

Shared Predicament of Nature and Motherhood in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

This paper examines and analyses conflating relation of nature and motherhood in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve by applying ecofeminist perspective. The novel revolves around a central character called Rukmani who struggles hard to survive and sustain her family working in the field. Her misery begins to unfold due to infertility she bears. Her daughter, Ira faces the same problem her mother had faced. It almost ruins Rukmani's life. She is always obsessed with motherhood, nurturing qualities, and natural surrounding around her. This paper explores why motherhood always bothers Rukmani thereby showing her bonding and belonging to nature. This paper being qualitative in nature applies ecofeminist theories for the textual analysis of the primary. The paper concludes that Rukmani's struggles in reproduction and her strong will to be in land community asserts the shared predicament of nature and motherhood where she is more obsessed with her biological role of mother.

Keywords: biological reproduction, conflation, land community, motherhood, nature and nurturing

Introduction

This article explores motherly qualities associated with land community and woman where a woman shares similar features of reproduction and nurturing to nature. Rukmani in the novel *Nectar in a Sieve*, is married to a tenant farmer, and enjoys harmony with the nature. The novel highlights relation of Rukmani with natural environment paying attention to nurturing qualities of both; nature and women. The concepts of ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva, "The soil is our Goddesses" (100), Maria Miles, "The feminine attribute- as a symbol of the land" (108), Val Plumwood, "women are historically linked to nature as reproductive bodies" (104) as well as Aldo Leopold's concept of "land community" (41) are theoretical insights insisting the link between nature and women in terms of reproduction and nurturing qualities. Thus, taking these parameters into consideration, this paper argues that women enjoy the bonding with nature, and if proven to be a failure to fulfill the motherly duties, it haunts them and land community.

Rukmani, Farming, and Nature

Farming Connects Rukmani with Nature. After Rukmani's marriage to Nathan, her involvement in agricultural activities makes her feel relief despite the poverty, "This mud hut, nothing but mud and thatch, was my home" (8). She is happy with the poverty-stricken situation of her family due to the farming. Her husband, though economically weak, is one who truly loves farming fulfilling his wife's desire to work at field. In the novel, Rukmani narrates, "I planted beans and sweet potatoes, brinjals and chilies, and they all grew well under my hand, so that we ate even better than we had done before" (15). The quote highlights that she planted potatoes, chilies and took care herself. It tasted even better due to the connection between soil and toil. The linkage of humans to the land is highlighted by Bell Hooks in "Touching the Earth".

Bell Hooks asserts the importance of land for the native people. She brings the reference of stories from her past to talk about the importance of nature to her and her community. She talks about importance of nature or soil by saying, "When we love the Earth, we are able to love ourselves" (139). She means to say that when one loves the Earth, then he or she loves himself or herself, "The sense of union and harmony with nature expressed here is echoed in testimony by black people who found that even though life in the new world was harsh, harsh in relationship to the Earth one could be at peace" (140). The indigenous people and their harmony with nature is echoed in their ultimate return to the land. Their relation with land or Earth is always at peace, "For many years and even now, generations of blacks folks who migrated north to escape life in the south returned down home for search of spiritual nourishment, a healing that was fundamentally connected to reaffirming to one's connection to nature" (142). The connection to the land is fundamentally important no matter where he or she goes. The link to the land is source of healing and nourishment.

Rukmani in the novel returns back to nature after her temporary stay in city due to obligation. She finds difficulties more in city as she is detached from the land and community. Her bonding with nature is seen from the early days of marriage. She was a fourth daughter of a headman who almost finished his money giving dowry to the three daughters. He could not offer any dowry to Rukmani so she was married to a poor tenant farmer. She understands her father's situation as well. She narrates:

Perhaps that was why they could not find me a rich husband, and married me to a tenant farmer who was poor in everything but in love and care for me, his wife, whom he took at the age of twelve. Our relatives, I know, murmured that the match was below me; my mother herself was not happy, but I was without beauty and without dowry and it was the best she could do. A poor match, they said. (6)

Due to the degrading economic situation of her father, she was compelled to marry a poor man but she was happy because she considered him as rich one in terms of love and affection. It is both her nurturing role that makes her contribute to the family and nature. She was happy to be with her husband despite the poverty because the husband's love to nature was as same as his love to land where he worked happily, "My husband soothed and calmed me" (7). She further narrates how she came to her new home with her husband. She expresses her happiness to see animals, fields, and farming on the way:

We rested a half-hour before resuming our journey. The animals, refreshed, began stepping jauntily again, tossing their heads and jangling the bells that hung from their red-painted horns. The air was full of the sound of bells, and of birds, sparrows and bulbuls mainly, and sometimes the cry of an eagle, but when we passed a grove, green and leafy, I could hear mynahs and parrots. It was very warm, and, unused to so long a jolting, I fell asleep. (7-8)

Her ecological insight is visible in the lines as she talks about her journey replete with the scenes of animals, greenery, parrots, birds, and sparrows. The pristine land having fresh and pure air with the sound of bells was a blessing for her which she enjoyed. Thus, she was not panic to see the mud hut which was her home. She was in complete harmony with nature. She writes, "I woke; I looked. A mud hut, thatched, small, set near a paddy field, with two or three similar huts nearby. Across the doorway a garland of mango leaves, symbol of happiness and good fortune, dry now and rattling in the breeze" (8). The mango leaves and garland is a symbol of happiness for her. Her bonding and belonging to the nature is seen immediately after her marriage to a tenant farmer as she looks at the land where she could work and she takes it as a blessing. Though people call her marriage a poor match, she enjoys growing vegetables, food stuffs, pumpkins with her husband.

Her knowledge of farming develops and she sustains her family. Her duty to plant vegetables and implant a baby in her womb goes together, "Sowing time was at hand and there was plenty to be done in the fields: dams of clay to be built to ensure proper irrigation of the paddy terraces; the previous year's stubble to be lifted; rushes and weeds to be destroyed; then the transplanting" (17). Her farming knowledge of sowing seeds, planting, irrigating, and weeds to be destroyed is seen in her daily activities. Her closeness to nature is seen through the farming of pumpkins which she grows as gardening. It is the farming that becomes integral part of her life, "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” (14). It talks how pumpkins grow out of soil more than in the past, she waters them. The seeds were sowed in the flat patch near the hut, the soil was fertile. Soon the green shoots of pumpkins appear and cover the field. She is connected with the land or soil.

For Aldo Leopold the idea of community consists of more than human beings including soils, waters, plants, and animals, in which humankind is one of thousands species. They all co-exist in harmonious relation as a matter of biotic relation reserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. He talks about environmental ethics, “An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct” (38). He says that an ecological ethics is a limitation on freedom of action which is directed to the struggle for struggles. Then he talks about the land ethics, “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals; or collectively: the land” (39). The land ethics covers the soils, waters, plants and animals collectively. Thus he writes:

Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy up-ward; death and decay return it to the soil. The circuit is not closed; some energy is dissipated in decay, some is added by absorption from the air, some is stored in soils, peats, and long-lived forests; but it is a sustained circuit, like a slowly augmented revolving fund of life. (43)

The quote asserts that land is more than soil; it is the fountain of energy passing through soils, waters and animals. The circles in varieties of form are seen in the living channels of food chains and the death/ decay returning to the soils.

Talking about bonding of soil to humanity Vandana Shiva in “Homeless in the Global Village” writes, “The sacred is the bond that connects the part to the whole. The sanctity of the soil must be sustained; limits must be set on human action” (99). She means to say that the soil is sacred, it represents part to whole. The unlimited progress based on modernization is to be controlled to sustain sanctity of soil. It is the soil, land that connects Rukmani with her nature as she involves in the agricultural activities. Shiva further writes, “Since soil is the sacred mother, the womb of life in nature and society, its inviolability has been the organizing principle for societies which 'development' has declared backward and primitive” (98). Land as seen in the quote is the organizing principle that organizes Rukmani and her family with a bonding of soil. She further

writes, "The soil is our Goddess" (100). Shiva's claim that the soil is the Goddess has been applied by Rukmani in her life.

Equally it is the land that makes the emotional bonding between her and her husband even stronger. Her relation with her husband is ecologically guided. She writes, "My husband ploughed it, steadying the plough behind the two bullocks while I came behind, strewing the seed to either side and sprinkling the earth over from the basket at my hip" (24). They worked together to carry out the agricultural activities. Farming helps her sustain her family.

Reproduction, and Nurturing Qualities of Women and Nature

Rukmani, from her early days of marriage, is obsessed with two jobs; farming in the field and bearing children. Though these jobs are defined in terms of traditions and based on patriarchal influence, she inherently wants them because she has ecofeminist sensibility. She fulfills both of the jobs initially by both growing pumpkins, vegetables, and giving birth to a baby daughter- Ira. Her belonging and bonding with nature makes her happy and satisfied. However, the farming in the field continues but farming in her womb stops i.e., she could not conceive for a long time after the birth of Ira. Her happy circumstance is lost as she could not produce a son as she remained infertile after her first daughter – Ira's birth. Her husband including her neighbors were worried, "Yet in the midst of her pain she could still think of me, and one day she beckoned me near and placed in my hand a small stone lingam, symbol of fertility" (26). She is less concerned with what other say, she is worried herself about a child she could have to continue works on the farm as her husband wishes. Thus she consults with Kenny about her infertility.

Her worries grow as her husband is more obsessed with taking a son to the field to continue the farming in the future. She struggles hard, consults with Kenny about how she can avoid the barrenness. This helps her to conceive and fulfills her duty by giving a birth to a son after seven years of marriage. Carrying the baby, Nathan says, "Seven years we have waited" (30). It was a happy moment for the family. Then year by year, she gives births to other four sons. She feels proud to deliver more four sons, "Ira had been fed well on milk and butter and rice; Arjun too, for he was the first boy. But for those who came after, there was less and less. Four more sons I bore in as many years — Thambi, Murugan, Raja and Selvam" (31). She is glorified to be a mother of multiple children. Bringing the reference of nurturing qualities of nature and women, Val Plumwood in "Ecofeminist Analysis and the Culture of Ecological Denial", claims, "Thus, it associates with inferiorized social groups and their characteristic activities; women are historically linked to nature as reproductive bodies, and though their

supposedly grater emotionality indigenous people are seen as a primitive earlier stage of humanity” (104). Plumwood associates nature and women in terms of emotionality, reproductive abilities and subordination in the society due to androcentrism. She means to say that nature is aligned with women as men always tend to think nature as resources.

Due to Farming, she was able to sustain her family, and was able to find a bridegroom to her daughter ‘Ira’. Problem comes again as Ira could not conceive baby for a long time. This time, the trouble is more intensified as the son-in-law returns her daughter back to Rukmani saying she is useless as she could not bear babies. As a mother, this is panic to her. When Ira comes back to her as barren women, Rukmani consults with the doctor again, “My lord, my benefactor --- many a time I have longed to see you” (44). She calls him a benefactor. It shows how she is concerned with reproductive activities. Ira’s infertility haunts her. As Ira has reached to puberty or womanhood, and a wife, Rukmani’s expectation is that Ira should conceive a baby. However, on the contrary, she could not conceive any child. Ira’s family returns the daughter. Ira’s mother-in-law comes to Rukmani and says, “I intend no discourtesy, but this is no ordinary visit. You gave me your daughter in marriage. I have brought her back to you. She is a barren woman” (68). Listening this, Rukmani is saddened and heart-broken. She realizes what Ira is undergoing in this situation. However, she does not accuse Ira’s family. She accepts the daughter. It shows benevolence, kind nature of Rukmani. She does not lose the hope; she believes that Ira will get treatment. As a nurturing mother, she says to Ira, “I will ask Kenny to help you” (71). She consoles Ira and ponders for a while, “It is for my daughter, She cannot bear; she is as I was” (80). She compares her own situation when she could not bear child despite having a strong desire. She convinces Ira saying she would be able to bear children. Due to her constant efforts, Ira conceives a baby though she was involved in prostituting due to poverty.

Farming vs. Construction of Tannery

The construction of tannery, nature unfolding its cruel form spreading drought, famine and Ira’s infertility go together. In the text, She writes, “The tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds; but the workers’ huts, of more flimsy construction, had been demolished” (57). The image of tannery as strong force replaced the land and farming, “They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maiden where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us” (38). The people involved in the activities of building the tannery attacked her village with clatter and din; they replaced the lawn where children used to play with and made the purchasing expensive.

Rukmani's opposition in the construction of tannery is similar to what ecofeminists critique of the western ideas of development. Rukmani vehemently protests the idea of making tannery. Building a tannery is a symbol of industrialization, and modernization. Her sons along with the villagers went to work in the tannery. The agrarian life was destroyed due to the construction. It was built in big size and it stood in the area where children used to play. As the agrarian life was destroyed, Rukmani's family was dislocated and displaced. Nathan was sad due to his sons' decision of working in the tannery. Drought and flooding ravaged the village leaving nothing to eat for the poor people. This act of making big building is anthropocentric. The construction of tannery for Plumwood, is the ecological denial resulting from human/nature dualism is problematic, "... establishes a discontinuity based on denying both the human-like aspects and nature-like aspects of human, as the denial of the sphere nature within the human matches the devaluation and denial of the nature without" (108). The quote clarifies that human nature connection is lost due to the discontinuity of human-nature relation denying the human like aspect of nature and nature like aspects of human.

Timothy W. Luke in *Ecocritique: Contesting the Politics of Nature, Economy and Culture* talks how nature has been sidelined saying it is almost ended, "Because Nature has ended, material signs of its now-dead substance need to be conserved as pristine preserved parts, like pressed leaves in a book, dried animal pelts in a drawer, or a loved one's mortal remains in a tomb" (68). The quote clarifies that the nature has been considered as a dead object which is said to be waiting to give life by humans. This is the result of capitalist economy which is unaware of environmental pollution, anthropogenic actions, loss of biodiversity. Luke further illustrates, "As powerful anthropogenic actions have recontoured, the earth to suit the basic material needs of corporate modes of production, these artificial contours now define new ecologies for all life forms caught within their economy and environment." (68). The quote highlights that the economy practiced in new scenario has reshaped the earth and its elements to suit the needs of corporate strategies and corporate mode of production. Luke further writes, "Natural resources exist, but Nature does not." (69). Generally, natural resources exist because there is nature. However, humanity based on corporate mode of production does not see nature's existence. It is like milking the cow without realizing the existence of cow.

The tannery was big and spruce, people falsely believe that it would improve their economic condition, "A large building, spruce and white; not only money has built it but men's hopes and pity, as I know who have seen it grow brick by brick and year by year" (5). The cemented building with bricks was strong enough to bear the heavy raging blowing of wind. But the wind destroyed villager's hut and remaining crops, "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you" (54). Now nature has shown its

cruel face to the humanity, “The corn field was lost. Our paddy field lay beneath a placid lake on which the children were already sailing bits of wood” (56). The quote clarifies that the land has been empty and children are playing. Moreover, people become homeless, “Many of our neighbors fared much worse than we had. Several were homeless, and of a group of men who sheltered under a tree when the storm began six had been killed by lightning” (56). The houses were demolished, people were sheltering under trees. The pollution increased and causes people to suffer. Now people are habituated to live with the noise, “It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got used to the noise and the smell of the tannery” (85). Rukmini is now feels victimized; she cannot act except bearing whatever troubles befall to her. Along with the domination of nature by the global corporate forces involved in making tannery, she feels dislocated, marginalized and dominated because she is what nature is. The naturalization of female and feminization of nature is seen in her character. Being frustrated, she says that she had got used to the noise of the tannery. Being worried, she remembers the mother Goddess in the adverse situation, “That year the rains failed. A week went by, two. We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need. We threw ourselves on the earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came” (98). She offered pumpkins and a few grains of rice to the Goddess so that she could save the community. The nurturing feeling that comes to Rukmini proves that she is a character with nurturing, love and affection.

Inhabitants of Rukmini’s village are attracted towards money-making process working as job holders in the tannery. The construction of tannery poses a constant threat to the natural farming which some of the villagers are not aware of it. They are unaware of the ecological imbalance it could bring. Talking about how previously protected ecofriendly culture could be destroyed, Eliane Potiguara in “The Earth Is Indian Mother, Nhandecy” writes, “In the new society, as men accumulated money and goods, they become the properties of wealth, which their names and surnames guaranteed. Previously honored and respected, women and their families went to work for the holders of money- an acquaintance, a brother, even the husband” (141). The quote says that the act of making wealth in the society or industrial society is the goal of men guided by capitalist model of economy which causes the loss of the relation of toil to soil. When the capitalist model of economy is practiced, it results in disappearance of organic unity between humans and nature.

The construction of cannery represents what westerners call ethnocentrism. Talking about this, Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* writes, “There is also the need to rid both critiques of the arrogant ethnocentrism which has been such a

marked feature of western world views” (11). She calls the ethnocentrism arrogant one as it assumes that western culture is human culture. She also relates ethnocentrism with patriarchy, “Accounts of a generalized patriarchy as the villain behind the ecological crisis implicitly assumes that western culture is human culture” (11). It results in ecological crisis which Rukmani undergoes after the construction of cannery. Plumwood further writes, “People suffer because the environment is damaged and also from the process which damages it, because the process has disregard for needs other than those of an elite built into it” (13). The quote says that the cause of suffering of human is the destruction of nature resulting into ecological crisis. Val Plumwood’s concept of anthropocentrism is related to the construction of tannery because the act of building the tannery is economically guided keeping humans at the center. In *Environmental Culture and the Ecological Crisis of Reason* she writes, “As the human-centered culture of our modern form of rationalism grows steadily more remote and self-enclosed, it loses the capacity to imagine or detect its danger” (100). The human centered culture is short-sighted as it loses the capacity to talk about the danger the crisis brings, “An analysis of human/nature dualism and some of the larger formation of human centeredness will show us why they are now, in the age of ecological limits, ecologically irrational – a danger to all plantenary life” (100). Plumwood opines that human centered behavior is ecologically irrational. Limitations on humans actions is to be imposed.

The conflict between man and nature is visible in the novel is visible as the replacement of the nature by the big building stands in sharp contrast to Rukmani’s attempt to live in nature. This conflict according to Tally Jr., Robert and Christine M. Battista is historically structured. In *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spatial Literary Studies*, they write, “The archetypal conflict of man versus nature provides a revealing glimpse into a certain frame of reference that cannot really be maintained, as mankind is ever and again forced to bear witness to itself as part of natural world” (3). Mankind is a part of nature but it witnesses mankind being apart of nature. They further write, “Most of the time, it seems nature stands in the background, more or less picturesque backdrop to the main drama of the human activity” (5). The nature as they observe is like a stage where men perform their role. Heather Eaton in “Can Ecofeminism Withstand Corporate Globalization?” writes, “Economic globalization is predicated upon the illusion of an ideal world in which well-being is measured by the accumulation of things to ease the burdens of life’s harsh conditions” (28). Eaton foregrounds that economic globalization is built on the illusion of ideal world where the natives are told of facilities they could get. Though the villagers agree to make the tanney, Rukmani in the novel protests the idea of constructing process. However, she cannot stop the construction of building amidst the land community. She is defeated to

the corporate globalization as the tannery aims at selling the local products and skins of cows abroad, “The corporate world has colonized everywhere: from television to class rooms, painting themselves green, supporting women’s initiatives, universalizing the consumer and commercializing youth” (30). The land is colonized and the youth of Rukmani’s village were commercialized.

Rukmani and Nathan undergo hardship due to famine. They could not survive in the village as industrialization was not under their control and they could assimilate themselves in the industrial process. They go to town for survival searching their son. The memory of the village comes in the mind of Rukmani. It is Puli who helps them in the city. Later on, she adopts Puli as her son. Her role of nurturing is seen again in the act of adopting Puli.

Conclusion

Rukmani’s successes in reproducing and rearing children despite hardships, and her belonging to nature through farming relate her to soil and land community. The shared predicament of nature and motherhood is the situation in which both Rukmani and nature undergo hardships associated with nurturing qualities. Thus she protests the construction of tannery as it stops land yielding the fruits. Moreover, her strong protest in making tannery, and her adoption of the boy Puli as a son indicate that she is a character with nurturing traits. Her connection to land shows her ecological insight. This is the reason why she continues her motherhood and farming even in the adverse situation of poverty. Her bonding to nature is reflected through the act of reciprocity, dependability, sharing and caring with the nature. The belongingness of Rukmani to nature and her role as mother and environmentalist explores as issue if nature is a feminist issue.

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