

## From Harvest to Havoc: Nature's Influence in *Nectar in A Sieve*

H. John Samuel<sup>1</sup>, Christy Jenifer. J<sup>2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Scholar (Reg. No. 21211274011012), The PG and Research Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627012,

Email: [johnliterarian1996@gmail.com](mailto:johnliterarian1996@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Ph.D. Scholar (Reg. No. 20111274012011), The PG and Research Department of English, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627012,

Email: [christsingh98513@gmail.com](mailto:christsingh98513@gmail.com)

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**Abstract** – Nature has always been a central element in literature, inextricably interlaced with human existence. Throughout history, from ancient to modern times, authors have explored the diverse perceptions and reverence for nature in different cultures, frequently depicting it as both esteemed and adored. Literary works encapsulate nature's magnificence, immense power, and escalating apprehensions regarding environmental deterioration. Nature, although demonstrating a loving quality that uplifts people, also possesses a destructive power capable of causing devastation. Despite its nurturing qualities, nature may also exhibit a formidable, wild force that hinders the spiritual, moral, psychological, and economic advancement of humans. In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, nature functions as creator, sustainer, and destroyer. The tale sensitively depicts the disintegration of Rukmani and her family due to nature's relentless force. This study critically analyzes the supremacy of nature over humanity, contrasting its destructive power with the detrimental impacts of urban modernism, which ravages both the environment and India's traditional values.

**Key Words:** Ecocriticism, Environmentalism, Urban Modernity, Rural Modernity, Nature, industrialisation

The connection between nature and human life is fundamental, and understanding this relationship is essential. From ancient times to the present, writers have explored nature as an integral part of human existence, with diverse perspectives on its significance. In Greek mythology, natural elements are revered as gods and goddesses. At the same time, in Hinduism, the Earth is known as 'Bhumi' or 'Bhuma Devi,' derived from the Sanskrit term 'Puhumi,' meaning Earth goddess. In her

book *Hinduism and Nature*, Nanditha Krishna explains how the sages of the Rig Veda highlighted the importance of appreciating nature, emphasizing its vital role and the need to respect natural resources. Many hymns in the Rig Veda, including around sixty-three stanzas, praise rivers, Mother Earth, and human reliance on the environment. This ancient view reflects the belief that human existence cannot be separated from nature. Tamilians, in particular, honour the Earth for providing food, rain for water, and air for breath while offering prayers to the sun, moon, trees, animals, and mountains. In his article, *Environmental Aesthetics Interpretation of Nature in 'Akam' and 'Puram' Poetry*, Murali explains how the Sangam poets categorized the environment into five aspects, or 'Aintinai,' to express the aesthetic value of nature in their poetry. The often-overlooked truth is that Indian culture has always been deeply connected to the environment. Indian literature reflects the intertwined relationship between human life and nature, highlighting the cultural reverence for the natural world.

In Christianity, the relationship between humans and nature is deeply significant. The Book of Genesis in the Bible describes how God created the world and mankind. The man was formed from "the dust of the ground" and placed in the Garden of Eden, where he was tasked with tending and caring for it (Genesis 2:7-15). This suggests that humans were created from nature and for nature, with nature being the first gift given to mankind by God. Caring for and preserving the garden was mankind's initial responsibility, highlighting the connection between humans and the natural world.

Similarly, the theory of evolution also places humans as a part of nature, with humanity emerging through a lengthy process of natural selection. The concept of ecological balance emphasizes the significant

role humans play in nature, as humans have the power to influence and shape their environment. Yet, humans often seek to prove their superiority as the earth's only literary species.

Different writers approach nature from various perspectives, with nature being a central theme in many literary works. Writers often express their concern for the environment by highlighting the beauty, power, and responses of nature to human actions. Some writers also focus on the destructive aspects of nature, illustrating how human beings are affected by natural disasters.

The renowned poet T.S. Eliot famously said, "A wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God" (62). Elizabeth Black observes that Eliot often portrayed societies that had become disconnected from nature and warned against the dangers of modernity in both human and environmental. By distancing themselves from nature, humans have allowed modernity to dominate, which leads to various environmental, social, economic, and psychological problems (3).

In his "*Ode to the West Wind*", P.B. Shelley describes the wind as both a destroyer and preserver. Similarly, S.T. Coleridge venerates nature in his poem "*To Nature*", where he views it as a god capable of granting joy, love, and freedom. He imagines building a church in a field, where he becomes a priest, highlighting his reverence for nature. Traditionally, nature is seen as both a creator and a preserver.

Indian literature, however, presents a more complex view of nature, depicting not only its beauty and prosperity but also its destructive and harmful sides. Gaines observes Rudyard Kipling's works, which highlight the beauty of nature while also addressing humanity's wrongdoings against it, such as deforestation and the slaughter of animals. In his poetry, especially in *Gitanjali*, Rabindranath Tagore promotes eco-spirituality, portraying nature as a divine gift for all living beings. He emphasizes that it is human actions, not animals, that disrupt natural resources. Contemporary Indian writers focus on natural calamities and disasters caused by human interference, further illustrating environmental concerns.

Indian literature reflects the interdependent relationship between humans and nature, particularly in rural settings where people rely on the land, rivers, forests, mountains, and rain for survival. Indian culture portrays nature not only as a source of prosperity but also as gods and goddesses to be worshipped and respected.

Nature can bring joy and abundance but can also lead to destruction and misfortune. It is clear that nature plays a vital role in shaping human life, as contemporary writers draw on their own experiences and those of their communities to explore this relationship in their works. The consequences of human negligence towards nature and the response to natural disasters are frequently depicted in these literary texts.

Eco-criticism, or Green Criticism, is an area of study that delves into the interdependent relationship between humans and nature. As Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm explain, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." This approach encourages literature to engage with and explore current environmental crises. Literature, in turn, portrays the effects of these crises on human life. Eco-criticism focuses on an earth-centred perspective, examining how human actions affect nature and how nature responds in return. According to Jean Arnold, "ecocriticism analyses the ways in which literature represents the human relation to nature at particular moments of history, what values are assigned to nature and why, and how the perception of the natural shape literary tropes and genres. In turn, it examines how such literary figures contribute to shaping social and cultural attitudes toward the environment" (1097). Nature has often been marginalized, muted, and relegated to the background in literary works, where humans are portrayed as the central subjects (Manes 1992). As Opermann suggests, literary ecology reflects human ideas about responsibility toward the natural world. When humans neglect their responsibility to nature, they risk facing nature's destructive consequences.

Eco-critical and ecological theories, therefore, shed light on how human actions influence nature and how nature, in turn, responds. The various moods of nature whether as a creator, preserver, or destroyer are often depicted in literature based on humanity's relationship with the environment. As literature mirrors social and environmental concerns, writers have explored the interconnectedness between humans and nature. When humans attempt to dominate nature, nature often asserts its supremacy through natural disasters and calamities. Human beings cannot withstand environmental crises such as floods, droughts, or storms without efforts to preserve and protect the environment.

In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, the novel illustrates the different roles nature plays: creator, preserver, and destroyer. The story portrays how nature

can both uplift and ultimately devastate a person's life economically, physically, psychologically, and morally. At the novel's outset, nature is depicted as a source of prosperity and support. Rukmani, the protagonist, marries a poor tenant farmer and sees the garland of mango leaves, a symbol of happiness and good fortune, hanging over the doorway of her new home. Together with her husband Nathan, she engages in farming and plants vegetables in their garden. When the weather is favourable, they experience a good harvest, reflecting the positive influence of nature on their lives. Rukmani's sense of nature's support is evident in her words:

I had planted in the flat patch of ground behind the hut, a few pumpkin seeds. The soil here was rich, never having yielded before, and loose so that it did not require much digging. The seeds sprouted quickly, sending up delicate green shoots that I kept carefully watered, going several times to the well nearby for the purpose. Soon they were not delicate but sprawling vigorously over the earth, and 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. (Markandaya 10)

Rukmani plants a variety of vegetables, including beans, sweet potatoes, brinjals, and chillies. Thanks to these crops, her family enjoys better nourishment than ever before. Rukmani also earns money by selling vegetables, which helps improve her family's financial situation. In this way, nature plays a vital role in supporting the family's livelihood and contributing to their economic stability.

The deep connection and reverence for nature is reflected in Indian culture, where people often derive names from natural elements like rivers and mountains. For example, in the novel, Rukmani names her daughter Irawaddy, which is the name of a river. By naming her child after the river, they honour and acknowledge the essential value of water in their lives (Markandaya, 17).

Moreover, according to Rukmani, "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (Markandaya, 41). When humans care for nature with vigilance, it provides them with food and happiness. However, if they neglect it, nature can quickly take control and become destructive. In the early chapters of the novel, Rukmani places her trust in nature, but as the

story progresses, she learns that nature does not always work in her favour.

Soon, nature transforms into a destroyer for Rukmani and her village. When nature behaves like a wild animal, no one is ready for its fury. Rukmani and Nathan failed to take measures to protect their hut from the weather or safeguard their land from flooding. Nathan remarks that it is a bad season, and the rains have ruined much of their work. The crops and vegetables they planted are devastated by the monsoon, and even their coconut tree is struck by lightning. The next morning, Rukmani inspects the damage caused by the monsoon and reflects on how it has destroyed their belongings in the village.

In the morning everything was calm. Even the rain had stopped. After the fury of the night before, an unnatural stillness lay on the land. I went out to see if anything could be saved of the vegetables, but the shoots and vines were battered and broken, torn from their supports and bruised; they did not show much sign of surviving. The cornfield was lost. Our paddy field lay beneath a placid lake on which the children were already sailing bits of wood.

Many of our neighbours fared much worse than we had. Several were homeless, and of a group of men who sheltered under a tree when the storm began six had been killed by lightning. (Markandaya 42-43)

After the destruction of their huts and fields, the villagers scramble to find food and gather palm leaves to thatch their roofs before nightfall. In just a single day, they lose everything they had. Without the ability to earn money, they cannot afford food to feed their families. Some people have enough money, but even then, they cannot find rice or vegetables due to widespread scarcity. The devastation caused by nature could have been mitigated with proper preparation. As Mark Elvin notes, "The most common view of the human relationship with nature was one of confidence and assertiveness. With preparation, determination, and skill, humans could overcome most of the challenges nature posed" (444).

Nature's harshness continues to impact the villagers. This year, there has been no rain, and the river has begun to dry up. The villagers had hoped that the rains would return to help them recover from the losses of the previous year. However, the lack of rain leads to famine and drought, worsening the situation in the village, as depicted in the novel.

Each day the level of the water dropped and the heads of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a trickle, the well was as dry as a bone. Before long the shoots of the paddy were tipped with brown; even as we watched, the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us. (Markandaya, 74)

Drought has significant effects on health, agriculture, the economy, energy, and the environment. The lack of water is a critical issue in today's world. The novel illustrates the various impacts of drought, highlighting its destructive consequences.

The drought continued until we lost count 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 great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and gasping in the blistering sunlight. (Markandaya 79)

There is nothing to harvest, even during the harvest season. As a result, the family begins to face economic hardship and struggles to secure enough food and pay their land dues. Sivaji, the land tax collector, demands payment, and Nathan pleads for more time. In order to survive, Rukmani and Nathan are forced to sell their belongings, such as clay pots, brass vessels, a tin trunk, shirts, and stocks of lentils and dried chillies, to raise some money. They also face difficulties in obtaining medicine for their son, Kuti.

Natural disasters like floods, starvation, and drought often lead to the displacement of people. In the novel, the villagers are forced to leave their homes and move to the cities in search of food and safety from hunger and drought. Some venture out to gather food, hoping to find a place where their needs can be met. After losing their sons to starvation and drought, Rukmani and Nathan decide to go to the city where one of their sons works. However, they fail to find him and instead end up working in a stone quarry to earn money for food.

Eventually, Rukmani loses her husband, Nathan, to illness, leaving her feeling alone in the city. Even their displacement does not bring a resolution to their suffering. As Fussell and Lowe observe displacement was identified as that which is likely to affect mental health due to disruption of social support systems, regular routines associated with homes, jobs, physical activity, and healthcare access, as well as crowdedness and isolation that can be felt by evacuees in shelters and later in arranged housing conditions who are more susceptible

to additional stressors, and may face danger or possible discrimination (3).

Natural disasters disrupt the moral development of people. In their desperation to survive hunger and starvation, individuals turn to immoral activities like stealing, blackmailing, and prostitution. Rukmani learns that one of her sons, Raja, was killed by security guards for stealing calfskin from a company. Meanwhile, Rukmani's daughter, Ira, turns to prostitution in order to earn money for her child.

The environment is also severely affected by natural calamities. After losing their belongings to the monsoon and drought, the villagers no longer think about returning to farming or restoring their fields. Instead, many abandon their land to work for various companies. Over time, rural areas are transformed by modernization and industrialization. In the pursuit of economic development, people welcome modernity into the countryside, unaware of the long-term consequences.

The destructive forces of nature drive people from rural to urban areas. Before the monsoon, a group of workers arrives with plans to build a tannery in the village. The villagers assisted in the construction of the tannery and huts for the workers, providing food and vegetables. The tannery grows rapidly, standing firm through the monsoon, even when the rest of the village is destroyed. Due to a lack of money and seeds, the villagers cannot return to farming, and many choose to work at the tannery for the higher wages it offers. As a result, the tannery thrives and changes the entire environment of the village. The tannery's expansion leads to the occupation of more land, as Rukmani observes:

It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Night and day 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. (Markandaya 49)

Rural areas are often seen as separate from modernity, but when they are affected by modernism, this phenomenon is known as rural modernity. The arrival of modernism and industrialism has had significant consequences for the environment of rural areas. The vital resources that sustain human life are destroyed by the expansion of industries. In the pursuit of economic

needs, people begin to abandon rural areas in favour of cities.

Urban modernity focuses on the creation of an urban-centered, industrial-based culture built upon science and technology. This ideology often leads to the devastation of natural resources in rural areas. It negatively impacts the lives of poor farmers, rendering the land infertile and leading to economic hardship. Modernity alters the identity of rural areas. For example, when rain falls on their land, Rukmani and Nathan hope for a bountiful harvest. However, their hopes are dashed when they learn that their landowner intends to sell their farmland to the tannery. Rukmani reflects on the impact of the tannery on their land;

Somehow I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. Since then it had spread like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way. It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of its inhabitants in a myriad ways. (Markandaya 136)

The tannery profoundly changes the environment of the village, altering everything in its wake. Just as urban modernity impacts rural areas, rural modernity also brings significant transformation.

In simple terms, both nature and modernization contribute to the destruction of human life. Through Rukmani's experiences, Kamala Markandaya illustrates how, although Rukmani initially sees nature as a source of fortune, it ultimately brings hunger, starvation, and the death of her son. Similarly, modernization destroys her life by taking away her land. The shift from rural to urban living, driven by both nature's forces and modern industrialization, transforms rural people into urban dwellers.

Rukmani is the key character through whom Markandaya explores the importance of nature and its role in her life. When the tannery arrives, the villagers generally accept it, but Rukmani resists. She warns Nathan about the potential consequences, explaining that the workers will take away their livelihoods, turning them from farming to trade, and their children will go hungry. When her sons Arjun and Thambi leave to work at the tannery, Rukmani is heartbroken and disillusioned (Markandaya 53). After losing their land, Rukmani and Nathan moved to the city to live with their son. However,

after Nathan dies in the city, Rukmani returns to her land, feeling unable to survive in the city without him. In the end, she accepts both the bounty and hardships that nature brings, understanding that nature offers both challenges and sustenance for survival. Furthermore, Nature urges humans to either adapt or perish. The natural world continuously erupts, shifts, storms, collapses, and spins, remaining unpredictable. Despite our pleas, it refuses to become orderly, predictable, or logical.

The devastation caused by both nature and industry can be compared here. While nature may show its harsh side, it can also protect if humans take care of it. In clear terms, urbanization is not a solution to the consequences of natural disasters like hunger, starvation, drought, and flooding. Nature, like a mother, may punish, but it also nurtures and cares. In contrast, urban modernity does not offer the same nurturing qualities; instead, it depletes natural resources and leads to the destruction of rural communities. Rural urbanization does not represent true development for a country or village, as it erodes both cultural heritage and natural resources. Both urban and rural forms of modernity discourage people from reconnecting with nature. When nature is pushed aside, human life collapses. Nature and humanity are interconnected and inseparable, and it is better to embrace both the blessings and challenges of nature than to pursue urbanization, modernization, and industrialization.

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