ISSN: 2583-7354

International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies

Publisher's Home Page: https://www.ijeks.com/

Fully Open Access Research Paper

Third World Ecologies and Capitalist Crisis in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

Mohammad Iliyas Khan[1*] Ruman Ahmad[2] Waseem Akram[3]

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India.

[2]Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India.

[3]Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-04-08-006

*Corresponding Author: mohdilyas9918@gmail.com

Article Info:- Received : 13 April 2025 **Accepted** : 25 May 2025 **Published** : 30 June 2025

Abstract

Addressing environmental degradation requires an epistemological shift, integrating the humanities with multidisciplinary approaches from science, economics, and literature. This paper contributes to the expanding discourse on environmentalism and literary production by examining how literary texts function as sites of resistance to anthropocentrism, from the Romantic age to the present. Using Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in Sieve (1954) as a case study which was previously analysed through ecofeminist, postcolonial, and feminist lenses.This study offers a Marxist and third-world environmentalist reading. Through textual analysis, it argues that such frameworks illuminate rural India's ecological struggles and expose the socio-economic injustices perpetuated by industrial capitalism. The paper ultimately suggests that literary fiction and cultural production can foster resistance and advocacy for sustainable development.

Keywords: *Marxist Environmentalism, Third World Environmentalism, Ecocriticism, Industrialisation, Social Justice, and Kamala Markandaya.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Our irresponsible and exploitative attitudes toward natural resources severely threaten human existence. The Western philosophy of anthropocentrism is rooted in the Bible, as illustrated by the phrase "dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and every living thing" (Genesis 1:26, New International Version). Anthropocentrism is a belief that has marginalised nature, placing man at the centre of everything and pushing nature to the periphery. Environmental thinkers and activists have challenged the notion of ecological exploitation. Mahatma Gandhi illustrated the reason for exploiting natural resources in his famous epigram, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed" **(as cited in Shiva, 1991)**. To protect the environment, can awareness of it and punishment for violating its laws be sufficient? The answer is no, because we

need to prioritise nature's ethical and moral values.

Our generation has exhibited eco-friendly behaviour after encountering environmental narratives and dystopian landscapes in movies. The emotional appeal of artistic forms became a significant platform from which we can collectively achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Creative minds have long drawn inspiration from nature, frequently using it as a symbol, metaphor, and allegory in literature. Poets of the Romantic age expressed their dissatisfaction with the sprawling factories in the city of London. They produced a new kind of poetry by depicting the natural landscape. The appreciation of nature and its beauty became dominant themes in the poems of William Wordsworth and his followers. Influenced by Romantic poetry and environmental movements and the exploitative legacy of industrialisation and capitalism, literary scholars were instigated to establish a new academic field of inquiry known as ecocriticism in the United States during the 1980s and green studies in the United Kingdom during the 1990s.

In their influential anthology, The Ecocriticism Reader, **Glotfelty and Fromm (1996)** define ecocriticism succinctly as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xix). Likewise, **Nayar (2010)** describes ecocriticism as a critical approach that scrutinises how cultural texts represent nature and landscape, highlighting the attitudes and rhetoric surrounding them. **Bate (2000)** perceives the environmental crisis as the outcome of damaging habits and attitudes of thought and the wicked ideas that make humanity dominate over nature. **Davary (2011)** points out that much of the environmental work in academia remains "Euro-American" and often ignores the voices and struggles of those from the Global South. Within the Indian context, **Roy (2014) and Ghosh (2016)** have made significant contributions to environmental writing, offering a profound critique of capitalism. **Vandana Shiva (1991)** argues that the agricultural system in India is industrially orientated, which harms the environment, and that it needs to be shifted from industrial to ecological farming.

Emerging initially in the United States, the field gained momentum by establishing the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the journal Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE). ASLE has become an open platform for discussing the environment and climate change through literature. However, if we go back in history, the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau provide conspicuous evidence of nature's themes. Over time, branches such as green studies and ecopoetics have broadened their scope. Marxist environmentalists such as **Benton and Dickens (2001)** argue that humans are inseparable from nature—nature is man's extended body, and its systematic exploitation ultimately undermines human existence. **Marx (1976)** famously asserted in Capital that "all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer but of robbing the soil" (p. 638).

2. METHODOLOGY

The method of the study is textual analysis using the theoretical framework of Marxism, colonialism, and capitalism in Kamla Markandaya's novel Nectar in a Sieve, published in 1954. The paper asserts that we urgently need a multidisciplinary approach to comprehend the climate crisis. The scenes of environmental destruction in the novel are historical evidence of how colonial power damaged the local environment. Today, the movement of environmental justice and reparation has offered a new dimension to the environment and colonialism.

3. DISCUSSION

The natural landscape of India comprises the Himalaya, deserts, and fertile agricultural lands. People generally think of the ecological calamity as something new, yet it has deep origins in history, especially in colonialism. The cultural aptitude of Indians toward nature was nurturing nature and worshipping its wonders. The colonial power not only disturbed the pattern of land use and exploitation of peasants but also left the legacy of dominance and control of nature and its resources. The British Empire extracted and used the best materials from colonised nations. African diamonds, Egyptian cotton, Indian dye, and Burmese furniture were available to maintain the supremacy of the nation at the cost of environmental destruction.

This environmental injustice continues through neocolonialism in the form of aid, policies related to the environment, and globalisation. The global south serves as a dumping ground for industrial pollution, which has an unequal impact on its communities. The burden of pollution and impact of climate change bears on the global south. Climate change does not affect all places in the same way. Colonised countries, which previously produced few greenhouse gases, are now among the most vulnerable to climate change. The Global South still suffers the most from ecological devastation, often for the benefit of the Global North **(Hickel, 2020)**. Colonial rule affected many of these countries' economies, infrastructure, and political power. The recent droughts, floods, and cyclones in Africa and Latin America **(IPCC, 2022)** illustrate that climate change has the worst effects on places that are already impoverished and poorly developed.

Carbon offset programs turn trees into goods, but they do not always listen to what locals say, so the benefits do not always go to the people who need them most. People often term this trend "green colonialism," which highlights how dangerous it is to have top-down environmentalism that does not consider local knowledge and rights **(Sullivan, 2020)**. For real environmental justice to happen, it needs to do more than just listen to the people left out; it needs to change who makes the decisions. Decision-making mechanisms developed during colonial times, when the most affected people had the least power, are still in use by many organisations worldwide. To decolonise environmental governance, we need to modify the rules and the ideas behind them. It involves knowing that Indigenous cultures often have knowledge systems, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), vital for getting things back in sync with nature. This knowledge comes from years of watching and interacting with ecosystems in the area. They propose adaptable solutions focused on respect instead of control **(Berkes, 2012)**.

Fairness in money is another crucial component of this dilemma. Countries that hurt the environment the most by industrializing now owe money and are morally responsible for climate change. We need more than just symbolic help to restore this damage. There need to be concrete commitments, like erasing debts, providing people with unlimited adaptation cash, and changing how climate finance is paid out. Often, aid imposes conditions that increase dependency on individuals, rather than empowering them to make their own decisions. In order to progress, it is crucial for the world to acknowledge the harsh realities that led to the current state of the ecosystem. Climate change is more than just a technical issue; it is also a profoundly political one shaped by years of unfairness and exploitation. We have to face the truth and take action. If not, every effort to make things more sustainable could cause the same problems.

4. ANALYSIS

Kamala Markandaya (1924–2004) was a British-Indian novelist who produced a dozen works of fiction with a strong consciousness of environmental degradation in colonial India. The primary concern of her fiction is to present a vivid picture of India during its transformation from a rural society to an urban one. Nectar in a Sieve **(Markandaya, 1954)** depicts rural India's transformation under industrial encroachment. Through the imagery of the tannery, which provided employment opportunities, the novelist illustrates how industrialisation in colonial India shaped the lives of its inhabitants in both positive and negative ways. However, it erodes traditional agrarian livelihoods, displaces families, and degrades the local environment. The novel portrays storms, droughts, and ecological depletion as nature's dialectical retaliation against exploitation. Under Marxist environmentalism, the relationship between humans and nature is inherently dialectical, as man alters nature and nature takes revenge upon human life. **Pepper (1996)** argues that this cyclical interaction underpins Marxist ecological thought. The novel's frequent natural calamities, such as devastating storms, droughts, and crop failures, illustrate this dynamic. Rukmani's reflection, "Nature is like a wild animal... be vigilant and it aids you; be negligent and it turns against you" **(Markandaya, 1954, p. 43)**, epitomises this tension.

Furthermore, the text critiques the exploitative zamindari system, which burdens peasants with exorbitant rents regardless of crop failure. When natural disasters strike, Rukmani and Nathan must sell household goods to pay rent, perpetuating their poverty and undermining

ecological balance by, for instance, selling cow dung instead of letting it replenish the soil. This violation of the natural cycle triggers soil degradation, exemplifying how economic exploitation translates into ecological harm. Third-world environmentalism, as theorised by **Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997)**, contends that environmental degradation in the Global South is deeply intertwined with poverty and social injustice. The novel illustrates how industrialisation displaces marginalised communities, concentrates pollution in rural areas, and reinforces systemic inequalities. While the tannery provides low-wage employment, it simultaneously pollutes the air and water, destroys farmland, and drives families toward urban slums.

Markandaya's narrative also reflects postcolonial ecocriticism, which analyses the destructive colonial impact on the environment. British colonial interests, embodied by Dr. Kenny and the tannery owners, catalyse exploitative industrial expansion without regard for local ecological and cultural contexts. The novel reveals how the European demand for leather reshapes rural Indian life, overriding indigenous values that revere animals such as cobras and cows. Symbolic imagery throughout the novel underscores the degradation of nature: birds once abundant now disappear, and noise and stench from the tannery permeate the village. Rukmani laments, "Even the birds have forgotten to sing" **(Markandaya, 1954, p. 92)**—a poignant reminder of the ecological cost of industrial progress.

5. CONCLUSION

Nectar in a Sieve is a powerful critique of the exploitative nexus between industrialisation, environmental degradation, and social injustice in postcolonial India. By re-examining the novel through the frameworks of Marxist environmentalism and Third World environmentalism, this study demonstrates how Markandaya's work anticipates contemporary debates on sustainability, environmental justice, and development ethics. The dialectical interplay between humans and nature, the socio-economic inequities perpetuated by capitalist-industrial systems, and the cultural dissonance imposed by colonial modernity are all woven into the narrative's fabric.

In an era where vulnerable communities still face displacement and ecological devastation under the banner of development, the novel's insights remain profoundly relevant. Future research could further interrogate its ecological motifs through intersectional lenses, including ecofeminism and indigenous ecocriticism, to deepen our understanding of literature's role in environmental consciousness.

REFERENCES

Bate, J. (2000). Bate, J. (2000) authored "The Song of the Earth." Harvard University Press.

Benton, T., & Dickens, P. (2001). The environmental crisis: Notes toward a sociological critique. The work was published in D. Smith's (Ed.) book, Environmental issues and sustainability, on pages 65–79. Open University Press.

Davary, B. (2011). Ecofeminism and Islam: Reclaiming earth and the sacred. In H. Eaton (Ed.), Ecological awareness: Exploring religion, ethics, and aesthetics (pp. 127–140). Lexington Books.

Ghosh, A. (2016). The enormous derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable. Penguin Books.

Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). The title of the book is "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology." University of Georgia Press.

Guha, R., & Martinez-Alier, J. (1997). Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South. Earthscan.

Kumar, S. K. (1969). Books Abroad, 43(4), 12–17, discusses tradition and change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya.

Markandaya, K. (1954). Jaico Publishing House published the novel "Nectar in a Sieve" in 1954. Jaico Publishing House.

Marx, K. (1976). Capital: A critique of political economy (Vol. 1) (B. Fowkes, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1867)

Nayar, P. K. (2010). Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism. Pearson.

Pepper, D. (1996). Modern environmentalism: An introduction. Routledge.

Roy, A. (2014). Capitalism: A Ghost Story. Haymarket Books.

ISSN: 2583-7354

Shiva, V. (1991). The violence of the green revolution: Third World agriculture, ecology, and politics. Zed Books.

Williams, R. (1976). Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society. Croom Helm.

Cite this article as: Mohammad Iliyas Khan et al., (2025). Third World Ecologies and Capitalist Crisis in Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve. International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies. 4(6), pp. 898 - 902. https://doi.org/10.70333/ijeks-04-08-006