

## **Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Women and Land in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will analyse Kamala Markandaya's novel, Nectar in a Sieve, through the framework of a materialist postcolonial ecofeminism. I will argue that the female protagonist Rukmani's identity crisis is resolved through her ambivalence towards nature and spaces. It is indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that she engages in to survive materially and triumph. Rukmani's crisis of identity is mediated through the land—metaphorically and literally—in the novel.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial ecofeminism, Women, Land, Nature, Ambivalence, Tradition, Modernity

*Why is it that the dispossession and eviction of millions of women from land which they owned and worked is not seen as a feminist problem?—Arundhati Roy, "Capitalism: A Ghost Story" (webservice).*

### **1. Introduction**

Postcolonial ecofeminism is a relatively new concept which is still at a nascent stage. The related fields of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism have been dominated by a typically Euro-American point of view till date, and both fields do not address the issue of postcolonial ecofeminism adequately, where both fields need to recognize "the "double-bind" of being female and being colonized" (Campbell, 2008). A postcolonial ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It then becomes necessary to disrupt the nature/culture dualism that aligns women "naturally" to nature. Disrupting the dualism would posit the women in an ambivalent relationship with nature and their immediate environment, whether rural or urban. Women then are not just simplistically and neatly aligned with nature or shown to be opposed to urban and technological development. They straddle the grey area between the two binaries. Much of the ecofeminist theory and accounts of women-led activism do not allow such an ambivalence to emerge. Women writing Indian fiction in English highlight this ambivalent relationship that women have with the environment, thus providing an important counterpoint to both theory and accounts of activism. Through this, they enable a re-imagining of women's spatial boundaries at the same time. In this paper, I will analyse and discuss Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). I attempt to show that the novels, the female protagonist's identity crises are resolved through the ambivalence towards nature and spaces—rural and urban environment, human nature and social customs—all of which are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that the women engage in to survive materially and triumph. The crises of identity of the women are mediated through the land—metaphorically and literally—in both the novels.

The land as a physical and geographical entity features predominantly in the lives of the women in the novel and the decisions they make regarding staying or leaving the land, or their land accepting or rejecting them as citizens. Secondly, the novel deals with the tensions between the idyllic village life and the encroachment of industrialization on the land as well as its occupants. Markandaya, in dealing with these tensions, has successfully teased out and critically presented, through her female characters, other related social problems that are intertwined with the issues of land ownership and the gendered dimensions of globalization and capitalism.

## 2. Kamala Markandaya and *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)

*Nectar in a Sieve*, published in 1954, is the first novel written by Kamala Markandaya<sup>1</sup>. She started writing novels just after India's independence from the British Raj in the year 1947. *Nectar in a Sieve*, influenced by this event, portrays some of the problems encountered by the Indian people as they dealt with the changing times. The socio-economic and political milieu of that era is characterized by “[p]overty, hunger and starvation...due to communal and [political] disturbances” (Bhatnagar, 1995). She presents the impact of industrialisation “from the points of view of the peasants, members of the lower middle-class in the city, the tribal and other common people. ...[and] the economic threat of starvation which forces people to accept working conditions which they otherwise would not accept” (Rao and Menon, 1997). Markandaya then uses fiction as her vehicle and medium to communicate her vision of life during the uncertain political climate which forms the basis of the setting in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

Markandaya's novels, including *Nectar in a Sieve*, are broadly termed by critics as being realist in genre. They aim to “create the impression of authenticity and objectivity in their portrayal of particular social environments” (Jackson, 2010). The narrative techniques that Markandaya uses in her novels are geared towards exposing social injustice in India (Jackson, 2010), thus the use of the more specific term ‘social realism’ by a number of critics to describe Markandaya's novels. According to A.V Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon, social realism is defined as the “awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence lives of men and women for better or for worse—and the overall interaction of the individual and society” (Rao and Menon, 1997). Within this genre of social realism, Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* is posited as an Indian peasant everywoman because Markandaya never mentions a specific time or place<sup>2</sup> in the novel which gives the story a semblance of universality. It is mainly through Rukmani's story that Markandaya explores social concerns about “economic hardship in India and the impact of industrialisation [and of nature] on the lives of the rural peasantry” (Jackson, 2010). Indira Ganesan remarks in the introduction to the novel that “[b]y giving voice to Rukmani, Markandaya gives us a woman who affects us deeply through not only the burden of rural life, but also the burden of being a woman” (Ganesan, 2002).

Rukmani's story is presented in a linear chronological narrative, narrated in the first person by Rukmani herself as an elderly peasant woman, as she reminisces about her life so far. The novel starts with a nostalgic reminiscence in the first paragraph. By the fifth paragraph in the novel, the reader is taken back in time to her childhood and it is from then on that the narrative moves forward in a straight chronological order, ultimately ending at the point where it began.

Within this linear chronological narrative, the narrative of female self-discovery within the Indian context unfolds. According to Elizabeth Jackson, the female self-discovery narrative “tends to centre around a married woman, usually a mother, re-assessing her life and her relationships” (Jackson, 2010). It is in this narrativisation of female self-discovery that the concept of identity, specifically the questions and crises of Rukmani's identity, is brought to the fore. Jasbir Jain elucidates that identity or selfhood “has to work through the body” (quoted in Jackson, 2010). In light of this quote, in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rukmani's early identity as child-bride, wife, a young woman and mother echoes cultural ecofeminism's claims that her closeness with the land is intimately linked to her body and spirituality. However, Rukmani's identity is mediated through *both* her labour and love of the land. Her interaction with the land integrates both production and reproduction, thereby giving it a materialist dimension. This is especially seen through experience of an identity crisis when she is evicted from her land thus making her neither of the land nor of the city. Rukmani resolves this crisis of identity by ultimately refusing to be passively and fatalistically associated with the land, thereby refuting the claim that as a third-world peasant woman she is best suited for the care of the land. This then problematizes her relationship with nature. The resolution of her identity crisis is mediated through her interactions with the British doctor Kennington (or Kenny).

<sup>1</sup>Kamala Markandaya was the only female writer in a group of mid-century Indians (writers writing fiction in the immediate aftermath of India's independence) writing in English, a group that included Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Khushwant Singh. Despite her success, Markandaya remained an intensely private writer who revealed little about her personal influences even up until her death in the year 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret P. Joseph does mention in her book (*Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1980.) that Markandaya's choice of nouns in the novel indicates that perhaps the setting could be anywhere in South India (Jackson, 149). However, the exact location (village, town), time and year are never alluded to in the novel.

It is also important to analyse the relationship of the other women in the novel with nature. Rukmani only presents one aspect of the broader woman-land-nature equation.

## 2.1 Gardening

Although the novel predates the emergence of (cultural) ecofeminism as an institutionalized theoretical field, several critics who have written about *Nectar in a Sieve* view Rukmani's connection with the land and nature through the prism of cultural ecofeminism. For example, Rukmani says that

[w]hen the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? (Markandaya, 2002)

This oft-quoted passage from the novel is seen to romanticize the relationship that Rukmani has with her land and to nature. The quote highlights that for a peasant woman, happiness consists of bare necessities at the elemental level made up largely of food, clothes, shelter and the idyllic beauty of the countryside (Srivastava, 1998). Nature, the sun and the beauty of the green fields appear as Rukmani's source of well-being. Two other themes emerge from the quote above: the symbolism of grains/seeds and women's sexuality.

Grains and seeds represent the overriding symbol for life itself in *Nectar in a Sieve*. When Rukmani tends to her garden and plans pumpkin seeds, she marvels at the life concealed within each of the seeds she sows, thinking that

their growth to me was constant wonder—from the time the seed split and the first green shoots broke through, to the time when the young buds and fruit began to form. ...it seemed to me 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 for safekeeping, fragile, vanishing with the first touch or sight. With each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous. (Markandaya, 2002)

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). Here, the biological role of procreation (reproduction) is intimately linked to Rukmani, land and seeds. Procreation is seen to be a critical role for a woman in Rukmani's society. A woman who fails to conceive early in her marriage may be renounced by her husband, as Ira is later on in the novel. Here, the claim that women are closer to nature rests on the premise of women bringing forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures and pains of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing. In a social sense, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept women close to the hearth and thus closer to nature. Cultural ecofeminists celebrate the relationship between women and nature by reviving ancient pre-patriarchal rituals centred on goddess worship, the moon and linking this to the female reproductive system.

Rukmani's work in her garden is closely associated with her coming-of-age, and thus linked to her awareness of sexuality. Rukmani finds that "[t]he sowing of the seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit" (Markandaya, 2002), linking her with the land through her body and labour. When the pumpkins started to form, Rukmani describes them as such:

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, and made much of this one fruit—he who was used to harvesting a field at a time.

"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, 2002, my emphasis)

According to Dana C. Mount, Rukmani's "first planting of pumpkins is a particularly moving process for her...[and] what is most striking is not the mere satisfaction or pride she feels, but the *pleasure* that the growth provokes in her" (Mount, 2011, original emphasis). Markandaya's book is remarkable for its time precisely because of the frank overtones of sexuality attributed to Rukmani. Later on in the novel, after celebrating the Diwali festival, Rukmani recalls her "senses opening like a flower to [Nathan's] urgency (Markandaya, 2002), a description of Rukmani's sexual desire which echoes her earlier description of the seedling "that unfurled its small green leaf to [her] eager gaze, [and her] excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous" (Markandaya, 2002). The text here uses nature as a metaphor to describe Rukmani's sexual maturation as well as sexual desire. By overtly linking Rukmani's body to the land, the text here hearkens back to cultural ecofeminism's naturalization of woman's pleasure and connectedness to the earth.

At this point, however, it becomes important to move away from the images of a romanticized and naturalized image of the third-world peasant woman reflected in the character of Rukmani. Although Rukmani is initially projected to be unproblematically linked to the land, Markandaya subtly interweaves a larger socio-political critique that characterises the postcolonial environment within the few descriptive paragraphs discussed above.

Rukmani reminisces that she was "young and fanciful" (Markandaya, 2002) when she used to tend to her garden. Before that, when recounting her early days of marriage, she recalls that she preferred going to her husband "matured in mind as well as in body, not as a pained and awkward child as I did on that first night" (Markandaya, 2002). It is revealed to the readers early on that Rukmani gets married to Nathan at the tender age of twelve. Markandaya, in alluding to these details, deftly interweaves a critique of child marriage and dowry into her narrative. Rukmani gets married to a landless and poor farmer because "four dowries is too much for a man to bear" (Markandaya, 2002). Rukmani's father is no longer of consequence as a headman of the village, where the power structure is now bequeathed to the collector due to the centralization of the government, an indication that Rukmani and her village are caught between "the residual power of the ancient world and newly acquired world which has yet to achieve full shape" (Sinha, 1998). A similar situation prevails when Rukmani's daughter, Ira, gets married at the age of fourteen and Rukmani and Nathan have to arrange for dowry to secure Ira's alliance. Markandaya's covert social critique of child marriage and the dowry system can be viewed through a critical lens intending to show how tradition combined with poverty oppress women more than men (Jackson, 2010).

Markandaya also raises the issue of literacy for girls in India in the uncertain political climate after independence through Rukmani. Rukmani's father taught her to read and write, a practice that her mother strictly opposes: "what use", my mother said, "that a girl should be learned!" (Markandaya, 2002). She teaches her children in future to read and write as well, and says of Nathan that "it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was, for Nathan could not even write his name; yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure, *as lesser men might have done*" (Markandaya, 2002, my emphasis), indicating that an educated wife was generally frowned upon in a society that values women for giving birth to "lusty sons and [having] a husband to look after" (Markandaya, 2002). The intentions of Markandaya's critique become clear later on as the novel progresses when she shows that illiteracy makes people believe in superstitions, thus making them gullible and credulous, and therefore susceptible to exploitation.

However, despite Rukmani being a learned woman, she is not free from the prejudice against her girl-child. Her first reaction at the sight of her daughter is "I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?" (Markandaya, 2002). Such a reaction is elucidated by Ramesh Chadha by contextualising it within the traditional Hindu society and religion:

The birth of a daughter in India is not considered an occasion for rejoicing. A son could have continued Nathan's vocation whereas the daughter would take dowry and leave only a memory behind. This attitude arises partly out of the rigours of the dowry system (Rukmani herself had suffered from it) and partly due to the traditional view that a son is his father's prop. This view is also supported by religion: A son is the saviour of the ancestors as he alone has the right to offer oblations. (Chadha, 1988)

Rukmani's daughter, and later on Rukmani's sons, are intrinsically linked to the land. While Nathan had "wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land" (Markandaya, 2002), his sons, capable and healthy, prove to be of little use to him and Rukmani. Rukmani's sons Arjun and Thambi leave their paternal profession of tilling the land for better financial prospects and start working at the tannery and eventually they leave the country for good; Murugan leaves the land and goes to the city to work as a servant; Raja is killed by the tannery officials when he is caught stealing a calf-skin. Their rationale for not tilling the land is explained by Thambi to Nathan that "if it were your land, or mine, I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return? Far better to turn away from such injustice" (Markandaya, 2002). Markandaya carefully merges the land and sons together to show that both Rukmani and Nathan had hoped too much from them—too much from the land and too much from their sons—and both disappoint them bitterly. Nathan and Rukmani are still unable to lead a happy life even after they have begotten sons. Ironically, it is Ira, the daughter who begets disappointment at her birth, who comes to her parents and family's aid. Irawaddy—the significance of her name is even more pronounced here as she is named after the river Irawaddy—becomes Rukmani's sustenance once when the family is starving, and again at the end of the novel when Rukmani is left husbandless and landless.

Hence, we see that although Rukmani alters the landscape through her gardening in beneficial ways and is positively linked to the land and her immediate environment, this romanticized view is given another angle and shade of ambivalence. Through Rukmani, a critique of the social and cultural "landscape" of the day is also offered to the readers. A further dimension of this is taken up in the novel through Rukmani's relationship with the tannery.

## 2.2 Tannery

The arrival of the tannery in Rukmani's village marks a period of transition for her as well as in the lives of many of the other villagers. It is a nod towards industrialisation and urbanisation. With the introduction of the tannery, "the novel also highlights the clash between the Gandhian and Nehruvian models of development that India has to choose from" (Chadha, 1998), where India's new prime minister in the 1950's, Jawaharlal Nehru, believed strongly in economic planning. Gandhi's beliefs about a violent and repressive urbanised and industrialised society that destroyed human souls and the beauty of nature were slowly becoming outmoded.

Rukmani is shown throughout the novel to be strongly opposed to the construction of the tannery and everything that it stands for. In a sombre mood, Rukmani says that "[s]omehow I had always felt that the tannery would eventually be our undoing" (Markandaya, 2002), and we see Rukmani's foreboding to be true to a certain extent.

The first immediate effect of the tannery is felt on the natural environment of the village. Rukmani describes that "the birds have forgotten to sing...[and ultimately the] birds came no more, for the tannery lay close" (Markandaya, 2002), and that the "slow, calm beauty of [the] village [had wilted] in the blast from town" (Markandaya, 2002). Here, it becomes easy to read Rukmani's sentimentalized laments against the destruction of nature in light of Vandana Shiva's pronouncements of maldevelopment. Shiva expresses a particularly negative and anti-developmental view of the application of scientific technology from the West (in this context, it is the building of the tannery in the rural village in India) and the resultant exploitation of nature and its processes. In advocating the concept of *Prakriti*, which is defined as "the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of *Prakriti*—the source of all life" (Shiva, 1989), Shiva "sees the promise of ecological stewardship in the daily practices of women like Rukmani" (Mount, 2011), and extends this to the potential of rural women in the Third World or the global South to act as caretakers of the land. Such a stance, apart from being essentialist in nature, also ignores the women's "connection to the sexual division of labour and the patriarchal ideologies that legitimize these relations" (Nanda, 1997). Rukmani's work, in her garden, on the farm and at home, is unpaid labour and "without independent rights of ownership of land, access to credit and new technologies, and equal, legally enforced wages for their labour, peasant women in the Third World face a bleak future" (Nanda, 1997). Rural peasant women's work, such as Rukmani's, is invisibilised economically and socially, when they are rendered one with nature. They are then seen as not making a valuable contribution to the state and economy.

Furthermore, a complete denial of modernisation and industrialisation (in the form of the tannery in the novel) ignores the enthusiastic and welcoming responses of some of the rural Third World women, for example that of Kunthi, Janaki and Kali.

These women's responses stand in direct contrast to the notion of being one with nature and the land. Kunthi declares to Rukmani that she is not a "senseless peasant [woman and] there is no earth in [her] breeding" (Markandaya, 2002). Kunthi is excited about the change in the form of "shops and tea stalls, and even a bioscope" (Markandaya, 2002) that will come in the village with the tannery. Janaki welcomes the tannery as a source of employment for her sons "for the land could not take them all" (Markandaya, 2002), such a response despite the fact that her husband's shop has been forced to close down due to the high shop rent that they cannot afford to pay. Kali "had always been fond of an audience for her stories" (Markandaya, 2002), and these three women, representative of the rural women in general who are eager to benefit from the changes that progress and modernization bring with them, "threw the past away with both hands that they might be readier to grasp the present" (Markandaya, 2002).

The responses of these women highlights the potential of development and capitalist tendency to have a productive transformation "which can lift the mass of labourers and peasants out of the morass of economic deprivation and *social degradation*" (Patnaik, 2001, my emphasis) of hunger and poverty. Kali's response later on in the novel elucidates this point clearly. The setting up of the tannery brings with it officials from different races and classes, such as the Muslims. The class privilege of the Muslim women is seen in the "jewelled rings" (Markandaya, 2002) they wear, "any of which could have fed the [peasants] for a year" (Markandaya, 2002). Kali says of the Muslim women that "[i]t is an easy life, with no worry of the next meal and plenty always at hand. I would gladly wear a bourka and walk veiled for the rest of my life if *I, too, could be sure of such things*." (Markandaya, 2002, my emphasis), indicating her yearning for security of food and to be free from the degradation of hunger. Rukmani and Kali's exchange here about the Muslim women illuminates that no one should have to endure the brutalising effects of extreme poverty such that people are constantly worrying about not having enough to eat.

The second negative effect of the establishment of the tannery in the village that is felt by Rukmani is that the prices of goods in the local marketplace rise substantially, increasing the gaps between different classes of people—the landowners, moneylenders and the peasants. Moneylenders such as Biswas seize greater control of the trade of buying and selling vegetables and other goods from the peasants, and although Rukmani does eventually sell her goods to him instead of Old Granny, she gains little in return. As Rukmani points out, "we no longer had milk in the house...curds and butter were beyond our means except for rare occasions...[and] no sugar or dhal or ghee have we tasted since they came" (Markandaya, 2002). The inflation of the bazaar prices exacerbates the condition of poverty and hunger for people such as Rukmani, and other related social evils start taking root. The tannery is linked to the commodification of women's bodies as it gives rise to activities such as prostitution. Ira's movements as a child have to be restricted, depriving her of the free space of the playground where the bazaar had been raised, and ultimately she resorts to prostitution to feed her family and to save her brother Kutti from dying of starvation. Ira's decision to take up prostitution stems from the changes happening "under the impact of modernity and industrialism [where] she thinks the preservation of life more pious than the observations of so-called moral values which fail to feed her family" (Razia, webservice). According to M.K Bhatnagar, Ira's decision to take up prostitution is, in a way, "a bold rejection of the innate institution of marriage" (Bhatnagar, 1995). Ira's motivation to do so is contrasted against Kunthi's, whose motivation to take up prostitution is based on selfish interests, thus highlighting the inculcation of individualism that comes along with the erosion of "the time honoured peasant-code...with no substitute" (Chadha, 1988).

The tannery does, however, open up new opportunities for alternative employment and occupation. While Nathan and Rukmani do not find it honourable that their sons, Arjun and Thambi, are working in the tannery, the family income is augmented by their sons' income. Rukmani herself is forced to come to terms with the fact that

With their money we began once again to live well. In the granary, unused for so long, I stored away half a bag of rice, two measures of dhal and nearly a pound of chillies. Hitherto, almost all we grew had been sold to pay rent of the land; now we were enabled to keep some of our produce. (Markandaya, 2002)

Similarly, Janaki's sons are employed in the tannery and she is shown to be faring much better than Rukmani as the novel progresses. Therefore, while it is shown in the novel that industrialization is not without its evils, it still presents some form of upliftment of the rural poor.

Rukmani and Nathan are ultimately shown to be victims of two major forces, the landowners or the *zamindari* system, and the vagaries of nature. Rukmani and Nathan are landless peasants, and with the establishment of the tannery, the landowner Sivaji sells the land that Rukmani and Nathan till to the tannery owners. Pravati Misra remarks that

The landlord in the erstwhile zamindari system was a rich person who was wealthy at the cost of the poor farmers and workers who were deprived of the basic needs of living. The archetype of the landlord suggests exploitation of the poor by a wealthy villager who enjoys social power. (Misra, 2001)

With economic development, most of the economic benefits went mostly to the large landowners and the elite upper class, as seen in the figures of the landowner Sivaji and the moneylender Biswas in the novel. Rukmani, in a moving passage, tries to make sense of the loss of her land:

Tannery or not, the land might have been taken from us. It had never belonged to us, we had never prospered to the extent where we could buy, and Nathan, himself the son of a landless man, had inherited nothing. ...The hut with all its memories was to be taken from us, for it stood on land that belonged to another. And the land itself by which we lived. It is a cruel thing, I thought. They do not know what they do to us. (Markandaya, 2002)

It is here that Rukmani's crisis of identity fully takes place when her land is taken away from her and she is forced to leave her home with Nathan. According to Nitya Rao, "land is a key element in the identities of indigenous people. Many of their struggles for recognition begin with land, which takes multiple meanings" (Rao, 2008). The act of rejection that the land brings for Rukmani results in what Stephen Chan calls the "condition of abjection" (quoted in Graham, 2009). Chan defines this condition of abjection as "psychosocial as well as physical displacement: the alienation—the *expulsion*, even—of individuals and families from what constitutes *home* for them. Often this idea of home bears a direct relation to 'the land'" (Graham, 2009, original emphasis). For Rukmani, there is some chance of her retaining her identity while she had her land, encapsulated by the quote "while there was land there was hope" (Markandaya, 132). For rural peasant women such as Rukmani, the land offers the most opportunity for self-sufficiency although it does not absolutely guarantee it (Mount, 2011). As Bina Agarwal elucidates, "[f]or many, [land] provides a sense of identity and rootedness. It is an asset that has a permanence that few other assets possess...their families alone could not guarantee them economic security. What they needed were fields of their own" (Agarwal, 2002). This point by Agarwal retains its poignancy most when Rukmani becomes husbandless (Nathan dies in the city) and she has no form of food or economic security. The implication of this is that if women are in-charge of the means of production through owning the land, it represents the opportunity for self-determination which is intrinsically tied to one's notion of identity. For Rukmani now, in the condition of abjection through her displacement/rejection from her land and home, there is no such hope. Such a situation finds its culmination in the figure of Old Granny, who dies penniless and a destitute on the streets in the village.

It is here then that the text is shown to strongly "resist the pastoral" (Mount, 2011). The expulsion of Rukmani from the land, or the land rejecting her, and her resultant identity crisis brings her and the readers face-to-face with another reality, that "the calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather" (Markandaya, 2002). The text exposes the destructive and dark capacity of nature itself, bringing to light the downsides of country life. The tannery, emblematic of development and capitalism, is not to be solely blamed for Rukmani's crisis. Markandaya, as a writer, aestheticizes even the unpalatable storms and droughts to reveal the constructedness of nature in her novel, and defying the idea that "the rural countryside is a place of refuge" (Mount, 2011). The indifference of nature is shown when six men were killed by lightning when the village floods due to a ravaging storm in the beginning of the novel and when Kuti dies due to starvation from a drought "with a bland indifference that mocked [Rukmani's] loss" (Markandaya, 2002). Such an exposition of nature, coupled with overlordism, politicizes the postcolonial environment to bring forth the material reality of living on the land: it makes visible the hitherto invisibilised wretchedness of poverty and the working conditions of women like Rukmani who have no food or land security, and *yet* are romantically linked to the land by appropriating their care-work.

Therefore, while the environment “cannot be treated without attention to violence, warfare, government corruption, and transnational greed” (D. Murphy, quoted in Mount, 2011), the woman-land-nature equation is nonetheless troubled and shown to be thrown into question when the land itself rejects Rukmani and nature is shown to be merciless and indifferent to her needs. It is significant that after the storm and the drought, when everything is destroyed, the lasting image is that of the tannery: “the tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds” (Markandaya, 2002). Markandaya’s exhortation for development is seen here, in the bricks and cement that can withstand the natural calamities better than the peasants’ thatched huts and mud walls, and provide better lives for the peasants so that they can at least overcome some of the debasements they are subjected to in their daily lives.

Rukmani resolves her crisis of identity through negotiating the traditional and modern aspects of her life. This is seen through her interactions with the British doctor, Kenny.

### **2.3 Negotiating tradition and modernity: Rukmani and Dr. Kenny**

Several critics focus on Rukmani’s character as a typical Indian woman who is an upholder of Indian tradition and values, and her ability to withstand so much suffering has earned her the title of a “Mother of Sorrows” (Srivastava, 1998). Rukmani also shows a keen dislike and mistrust of the rapid changes happening around her due to the onslaught of industrialisation and capitalism. However, her initial conservatism changes to negotiation through her conversations with Dr. Kenny, who represents “progressive enlightenment [and] the need for constructive programmes for rural reform and social service” (Chadha, 1988). This is aptly encapsulated by Nathan’s philosophy to “[b]end like the grass, that you do not break” (Markandaya, 2002).

When Rukmani is unable to bear sons—an indication of her infertility—she “placed even more faith in the charm [her] mother had given [her], wearing it constantly between [her] breasts” (Markandaya, 2002). When her superstitions fail to yield any result—“nothing happened” (Markandaya, 2002)—Rukmani seeks out Dr. Kenny for treatment for her infertility. She does the same for her daughter Ira. Rukmani, however, does not tell her husband Nathan about her (and her daughter’s) treatment from the British doctor. By concealing this bit of information from her husband, Rukmani is shown to “[exploit] gaps in the system; she is subverting what she understands to be the limiting patriarchal control over her life by taking charge of her body in accessing the medical services she needs to create the family she wants” (Mount, 2011). Furthermore, it is also a way of undermining and standing up to Kenny’s perception of her as an “ignorant fool” (Markandaya, 2002).

However, Rukmani goes back to her superstitious ways of living and suffers calamity after calamity with passive endurance. During the drought, Rukmani “took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to [her] Goddess, and [she] wept at her feet...but no rain came” (Markandaya, 2002). When her son Raja dies at the hands of the tannery officials, she meekly says that she understands. When Kenny exhorts her to “demand—cry out for help—do something” (Markandaya, 2002) and that “people will never learn” (Markandaya, 2002), Rukmani still does not understand and still does not learn. This refrain is repeated by her son Arjun when he and Thambi join the strike for higher wages at the tannery. Rukmani’s nostalgia for the land does not let her understand that the “social structures of industrial production within which they function can be stifling and exploitative to the social structure of the agrarian production within which [Nathan and Rukmani] function” (Bhatnagar, 1995). The younger generation resists this exploitation, but Rukmani still has to negotiate between the structures of blind tradition and the progressivism of Kenny. When Ira starts earning money from prostitution and Kuti’s health shows some improvement in the initial stages, Rukmani’s path to negotiation starts here when the realisation dawns on her that it was Ira’s earnings that had been “responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not I, not my prayers” (Markandaya, 2002). Rukmani sharpens her social critique and starts becoming a more assertive person through her debate with Kenny about his personal life: “she grows from a dumbstruck child-wife terrified at putting herself in the hands of a foreigner, to the assertive woman whose native instincts and intelligence excite Kenny’s admiration” (Barbato, 1991).

However, it is important to note here that Markandaya is not opposing tradition completely and neither is she showing the success of Western modernity to be superior. The negotiation does not happen in an unambiguous manner, for example, although Dr. Kenny manages to cure Ira’s fertility, it comes too late to restore Ira back to her husband and the child is born an albino.



The turning point for Rukmani comes when she is displaced from her land and leaves for the city with Nathan. Prior to the eviction, Kenny chastises Rukmani: “Do you never”, he said, “think of your future? While you still have your strength and can *plan*?” (Markandaya, 2002, my emphasis). Rukmani replies that they are in God’s hands and have no means to plan. However, Kenny’s advice about planning takes on a new resonance for Rukmani when the land itself rejects her and she has nowhere to go: “decide what we are to do for ourselves, *plan* as Kenny said for ourselves and our children. This present chaos is madness” (Markandaya, 2002, my emphasis). Rukmani demonstrates her negotiation with modernity by implementing Kenny’s advice about planning in her city life.

The city initially disorients both Rukmani and Nathan. Rukmani feels sick and “dizzy” (Markandaya, 2002) during her onward journey to the city, and once they reach the outskirts, they lose all sense of direction while trying to find Murugan’s house. Once in the city, they are forced to compete with an exodus of rural immigrants who have moved to the city due to the changes in the agricultural economy. Rukmani’s final act of going back to her land is usually attributed to the alienation, moral degradation and uprootedness she feels in the city. However, it is my contention that the village and the city are not very different from each other under the circumstances of industrialisation and modernisation. In the temple where Rukmani and Nathan seek shelter and food, we see the atmosphere there similar to the one characterised in the village: that of hunger and fear. Rukmani has to ferociously compete with other homeless people for her share of food. Rukmani’s belongings are stolen in the temple and she feels herself to be a victim of theft and deceit in God’s house. However, a similar situation prevailed in the village when Nathan betrays her by having an extramarital affair with Kunthi and having an offspring with her, and Kunthi steals rice from Rukmani’s granary. If Rukmani feels no sense of kinship and community in the city, her own kin and community have also dispersed from the village, leaving her on her own. Therefore, just as the land (village) rejects Rukmani, the city also rejects her in a similar fashion. Rukmani’s “condition of abjection” (Chan, quoted in Graham, 2009) reaches its peak here where Rukmani is characterised as being in a “country with land but no habitat” (Graham, 2009). Rukmani herself is aware of this reality: “we had left because we had nothing to live on, and if we went back it was only because there was nothing here either” (Markandaya, 2002).

According to James Graham, “the rural peoples...are always already left behind in colonial modernity that speeds [them] into the future” (Graham, 2009), and this seems to be the initial critique Markandaya offers us of development and modernity. However, Rukmani’s new-found ability to assess her experiences and to negotiate both the forces of tradition and modernity through the exercise of planning for the future, resists such a reading of the narrative. To earn money in order to survive on a daily basis in the city as well as to save, Rukmani’s literacy comes in handy in the city where she offers to write letters for people. Such a job, however, is riddled with gender biases and Rukmani does not fare too well in earning money by just writing letters. With the help of the street urchin Puli, who has leprosy, Rukmani and Nathan work in a quarry to break stones. The soul-killing toil in the quarry is highly dangerous and stressful because they have to be constantly alert for dynamite blast warnings. Nathan loses his hold completely when the strain proves too much for him. He “progressively deteriorates in physical and mental strength...feels quite uprooted [and] can no longer survive” (Rao and Menon, 1997). Rukmani proves to be stronger in spirit than Nathan, and even after Nathan dies a pitiful death, Rukmani still plans to return back to her land, demonstrating her new-found resilience and asserting control over the conditions of her own life.

Rukmani’s final act of adopting Puli is her way of keeping hope alive—she does not have land as hope, and neither does she have her husband by her side anymore. Puli’s adoption is also her way of reaching out to a wider community and establishing those connections that she nurtured back in her village once more. Her act acquires a larger significance because Rukmani adopts Puli with a *promise* (Barbato, 1991) of curing his leprosy in the village hospital run by Kenny and her son Selvam. The very act of promising distills in itself the actions of planning. Thus, when the novel starts with Rukmani reminiscing her life, the image is one which encapsulates both tradition and modernity: “In the distance [on the land]...a large building, spruce and white; not only has money built it but men’s hopes and pity, as I know who have seen it grow brick by brick and year by year” (Markandaya, 2002). The hospital, a symbol of modernity, is built on the village land, a symbol of tradition. Puli’s leprosy is cured in the building that is the epitome of tradition and modernity, and Rukmani’s promise finds its fulfilment.

Also, in the building of the hospital, we see the coming together of two cultures, the British (Dr. Kenny) and the Indian (Selvam) (Barbato, 13), and Markandaya seems to be pointing to the ability of the two cultures to successfully come together when they are able to incorporate the best of each other—the best of modernity (West) and the best of tradition (East).

Rukmani's resolution of her identity crisis comes in the wake of accepting the ambivalence towards nature and spaces—the rural village and the urban city, human nature and social customs—all of which are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that she engages in to survive materially and triumph. Her final act of returning to the land is testimony to the distillation and acceptance of this ambivalence in negotiating tradition and modernity: despite the fact that she has negotiated both the land and the city, and both reject her, she still chooses to come back to the land which is starting to embody both aspects itself. Her return is then an *active* choice born of a complex process of reconciling her trust in the land, spirituality and the Gods and man's ability to plan and assert control over his/her life. At this point, Rukmani refuses to be passively and fatalistically associated with the land, thereby refuting the claim that as a third-world peasant woman she is best suited for the care of the land. Thus, it resists a simplistic reading of a celebratory and romanticized return of the native who is one with the land.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has shown that in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the female protagonist's identity crises are resolved through the ambivalence towards nature and spaces—rural and urban environment, human nature and social customs. These are indicative of the postcolonial environmental condition that the characters engage in to survive materially and triumph in their decisions. The crises of identity of the women are mediated through the land in the novel.

Issues that have urgently surfaced in the novel that are still relevant today are: (1) women's seeming embeddedness in nature, (2) the violence of the postcolonial state and the new elites which displace the women from their homes and land, (3) the ways in which the text and the women ultimately resist being easily dichotomized to fit the nature/culture binary, and (4) the women's assertion of their individual decisions through the ambivalence they feel towards nature, land and the notion of development.

Questions of Third World women's labour and ownership of the land they till and work on have also figured in Markandaya's novel. The tensions between the "ontological insistence to belong" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010) and land as a "disputed object of discursive management and material control" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010) are highlighted in both the novel. The question of birth-right to the land or being entitled to it through legal laws is at the heart of the matter in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The novel thus moves away from the romanticized view of nature and land by showing the untenable conditions the women live and work in.

Linked to the above-mentioned issues of the land is the notion of development. While Markandaya's novel starts off with a seemingly anti-developmental attitude, it takes a turn towards being broadly counter-developmental (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010) or posits development ultimately as a contradictory process by the time the novel reaches its conclusion. It is also recognized by the novels that under the present set of conditions, globalization cannot help but produce uneven development and some destructive elements of such a process sometimes cannot be simply done away with completely.

The exclusion and rejection of women from the land pushes them towards the city, where the city too presents no better alternative. The question of belonging for women, whether to the land (village) or the city, or both, or to none, raises the issue of a gendered citizenship. Rukmani becomes one of the urban dispossessed in the city.

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