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Ecological Consciousness in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is a eminent woman writer whose writings encompass facets of suppression and subjugation that commences with the abuse due to poverty, casteism and the moral ethics of the people. She has acerbically offered the problems of women in relation to the environment in her celebrated book, "Nectar in a Sieve". Kamala Markandaya also vividly presents the description of the damaging and suffering of nature and women in the texts in the hands of male forces. The way in which women are side-lined in a male governed society has been explained by her. She categorises nature with the body of a woman and directs the readers to believe that nature, in the same way as woman, is raided by societies governed by male oriented philosophy. In such societies, nature and women, both are considered in an inferior way opposing the fact that both have an capability to give birth and nourish. This mistreatment has made women conscious of the heartlessness of the male dominated world towards nature. So, women have come together against this misuse of nature from time to time as they can relate to nature's suffering.

Nature is often attributed with maternal or feminine potentials of being repressive, submissive, tender, retorting and fostering persona. This real elementary idea gave birth to the Ecofeminist philosophy: the notion of a linking between feminism and ecology. The proponent of Ecofeminism Francois d' Eaubonne has cited arguments about the seeming relationship between nature and its exploitation with the aggression and oppression of the women. Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya intensely presents the portrayal of the destroying and suffering of nature and women in the writings in the hands of masculine forces.

Keywords: ecofeminism, feminism, nectar in a sieve, subjugation, exploitation

Introduction

Some eco-feminist studies display that the dissimilarity between women and men and nature and culture brands a dualism that is too severe and fixated in the difference of women and men. The ecofeminism associates the social standing of women with the social status of nature, rather than the non-essentialist view that women along with nature both have feminine and masculine qualities have often been seen as less worthy, nature is also understood as having slighter value than culture, or the potentials tangled in these perceptions. Most essential to ecofeminism is the vision that the culture/nature dualism of western culture is gender biased: means, men and masculinity are connected with culture and culture is valued, while women and femininity is associated with nature and both are undervalued. These allied assessments lead to hierarchy, which is then applied to justify the dominations of women, nature are associated. But the question arises that is culture/nature gender dualism of western culture relevant in eastern cultures as well?

Kamala Markandaya novel Nectar in a Sieve deals with the elementary association between nature and women. Here the woman is Rukmani whose life is confined to her husband and family. All over her life she has to face misery, torments of infertility, scarcity of food, desertion and so many more Womanizing Nature problems but she bears with those very tolerantly just like the Mother Nature who embraces her children without any expectation each day.

Kamala Markandaya achieves remarkably well to deal with the problems of nature and women, predominantly from the working class. Rukmani, the protagonist, Ira, the daughter of Rukmani and the environment in which they live, all have been portrayed as victims of the patriarchal system, zamindari and impending industrialization. Rukmani works as a labourer

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in a garden and is truly devoted to her work which advocates her deep relationship with the nature. Her happiness surges when she perceives the fields flourishing. The connection becomes more protuberant when she asserts, our choice to work in the jungle and to farm is very essential. In spite of her hard work, the labour accomplished by her at home is not given any significance at all. The story is drawn around the different phases of Rukmani's life, her finding of herself and her emotional situation at those different stages. These include her marriage at early age, then being a wife and a mother. Over all these stages, her connection with the land is accentuated that repeats the ecofeminist analysis. These ties include spiritual as well as physical fundamentals. The title of the novel has been obtained from Coleridge and emerges in the epigraph: "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live". Above said couplet is rightly used by Kamala Markandaya as these lines flawlessly express the core of the novel. If hard work made by a person produce no results, it becomes as fruitless as attempting to hold Nectar in a Sieve. The same notion applies to life as well, without objective life also becomes fruitless. According to author, for a farmer, agricultural is his life. He has no other goal or hope and if he is withdrawn from his work due to any reason then he eventually suffers from hunger, poverty and even death. The novelist here compares the short term happiness of the farmer to Nectar in a Sieve. M.K. Bhatnagar concludes in his article, "Kamala Markandaya: The Insider-Outsider", Markandaya's first novel Nectar in a Sieve illustrates all her basic preoccupations: the protagonist-narrator Rukmani caught in a hard peasant life; the vagaries of nature, the depredations of modern civilization (in shape of tannery), the forced migration to city and so on, revealing how work without hope draws nectar in a sieve.

This novel highlights the difficulties faced by the Indians due to changes in policies related to land, rehabilitation, labour, industrialization and so on. The plot is introduced with the marriage of young Rukmani to Nathan who is a tenant farmer. Rukmani's three elder sisters have been married in well-off families which gave the villagers a topic to gossip. Rukmani's father is a headman of the village who once had influence over village matters but due to certain changes in rule, his stature was greatly abridged which forced him to initiate this incompatible alliance. Rukmani's elder brother says this all in exasperation: "The headman is no longer of consequence. There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; not to the headman". These confrontations are somewhat harsh for Rukmani to tolerate: "It was as though a prop on which I inclined had been generally kicked away". According to the author the peace of Rukmani's initial life with qualms that anticipate the forthcoming unpleasant moments. All over the novel, the author succeeds in engaging the reader on an optimism that there are probabilities of enhancement in the circumstances. Clues like the able physique of Nathan that assures higher work output make the readers positive till the end. Nathan, at his village that is far tossed from Rukmani's home, is keen of proving himself. He promises Rukmani clutching grain in his hands: "With such harvests as this, you shall not want for anything".

Even if the readers presume that everything will be fine soon, she has interwoven the element of doubt that things

can go off-centre any moment and the novel keeps flopping between hope and sadness. The farm, on which Nathan works, soon become the second home for Rukmani and she starts enjoying supervising the farm. Susheela Rao discovers Rukmani's exceptional similarities with nature in her. Rao gives accounts of numerous sections of the novel in which Rukmani is aware of the cycles of the seasons and mentions on climatic changes with excellence. There are many instances that validate her bonding with nature. In her life, the garden possesses a high place. As she got married at the age of twelve Rukmani is undeveloped and her physical, mental and emotional growth develop along with her work in the garden as well as the growth of vegetables.

Her first cultivation in the garden is a pumpkin and she is deeply influenced by it. The growth of pumpkins gives an incomparable pleasure to her which can be inferred from the passage: 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 and was full of appreciation... "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. Despite the fact that the novel was published before the introduction of the concept of ecofeminism as a theory, Nectar in a Sieve Rukmani's association with the nature is considered through the lens of ecofeminism. 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 accentuates that happiness for a simple woman comprises of just minimal necessities such as shelter, clothes, food and the scenic beauty of landscape. The sun and the greenery of the fields are a source of joy for her. In this novel the seeds are shown as a sign of new life. It is clear from the incident where Rukmani takes the seeds of pumpkin in her hands for plantation, she looks at the seeds and wonders at the fact that the little seeds hold a life in them and their growth was a constant wonder for her since the time the seed split and fruit began to develop.

The account of tannery, where the carcasses of animals are transformed into leather, is the reason of disruption to wild creatures, and is considered as a slaughter contraption by Rukmani and feels that the setting up of tannery has produced another undesirable effect as substantial increase in the prices of articles in local shops. She reasons that this is a cause for the larger variance in classes of people that includes laborers, moneylenders and landlords. Biswas, a moneylender, takes more amount of goods as a token against money due to which Rukmani gets lower price from him in return for her vegetables.

This hike in price causes havoc in the lives of lower class workers such as Rukmani and causes the onset of several social disorders. Due to this scarcity and starvation thus produced, the form of a woman is transmuted into a commodity product leading to prostitution. This devastated state affects both Rukmani as well as Ira. She has to take to prostitution as last resort in order to keep her family and her brother out of the claws of starvation. Ira has to take this awful decision due to the change going under the influence of modernity and industrialism M.K. Bhatnagar sees the

decision of Ira as “a bold rejection of the innate institution of marriage”. Ira’s decision is contrastingly put together with Kunthi’s decision that chooses prostitution for the betterment of herself rather than for the support of her family needs.

However, it is important to point out that Markandaya is not confining tradition nor is she representing the superiority of the western innovation to be prevalent. Henceforth, the above analysis depicts Rukmani’s profound anxiety and her love for land, natural environment and for the native customs. There is such a tough alliance that Rukmani generates with nature that no one can disrupt it, in the rural or in the urban segment of her journey. In spite of the enormous adversities that she struggles against, both at the village and at the city as well, she emerges out as a lone companion of nature. In this aspect, women and land are equated here as they both can be fertile or infertile for cultivations and children are like crops of the land. It is proved that land and women are the submissive and productive objects which are used and farmed by the men to conclude the novel is a whimsey of materialistic ecofeminism that also connects some organizations of power, labor and property as the source of authority over women and nature. The links are very much understandable in the case of Rukmani and her daughter Irawaddy who are the greatest victims of this materialistic ecofeminism in terms of production and reproduction. Probably the most serious tests to mainstream philosophy are at the level of abstract analysis and theory. As ecofeminism raises important issues about the philosophical conceptions of the self, facts and the knower, reason and rationality, and a host of favoured polarities that form the backbone of philosophical imagining, even the conception of philosophy itself.

The challenge to philosophy is to replace conceptual arrangements, theories, and practices that presently feminize nature and naturalize women to the mutual harm both with ones that do not. This is what ecofeminists mostly argue is needed from feminism, environmentalism, environmental philosophy, and way of life.

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