowledgment within the framework of capitalist principles. Their marginalized status signifies the broader issue of limited political visibility and underrepresentation of the challenges faced by economically disadvantaged individuals, a phenomenon often overlooked in media portrayal and policy formulation. Rukmani's narrative thus emerges as a potent symbol, shedding light on the intricate socio-environmental disparities inherent in postcolonial India and offering a critical perspective on the global ecological landscape.

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**SP Publications**

**International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)**

An International Peer-Reviewed Journal; Volume-5, Issue-4(April Issue), 2023

www.ijoes.in ISSN: 2581-8333; Impact Factor: 6.817(SJIF)

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