

## **Ecofeminism and Gender Perspectives on Sustainability in Kamala Markandaya's Novel "Nectar In A Sieve"**

**Mr. P. Ashok Kannan<sup>1</sup>, Dr. V. Anuradha<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, University, Maduravoyal, Chennai-600095, Tamilnadu, India, Assistant Professor, St. Thomas College of Arts and Science, Koyambedu, Chennai-600107, Tamilnadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English & Dean Admissions (Bihar, West Bengal, & Assam), Dr. M.G.R. Educational and Research Institute, University, Maduravoyal, Chennai-600095, Tamilnadu, India.

### **Abstract**

Kamala Markandaya's novel "Nectar in a Sieve" is a powerful narrative that marries ecofeminism with gender issues of sustainability. This research paper looks at the interconnectedness of women with nature in the novel, with more emphasis on the novel's protagonist, Rukmani, as she leads her life in rural India. The novel realistically unfolds the sorry state of affairs women experience in the course of their lives steeped in a deep affinity with the soil they till, against ecological damage and patriarchal subjugation.

Markandaya thereby tells the important role of women in environmental stewardship and sustainable practices through the experiences of Rukmani. This novel epitomizes how the exploitation of natural resources and marginalization of women are parts of interconnected problems and thus have to be confronted together. The paper tries using the socio-economic and cultural issues faced by Rukmani and the other female characters to advocate for a gender-sensitive approach toward sustainability, whereby women's contributions to environmental conservation are valued as well as recognized accordingly.

This research also captures the wider implications for ecofeminism with regard to postcolonial literature and how this author develops her work based on colonial and patriarchal systems that foster environmental and gender injustices. In situating "Nectar in a Sieve" within an eco-feminist framework, it is the purpose of this paper to foster greater understanding of the interconnectedness of the issues of gender and environment vis-à-vis concerns for sustainability and to foster advocacy for more inclusive and participatory solutions to environmental problems.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Gender Perspectives, Sustainability, Gender Equality, Rural India, Socio-economic challenges, Cultural issues, Colonial systems, Gender injustices, Sustainable practices.

### **Introduction**

Kamala Markandaya is an Indian novelist of repute, highly critical and deeply focused on socioeconomic factors in her writings. Most of the time, her novels mirror the harrowing realities of Indian society and dwell on themes like poverty, hunger, social injustice, and tussles between tradition and modernity. The following explores some of the prevalent socioeconomic factors in the novels of Markandaya and how they shape her characters and narratives. She was one of those novelists whose novels are a tapestry of life integrated with minute socio-economic issues of India. Her novel reflects a clear vision of the sufferings of people in this fast-developing society. Markandaya's work is the reflection of influence of

poverty, struggle for identity, clash between traditional values, and modern aspirations through the medium of her characters.

Socioeconomic variables are some of the most important structures that define and shape a given society. Included in these are income, education, employment status, and social class—all strong variables that all too often predict opportunity and quality of life for individuals and their communities. Income is a basic socio-economic determinant of access to resources and services. In general, higher income levels imply superior access to quality education, healthcare, and housing, while lower income levels are associated with economic disadvantage and reduced opportunity. Income disparities, a concern in many

societies, tend to widen social divisions and make social mobility harder to attain. Socioeconomic factors are intertwined aspects that form the backbone of societies. They determine individual opportunities, quality of life, and overall well-being. Reducing socioeconomic inequalities and fostering social mobility are crucial for the development of fair and prosperous societies.

### **Nectar in a Sieve**

"Nectar in a Sieve" is a heartrending novel that describes the life of Rukmani, who, as a twelve-year-old girl, was married to a poor tenant farmer named Nathan in the countryside of India. Within a generally fast-evolving environment, it builds up scenarios of poverty, resilience, and a struggle for survival.

Rukmani leads a life filled with a lot of suffering: barrenness, famine, and the penetration of industrialization. She gets pregnant after six years of marriage with the help of a foreigner doctor named Kenny and goes on having many children. With every new birth, there comes a lot of trouble since the family is unable to make their both ends meet.

A tannery built in their village brings a ray of hope and despair. Although the tannery provided jobs, it also dislodged the traditional way of life as labor strikes and social discontent grew. Her family continues to experience more tragic events, such as the death of her sons and prostitution of her daughter Ira to save her youngest son named Kuti from starvation.

Notwithstanding, Rukmani did not give up easily. She finds solace in her relationship with Kenny, especially since he has been very helpful to her family in many ways, finding a job for her son Selvam. The novel ends on a hopeful note, with an assurance of a new hospital to be built in the village and a hope of promising future for the young generation. The novel "Nectar in a Sieve" by Kamala Markandaya goes deeply into socioeconomic problems, particularly the effects of industrialization on traditional societies.

"Nectar in a Sieve" unravels in a rural village in Tamil Nadu, where the protagonist named Rukmani and her family confront the brutal

realities of poverty and hunger. Following are some of the socio-economic factors that the novel deals with:

**Industrialization:** Indeed, the coming of the tannery to their village makes greater differences. The tannery brought along employment, but in the process, it disrupted the green agrarian way of life by environmental degradation and social upheaval.

**Poverty and Hunger:** The villagers, including Rukmani's family, struggle with constant fear of starvation and economic instability. The novel poignantly portrays the impact of crop failures and the lack of resources.

**Exploitation:** The tannery's presence leads to the exploitation of the villagers, who are often forced to sell their land at low prices, resulting in a loss of livelihood and increased poverty.

### **Socioeconomic Factors in "Nectar in a Sieve"**

Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve" is a heart-wrenching novel that expounds the socioeconomic problems of rural India's existence during those most transformative years. The events in this novel unfold in a small village where Rukmani and her family face the complications induced by industrialization and economic changes. Through the eyes of Rukmani, Markandaya examines the effects of socioeconomic elements on individuals and society.

### **Rural Life and Economic Stability**

The core of "Nectar in a Sieve" is the portrayal of rural life, filled with close intimacy between man and the earth, agriculture being the main staple of the inhabitants' survival. The lead character, Rukmani, along with her husband Nathan, were farmers whose livelihood depended upon working on land. Their economic stability was closely knit with the good and bad times their crops experienced, crops they used to barter for food and other essential items. It is an unpretentious way of life, with its dignity and self-sufficiency. Nathan is more proud of his job and draws his pride from teaching his sons something about the earth.

### **Industrialization Arrives**

A turning point comes in the form of a tannery reaching the village as industrialization threatens to overtake the old rural ways. This set of socioeconomic changes accompanies the tannery: the arrival of workers, increase in prices, and the dislocation of the economic balance of the village. The presence of the tannery creates cheap labor demand; therefore, it leads to the exploitation and a shift away from agricultural practices. This industrial development does not only jeopardize the economic stability of the villagers but also brings vices such as prostitution and breakdown in family structures into their midst.

### **Displacement and Urban Migration**

As the tannery expands its scope and power, Rukmani and Nathan are compelled, finally, to sell their land and move to the city looking for employment. This displacement from the rural community to the urban speaks volumes of the general historical trend in India caused by industrialization. This migration to the city signifies a large socio-economic change which Rukmani and Nathan have to go through-being faced with an altitude in life full of uncertainty and hardship. The novel deals with the struggle of urban poverty, counterpoising it to the relative stability and familiarity of rural poverty.

### **Impact on Family and Values**

The socioeconomic changes brought about by industrialization have profound effects on family dynamics and values. Rukmani's sons, for instance, are unable to continue the tradition of farming and are drawn to the opportunities presented by the tannery and the city. This shift leads to the fragmentation of the extended family network, a cornerstone of rural life. Besides, the novel deals with the disintegration of conventional values among the children of Rukmani: her eldest daughter, Ira, becomes a prostitute, and her son Selvam becomes pragmatic in his approach to life, taught by Western ideas of self-advancement.

### **Critique of Colonialism and Industrialization**

Markandaya portrays the socioeconomic change in "Nectar in a Sieve" not only descriptively but critically. She pinpoints the exploitation of

colonialism and industrialization, claiming that people like Rukmani and Nathan are victimized and helpless. There is, therefore, a kind of critique of hegemony for urban development and the displacement of rural communities in the novel. Through Rukmani, Markandaya will underline the ability of poor Indian peasantry to show resilience and fortitude against such changes but at the same time question the possibility of traditional values staying ahead of the din and dust of socioeconomic change.

"Nectar in a Sieve" is well-presented about socioeconomic factors that influence the lives of its characters. Kamala Markandaya shows, through the experiences of Rukmani and her family, the intricacies of rural life, the cacophonous impact of industrialization, and, finally, the wider historical context of economic change in India. It is at once a moral lesson in the resilience of people and communities against socioeconomic challenges and a critique of those very self-same forces driving such changes.

### **Gender Roles and Economic Dependency: Cases of Rukmani and Ira**

Kamala Markandaya's novel "Nectar in a Sieve" is a poignant exploration of the lives of rural Indian women, focusing on the experiences of Rukmani and her daughter Ira. The novel delves into the themes of gender roles and economic dependency, highlighting the struggles and resilience of these women in the face of societal and economic challenges.

### **Rukmani's Journey: Navigating Traditional Gender Roles**

Rukmani is the protagonist, full of the traditional gender roles that are culturally expected of a woman from rural India. She is at an early age trained to be an obedient wife and mother. The marriage between Rukmani and Nathan, a tenant farmer, sets the foundation for her life economic dependency. Her place is within the domestic sphere, tending to her household, garden, and bringing up her children. Her sense of identity and self-worth is deeply linked with her capability to enact these functions.

Despite the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles, Rukmani exhibits remarkable strength and resilience. She adapts to the harsh realities of rural life, finding solace in her connection to the land and her family. Her garden becomes a symbol of her agency and her ability to contribute to the family's sustenance. However, Rukmani's economic dependency on Nathan and the land underscores the precariousness of her situation. A tannery coming to their village disrupts their way of life and creates financial instability, which ultimately forces Rukmani to realize the constraints of her traditional role.

### **Ira's Struggle: Challenging and Reinforcing of Gender Norms**

Ira, the daughter of Rukmani, symbolizes another dimension in the struggle against gender roles and economic dependency. Unlike her mother, the life of Ira is punctuated by a series of personal and social obstacles that she has to negotiate and, at times, defy. Thus, one sees the arrangements for the marriage of Ira in her tender years-which turns out to be a case of abandonment on grounds of barrenness. Infertility now becomes a source of shame and economic burden as her husband returns her to her parental home.

Ira's return home heightens the financial burden in the family, and her desperation makes her make hard choices. For the sake of her family, Ira resorts to prostitution-a decision entirely contrary to female purity and virtue that is expected by societal tradition. This is a strong act that underlines how women at times are driven to extremities because of economic hardship. Ira's case illustrates how the combination of gender and economic dependency may make certain social norms even restrictive but simultaneously coercive for women to resort to extreme measures.

### **The Intersection of Gender and Economic Dependency**

The experiences of Rukmani and Ira in "Nectar in a Sieve" illustrate the complex interplay between gender roles and economic dependency. Both women are bound by societal expectations that dictate their roles and limit their opportunities. Rukmani's life is a testament to the endurance and

adaptability of women who navigate traditional roles, while Ira's story highlights the harsh realities and difficult choices faced by those who challenge or are forced outside these norms.

Markandaya's depiction of such characters equally tells about the changes in the broader socio-economic environment that is engulfing rural India. The arrival of the tannery shows a case of industrialization encroachment and the consequent dislocation of the agrarian way of life. It increases the vulnerability of the family of Rukmani, who survives on odd jobs. The novel critiques such economic changes, with their exploiting nature being underlined for the human cost of progress and modernization.

In "Nectar in a Sieve," Kamala Markandaya weaves a truly complex tapestry of issues regarding gender roles and economic dependency through the lives of Rukmani and Ira. Taking in the greater struggle of the rural Indian female, their experiences tread between the constraints of traditional sex roles and the battle with economic privation. Markandaya reveals women's resilience and agency through their stories against overwhelming odds. The novel can, therefore, be considered a powerhouse at the intersection of gender and economics, showing how women's lives are continually shaped by societal expectations and economic vectors.

### **Community and Social Support in Kamala Markandaya's "Nectar in a Sieve"**

Kamala Markandaya's novel "Nectar in a Sieve" is a sensitive portrayal of the lives of rural Indians during a period of great social and economic transformation. Set in a small village in southern India, the story traces the life of Rukmani, a farmer's wife, and her family through the encroachment of industrialization and colonialism. Among the major themes running through the novel is the role played by community and social support-that is, the centrality of neighbours and social networks in the lives of the characters.

#### **Social Networks and Economic Support**

It extends the social networks of the village beyond the immediate neighbors to include relatives and friends. Such networks are extremely

important for economic survival in a purely subsistence farming community where resources are limited. Villagers often share and barter in order that all get enough to survive.

Rukmani's relationship with her friend Kali is a prime example of this economic support network. Kali, who is more experienced in farming, often advises Rukmani on agricultural practices, helping her improve crop yields. This exchange of knowledge and resources is crucial for Rukmani's family's survival, particularly during times of famine.

Besides, the social networks within the village act as a cushion against hard times. When Rukmani and Nathan are forced to sell their land to the tannery owners, they are able to survive only by the goodwill of their friends and family. This assistance is both financial and emotional, as the people help them deal with the trauma of losing their life's work and the later shift to the city.

### Conclusion

In the novel "Nectar in a Sieve," Kamala Markandaya depicts the meaning of a sense of community and social support within the lives of rural Indians. Social networks come first in giving emotional and practical support that might help an individual or a family to solve various challenges such as poverty, industrialization, and social change. While economic and social change caused disruption, the novel gives emphasis to the strength of communal bonds and the human capacity for resilience and solidarity. The novel is an anguished portrayal of ecofeminism and gender perspectives on sustainability. The novel postulates women and nature are interconnected; it traces the ordeals faced by rural Indian women who have to bear the brunt of both environmental degradation and patriarchal oppression. Through the main character, Rukmani, Markandaya depicts how women's lives are inextricably linked with the land they cultivate; hence, sustainable management is important to the latter's survival and well-being. The novel conclusively demands recognition of the contribution made by women in the care of the environment and introduces the need for tackling sustainability in a sensitive gender perspective.

### Bibliography

1. Agarwal, Bina. "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1992, pp. 119-158.
2. Shiva, Vandana. "Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development." Zed Books, 1988.
3. Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. "Ecofeminism." Zed Books, 1993.
4. Merchant, Carolyn. "The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution." Harper & Row, 1980.
5. Plumwood, Val. "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature." Routledge, 1993.
6. Warren, Karen J. "Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters." Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.
7. Gaard, Greta. "Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature." Temple University Press, 1993.
8. Salleh, Ariel. "Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern." Zed Books, 1997.
9. Markandaya, Kamala. "Nectar in a Sieve." Signet Classics, 1954.
10. Sharnappa, Patil Sangita. "Reconstructing Ecofeminism: A Study of Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve." *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016.
11. Mount, Dana C. "Bend Like the Grass: Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2011.
12. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English." Heinemann, 1971.
13. Rao, Ranga. "Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study of Her Novels 1954-1982." B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1992.
14. Jain, Jasbir. "Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writing of Shashi Deshpande." Rawat Publications, 2003.

15. Nayar, Pramod K. "Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction." Pearson Education India, 2008.
16. Paranjape, Makarand. "Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English." Anthem Press, 2009.
17. King, Bruce. "Modern Indian Poetry in English." Oxford University Press, 1987.
18. Dhawan, R.K. "Indian Women Novelists." Prestige Books, 1991.
19. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa. "Indian Writing in English." Sterling Publishers, 1985.
20. Naik, M.K. "A History of Indian English Literature." Sahitya Akademi, 1982.