

# An Ecocritical Reading of Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the rising theory of ecocriticism and its role in literature, specifically Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. Ecocriticism is identified and defined early in the paper and is followed by a number of relevant examples establishing the theory. I explore the effects that the animals and their existence has on the Indian family as well as the ways that the family utilizes, exploits, and relies on the land and its animals. I also examine how the animals in this novel symbolize their fellow earth inhabitants, the humans, by providing specific examples and excerpts from the text. This paper demonstrates how to evaluate a novel through an ecocritical lens, a practice which, if applied to other novels, can reveal many critical and worldly characteristics that would have been lost in other theories.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a story about woman's quest for happiness in a transforming India. Many theorists have read the novel through the common lenses of feminism, post-colonialism, or Marxism. Sangeeta Dutta critiques the theme of motherhood and the mother's powerlessness in the novel, while Joan F. Adkins focuses on the British influence in India and the resulting effects on Indian writers' literature. Readers often view the novel in relation to one or more of these theories. The time has come for readers and writers alike to open their minds to read literature in relation to a new theory: ecocriticism. With the increasing concern for the world's depleting environment, human beings need to fully understand their impact on the environment in order to reduce destructive habits.

Ecocriticism is the study of the environment's relationship to human beings in literature (Heise 638). It focuses on how the nonhuman and human function together and ultimately affect one another. Some factors of this interaction are "how culture shapes the perceptions and uses of natural environments... and how risk scenarios,

crises and disasters amplify or reduce sociocultural differences" (Heise 638). For example, the characters in Markandaya's novel are in a primarily agricultural environment. Therefore, they are more dependent on the land for survival. The environmental disasters the family faces, monsoons and droughts serving as only two examples, highlight the family's reliance on their available natural resources. When faced with these calamities, the people of the village become common allies in the quest for survival. The insensitive environmental effects do not change according to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Along with plants, weather, and other varying ecological factors, animals are part of the relationship between nature and human beings. The animals within the environment play a role in the theory, more often than not, by acting as a direct symbol of one or more of the characters. Clearly, Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* lends itself to an ecocritical reading.

Many ecocritical theorists see animals as a significant aspect of the relationship among man, literature, and nature. Through critical animal studies, "The otherness, the

exploitation, and the oppression of the animal are sometimes a transparent metaphor... for humans' oppression of humans" (Heise 640). In *Nectar in a Sieve*, the bullock is one animal that acts as a metaphor for Rukmani's struggles. On their journey to find their son, Rukmani and Nathan seek the help of a carter. He seats the two among the many stacks of skins already occupying his full cart. When the cart makes its first stop, Rukmani notices the bullocks that are pulling it. She sees a serious injury on one of the bullocks, but it obediently continues to pull the cart. The injury reaches its peak when Rukmani and Nathan finally arrive at the city. She notices that the wound had become infected: "more skin had been eaten away and trickles of blood were running down the edges" (Markandaya 141). The poor animal had been struggling the entire journey, but keeps pulling the cart. Under ecocritical theory, the bullock stands as a symbol for Rukmani's festering sorrows that haunt her throughout the novel. For example, Rukmani loses her son, Raja, when the tannery men issue him a fatal blow to the head. The family is left to prepare his dead body for burial. Rukmani also witnesses the slow deterioration of her youngest son, Kuti. Every day, she must watch him grow hungrier and weaker, until he can no longer survive. The family must bury a second son. She battles extreme famine and poverty for the majority of her life, yet throughout every hardship she encounters, she keeps pulling her life behind her.

During one of the many times Rukmani and Nathan admire their land, Rukmani takes particular notice of the birds that inhabit it freely, happily, with little to no human interaction. She remembers the kingfishers, flamingoes, and paddy birds that once inhabited the water. These birds symbolize Rukmani's life before the tannery, bright, healthy birds living as one with the land. The tannery's effects range far and wide. Soon the only animals at the rice paddies are "crows and kites and such

scavenging birds, eager for the town's offal" (Markandaya 69). The tannery brought the same change in Rukmani and Nathan that it brought in the birds. The family scavenges for food and water, sells almost all of their possessions, and must intrude on others for help.

Along with the bullock, the fish, and the birds, the cobra in Rukmani's garden can be analyzed with an ecocritical view by examining the circumstances of its death. While Rukmani is tending to her vegetable garden, she hears a small rustling in the leaves. She parts the foliage and accidentally touches the snake, which surprisingly does not strike at her. Nathan comes rushing to her aid and kills the snake, mutilating its body into little pieces. Unfortunately, Rukmani finds out too late that cobras are sacred animals. Kali explains to Rukmani, "it is a pity your husband killed the snake, since cobras are sacred" (Markandaya 16). It is a pity also because snakes are very efficient and helpful for rice-farming by killing the rodents and mice that the rice attracts. By killing the snake, Nathan is essentially perpetuating the problem of pests eating the rice. The family is also going against Hindu practices by killing another living thing. Nathan kills the snake for the sole reason of it being in their garden. The snake did not cause Rukmani or Nathan any harm, yet it is wrongfully murdered. By killing the snake, the couple is knocking nature off of its organic balance and essentially causing more problems for both themselves and the environment.

An ecocritical reading of the novel highlights the tannery and its effects on the village people and their environment; these effects include the elimination of the land's native creatures and the destructive noise that harms both the people and the animals. The introduction of the tannery to the small village shows the beginnings of outside populations colonizing the small town of India. Out of all of the new men in the village, it is important to note the one white

man also brought in by the tannery work. While the tannery men are working under the supervision of the overseer, the village people watch in confused astonishment. The white man comes onto the scene after a short while and speaks to the overseer. It is clear that the white man is in a position of high power, because the overseer immediately orders the village people to disperse. Whereas, before the white man came and spoke to him, he let the people watch freely.

Early on in the novel, Rukmani's son, Arjun, is the first to bring news of the tannery's construction. The small boy says between excited gasps, "They are pulling down houses around the maidan and there is a long line of bullocks carts carrying bricks" (Markandaya 25). The noise, construction, workers, and exploited resources of the tannery greatly affect the town and its environment. According to Rukmani, "Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us" (Markandaya 29). The harsh effects of the factory drive away the land's native animals. Many villagers may think the factory is a good thing, bringing more business to the small townspeople and bringing more money into the town. When the tannery workers left for a short time, some people are genuinely upset. Rukmani states, "There were some among the traders—those who had put up their prices and made their money—who regretted their going" (Markandaya 27). In contrast to these specific townspeople, Rukmani is glad to see the workers leave. She knows that the tannery brought more harm to the village than it did help.

The tannery intrudes on the villagers' daily lives with its noise; Rukmani calls the ruthless noise "clamour" (Markandaya 31). The tannery noise is seldom mentioned in the novel, but it has large environmental effects, none of which are discussed in the novel. While the noise is troublesome to the people of the village, it has a more traumatic effect on the animals that inhabit the area. A study of Eastern Bluebirds discovered that

"Increases in environmental noise tended to be associated with smaller brood sizes and were more strongly related to reductions in productivity" (Kight et al. 1989). If the people in the novel are affected by the noise, then the animals, most of which have more sensitive hearing than humans, are also affected. In such noise-polluted areas, some female animals "are unable to hear the vocal displays of males" (Kight et al. 1989). As a result, fewer male and female birds have the opportunity to reproduce. Animals can also go deaf from constant or severe exposure to loud noise. Hearing is one survival instinct for many species. By not being able to hear possible enemies, the deaf animals instantly become helpless prey.

Apart from the environmental troubles imposed by the tannery, Rukmani and Nathan must face various troubles of their own. Since they survive by farming the rice paddies, their wellbeing relies heavily on the success of the land. She must struggle to survive and witness her homeland shrivel away. Indira Ganesan, who wrote an introduction to the novel, blames the tannery and nature itself as a source of conflict for the family. She states that possible problems in the novel "can be nature or a newly built tannery run by a corporation" (xiii). Ganesan fails to consider other possible reasons for these conflicts or why they are included in the novel. One reason is that Markandaya exploits nature in order to add dramatic details to her novel. These conflicts may arise for the sole purpose of bringing hardship to the family. For example, a great monsoon "with an evil intensity" broke out over the land after Ira left the family (Markandaya 39). These rains destroy much of the land, including the family's house, the crops, and the coconut tree outside. The heavy rains can be a symbol for Rukmani's sadness of saying goodbye to her first child. Markandaya implements this practice, called pathetic fallacy, in many situations of her novel. There is another monsoon the day that Nathan dies. The rain started well before

Nathan's death, also acting as a form of eerie foreshadowing. Rukmani explains, "The rain which had been a fine drizzle had become by morning a heavy downpour" (Markandaya 180). When she came across her beloved twitching in a mud-filled rut, she could not do much to save him. Markandaya personifies the rain to add a layer of drama, writing, "The pitiless rain came splashing down uncaring" (183). Not only is the rain associated with sorrow and misfortune, but it is also used to describe a cruel and unforgiving nature. Rukmani even states, "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you" (Markandaya 39). As long as one keeps the lands wellbeing in mind, she explains, then the land will cooperate. In contrast, if one disrespects the land, it will be cruel in return. It is ironic that one of Markandaya's main characters makes this statement; one could read the line as Markandaya saying she trained nature to work for her novel.

A closer reading of the novel reveals that the tannery may not hold all of the blame for the harsh effects on the environment. As George B. Handley states, "social and environmental ills often cause and exacerbate each other" (95). Rukmani and Nathan often take from the land, seldom giving to it in return. For example, Rukmani collects dung from the land because it is "easy to sell and commanded a good price" (Markandaya 31). While Rukmani sees the dung as too valuable to waste on the land, she fails to consider the dung's major impact on the environment acting as a vital fertilizer in the soil and a necessity for its wellbeing. When Kenny witnesses Rukmani taking the dung, he says, "Yet I thought you would know better, who live by the land yet think of taking from it without giving" (Markandaya 32). She asks what she should do as a substitute. Kenny does not reply to her question, abruptly ending the conversation. Rukmani, Nathan, and their children also take all of the fish from the rice paddies. When it is time to drain the paddies, each family member takes

a net and catches the fish that flow out with the water with "greedy hearts" (Markandaya 44). After the water drains, the fish "were caught in the meshes and among the paddy, shoals of them leaping madly" (Markandaya 44). They gather the fish until there are none left in the paddies, none left for the ecosystem. What the family doesn't understand is that they took fertilizer from the land and food from the birds. Had they left the dead fish in the paddies, the nutrients from the fish bodies would have integrated into the soil and fertilized it. This healthy fertilization would have provided a better rice-growing environment for Rukmani and Nathan. Perhaps healthier land would have prevented some of their many agricultural troubles.

Along with stealing fertilizer and food from the land, Rukmani and Nathan destroy the environment further through their devastating farming process. Early on in the novel, Rukmani expresses her utmost happiness at living a rice-farming life: "While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye... and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times... what more can a woman ask for?" (Markandaya 8). She is convinced that rice farming is good and wholesome and that she has all she needs for a healthy life. The family, and even Markandaya, fails to consider the terrible effects their lives and habits have on the environment. In a moment of calm admiration, Nathan and Rukmani look out over the land. It is at this moment that Rukmani says in awe, "we gazed at the paddy fields spreading rich and green before us, and they were indeed beautiful" (Markandaya 69). While the rice paddies may look aesthetically pleasing, they are emitting harmful gases and destroying the soil. Rukmani especially romanticizes the rice farming life when they get a bountiful, unexpected harvest. She even makes it a majestic feeling, saying, "The sowing of seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit" (Markandaya 102). To

her, seeing and holding the grain produced from the paddies is the most satisfying feeling. She does not know the consequences of the harsh farming process that gave her that grain.

Collecting dung and farming the fish from the paddies are only two examples of the damage Rukmani and Nathan did to the environment. Their life of rice farming brings far more destructive effects to the land. Firstly, it is important to note that rice paddies are not set in natural lakebeds; the soil is drowning underneath of the collected water. For example, before the Liangzhu paddy fields of China, there were “three house foundations, four graves, some 160 pits and two wells” present on the land (Zhuang et al. 532). Once the rice paddies were formed, all of people’s houses, graves and wells were lost forever. The soil underneath of the water was left to mingle with the water particles to form a clay substance, which resulted in a profuse crust over the land when the paddies were drained (Zhuang et al. 532). The land then became useless as it died under the years of crust. It is a possibility that the paddies in the novel will have the same detrimental effect on the land.

Secondly, fossil fuels, agrochemical requirements, and “the methane emission associated with the fermentation of organic material in the flooded rice fields” result in additional harmful impacts to the land (Fusi 119). The fossil fuels and agrochemical requirements may not relate directly to *Nectar in a Sieve*, but the methane emissions most likely happened in Nathan and Rukmani’s rice paddies. According to one study, “Rice-paddies are one of the largest anthropogenic sources of atmospheric methane” (Tokida et al. 132). Nowhere in the novel does Markandaya mention any harmful effects of rice farming or even reference the most prominent problem of methane emission. Growing one plant over such a large expanse of land is not beneficial to the

ground. It is simply not how nature works; an ecosystem must have diversity to survive.

Thirdly, rice farming is extremely water-intensive and draws on the ecosystem. The amount of water used is one of the most damaging aspects of the practice. When the drought hits, it proves how dependent both the family and the ecosystem are on ample water availability. The family had little food because of the dried up, dead rice paddies and little to no water. Rukmani was forced to travel to the town water reservoir to collect a small serving of drinking water for her and her family. Even the “plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water” (Markandaya 76). The trapping of so much natural water for the rice paddies eliminates possible sources of water for drinking, irrigation, bathing, and washing purposes.

Along with collecting dung and rice farming, the rock quarry is yet another environment in the novel that lends itself to an ecocritical reading. Rukmani and Nathan arrived at the quarry with the help of the little boy Puli. The first thing the couple notices is the unbearable sound: “As we drew near, the din grew louder; we had to shout to make ourselves heard” (Markandaya 170). The constant blasting and whistling of the quarry had drastic effects on the land and animals. The mountainside was blown apart and rid of its topsoil. As a result, no lush, green hillside lays next to the quarry, but instead “another, lesser hill, bear and rocky, with here and there a few clumps of prickly pear” (Markandaya 170). Both the noise and the harsh land conditions drive away the animals from the land. The animals are forced from their homes to find resources in another location. Many may die from not being able to find food, shelter, or water.

Another detrimental, and rather disgusting, environment in the novel is the open sewage trench in the city. When Rukmani and Nathan travel into the city, they stop at a doctor’s house in search of their

son. The doctor and her servant inform the parents that their son is no longer working there, but ask them to stay for a meal. It is Rukmani who notices “what lay there open to the blue offended skies” (Markandaya 157). She asks to use the latrine and is astounded by the “most foul stench” that emanates from the area. She sees a trench of waste, surrounded only by four walls of tin. There is no door or roof enclosing the area. This trench of sitting feces is a terrible source of disease. Since there is nowhere for the waste to travel and disintegrate, its harmful bacteria festers into cholera, typhus, or other related diseases. The trench is also exposed. Innocent animals or people could easily wander unknowingly into the area and come in contact with the waste.

Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* is only one of many works that can be read through an ecocritical lens. In fact, some theorists argue that ecocriticism is not a canon, but a way of reading (Heise 640). As a canon, ecocriticism implies that it is a preset group of works that can only be read in relation to one theory. Instead, all texts have the potential to be ecologically or environmentally based writing. This emphasis “has enabled ecocritics to reread texts from a variety of historical periods and geographic regions,” including post-colonial, feminist, and Marxist texts (Heise 641). Viewing literature in this way brings many works back into consideration, works that have previously been neglected. Other critics agree that nature should be seen as “protagonist not scenery” (Handley 94). Defying old norms, ecocriticism looks at the environment as one of the most prominent figures in a situation, or more specifically, a novel.

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