

38  
**ECO CONSCIOUSNESS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S  
 NECTAR IN A SIEVE**

*S.Venkatalakshmi, (Ph.D. Research Scholar), Asst. Prof, Department of English,  
 Dr. SNS RCAS, Coimbatore*

Literature and nature have a close relationship in the works of writers of all ages. At present the intimate relationship between the natural and social world is being analysed and emphasized in all areas. The relationship between nature and society has been determined by two terms ecology and eco-criticism. Ecology is defined as the way in which plants, animals and people are related to each other and their environment. India is a country with variety of ecosystems and it has been affected due to increasing population and avarice of mankind. The concern for nature changes Indian literature from destruction to reverence.

After independence many female authors with high educational and intellectual standards came forward to impart psychological depth of women characters. These women novelists create interesting characters who successfully oppose the oppression inflicted on women in the society. Indian English women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Ruth Pawar Jhabvala, Nargis Dalal, Shobha De and Bharathi Mukherjee etc take initiatives to portray the role of women in the society. Among other women novelists, Kamala Markandaya holds an enviable position in Indian English literature.

Born Kamala Purnaiya in a small town in Mysore in 1924, Markandaya attended the University of Madras, beginning in 1940, where she studied history. From 1940 to 1947, she worked as a journalist and also published short stories in Indian newspapers. During the War she worked for the Army in India and later returned to journalism.

Fame and success came with her first published novel, *Nectar In A Sieve* (1954), a Book-of-the-Month Club Main Selection and best-seller in the United States. In 1955, the American Library Association named it a Notable Book. That novel was followed by nine others: *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Cofferdams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), and *Pleasure City* (titled *Shalimar* in the American edition, (1982).

Kamala Markandaya's bewail over destruction of landscape, her voice for preservation of nature may earn her the name "perceptible environmentalist". Markandaya is unconvinced of the advantages of the development of modern industry. The change it brings is rapid, violent and disorganizing. She believes that the change led in by the growth of industry marginalizes the subalterns by displacing them from their lands and ruining their very livelihoods. She is strongly convinced that growth of industry is not a signpost of everlasting happiness for majority of people eking out their livelihoods in the villages.

A critical examination of the fiction reveals the writer's implicit ideas on environmentalism. She expresses her views strongly against the industrialization and its harmful bearing on the natural environment. She considers that the insensitive industrialization not only pollutes the natural landscape but also dislocates the lives of the people in the countryside. The novel is critically relevant and instructive in the context of the deliberate violence committed on the nature in the name of achieving rapid economic and social progress of human societies and the attempts to redesign the contours of natural environment displaying the insensitiveness of human nature. It is therefore a silent but sharp protest against the demoralizing impact of the industrialization and is quite edifying from the perspective of maintaining and

preserving the harmony between the nature and human nature.

To Markandaya, nature is a vital sustaining force of human life. The survival of human life is considered unimaginable without it. It is perceived and constructed as being an integral part of the humans. It is depicted not only as a regenerative force but one with an infinite power of destruction. It is conceptualized as a trained 'wild animal', which, if not treated sensitively or disregarded, has the ability to be more destructive in its disposition. Untamed nature is represented to be treacherous and ruthless. 'Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk 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.' She forcefully communicates her ideas on how man and the nature are interlocked in a symbiotic relationship. She demonstrates that the survival of humanity depends on the sensitive treatment of nature. Indeed, she expresses her concern for careful husbanding of resources. Any thoughtless approach or disregard to the dynamics of nature and its functioning, or any move to alter or redesign its contours would only lead to the consequences, which would be quite unimaginable to the human mind or which would put the survival of humanity in risk. It is therefore important to preserve and protect it from greediness of humans. So, the narrator forcefully articulates her concern for preservation of the nature's uniqueness and serenity.

According to Beth Zeleny, "Markandaya implicitly connects woman and landscape through her recurring use of seed imagery. ... As giver and nurturer and endurer of life, woman participates in the cycle of life as seed, then seedling, which ultimately becomes part of the soil that supports future seed" (Zeleny, 1997).

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). With this turn towards the future Markandaya successfully buries the suspicion in her character that things as well as the paddy that runs through his lands. A symbiotic relationship is thus established, in theory at least, 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 we look in particular at the depictions of Rukmani's work in the garden, we can see that this practice links her with the land through her body and her labour is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment' 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)

The beginning of the industry (tannery) meant invading the villages with clatter and din. She is sharply critical of the other consequences such as the industrial pollution and the disruption to the tranquility of the pastoral life and landscape. Markandaya exhibits intense awareness of the corrosive effects of the industrialization and urbanization on the natural environment and inestimable damage to the purity of nature. She conveys how the humans become insensitive to the aesthetics of nature. The adverse effects of the urbanization are seen in the growth of unhygienic conditions and the disoriented life of humans. The irrevocable outcome of this process in the towns is the loss of man's connection with the aesthetics of nature, the ultimate benefactor of humanity. This view is extraordinarily communicated by the novelist.

Markandaya voices her sharp protest against the demoralizing impact of the industrialization. Her representation of unhygienic conditions in the towns and her distaste for highly urbanized cities conspicuously reflect her intense anguish at the catastrophic environmental impact of colonial and post-colonial industrialization. Her fictionalized narrative of the changing landscape on account of the growth of industry does indicate the emerging consciousness for the protection of the natural environment. Her narrative becomes particularly significant in the context of rising environmental awareness contemporaneously in different locations of the world.

The novel is therefore appealing to modern readers for its sensitive and moving portrayal of the human tragedy due to the obsession for human progress unmindful of the destruction of nature. Hence, what is striking is her respect for nature's inherent energy and a belief in pristine nature as a necessity for human life, a dismay at inroads (in the name of development) man has made against the land, a conviction that man must respect the nature's sacred energy and so must reverse the present trend toward progress at any cost, an unwavering passion for what is nature.

It may be apt to conclude here with an expression of the great leader of the Native American Suquamish Tribe, Chief Seattle who said to his white conquerors: "Teach your children what we have taught ours that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." Therefore, Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* can be considered a critical text in terms of present and future relations between human communities and the environment.

### Works cited

1. Markandaya, K. (1954). *Nectar in a Sieve*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
2. Bhatnagar, Anil Kumar. (1995). *Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic Study*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.
3. Zeleny, Beth. (1997). "Planting Seeds in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*". *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 17.1, 21-35.
4. Rao, Susheela N. "Nature in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffin Dams*." *The Literary Half-Yearly* 1995: 41-50.
5. Parameswaran, Uma. *Kamala Markandaya*. Series Title: *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2000.