



UGC Approved Journal



# IJELLH

International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume 6, Issue 5  
May 2018  
[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Sanjukta Bala

Assistant Professor, Department of English , Basirhat College

Research scholar in Jadavpur University

Department of English

Address: 122/2, Lenin Sarani Bye Lane

Newbarrackpur, 24pgs North

W.B. 700131.

Phone no: 9830851681, mail id: [sanjukta.eng@gmail.com](mailto:sanjukta.eng@gmail.com)

Redefining ‘Development Model’: An Ecofeminist Reading of Markandya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*

Abstract

For many of us the word ‘development’ bears positive connotations. After independence of India many initiatives were taken to make a “New India”, a developing India. The makers of this idea of new and developed India envisaged a country that is at pace with the sea change that the rest of the world was going through. A change that can be defined in terms of industry, factory, new economy and development. This was a development model primarily borrowed from the west. We followed the west to revolutionize our rather agricultural economy. At this stage something went wrong. The promise of a good life remained a distant dream and the reality struck hard. Kamala Markandya’s novel *Nectar in a Sieve* documents how industry destroys the rural economy, damages the subtle ecology and alters the lives of poor village people through the struggles of her protagonist Rukmini. This is a study of the novel from an ecofeminist perspective which is at the very core a critique of modernity ; a modernity that is an imitation of western ideas of progress and development.

Keywords: Post-colonial India, development, criticism, Markandya, ecofeminism.

Development projects which are based on western ideas when implemented in a rural setting we counter catastrophes. Industrial endeavours began to set foot in Indian villages. Many saw opportunities in these establishments as they promised a better world after a long struggle for independence. But the question is did they in reality change the lives of poor Indians who were mainly farmers. These village people lost their lands in the hands of industrialists; they were forced to work in the factories in exchange of meagre wages. The self sustaining economy of a village that primarily rested on agriculture and local farming got destroyed for world class development projects. Farmers who were experts in their fields turned out to be inefficient in factory works as they didn't have the knowledge of machines. The sons of the farmers who now have lost the knowledge of farming goes to the cities to earn more as the wages offered by the companies is not enough to sustain a family. Women and children suffer the worst; sometimes women are forced into prostitution and children die of starvation. The image of new India was undoubtedly an attractive one but it proved in many cases a disaster. This paper strives to explore the many ill effects of mindless implementation of development projects within a rural setting.

What we know as modern development concept is an offspring of western Enlightenment ideologies. The idea of a universal ethics and customs, an unified world order which are the main conceptual aims of western Enlightenment proved to be ways to implement western concepts of development, knowledge and finally the existing world order. Adorno and Horkhimer in their essay *Dialectic of Enlightenment* writes:

“Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumph calamity. Enlightenment program was the disenchantment of the world... The ‘happy match’ between human understanding and the nature of things that he (Francis Bacon) envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind conquering superstitions is to rule over disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limit, either in its enslavement of creation or in its defence of worldly masters.” (22)

The calamity is that what has been projected as a supreme intellectual ideology that will ensure superiority of humans over the rest actually worked for a section of people and proved to be a disaster for the majority of people who are poor and has existence as a marginal being: this includes women, children, out casts, animals, plants and the whole ecology. As this paper

aims to criticise the dominant development model from an ecofeminist perspective it becomes essential to note how ecofeminism views western model of development. Vandana Shiva , a prominent Indian ecofeminist author and activist terms development as “mal-development” as she perceives that developmental projects when implemented without taking in consideration the overall betterment of the people of the land can never be established as a positive step, a constructive endeavour. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* explains how the world views development and its aim and what the reality is. She writes:

“ ‘Development’ was to have been a post –colonial project, a choice for accepting a model of progress in which the entire world remade itself in the model of the colonising modern west, without having to undergo the subjugation and exploitation that colonialism entailed. The assumption was that western style progress was possible for all.” (1)

But the fact is according to Shiva : “ Development was thus reduced to a continuation of the process of colonisation; it became an extension of the project of wealth creation in modern western patriarchy’s economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or exclusion of women , on the exploitation and degradation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures...throughout the Third World, women, peasants and tribals are struggling for liberation from ‘development’ just as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonialism.”(2)

Indian women authors from a very early stage of Indian literature, right after independence showed remarkable understanding of the catastrophes that developmental projects can give rise to if implemented unethically. They have time and again focused upon the fact that industries and factories that are built and run by exploiting nature and its resources cannot possibly ensure a better life for people whose lives are closely connected with nature. But in today’s world there is the one dominant definition of progress that primarily depends on exploring and exploiting of resources. The whole point of progress and development is to have power over nature and all the others who are considered by the dominant standard as inferior: the land and its people.

As we enter the text, Markandya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* we instantly are introduced to an Indian village, an idyllic rural world. We are introduced to Rukmini, the protagonist of the novel. She is married to Nathan, a farmer. Nathan though does not own a land of his own but grows sufficient crops to sustain his family. Rukmini on the other hand also does local garden farming. And the picture that emerges is of a post independent Indian village that is

self sufficient in managing the lives of its people. Children are well fed and women have a dignified way of living. Rukmini's connection with nature unfolds within a private domestic setting. Her connection with nature and for that matter with the people of the village is important in this context because when industry creeps in nature is exploited and the life of these people which is connected with nature gets altered. The big impact is mostly endured by women and children as they work closely with nature. Rukmini's connection is a deep almost spiritual one. In her garden when tending to her plants she exclaims:

“ 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...I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be offhand. I put the pumpkins away. But pleasure was making my pulse beat; the blood, unbidden came hot and surging to my face.” (11)

Life in the village is slow yet steady. Rukmini with her big family lives a modest life. And then change surges in, in the guise of modernity, development and progress. The project is to open a tannery factory in the village. The opening of a factory for some is an opportunity to earn daily wages. The reality is different as the project is a profit oriented development project that only ensures profit for the owners, people of power. Such initiatives were taken to make new India but in reality the situation worsened for the poor villagers whose only hope was the land. But land, their own land is being taken away from the farmers. The local people who belonged to the place are told to leave. We realize that this is the way the colonial power operates in Third World countries in the name of development. Rukmini never likes the outsiders. Though many of the villagers see opportunity in the new establishment but Rukmini remained critical about them. But her husband Nathan could not see what Rukmini could predict. Nathan is only occupied with one thing; he understands that as long as these outsiders remain in the village he could sell his products to them at a much higher price. But he fails to see the changed economic processes would make things worse for them as well because they too have to buy things at higher costs. The lives of such farmers depend upon land and a major portion of the daily necessities come from the local farms and household gardens. And when the local economic systems crashes down women and children suffer the worst. The lives of these women and children depend directly on the land. The industries change the economy and the market strategies. We need to understand here how the new economy do that in order to profit from the market and within these

systems the poor villagers, the farmers are remain deprived of better livelihood. Chhaya Datar in her book *Ecofeminism Revisited* writes:

“Global markets allow the interior of the Third World to produce for the market and enter the cash economy. However , these people lack bargaining power and thus earn lesser./ The terms of trade (i.e., the price at which poor countries sell to buy from the rich) are pitted against the poor. Rich countries form a “buyers’ market” to dictate prices. Even though poor people from the majority they do not enjoy absolute control over their products.

The productivity of the Third World has been moulded to suit the demands of developed countries...It promises modern amenities but destroys their self-sufficiency. Development dismantles and disintegrates while promising to reconstitute – a hollow assurance which is never realized in the Third World.” (66)

Rukmini understands that the changing scenarios will have devastating effects on her life and the lives of all of them. And unlike others she never hesitates to express her displeasure:

“Never , never’, I cried. ‘ They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things.” (30)

The hope of a better life gets shattered as soon as the reality opens up in front of them. The first blow comes from nature itself. The flood takes everyone by surprise. Rukmini, Nathan and their children spent hungry nights and days. But gradually they start to repair the damages and begin to feed the children and themselves. It is in such desperate times that the villagers start to work in the tannery and begin to earn daily wages. The factory for a very brief period of time seems to be a boon for the villagers. But Rukmini is in no mood to accept this. She could sense that her village is now turning into a town where there is noise everywhere, young hooligans are idling on streets, and men are constantly thinking to earn money this way or the other and local shops are losing out to big shop owners. When their lives are undergoing change every day the tannery too changes its size and its power over the villagers.

“It was a great sprawling growth, this tannery. It grew and flourished and spread. Not a month went by 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. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities- or that so many animals existed- but so it was, incredible.” (49)

Anita Desai gives us the subtle hints at how this new economy creates market strategies, creates demands for stuffs that are harmful to the subtle ecology of a place and to the inhabitants that includes animals too. These are the stepping stones of a capitalist order that today we consider as the dominant world order that determines what development is and how the model will be implemented.

After dismantling of the local farm based economy the development project forces the poor villagers to live in severe poverty. The garden that used to feed the entire family now barely is able to provide for them three meals. Rukmini’s sons are forced to work in the factory for meagre wage and later it is found that their eldest daughter Ira is forced into prostitution. The colony of the labourers from outside is already set in the outskirts of the village. The men too see the women as objects just as the new development model sees nature and the people as resources. The vicious cycle of money making engulfs the lives of the poor villagers. A major setback happens when the first factory strike takes place. Rukmini’s sons stop going to work. They demand more wages which is a legitimate demand. Because of the strike many lose their work. The apparent stable condition begins to crumble down. The development project proved to be a trap to exploit and oppress the poor village people. Those who have little sense and demanded due wages are left without job and money. The trap engulfs all. Arjun and Thambi leave for Ceylon to work in tea plantations. Rukmini knows that they will not return as they will never be able to earn enough money to come back to village to work. Her son Raju dies within the factory. Kuti the youngest son dies of malnutrition and it is to make this little heart beat Ira becomes a prostitute. The final and greatest loss they suffer is when they are asked to leave the land. The land is sold for the tannery to expand. Rukmini rightfully explains the expansion of the factory as the growth of an untended weed that destroys the lives of every other life-form that comes in its way.

“It had changed the face of our village beyond recognition and altered the lives of the inhabitants in a myriad way. Some- a few- had been raised up; many others cast down, lost in its clutches.”(136)

Nature too is not left unaffected. The tannery not only changed the lives of the villagers it has also left its mark in many damages it caused in nature. Rukmini reminiscences:

“At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots of our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river , flamingos, striding with plumage of a glory not of the earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close- except crows and kites and such scavenging birds.” (71)

Rukmini and Nathan now are in the city. With the help of an orphan boy Puli both of them find work as labourers in construction projects. The work demands extreme physical effort and for these people who are accustomed to work in paddy fields could not cope with the pressures. Nathan dies leaving Rukmini all alone in a merciless city. She returns with Puli. Though landless she now hopes to begin afresh in her own village that she loves so dearly. The novel ends.

Development, progress , new economy these terms define modernity for most of us. And when modernity steps in life changes. It is clear that much of the ill fortune that both Rukmini and Nathan suffer originates from the factory. It fails drastically to give the poor village people a decent life. It may seem that not just the tannery but nature too is causes much suffering to them . But there still was hope as they had their land. But because of the tannery the self sufficient systems has been dismantled and finally the land is taken away from them. They are left with nothing. Mindless implementation of development project results in catastrophes. Only the poor and most significantly the lives of women and children are affected in most severe ways. Vandana Shiva in her article “The Impoverishment of the Environment : Women and Children Last” (*Ecofeminism*) writes:

“ Development was to have created well –being and affluence for all in the Third World. For some regions, and some people , it has delivered that promise , but for most regions and people , it had instead brought environmental degradation and poverty. Where did the environmental paradigm go wrong?”(70)

Maria Mies in that same book in the article “The Myth of Catching – up Development” explains why these development paradigms that are blind imitation of western ideologies cannot give rise to an overall progress for all. She writes:

“The logic of this accumulation model, based on exploitation and colonizing divisions , implies that anything like ‘catching up development’ is impossible for the colonies, for all colonies. This is because just as one colony may, after much effort , attain what was considered the ultimate in ‘development’ , the industrial centres themselves have already ‘progressed’ to a yet more modern stage of development...The catching-up policy of the colonies is therefore always a lost game. Because the very progress of the colonizers is based on the existence and the exploitation of those colonies.” (59)

Markandys’s *Nectar in a Sieve* cannot only be considered a work of fiction; it is a document of the realities faced everyday by every poor villager of our country. The promise of a better life remains unfulfilled and gradually fades away as the lives and hopes are sucked away from them. The development paradigm has proved to be a failure for major population of Third World countries and that’s why a new development model needs to be implemented that does not necessarily see nature and the people as resources to be exploited rather entails a vision of progress for all.

## Works Cited

Datar, Chhaya. *Ecofeminism Revisited*. Rawat Publications. 2011.

Horchimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford University Press, 2002.

Markandya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin Books, 2009.

Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism* . Rawat Publications , 2010.

Shiva , Vandana. *Staying Alive* . Women Unlimited, 2010.