

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND WOMEN : A CASE STUDY OF 'NECTAR IN A SIEVE'

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ABSTRACT

Women become the prime losers and first victims when nature is ravaged by men. The reasons are not far to trace. Women have maintained and enjoy a deeper and closer association with nature and women as compared to men. This close bonding between the two has also been instrumental in safeguarding nature for a long time. The present paper undertakes a close study of Kamala Markandaya's debut novel 'Nectar in A Sieve'. It vividly highlights the detrimental impact of development, science and technology on the entire village. The ecological deprivation and turmoil which is effected by the setting up of the tannery, directly impacts people's lives. The harvest that man reaps is - poverty, economic degradation and nature's fury. The article attempts to trace how patriarchal - driven modern development is the root cause of abuse - of nature and women alike. It studies women as the guardian and perpetuators of nature because of the time-honoured relationship.

The novel affords an apt picture of the Indian farmer who is rooted in his land. Apart from the fact that it provides sustenance to them, they also share a deep emotional bond with it. The novel instills a reverence for the agrarian culture and way of life in India. Even though ecological imbalance is largely male - engendered, we have farmers like Nathan to counter that posit. Despite a courageous fight with his circumstances and the juggernaut of urbanized development, he helplessly submits to the corporatism that invades the village.

Keywords: Nature, Imbalance, Ecology, Degradation, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to highlight how women become the primary victims when nature is ravaged and abused by men. This is because there has been a deeper and closer association between women and nature as compared to men. To illustrate, I have taken up Kamala Markandaya's famous debut novel,

Nectar in a Sieve. Nature's exploitation is studied with regard to gender. The word has been used with special reference to women because we need to understand their sensitive equation with nature. The article endeavours to incorporate her perspective. The book closely examines the detrimental impact of thoughtless development, science and technology on a wide range of people - Rukmani, the protagonist, her family and the entire village. The

ecological deprivation and turmoil directly impacts people's lives. Nature is plundered for financial gains by setting up a tannery. However, the harvest that man reaps is poverty and environmental degradation. This piece of fiction closely traces how patriarchal – driven modern development is the root cause of natural exploitation and of women too. This is manifested by economic subordination, loss of natural resources and livelihood which in turn, generate poverty.

Women have been the guardians and mothers of nature because of the time honoured relation between the two. Traditionally and theoretically, our society is male dominated. This becomes the root cause of the twin exploitation of nature and women – both becoming symbols of things to be used or misused at will. Also, since women have been connected with cultivation of land since ancient times, they would always favour its protection and preservation. In a way, women stand as the unproclaimed saviours of nature. These views are also seconded by the French writer, Françoise d' Eaubonne who declares women to be the life support systems of the present and future generations. In contrast, men are born dictators who are used to ravaging both nature and women. Hence, feminism and ecology are inter-related. It also implies that a healthy and favorable relation between the genders could be translated in terms of nature too.

Carson also raises similar views saying that man and nature are two faces of the same coin. Both are complementary to each other for their survival. So, a balance between the two is most essential if both have to thrive. Mary Daly, an American feminist also highlights the dynamic connect between women and nature. The former have always been life givers. Men are inherently destructive and thus, incapable of bonding with nature. This in a way, also explains their unhealthy domination over both women and nature. On the other hand, we have Indian writers and ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva. She argues that women and nature are victimized and abused due to the current world order that hinges on development based on modern science and technology. The age old knowledge of women

about nature and their reliance on it for sustenance is replaced with modern scientific practices. This has catapulted in the uprooting of natives from their ancestral soil, both physically and culturally. Their culture has also come under attack. In the international market, it has been reduced to commodities for sale. Thus, the upsurge of the word 'ethnic' in the global industries related to food, music and so on. This mania of development is primarily driven by economic gain – the mainstay of western capitalism. This casts vicious effects on all humans in general but on women and nature, in particular. The west sees nature as a resource which has to be used to its optimum level to satisfy human wants.

This need-based attitude prevents man from extending care and love to the environment which supports and sustains all life on this planet. Women are deprived of their land, the source of their livelihood. This pushes them against the wall, engulfing them in a desperate struggle for survival. Hence, the induction of new agricultural techniques has replaced traditional farming practices, especially in developing countries like India. The ancient partnership between women and nature which was responsible for enriching the ecosystem, has almost sung its swan song. Nature has been subordinated to science which aims to further GDP and agro-produce. This development alias mal-development is the main culprit behind the dual exploitation of woman and nature. This postulation has given birth to other formulations like that of Beena Aggarwal. She talks of two determinants namely class and gender. They control distribution of power, property, even labour and thus, interaction with nature. For this reason, the poor farmers and tribals are the worst hit when nature is tampered with or destroyed. The reason is that the bond between the two is kind of inseparable.

The solution lies in transformation, in formulating alternatives – in production, technology and indigenous knowledge. This can be possible only with the help of the locals, especially women who can interact with trained agriculturists and scientists. This could help to evolve a new system where class and gender is reformulated with regard to labour

and resources. This alternative development model would work differently from the present one which is market oriented and fuelled by capitalism. To put it simply, the locals would follow their own subsistence practices and have their own production system. This would be greatly helpful in addressing the grievances of rustic women who draw sustenance from nature. Such a new development model would also generate environmental awareness on both sides – the local community as well as the intellectuals. India needs to rethink its mindless policy of liberalization and privatization if the livelihood of its villages is to be preserved.

Gnanadasan asks a poignant question: “How is this community going to survive when its intricate web of relationship with the earth is broken?” (75) In the novel under question, it is the tannery which encroaches upon agrarian land and culture. It stands at the root of exploitation of women and nature. It is again a patriarchy driven phenomenon. The setting up of the tannery in the novel can be traced to men like workers, overseers, landowners, moneylenders, shopkeepers and so on. All these classes hence, become symbols and advocates of modernization. The tannery completely undoes the idyllic life of the village, desecrating its pristine beauty and serenity. The lush flora and fauna of the village is replaced by concrete like rusted iron, bricks, dust raised by the bullocks carrying cement and other building material. The hype of progress and new jobs created by this new project generates a flutter. The villagers now start abandoning agriculture and begin working for the construction of the tannery. The other plank of the patriarchal engendered mal-development is represented by landowners or zamindars like Shivaji. He leases out his land to Rukmani and Nathan. The couple cultivate it for thirty long years but sadly, it is sold off to the tannery after this period.

Things are made worse by natural disaster in the form of a deluge which damages all the paddy. In the struggle between patriarchal and agrarian culture, the former wins, leaving the duo landless and homeless. Rukmani and her spouse represent all those peasants in India who face rough weather due to mechanization. Indifferent to the plight of the

already crushed villagers, moneylenders like Biswas and Hanumanta charge exorbitant prices from the farmers. Small businessmen are also wiped out due to the emergence of bigger shops. The pastoral land is also devoured by the upcoming colony for senior officers. The attitude of the younger generation changes as they no longer wish to pursue farming, their ancestral profession. They prefer to run after easy money which the tannery offers.

In a way, the tannery bestows a fractured identity on the younger lot. The novelist also ropes in the concept of global warming in the novel by depicting a long and unbearable period of drought which further devastates the lives of the people. “The drought continued until we lost control of the time. Day after day, the pitiless sun blazed down, scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it split and irregular fissures gaped in the land” (Markandaya 79). The tannery defaces the village beyond recognition. The loss of traditional occupation leads to hunger which drive women to prostitution. Kunthi, who is Rukmani’s neighbour and Nathan’s mistress, is an example in point. The next woman to fall prey to men’s lust is Ira, Rukmani’s daughter.

The novel also makes Rukmani a kind of symbol for the third world peasant woman. We are told about her love for animals, appreciation of the birds and their sounds, her adoption of mixed cropping and using her traditional knowledge for cultivation. For instance, she underlines the importance of the use of cow dung which acts as a major fertilizer for crops, provides fuel for the kitchen and an effective germicide when smeared in the house. In this fiction, where men are portrayed as the propellers of mal-development, on the other, they act as saviours too like women. They also nurture nature and are the primary victims when nature is victimized. Nathan represents all the Indian farmers who are the bread providers for the nation. With farmers, we can even club tribals and natives for whom farming is the only means of subsistence. From this angle, our ecological problem can be called gender neutral. If we were to take just one view of the issue, even though it is a traditional view enjoying the support of many – that ecological

balance is gender based, it would not be completely true. In fact, supporting that view solely would effect a gender bias on the issue.

Nathan is a poor peasant who works as a tenant on his landlord's fields. He is always busy tending his animals or ploughing the land. When he sees the ripe pumpkin that Rukmani had planted, he is all admiration for her. His joy, devotion and passion are embedded in the land and his crops. The picture of Nathan and Rukmani working together as comrades in the fields, is a perfect image of our farming being gender neutral. For both, the land and its produce are their children and separation from the same is death. Land for them, is not a means of monetary gain but spiritual sustenance. Nathan is able to face all hardships as long as he has land with him, even though he does not own it. However, when he learns that it has been sold to the tannery for a good price, he is not able to take the setback. It means a lot to him, losing the affinity, dependence

and intimacy with the land which he had nurtured like his baby. Hence, the root cause of environmental imbalance is not only patriarchy but bigger players like global corporatism.

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