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### Environmental Depletion in India and *Nectar in Sieve*

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#### Abstract

Kamala Markandaya wrote just after independence when new India's prime agenda was its and the country had opened its eyes to post-colonial problems where colonial treatments were carried on by the local rich. However, though, pollution was not in agenda before Independence but a close look tells us that the road to pollution had been built long ago. The authorities in their understanding of development could not envisage the later effect of clearing the precious forests. In her novels the gradual killing of the greenery at the hands of modernization can be seen. When the novel is read from the ecocritical perspective it is observed that her novel *Nectar in Sieve* has nature as one of the protagonists of the novel. It also tells us about the power of monsoon rain in making or ruining the lives of the millions. The novel was published in 1954 and not much difference can be noticed even half century later. Besides post-colonial themes her novels reflect a key fact, that is, how nature shapes the culture and how time and again people fail to realize this and fall victim to the consequences. Nature can upset the social, cultural, economic and political setting. The paper uses ecocriticism as the base for the present study.

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#### Introduction

In the process of modernization forests and agricultural lands are cleared but no steps are taken to rehabilitate the dependents. As a result, they move to town which lead to overcrowding of urban areas and most of them in lack of jobs commit crime. This also results in building of more houses in cities and which is fulfilled by cutting down the trees and this leads to increase in concrete jungles where sight of a tree is a rarity. Hence, though her characters do not debate on environmental conservation, ozone layer, pollution, carbon burning units yet they bring the focus at the very foundation, family, being shaken due to natural imbalance. She shows impact of urban modern culture on individual lives but its base is built over the dead body of nature.

#### Monsoon in India

The most important feature in meteorology of Indian subcontinent is the monsoon. It is both boon and bane for India. Its abundance leads to flood and its absence leads to drought. Flooding occurs when there is prolonged rainfall over several days, intense rainfall over a short period of time,

or an ice or debris jam which cause a river or a stream to overflow and flood the surrounding area <sup>[1]</sup>. If one goes behind the reasons for the occurrence of flood a number of causes will be found among which interference with nature is common. Some examples are deforestation, urbanization and construction of transport network. The canopy, undergrowth and the root system in forest provide some protection from floods by trapping and absorbing precipitation. When these are cut down, heavy rainfall results in rapid run-off and causes soil erosion. This soil is carried by the water to rivers where it accumulates on the river bed, raising its level. This reduces the water holding capacity of the river channel resulting in overflowing. The less water a river channel can hold, the greater the chances of a river overflowing its banks and flooding the surrounding areas. Besides this in the process of urbanization faulty planning of city is another factor of flood. Growing up houses in low lying areas easily submerge even with moderate rains. Storm water drainage systems are either absent or often not adequately developed or maintained in urban localities. In addition to this, construction of road and railways hampers drainage system <sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, urban areas

lack enough trees to hold ground water as a result it easily gets flooded when proper drainage is not there. The example of what happened at Badrinath, Uttarakhand is an example of human interference with nature. The effect of the cloud burst and landslide would have been lesser had the buildings would not have been built by cutting the river banks and hills which weakened the support at the ground and water washed off everything.

Drought on the other hand is scarcity of water, which occurs due to inadequate rains, late arrival of rains and excessive withdrawal of groundwater. It is a period of unusually dry weather which persists long enough to produce a serious hydrologic imbalance, leading to crop damage and water shortage. India faced drought in 66-67, 72-73, 79-80, 86-87, 96-97, 2001-2002 and it continues even today <sup>[3]</sup>. There are various factors which cause rainfall in India. Whether reduction in rainfall is due to deforestation, has raised a lot of discussions. Ian St. John argues that East India Company exerted a conspicuous impact upon the natural environment of India and the most tangible effect was deforestation. They replaced tree transplantation by tea gardens in Assam and Bengal hills demand for teak heavily damaged forests of Deccan Mysore bringing environmental damage in the forms of soil erosion, reduced rainfall and higher temperatures <sup>[4]</sup>. Rice is of the opinion that in India the reduction from deforestation has been compensated by the increased evaporation that irrigation promotes <sup>[5]</sup>. He, however, forgets that urban areas have no irrigation facilities and so in the absence of trees there will be less evaporation in such areas and consequently less precipitation.

In India government set a team in 1906 which found out that since monsoon currents are found out of the country so it does not depend upon forests. On the other hand, data of Veelecker report shows that on Nilgiri hills total rainy days, except in June, July and August (which were excluded because the rains during the period are not of local origin), during treeless (1870-74) were 374 while during wooded period (186-90) were 416 and it went on to 481 days during 1918-22 <sup>[6]</sup>. In Ranganathan's citation of Nicholson it is shown that Chotanagpur region before deforestation was well known for instability rain during hot summer afternoon which made the gardens flourish, but in the last half century forests have been destroyed and consequently tea plantation got destroyed because of absence of instability rain and at present there is no tree garden in Chotanagpur <sup>[7]</sup>.

It's a fact that monsoon depends upon the outside factors of the country but it can also not be denied that forests help in rain in other months round the year in the absence of monsoon and which leads to growth of variety of crops besides maintaining the heat. In addition to this it helps in controlling the flood and drought. In lack of forests underground water is not trapped and which leads to dryness and crack making the land barren. The study in other countries also show that forests are important for rain,

Leaves help turn down the thermostat. They cool the air through a process called evapotranspiration. Evapotranspiration is the combination of two simultaneous processes: evaporation and transpiration, both of which release moisture into the air. During evaporation, water is converted from liquid to vapor and evaporates from soil, lakes, rivers and even pavement. During transpiration, water that was drawn up through the soil by the roots evaporates from the leaves. It may seem like an invisible process to our eyes, but a large oak tree is capable of transpiring 40,000 gallons of water into the atmosphere during one year. Heat

islands are cities that are often several degrees warmer than the suburbs because the urban areas generate and trap heat. Studies of Atlanta found that temperatures downtown were 5 to 8 degrees hotter than those in the suburbs <sup>[8]</sup>.

The planting of trees can assuredly increase local precipitation, and can help reverse the effects of dryland soil salting. There is evidence everywhere, in literature and in the field, that the great body of the forest is in very active energy transaction with the whole environment. The upward spirals of humid air coming up from the forest carry insects, pollen, and bacteria aloft. This is best seen as flights of gulls, swifts and ibis spiral up with the warm air and actively catch insects lifted from the forest; their gastric pellets consist of insect remains. It is these organic aerial particles (pollen, leaf dust, and bacteria mainly) that create the nuclei for rain. The violent hailstorms that plague Kenya tea plantings may well be caused by tea dust stirred up by the local winds and the feet of pickers, and "once above the ground the particles are easily drawn up into thunder heads to help form the hailstorms that bombard the tea-growing areas in astounding numbers". (New Scientist, 22 March '79). Thus, the materials given up by vegetation may be a critical factor in the rainfall inland from forests <sup>[9]</sup>.

### Nectar in a Sieve

Kamala Markandaya in this novel shows the two extremities of rain. The narrative reflects flood due to monsoon rain and drought due to failure of monsoon and lack of local precipitation. Markandaya starts her novel by showing how important agriculture is for Indians farmer and as the story moves on she presents how when this straw is taken away they drown in complete misery. Through the saga of their life a lot is shown among which natural calamities and concretization of the earth are few. Men, women and children all alike are seen at the mercy of nature. Though the novel is written half a century ago it is very much applicable today since there has hardly been much a change at the fate of farmers which is at the mercy of nature. For farmers there is nothing as precious as a good harvest. As soon as Nathan brought home his newlywed bride he showed with pride his treasure, that is, paddy grains. When Rukmani grew up she too shared Nathan's pride in fields and grains,

While 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? My heart sang and my feet were light as I went about my work. Peace and quiet were ours <sup>[10]</sup>.

India has been a largely agricultural country and it has an influence on people's life and culture, yet they are so gullible and selfish in their dearth that they consume what should be added to land for its betterment. When Kenny, a doctor in the narrative, asks if the dung was not for the land, Rukmani replies, "Indeed no dung is too useful in our homes to be given to the land, for it is fuel to us and protection against damp and heat and even ants and mice" <sup>[11]</sup>. This is typical of human beings who know only of taking from land and never returning. Such trend obviously cannot exist for long and ultimately nature gives up and there is no yield. Kenny is amazed at her lack of knowledge as she lives by the land but thinks of taking from it without giving.

The life in village is devoid of modern luxuries, yet they are happy in their natural world without any desires of town. Even today in comparison to urban areas there is not much

modern luxuries in Indian villages. Development, however, is swifter than is thought of and its penetrating power cannot be underestimated. From towns and cities, it seeped into the remote areas and turned the simple life of farmers upside down. Agricultural lands were taken by the capitalists for opening industries. The lands were cleared and farmers were offered work for good sum. Markandaya reveals other side of development which does not sound so promising. When tannery industry started in the village Rukmani portrays the death of fresh air and nature,

It will not gladden me. Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us <sup>[12]</sup>.

With dry fields and starving stomachs they could not do anything but embrace the new development. Opening of tannery industry in the village brings out stark reality of how gradually people stepped towards depletion of environment. The smoke of cooked food, laughter and fleshy body of the labourers working in the tannery and their family stands in contrast to skeleton body of the villagers. Hence, they easily got lured towards a promising future. Tannery gave them what land could not. Tannery had taken a lot from their life, "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the *maidan* (field) where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us" <sup>[13]</sup>.

With deterioration of nature the luxury to live among nature remains a dream for those who understand its value. Monsoon hit the village very hard and took away with it farmers' hopes. After the devastation of monsoon comes the onslaught of drought and the remaining happiness with a number of lives were lost in it. Land was dry but tannery industry was still growing.

### To Sum Up

Markandaya portrays her major characters, Rukmani and Nathan, as the symbol of nature. They strive hard to thrive in manmade concrete jungle but failed. As natural environment is suffocating in the industrial pollution and the people without realizing its effect are still running after their own interpreted development. It's not that suddenly overnight there is crisis in ecosystem. In fact, the process started long enough. When the British left they took the valuable wood with them leaving Indian forests panting. The Indians could not come out of the hangover of colonization and tried to grab whatever was left by the British. In their hoarding they forgot that they were creating countries grave. The process continued and by the end of the century India was drastically down in environmental concern on the global map. When country woke up in a free land in 1947, some took it that they can take everything that country has to offer without replenishing what it has been deprived of by the colonies. The fact is what started centuries ago is still continuing and even after so many years of Independence law seems inadequate to bring a complete cease on deforestation. Examples of Badrinath landslides and Uttarakhand forest depletion leading to flood are not enough to make the people learn a lesson. Nature is not weak. It has taken humans years to destroy it but nature can wipe whole humanity in minutes. Nature can renew itself but not humans. Hence the seeds of deforestation shown before Independence has to uproot as it has spread its roots throughout the country and is in process of converting the land in desert.

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