

AGRICULTURE AND ECO-FEMINISM: A STUDY OF KAMALA
MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE*

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Abstract:

Women are the first to suffer the consequences of climate change and the last to reap the economic benefits. Adenike Oladosu calls for an ecofeminist approach to help women smallholder farmers meet the challenges of climate change and produce food. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of feminization of agriculture, i.e., women's increasing work and responsibilities in agriculture, and explores its importance in women's empowerment and the contribution of feminist thinking (e.g., ecofeminism - women and the environment - gender, environment, and sustainable development) to advancing the gender paradigm in environmental concerns and plans for agricultural and rural development.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environment, Agriculture, Empowerment, Feminist.

Content:

India has the fourth largest agricultural sector in the world. India has an estimated 180 million hectares of arable land, of which 140 million are planted and under continuous cultivation. India's agricultural profile, however, is overshadowed by the controversial impact of the Green Revolution policies introduced in the 1960s and 1970s under pressure from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the World Bank. The Green Revolution brought a modern approach to agriculture with the introduction of irrigation systems, genetically modified seed varieties, the use of insecticides and pesticides, and numerous land reforms. It had an explosive effect, leading to unprecedented agricultural productivity in India and transforming the country from a food importer to an exporter. But the Green Revolution also led to a decline in agricultural prices that hit India's small farmers.

The tradition of India's small farmers can be traced back to the first agricultural reforms of independent India. Known as the "laws of divided inheritance," the reforms were intended to limit the accumulation of land by mandating redistribution, in which land was divided among male heirs of the previous generation. Maintaining these laws not only limits the size of farms, but also excludes women from ownership or inheritance. Moreover, as small farmers increasingly have to compete with larger farms, more and more men are migrating to cities to find higher wages and jobs. Women, in turn, stay behind to support the family structure and maintain the smallholder lifestyle. In 2011, women made up 75% of the agricultural labor force in the subcontinent.

In rural India, the percentage of women who depend on agriculture for their livelihood is as high as 84%. Women make up about 33% of farmers and about 47% of the agricultural labor force. These statistics do not include work in livestock, fisheries, and various other forms of food production in the country. In 2009, 94% of the female agricultural labor force was engaged

in cereal farming, 1.4% in vegetable farming, and 3.72% in the cultivation of fruits, nuts, beverages, and spices.

The percentage of women in agriculture is 47% in tea cultivation, 46.84% in cotton cultivation, 45.43% in oilseed cultivation, and 39.13% in vegetable cultivation. While these crops require labor-intensive work, this work is considered relatively unskilled. Women are also highly involved in secondary agricultural activities. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Indian women account for 21% of fishermen and 24% of fish farmers. Despite their dominance in the labor force, women in India are still extremely disadvantaged in terms of pay, land rights, and representation in local farmer associations. In addition, their lack of empowerment often leads to negative externalities such as lower educational attainment for their children and poor family health.

Each week, One Earth is proud to feature an environmental activist and hero from around the world who is working to create a world where humans and nature can coexist in harmony. In 1991, Vandana Shiva founded one of the first community seed banks in India. With over 150 local agricultural centers in 22 states storing and growing indigenous plant species, Shiva is considered the "Gandhi of grain."



Today, the Indian agricultural sector continues to face efficiency challenges due to the lack of mechanization, poorer farmer conditions, and small farm sizes. Traditional agriculture is still prevalent in India, with many farmers relying on livestock for crop production, fertilizer, and the use of animal-powered plows. According to statistics from 2011, the average farm in India is about 1.5 hectares, which is minuscule compared to the average 50 hectares in France, 178 hectares in the United States, and 273 hectares in Canada.

The human race has come into existence due to heritable changes over successive generations through a long duration phenomenon called evolution in which ecological equilibrium has played a critical role. Hence, the human species is just a fraction of this ecological armamentarium and their existence solely depends upon the ecosystem. Donald Hughes' explanation about ecology and its relation with humans is reasonably significant:

Human ecology, then, is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salty; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and plants, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (Hughes 3)

The primary rule of ecology is this: every single thing is linked to the remaining ones. Hence, although ecology is considered as a branch of biological sciences yet its arena is widespread. Paul Shepard interprets that ecological insight can be loomed “mathematically, chemically, or it can be danced or told as a myth.” Ecological manifestations can be observed in “widely scattered economically different cultures.”

It is manifest, for example, among pre-classical Greeks, in Navajo religion and social orientation, in Romantic poetry of the 18th and 19th century, in Chinese landscape paintings of the 11th century, in current white haedian philosophy, in Zen Buddhism, in the world view of the cult of the Cretan Great Mother, in the ceremonials of Bushman hunters and in the medieval Christian metaphysics of light. (4)

The continuously increasing menace to the environment from incessant use of nature and natural resources has grabbed the interest of writers in the last decades. The consideration of the aforesaid ecological issues in writings of the eminent novelists has lead to the beginning of a *de novo* literary approach, explicitly ecocriticism. According to *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, “Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation.”

The human species is just a tiny droplet in this ocean of global ecosystem. Still, human culture has witnessed oppression and exploitation of nature by male-dominating social groups. This aspect has made women closer to nature as compared to men because they have faced similar oppression by the patriarchal society over decades. It provides the female a special opportunity of questioning the exploitation of nature, delimiting the supremacy of patriarchal society, and curing the estrangement developed between the human and the surrounding environment. This homology has led to the emergence of a *de novo* approach in the realm of ecocriticism i.e. ecofeminism. The most significant approach emerging out of ecocriticism and environmental activism bears affinity with ecofeminism. In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, “Ecofeminism is defined as a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society”. According to *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, “Ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology”. The theory of ecology gives a reasoned reflection for observing the various subjugations that women and nature face. Ellen O’Loughlin bridges the distance between these mutual oppressions through the following metaphor:

An ecologist cannot just add up the parts of a pond and think she is coming close to describing that ecosystem and how it functions. A fish in a pond and a fish in an ocean, looked at ecologically, must be understood as inhabiting different, maybe similar but not the same, places. Likewise women are in different places [in terms of occupation, class, and identity].

Whether I am in a field or an office, what I do there, my niche is at least partially determined by the interconnection of societal environmental factors. (147)

Markandaya is a prominent woman writer and her novels include the element of subjugation that originates from the exploitation due to poverty, caste system and the conflict among values of the people of the East and the West. She has trenchantly presented the issues of women in relation to the environment in her marvelous work *Nectar in a Sieve*. The manner in which women are sidelined in a male dominated society has been illustrated by her. She identifies nature with the body of a woman and guides the readers to believe that nature, in the same way as woman, is marauded by societies governed by male oriented ideology. In such societies, nature and women, both are treated in an inferior way contrasting the fact that both have an ability to give birth and nourish. This mistreatment has made women conscious of the callousness of the male dominated world towards nature. So, women have come together against this exploitation of nature from time to time as they can relate to nature's agony. This phenomenon is more prevalent in rural and underdeveloped regions where agriculture is the main occupation and misuse of forest-land for farming is a rampant.

Kamala Markandaya manages exceptionally well to deal with the problems of nature and women, particularly from the working class. Rukmani, the protagonist, Ira, the daughter of Rukmani and the environment in which they live, all have been shown as victims of the patriarchal system, zamindari and imminent industrialization. Rukmani works as a labourer in a garden and is truly devoted to her work which suggests her deep connection with the nature. Her happiness increases when she observes the fields flourishing. The connection becomes more prominent when she asserts, "our freedom to work in the forest and to farm is very important" (Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* 241). Despite her hard work, the labour performed by her at home is not given any importance at all. The story is framed around the different phases of Rukmani's life, her discovery of herself and her mental situation at those different stages. These include marriage at the age of 12, her being a wife and then a mother. Through all these stages, her connection with the land is emphasized that reiterates the ecofeminist analysis. These bonds include spiritual as well as physical elements. The title of the novel has been extracted from Coleridge and appears in the epigraph: "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, and hope without an object cannot live" (qtd. in Iyengar 438).

The above couplet is aptly used by Kamala Markandaya as these lines perfectly express the essence of the novel. If efforts made by a person yield no results, it becomes as fruitless as attempting to contain *Nectar in a Sieve*. The same applies to life, if there is no objective then life also becomes fruitless. The author has shown that for a farmer, agrarian work is his life. He has no other goal or hope and if he is alienated from his work due to any reason then he ultimately suffers from hunger, poverty and even death. The novelist compares the short term happiness of the farmer to *Nectar in a Sieve*. According to M.K. Bhatnagar 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. (Bhatnagar 3)

This novel highlights the difficulties faced by the Indian people due to changes in policies related to land, rehabilitation, labour, industrialization and so on. The plot is initiated with the marriage of young Rukmani to Nathan who is a tenant peasant. Rukmani's three elder sisters have been married in wealthy families which gave the villagers an issue to gossip. Rukmani's father is a headman of the village who once had authority over village matters but due to the change in rule, his stature was greatly diminished which forced him to initiate this mismatched alliance. This becomes clear by the words of Rukmani's elder brother: "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" (Markandaya, *NIS* 4). These words are rather hard for Rukmani to endure: "It was as though a prop on which I inclined had been generally kicked away" (Markandaya, *NIS* 4). Markandaya in this way deliberately inflects the peace of Rukmani's initial life with qualms that anticipate the forthcoming unpleasant moments. Throughout the novel, the author succeeds in hinging the reader on a hope that there are chances of improvement in the situation. Clues like the able physique of Nathan that promises higher work output make the readers optimistic till the end. In an incident, Nathan, at his village that is far flung from Rukmani's home, is desirous of proving himself. He promises Rukmani holding grain in his hands: "With such harvests as this, you shall not want for anything" (Markandaya, *NIS* 6). Even if the readers assume that everything will be fine soon, Markandaya has interwoven the element of suspicion that things can go awry any moment and the novel keeps dangling between hope and sadness.

The farm, on which Nathan works, soon become the second home for Rukmani and she starts enjoying tending the farm. Susheela Rao finds Rukmani's unique association with nature in her "heightened awareness of nature's beauty" (42). Rao gives accounts of numerous sections of the novel in which Rukmani is aware of the cycles of the seasons and remarks on the tasteful and climatic excellence of the scene. There are many instances that substantiate her bonding with nature. If considered carefully, it can be said that her work in the garden helps her to bond with the earth in a physical way. In her life, the garden holds a high place. Having got married at the age of twelve Rukmani is immature and her physical, mental and emotional growth goes along with her work in the garden and the growth of vegetables. She recalls:

"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" (Markandaya, *NIS* 13).

Her first plantation in the garden is a pumpkin and she is greatly influenced by it. The growth of pumpkins gives an unmatched 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 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. (Markandaya, *NIS* 10)

Beth Zeleny points out, “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 22).

The incident of the establishment of tannery in the novel also helps the reader to identify the bonding of Rukmani and nature. She is unhappy due to the setting up of the tannery because according to her the tannery is placed on the empty stretch of land that is a common land and she sees its presence as an encroachment of a resource that belongs to the village. She recollects, “They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the *maidan* where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us” (Markandaya, *NIS* 4). In the above mentioned passage, Markandaya depicts that the practice of privatization of land is a common scene in colonization. Shiva and Mies indicate that privatization of land that belongs to the community is one of the major traits of neocolonialism by asserting that, colonialism and capitalism transformed the land and soil from being a source of life and a commons from which people draw sustenance, into private property to be bought and sold and conquered; development continued colonialism’s unfinished task. (105)

Industrialization changes the perspective of people who under its influence see land and bodies as mere commodities. Due to the establishment of the tannery on the public land, strangers start visiting the village which makes Rukmani worried and she takes special attention of her young daughter Ira in order to avoid any mischance. In fact, the tannery causes “the end of [her] little girl's cheerful days She had been utilized to travel every which way with her siblings, and they went whither they wished” (Markandaya, *NIS* 29-30). It was not only Ira whose freedom is taken away by the tannery, even the animals started keeping themselves away from the village. Rukmani recalls that:

there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close. (Markandaya, *NIS* 69)

The discussion of tannery, that changes the dead bodies of animals into leather, is important because it is not only shown to cause disturbance to wild animals, it is considered as a killing machine by Rukmani:

Not a month went by but somebody’s land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in— thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins — and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities — or that so many animals existed — but so it was, incredibly. (Markandaya, *NIS* 47)

Hence, the above analysis depicts Rukmani’s profound apprehension and love for land, natural environment and for the indigenous customs. There is such a sturdy alliance that Rukmani creates with nature that no one can break it- neither in the rural nor in the urban phase of her

journey. Despite the immense adversities that she struggles against, at both the village and the city, she emerges out as a sole companion of nature.

Nevertheless, women still do not have the full right to inherit land, and in some cultures it is forbidden for women to own land. Some traditional belief systems are a major barrier to women's full participation as farmers. Nevertheless, high yields are achieved even though they have little access to land or credit. These high yields are often due to women bringing their indigenous knowledge to the field. If women are able to produce 60 to 80% of the world's food without having the right to own or inherit land, imagine how many more women will be able to multiply their production capacity to feed nations if they are given full access to land ownership.

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