

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

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The concept of Postcolonial Ecofeminism is still at a budding stage. This perspective recognizes that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism. It focuses on the intersection of postcolonial and environmental issues. The related fields of Postcolonial Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism do not address the issue of Postcolonial Ecofeminism adequately, where both fields need to recognize “the “double-bind” of being female and being colonized” (Campbell).

Postcolonial Ecofeminism can be outlined best in Indian fiction that explicitly foregrounds women. This paper is an attempt to trace Postcolonial Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Women's relationship to the environment is ambivalent. This is particularly highlighted by women writing Indian fiction in English. Women, nature, development and globalization are not linear categories that either complement or contradict each other in totality. Globalization is best seen as a contradictory development where it integrates women into the countless spheres of global capitalism, and simultaneously loosens the grip of traditional patriarchy on the women. Therefore, a total rejection of globalization or modernity as called for by some ecofeminists is not a very compatible framework.

Markandaya's text about a peasant farmer and her daily struggles has fallen out of favour, due to the indifferent readings of Rukmani, the heroine, as a passive female character, a position which this paper challenges. This paper also asks whether an ecofeminist reading still makes critical sense. The rural women of South are natural ecologists. The heroine Rukmani is someone with great ties to the land, and great concern for the environment. Her everyday life is a platform for her growing political consciousness as well. This paper revisits Markandaya's early postcolonial classic by reading it as a possible ecofeminist text through an analysis of the main character's daily negotiations of her rural lifestyle and a rapidly industrializing, post-Independence India. The overwhelming role of nature in the novel and particularly in Rukmani's understanding of the value of life means that it would be erroneous to overlook these ecofeminist themes. This paper, then, aims to situate an ecofeminist reading within the context of a more specific postcolonial analysis in order to understand Rukmani as an active agent through her labour on the land and her embrace of community. It particularly focuses on the ways in which Rukmani employs tactics to negotiate modernity through the under-examined relationship between herself and the white doctor, Kenny. Rukmani's ultimate decision to return to the land is not read as a retreat,

but rather a thoughtful response to urbanization.

In Kamala Markandaya's 1954 novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, the heroine, Rukmani, is forced onto the threshold of a rapidly changing India marked by the centralization of power, increased economic activity, and urbanization. The novel portrays the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous coincidence of the darker aspects of the women concerned. Rukmini and her family nearly starve to death when nature is unpredictable and there is a drought in this novel. While Rukmini accepts the lot that is meted out to her, her daughter Ira is forced into prostitution due to their dire financial state. Published in the mid-twentieth century, prior to the rise of mainstream environmentalism, the novel resists the environmentalist stereotype, that postcolonial literature has come only recently to environmentalism. The text demonstrates a complex environmental perspective, embodied by Rukmani's commitment to her rural lifestyle. This perspective is concerned with the protection and preservation of nature and the environmental destruction insofar as it threatens livelihoods.

Rukmani and her husband are rice farmers and their relationship with nature is thus mediated through their labour. Through the act of gardening Rukmani develops the closeness with the land. To understand Rukmani's relationship with the land and her environment, it is important to focus first on the beginning of the novel. Of her early married days Rukmani recalls:

*While 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? (8).*

The way she links the beauty of the fields with the beauty her husband saw in her, reflects a harmoniousness and fullness of life that sets the tone for the contrasts to follow. Markandaya's novel bears witness to the first arrival of white missionaries and officials, and the presence of both religious (Sikhs and Muslims) and racial foreigners is an important element of the text. It portrays the eruption of large-scale industrialization. The text establishes its environmental voice through the daily labours of Rukmani and her family as well as through Rukmani's sensitive voice.

*Nectar in a Sieve* begins with the young Rukmani's marriage to Nathan, a tenant farmer. When they relocate to Nathan's village far from Rukmani's family home, he is eager to prove himself. He holds up a handful of grain and promises that with "Such harvests as this, you shall not want for anything" (6). The promise of a bright future is represented in the able body of her husband, as well as the paddy that runs through his lands. A symbiotic relationship is thus established between the farmers/producers and nature. The farm soon becomes the centre of their lives, and Rukmani finds her passion in tending the land. Susheela Rao locates Rukmani's special relationship with nature in her "heightened awareness of nature's beauty" (42) as well as her connection to the rhythms of the seasons. Rao points to many passages in which Rukmani comments on the aesthetic and atmospheric beauty of the landscape. Looking in particular at the depictions of Rukmani's work in the garden, one sees that this practice links her with the land through her body and her labour. In Markandaya's text, the body begins as a symbolic site for Rukmani's maturation.

The garden has a special place in her life and is closely associated with her coming-of age. Being as young as she is, having married at twelve, Rukmani experiences her own physical, emotional, sexual and psychological development

through her work in the garden and the growth of her vegetables: "I was young and fanciful then," she recounts, "and it seemed to me not that they grew as I did, unconsciously, but that each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf" (13). Her first planting of pumpkins is a particularly moving process for her. In the passage describing the pumpkins what is most striking is not the mere satisfaction or pride she feels, but the pleasure that the growth provokes in her:

*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. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration..*

*"One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before," I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping my eyes down.*

*"Not from our land," said Nathan. "Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman.*

*"I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be offhand. I put the pumpkin away. But pleasure was making my pulse beat; the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to my face.*  
(10)

This embodiment of nature is one of the forces that ultimately connects her to her land and that determines her commitment to it later in the text. The satisfaction and pleasure she gets from nature is not defined by leisure or recreation but rather through work and production. This focus on labour and labouring is not unique to postcolonial environmentalisms but it is a key feature of them, especially where that labour is for survival.

Whereas contemporary postcolonial literature often depicts life within a capitalist mode of resource use,

the emphasis on labouring closer to the land often persists in the environmentally-oriented texts. Rukmani describes work and fulfilment in the same breath: "The sowing of seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit, but there is nothing to equal the rich satisfaction of a gathered harvest, when the grain is set before you in shining mounds and your hands are whitened with the dust of good rice" (102). It is clear that her perspective on labour is becoming outdated when her sons mastermind a strike at the tannery where they work. Their discourse on rights, labour and power is foreign to Rukmani: "I do not know what reply to make—[my sons] are strangers. Nathan says we do not understand, we must not interfere: he takes my hand and draws me away" (64). Her experience of working the land structures her ideas of labour relations and she is unable to divorce the worker from the work she does. For this reason she cannot grasp the idea that her sons would take a contradictory stand towards their work

What is striking about Markandaya's novel, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, is the ways in which her text first offers, and then resists, the pastoral. There is a resistance to depicting nature as simply a sacred mother-figure or a ruined power. Instead, tones of ambivalence and ambiguity mix with an appreciation or love for one's surroundings. The descriptions of the farm, for example, evoke ideas of an unspoiled, productive, provincial landscape that is at peace with, and always nostalgic for, it's even more harmonious past—all features which Lawrence Buell variously associates with the pastoral. On the other hand, the text is not shy about the downsides of country life. The following description of the storm-ravaged farm defies the idea that the rural countryside is a place of refuge: "Uprooted trees sprawled their branches in ghastly fashion over streets and houses,

flattening them and the bodies of men and women indiscriminately" (41). This tension between the pastoral and the anti-pastoral is, according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, a common theme in postcolonial writing. They discuss some of the complexities of the postcolonial pastoral in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, where they write that it "affords a useful opportunity to open up the tension between ownership and belonging in a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts: contexts marked, for the most part, by a direct or indirect engagement with often devastating experiences of dispossession and loss" (85). Markandaya's novel reflects on this loss directly through the land-grabbing machinations of the tannery as well as the simple fact of reliance on unpredictable natural patterns, such as flood and drought.

Rukmani herself, in what Rao calls the most important passage in the novel, describes nature thus: "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (39). There is a sense in this passage that Rukmani is trying to come to terms with her own role in this very meaningful yet strangely ambivalent relationship. Although in this passage she appears to speak from a position of power, throughout most of the novel she seems to accept her position at the mercy of nature. For the greater part of the novel she and her family are undernourished and overworked. In one prosperous season following a year of brutal drought, she depicts the conflicting feelings that arise as they watch over their crop:

Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen. We watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it be snatched away; or as a mother

her child, with pride and affection. And most of all with fear (93).

Amongst the many emotions that nature evokes for Rukmani, this passage highlights a clear sense of the loss of control over nature that, although it does not dominate Rukmani's life, does threaten to take it all away. The family is hungry; their youngest dies of starvation while outside the harvest ripens, ever so slowly—"indifferent to [their] need" (71). It is almost as painful to watch the death of her son as it is to watch Rukmani's apparently passive acceptance of her situation. Barely roused to anger, she apparently accepts the situation as part of her way of living: "This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know," she writes, "that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve. ... Still, while there was land there was hope" (132). The land offers the opportunity for self-sufficiency—it does not guarantee it.

In Markandaya's work, her politicization of nature is seen primarily in two instances:

Rukmani's embodied relationship with the land and the commodification of nature by way of the tannery. For Rukmani, the first crime of the tannery is that it is built on the maidan, an open field shared by all. "They had invaded our village with clatter and din," she recollects, "had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us" (4). Here Markandaya is echoing a pattern of the division and privatization of land that has been the hallmark of industrial development throughout colonizing and colonized worlds. The intrusion of industrialization brings with it the commodification of land and bodies. Without this free space, and with the imposing presence of male strangers in the town, Rukmani keeps her young daughter Ira close to her. Indeed, the arrival of the tannery marked "the end of [her] daughter's carefree days ... She had been used to come and go with her

brothers, and they went whither they wished" (29-30). Rukmani's daughter was not the only one whose freedom was disrupted by the presence of the tannery. Rukmani noticed the way the animals avoided the village now, too. "At one time," she recounts:

there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close (69).

The significance of the tannery also lies in its consumption of animals. In addition to disturbing the local wildlife, the main function of the tannery is to transform animals into leather for consumer goods. Rukmani describes it as a sort of mass (post)killing machine:

Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in—thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins—and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities—or that so many animals existed—but so it was, incredibly. (47)

Rukmani appears to object to the speciesist nature of this industry that profits from the slaughter of non-human animals. When taken alongside Rukmani's fears for her daughter's safety, Markandaya's novel becomes an exemplar of the feminist theorizing of Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, among others, who have worked to highlight the connections between the subordination of women and the subordination of animals, often in terms of

direct physical harm suffered at the hands of men.

Of course, when Rukmani's son is killed by the guards at the tannery, it becomes clear that Markandaya's critique is not only about gender; class and caste vulnerabilities are also her concerns. Markandaya shows that the real effect of the tannery is to aggravate the existing gaps between variously positioned people, making the weak even more so. These weaknesses have the effect of making living off the land even more difficult at the same time as they alienate people from the land. This shift is evident in the local marketplace. Rukmani had always sold her vegetables—those nice enough to fetch a price, "leaving the spoilt or bruised vegetables for ourselves" (22)—to Old Granny to trade in the market, but with the rising prices of goods the petty moneylenders had begun to seize greater control of the buying and selling trade, able to pay growers like Rukmani a little more for their goods. Yet, as Rukmani judiciously points out, the benefit was outweighed by the higher costs of goods. "No sugar or dhal or ghee," she explains, "have we tasted since they came, and should have none so long as they remain" (28). Despite their hunger, Rukmani remains fixed on the idea of acting according to caste dictates. When her son says he will work in the tannery to earn money to buy the food they desperately need, she admonishes him: "You are not of the caste of tanners. What will our relations say?" (51). Her prejudices are further revealed when she discusses the wives of the high-ranking Muslim men who run the factory under its white owner. She is unable to see past their differences, calling the women "a queer lot" and expressing pity for the way their veiled lives "deprived [them] of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their skin" (48). On one occasion one of the women calls Rukmani into her home to buy produce from her. Rukmani's observation that "Her fingers,

fair and slender, were laden with jewelled rings, any one of which would have fed us for a year" (48), is invested with the multi-layered ways in which class, caste and religious difference are exacerbated by the tannery. The tannery, by bringing those of different class, castes, and religions into one place showcases the existing hierarchies and power differentials between the groups.

Rukmani's character can be seen to interact with and even embody modernity. Her intellectual affair with the worldly white doctor reveals a different dimension of her character. It reverses the standard critical reading of this character as a stereotypically passive peasant woman. This standard reading is flawed because of the under-studied relationship between Rukmani and Kenny, the white doctor in the novel. It is through her discussions with Kenny that Rukmani sharpens her social critique and develops her own perspective on India's future. Through Rukmani's character there is an opportunity to revisit ecofeminist theorizing about the relationship between rural women of South and the environment.

Rukmani develops into a stronger, more assertive character through her interactions with Kenny. Although their discourse is primarily about the character of Indian people and the shape of Indian society, the tactics that she develops through her relationship with Kenny ultimately enable her to achieve her original vision of maintaining her life on the land. Her boldness in this relationship is an indication that she is not a victim of modernity but is rather in dialogue with it. She comes into relation with a representative of the colonial power—the foreign white doctor—she tries to enter into a somewhat egalitarian, or at least human, relationship with him. She sees herself reflected in his eye as a stupid peasant, but this neither frightens nor dissuades her. Instead she continues to determinedly be herself

Kenny first enters Rukmani's life when he helps to ease the death of her ailing mother, and Rukmani later consults him for treatment. At first she is scared by Kenny; because of his foreignness but also because of his stern manner and his impatience with her cultural customs. But very quickly she becomes used to his presence, and comes to appreciate him for his honest yet sympathetic bedside manner as he tends to her dying mother. Over time their relationship grows, and it is clear that theirs is a different sort of friendship than he has with other villagers. Perhaps it is due to the fact of Rukmani's literacy; she was taught to read and write by her father, and she values these skills very highly. This prized education may be what gave Rukmani the confidence and initial encouragement to communicate to Kenny on a different level. Theirs is not a romantic relationship, but is instead an intellectual affair. Rukmani seems to enjoy conversations with Kenny that she never engages in with her husband, who can neither read nor write and who shows little interest in the world beyond their village. They share secrets that Nathan does not know and would not necessarily understand – such as the fact that he helped her and her daughter overcome their infertility.

When Rukmani finds that she is having trouble conceiving after the birth of her first child, she and her mother visit the temple regularly to make offerings and pray for a child, all to no avail. When Kenny learns of her difficulties, he offers to treat her. His intervention makes it possible for her to have many more children. However, fearing that Nathan would be upset that she had put herself "in the hands of a foreigner" (21), Rukmani never tells her husband about this. By seeking out his help and concealing it from her husband, Rukmani is exploiting gaps in the system; she is subverting what she understands to be the limiting patriarchal control over her life by taking charge of her body—that

most immediate of environments—in accessing the medical services she needs to create the family that she wants. The doctor’s visit says much about Rukmani’s relationship to the strategies of the local patriarchy—namely, that she is willing and prepared to outwit its control where it does not suit her needs.

By the end of the novel Rukmani has nearly lost nearly everything. After being evicted from their land, she and Nathan head to the city in hopes of living with one of their sons who had left the farm in search of work years ago; they never do find him. Immersed in the chaos of the city, they feel alienated. They are suddenly without a home, a community, or means. Rukmani then makes two significant responses to this downturn in her life. The first, her decision to return to the land but the second, her decision to adopt a homeless boy, takes us back to ecofeminism through her commitment to an expanded notion of community. By reconverting the rural into a place where she can be comfortable, she explains how the colonized is never in a state of fixed powerlessness vis-à-vis the colonizer, but is rather in a position to exercise power. Rukmani’s position becomes not only one of an agent of her own will but as a force that the postcolonial state must respond to. If it is difficult to see Rukmani’s impact on the postcolonial state, we can at least see her impact on the broader community.

Rukmani’s care for Puli can be read in the context of this sense of communion with her fellow creatures. The connections between her affection for Puli and her care of animals are made clear in the novel

through a few key references. First, Rukmani remarks that the children living on the street behave “like animals” around food (152). She expresses an element of concern. The child himself draws on similar discourse, announcing that he “is called Puli [tiger] after the king of animals, and I am leader of our pack” (153). As a lost newcomer to the city, Rukmani feels connected to this wandering child who survives not only his loneliness, but his disability due to leprosy. Rukmani admires Puli’s bravado and his refusal to be pitied. Together, by pooling their resources and their labour, Rukmani eventually saves enough money to return to her village, for “with each passing day my longing for the land grew” (166). She recognizes the futility of this move, knowing that they “left because we had nothing to live on, and if I went back it was only because there was nothing here either” (175). By deciding to go back home to the land that had deserted her, Rukmani reverses the fate of rural migrants everywhere. She chooses not to accept the jarring cityscape as her fate.

She takes Puli back home with her and although in truth she knows she has little to offer the boy, by bringing him to live near her old farm she is sharing the greatest wealth she has ever known—the nearness to the land; “life to my starving spirit” (186). Her son and daughter welcome them back onto their small plot of leased land and the reader is left to imagine the difficult continuation of their efforts to support themselves both through and against the new order of things.

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