

Postcolonial Capitalism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract

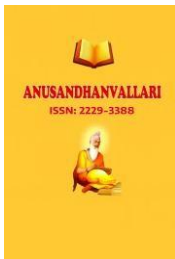
This paper discusses Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, which is a critique of the capitalist development in post-independence India, but more specifically, how the rural hinterland is becoming a sacrifice zone of economic development. The book highlights the destruction of the industrialization process in the agrarian life, where the environmental devastation, soil erosion, the climatic insecurity, and the break of the established ties with the nature exacerbate the agrarian vulnerability of the rural population. The book shows the restructuring of land, labour, ecology and identity by capitalism through the experiences of Rukmini and her family that is advantageous to the industry and that makes the lives of peasants' disposable. The coming of the tannery is marked not by modernization and prosperity, but by displacement, loss of livelihood and the destruction of social and ecological stability. The novel reveals the biased logic of development where resources and labour of the rural poor are exploited towards national and economic development, but their pain still goes unnoticed in the mainstream discourse of progress. This paper also demonstrates the ways in which *Nectar in a Sieve* anticipates the slow and structural violence of capitalism in the postcolonial countryside and disrupts celebratory modernization imperialism by placing the victims of its imperialism on the center stage.

Keywords: Capitalocene, Sacrifice Zones, Cheap Nature, Displacement, Ecological Distribution Conflicts, Slow Violence

Introduction

Capitalism is not a dispassionate economic system or even a straightforward system of exchange in English literary studies. It is perceived as a historically particular social structure according to which ownership, labour, and relationships of classes are organised and according to which the society comprehends progress, productivity, and value of a person. According to Raymond Williams (1985), capitalism should be differentiated by capital in general sense in that it is a specific historical form of centralized possession of the means of production, which cannot be separated by the wage labour and the social order generated by that relation (51-52). Capitalism in the analysis of literature is not considered, however, by way of factories, markets, and commerce; but rather as a broader system, which influences the ordinary life, the hierarchy of the society, the morality, and the modes of consciousness. That is why the Marxist literary criticism has continued to be significant to English studies, the interpretation of literature is not as individual imagination but as a part of the material past, where economic forms can be seen in the plot, character, language, and conflict.

In this light, literature is among the most significant places where capitalism could be known and criticized. The issue that Marxist criticism is interested in is how literary texts encode social contradiction, inequality by class, commodification and the ideological discourse in which an act of exploitation is made natural. According to Terry Eagleton (2002), it is important to mention that Marxist criticism is not merely the sociology of literature, which would find out about the external facts regarding publication or class representation; it seeks to elaborate the literary work more comprehensively, by linking the form, meaning, and history. This perspective

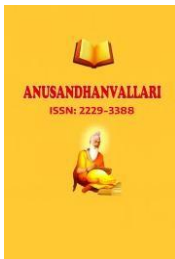


is particularly helpful in postcolonial literature studies, where capitalism cannot be disentangled along with colonial rule, uneven development and the afterlives of empire. The narrative of postcolonial capitalism by Cheryl Narumi Naruse, is useful in this context since she defines the concept in question as the type of capitalism that is both practiced and imagined in the historical awareness of colonial subordination, and thus, makes it obvious that the capitalist modernity of the postcolonial world cannot be discussed outside of the framework of political subjugation and inherent inequality (114).

This is a direct understanding of capitalism that can be applied to *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya. Capitalism in the novel is not a given economic theory; it is dramatized with the transformation in the material form of rural India by the tannery. The tannery itself, however, at the very beginning seems to represent the symbols of development, modernity, and the future of economic growth. But over time Markandaya is able to demonstrate that destabilization of agrarian life is what rests the foundation of so-called progress. Dana Mount notices that Rukmani is on the edge of a fast-changing India, one that is becoming urbanized, more economical and power is becoming centralized (Mount 1). The tannery is, therefore, not just about industrial growth. It marks the entry of the new social order when the village is included in a broader capitalist system, and peasantry has to adapt to new principles not according to subsistence and community but according to the productivity, trade and profit.

The commodification of land can be considered as one of the most obvious indicators of capitalism in the novel. Land is not merely an economic asset to Rukmani and Nathan before the tannery shows up; it is the source of pride, permanence, livelihood and future. Their connection with the land is unstable due to the fact that Nathan is just a tenant, but the land still provides some kind of self-determination. Mount claims that the land is self-sufficiency and more to the point, controlling the means of production, however weak that control can be (Mount 8). As soon as the tannery is founded, this association is transformed in nature. It occupies the common spaces of the village, the prices in the bazaar increase and the industrial development starts taking over agrarian use. According to Mount, the first violence of the tannery, as seen by Rukmani, is that it has taken over the maidan, the open field used by all, and turned it into a privately-owned space, where it was previously the common space (Mount 8). Literary wise, this is a very capitalistic change: land is no longer seen as a sustaining relationship of life but re-defined as property, use, industry space.

The commodification of labour is also a manifestation of capitalism in the novel. The labour of Rukmani and Nathan is connected to the survival of the family, the time of the year and the direct reliance to the land in the world they live in before industrialization. As the tannery comes, labour becomes more and more separated out of these older structures, and is quantified in terms of exchange value. Wage work seems to be an opportunity, particularly to those of the younger generation, yet the novel shows that such a promise is so false. The tannery does not add much to the rural life, but rather takes it away at the inside. According to Mount, although wage-work at the tannery might appear to generate a new low-middle class, in actual sense, it has the potential of increasing inequalities and rendering the vulnerable even more vulnerable (Mount 9). This is among the most significant lessons that Markandaya teaches us about capitalism, it may seem to give choice eventually when it had ruined previous modes of survival. It is not that the villagers are voluntarily taking up industrial labour in a position of strength: they are driven to it by the undermining of the agrarian order, which they had been relying on.



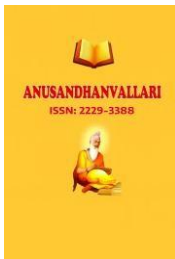
Migration of Capitalism

The novel can be even more unveiled with references to the theory of the cheap nature developed by Jason W. Moore. According to Moore (2016), capitalism grows by producing and seizing cheap labour, cheap food, cheap energy and cheap raw materials, all of which have to be obtained at minimum social cost in order to accumulate (99-102). He goes ahead to say that capitalism endures by finding and measuring natures which can be subjected to as being outside capital yet they are necessary to capitalism (Moore 114). This structure throws light to the contribution of the tannery in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The village is transformed into a periphery of the low nature: the territory of the village is consumed in the industrial growth, the labour force is turned to the wage-work, and the ecology is destroyed in favour of the production. Markandaya therefore demonstrates that capitalism is not just the exploitation of nature; it re-structures the relationship between man and nature to ensure that both are exploited more vehemently. The tannery is successful since the costs of its development are passed on to the people who have least power to counter them.

The novel is dependent on the ecological aspect of capitalism. Markandaya does not consider nature as a decorative backdrop; on the contrary, she offers nature as the material foundation of peasant life. As soon as that ground is destroyed, social relations start to disintegrate. Mount demonstrates how the emergence of the tannery disrupts the wildlife, transforms the village landscape, and also leads to commoditization of the bodies and land (Mount 8-10). This implies that ecological disturbance cannot be separated with capitalism in the novel. The industrial development is not only rearranging the social framework of life, it is reorganizing the natural surroundings: the disappearance of the common land, the extinction of birds and animals, increase of prices, and pressure on subsistence all shows that the village is being destroyed not only economically but also environmentally. The novel thus prefigures subsequent ecocritical and postcolonial discourses that capitalist modernization usually relies upon the destruction of the peripheral environments in the guise of civilization and betterment.

Dispossession is also inseparable with capitalism in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The conception of postcolonial capitalism as developed by Naruse also assists in clarifying the fact that in postcolonial literature one needs to interpret capitalism in the context of the colonial domination and incorporation into the world order unequally (Naruse 114-15). It is exactly such a world that can be traced in the novel of Markandaya. Even though India is formally independent, the power-political structures and development persist in favouring the capital owners, property owners and institutional power holders, whereas the rural poor are still vulnerable to displacement. Rukmani and Nathan lack this kind of protection that ownership gives. When the economic order is changed, they are exposed to eviction, hunger and migration. The city fails to save them out of this process; it only increases their alienation. In this respect, the novel demonstrates that capitalism is not merely a problem of industrial advancement but a social hierarchy where some human life is sacrificed in the name of modernization.

To English literary criticism, capitalism in *Nectar in a Sieve* can be characterized as a historical order of ownership, wage labour, commodification, and power of classes that reorganizes the social as well as the ecological life. The success of Markandaya is that this system intrudes even into the most personal spheres of life: marriage, family, food, hope, land, and physical survival. The tannery turns out to be the capitalist emblem of the novel since it introduces a novel valuation measure. What is important is not the human need or community continuation but what can be mined, marketed and developed. Rural lands are useful only to the extent that they are useful to industrial production. The individuals that inhabit it are only important in that they can be employed as labour or dispossessed without loss. Thus, *Nectar in a Sieve* is not just a country tragedy. It is an eloquent literary indictment of the capitalist system as a mechanism that transforms land into property, labour into wage labour and the life of human beings into something that can be measured in financial terms as profit rather than human dignity (Williams 51-52; Mount 8-10; Moore 114).

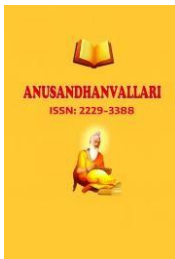


Growing capitalism in postcolonial Global South has created new spatial, ecological, and social dynamics because capital tries to connect remote areas with a global competitive market. The term hinterlands, which is traditionally merely referred to as the agrarian peripheries or even as a source of resources to the cities around them, is being incorporated into broader industrial and logistical systems. The products are now being manufactured, processed, kept, shipped, and circulated over these areas; the city and the countryside are melded together. Consequently, villages, agricultural territories, and fringe settlements are changed into an industrial area, connected with roads, freight routes, warehouses, and extractive systems. This is not merely a redistribution of economic activity, but a redistribution of land use, a loss of control by regions over the natural resources, a redirection of regional ecologies to the capital needs. Hinterlands therefore instead of enjoying equitable development are transformed into zones of environmental deterioration, social warfare, and livelihood insecurity (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Jain and Korzhenevych; Peeren et al.).

Such overseas migration of capitalism is perpetuated by an inexorable pursuit of cheap labour, cheap food, cheap energy, and cheap raw material, which can continue to make production profitable in a global scale. In this respect, capitalist spread is supported not by the barrenness of the distant space but rather by the ability to transform it into the new sources of exploitation. These spaces are rendered legible and exploitable by state policy, infrastructural planning and technocratic conceptualization of development, and pushed to the periphery the environmental costs and human suffering. Forests, rivers, soil and minerals, even human labour, are all considered to be useful to accumulation in as much as the lives of the people who are dependent on these ecologies are made more and more dangerous. In its aftermath comes a process of accumulation by dispossession where land alienation, environmental degradation, displacement and loss of livelihood are hailed as the rhetoric of growth and modernization. The hinterland communities are usually victims of slow violence caused by development as perceived by the state and industry, and they can occur in the form of contamination, food insecurity, climate vulnerability, and loss of social worlds (Moore 2016; Patel and Moore 2017; Harvey 2003; Cernea 1997; Nixon 2011).

Planetary urbanization refers to the proliferation of urban processes well beyond the boundaries of the circumscribed city into the outer realms that are needed to support metropolitan life. In the globalized form of capitalism, hinterlands are no longer simply rural reserves of food or raw materials operating into the urban hubs, but are becoming reorganized into extraction, production, logistic, circulation, and disposal activity landscapes. With these functions being dispersed into the peripheries, the city / country distinction is becoming less fixed, and villages, woodland, river basins, agrarian areas are being incorporated into industrial networks. This restructuring has had a close relationship with neoliberal development and development of global markets in the Global South where peripheral ecologies are transformed into accumulation zones. (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Sassen 2014). The effects are both ecological and spatial: capitalist development goes further into the territories that had been assumed as external to the city but now are fully incorporated into the metabolism of the industrial city.

The idea of ecosystem people proposed by Gadgil and Guha comes in handy especially when it comes to the disproportionality of the burden affecting this transformation. Their development focuses on the communities that rely directly on local ecologies to provide food, fuel, food, fodder, water, and livelihood, thus particularly sensitive to the ecological disturbance and environmental deterioration (Gadgil and Guha 95). Jason W. Moore (2016) goes deeper with this argument by demonstrating that capitalism is reliant on the fact that cheap nature, i.e. appropriation of cheap labour, food, energy, and raw materials, is produced consistent of the frontiers that get treated as external to value despite being essential to accumulation. This reasoning is based on the ideological division between the society and the natural world as a result of which colonized populations, Indigenous people, women, and populations of colour are historically undervalued and put to exploitation. With



such a position, they can appropriate their work, their land, as well as their environments at low or no cost. What can be seen as development in the perspectives of the state and capital consequently tends to turn into a displacement regime, impoverishment and slow-moving violence to people at the margins, where land, access to common resources, ecological stability and social autonomy will be left behind as urban and industrial growth proceeds to enjoy the benefits of the cheapening of life and environment elsewhere.

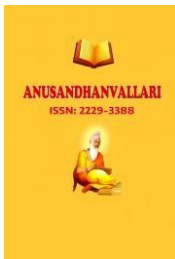
This process is shown in postcolonial settings like India where capitalist modernization fails not only to blur the rural and the urban, but it restructures the countryside into an extraction and extraction field. Hinterlands are designed to fulfill the needs of the remote markets and urban-industrial regimes, and the ecological and human expenses of such supply are pushed over the local people. In this regard, planetary urbanization is not to be perceived as an indifferent spatialization but a highly unequal historical process whereby capitalistic expansion relies on absorbing, degrading and cheapening peripheral natures and lives.

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) by Kamala Markandaya is regarded as one of the most effective early Indian English novels concerning human price of development. The novel takes place in a village in southern India right after Independence and it traces the life of Rukmani who is at the age of twelve married to a tenant farmer, Nathan, and how her life is slowly ruined by famine, tenancy insecurity, and the coming of a tannery. Markandaya narrates the story through Rukmani in the first person to demonstrate that industrialization is not perceived as an abstract national development but rather as a concrete attack on land, labour, kinship and subsistence. The tannery does not only introduce employment, the tannery is changing the village economy, altering the prices, pulling the young men out of the fields, and altering the ecological balance upon which the life of the peasants depends. In that regard, the novel reveals the process of modernization in the country, turning into a periphery area of industrial exploitation a self-sufficient agrarian world.

Of particular importance is the fact that environmental precarity has been interconnected with economic dispossession in the novel. Rukmani and Nathan inhabit an ecologically dependent existence based on land, rain, and seasonal cycles and they are vulnerable to such a degree that Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1995) refer to such a state as eco-system people, those communities whose livelihood is directly dependent upon the ecology of a specific region. On the rise of the crop failure, hunger and land loss, the family is being pushed up to tannery and, ultimately, to migration. Markandaya therefore exposes the fact that industrial development is not merely that which replaces one mode of work with another, but that it brings about more profound discontinuity whereby the agrarian life is disrupted and individuals are reduced to being subordinate to forces outside their control. Subsistence farming is no longer able to support the village youth, particularly Arjun and Thambi, who are absorbed into wage labour and is a demonstration of how capitalism quantifies human labour and reviews persons only as useful in the industrial process.

The tannery is an artifact of one of the models of development that views the rural hinterland as a frontier to be restructured to make money. The capital appeals in the novel are not only the betraying of the raw materials or labour, but also the degradation of the people who occupy the land. The family of Rukmani is of no use to the new economy other than to supply labour, but their plight is unnoticeable to the institutions of authority that glorify the process of progress. Markandaya thus pre-empts future criticisms of development by demonstrating that the bloodshed of capitalism is sometimes slow, gradual and normalized. Hunger, ecological degradation, unemployment, displacement, and the destruction of dignity occur at a slow pace but they are not less destructive because they are gradual. Industrialization turns out to be a regime of slow violence against the rural poor in the name of national development in the novel.

This is one of the strongest early Indian English novels on the human cost of development, and *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) by Kamala Markandaya is a novel. The village is a south Indian village just after independence



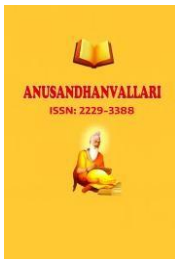
and the novel narrates the story of a woman, Rukmani, who is married off at twelve years of age to a tenant farmer, Nathan, and who is slowly derailed by famine, a lack of tenancy ownership, and the tanning plant. Markandaya contributes to a deeper exploration of the real truth about industrialization as experienced by Rukmani as a narrative piece that is first-person narrative that industrialization is not a broad-based national development and progress but rather a material attack on land, labour, kinship and subsistence. The tannery is not only a source of employment it reshapes the village economy and increases prices, displacing young men and peasants out of farming and destroying the ecological balance upon which the life of peasant civilization was built. In this regard, the novel reveals the infiltration of modernization into countryside in the form of transformation of the previously self-sufficient agrarian environment into a peripheral terrain of industrial mining.

Of particular interest is the fact that the novel creates a bridging of the links between environmental precarity and economic dispossession. Rukmani and Nathan are living in close reliance on the land, rain and seasonal cycles and vulnerability is likened to that of what Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha term as the situation of ecosystem people, communities whose livelihood is directly dependent on the local ecologies. With crop failure, hunger and other forms of land loss coming in more and more, the family is driven to the tannery, and, at its extreme, to migration. Markandaya, therefore, shows that it is not just a replacement of one mode of work by another, industrial development leads to a deeper disruption where agrarian life is being destabilized and human beings turned vulnerable to other forces beyond their control can be seen. Processing human labour into wage labour through subsistence crop agriculture being unable to support them, the village youth particularly Arjun and Thambi are monetized, and once more, displaying how capitalism monetizes the human labour as well as repricing persons in terms of usefulness in the industrial context.

Identity Crisis

In Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, it is made so clear that the rural poor are still unseen in the discourse of development and nation-building. As Rukmani and Nathan are forced into the city following the loss of their land, they never get the chance and respect but a more brutal regime of existence dictated by money, scarcity and expendable labour. Rukmani is trying to earn her living through being a letter-writer, but the income is just enough to purchase food, whereas quarry work is gradually ruining the health of Nathan. The brutality of the moral economy in the novel is further expressed when Raja dies as a result of stealing calfskin in the tannery: the loss of the commodities is considered a bigger offense than the murder of a poor person. Markandaya uses these episodes to reveal a world where labouring bodies are appreciated in terms of what they can create, and where the interest of the government is directed towards property and profit as opposed to hunger, disease, or human dignity. The city is therefore an extension of the tannery line of reasoning that turns individuals into work units and deprives them of social value when their labour force becomes inefficient.

A novel is even more effective when the concept of slow violence by Rob Nixon (2011) is taken into consideration. The devastation in *Nectar in a Sieve* is not made in one theatrical act; instead, it is built up by increasing prices, ecological deprivation, land expropriation, hunger, disease, debts and forced migration. Prior to their physical departure out of the village, Rukmani and Nathan already feel the displacement without the need to move since they are in the community but the very land they lived on is slowly losing its security and liveability. Once they eventually relocate to the city, this displacement acquires a new shape, with precarious labour, city poverty and body fatigue substituting the more established certainties of the rural life. The novel by Markandaya thus predicts subsequent arguments focusing on environmental justice by demonstrating how development creates sacrifice zones where some lives become disposable so that economic growth may seem successful in other areas.



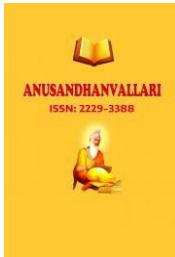
Not only raw materials and animal hides are used in the tannery, but also peasant land, physical power, and social structure of the village, the costs of capitalist modernity are hidden in the countryside.

Nectar in a Sieve in this sense is not just a novel of personal affliction, but an indictment of an order of development that considers the poor as dispensable but disposable. The death of Nathan following quarry labour, unsuccessful attempts of Rukmani to achieve compensation or relief and the constant displacement of the family prove that the development of capitalism is supported by the devaluation of both nature and human life. Markandaya rejects the triumphant discourse of modernization by pre-empting the discourse of those who are not privileged by modernization and who are being destroyed by the onslaught of modernization. Her novel finally raises a question to which postcolonial environmental justice continues to be devoted: by whom does the nation shape its own and whose lives are lost in the process.

One can read *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamala Markandaya in a profitable way, in terms of the notion of the slow violence introduced by Rob Nixon, since it is based on the idea of progressive erosion of land, livelihood, and human dignity, which is gradually undermined by this process. When the tannery arrives, it does not completely shatter the world Rukmani is familiar with instead it gradually anaesthetizes it to the point where it becomes loyal to the noise, the stench, the ecological imbalance and escalating prices and social instability until the village is no longer the same thing that was supporting those who lived there. The apparent adaptation of Rukmani to these changes is an indication, not of any resiliency in the liberatory sense of such a thing, but of an enforced adaptation to a new economic order where agrarian life is being systematically emptied out. This is further aggravated by drought, land insecurity and expansion of wage labour that leave the family between a devastated countryside and an urban world that has nothing to offer but further degradation. Through this, the novel illustrates that the capitalist growth is fostered by delayed and cumulative types of violence which in most cases are not identified as violence at all.

Another aspect that the novel sheds light on is described as an ecological distribution conflict by Joan Martinez-Alier and Martin O'Connor. The tannery puts the economic advantages in the possession of landlords, merchants, and industry and pushes the environmental and social dislocation onto to peasants such as Rukmani and Nathan. They lose their land, they have food insecurity, their bodies are exhausted, and they are humiliated socially, but their family is not compensated, and there is no political recognition of them. It turns the village, therefore, into a place of unequal distribution of environmental goods and bads: it is the capital that acquires land, labour, and raw materials, the villagers absorb the pollution, dispossession, and hunger. Markandaya makes it very clear that this injustice is not random but institutional. The people reliant on the local ecology are the ones made most invisible by the policy and profit body and their plight has not been a part of the official ecological discourse of development. Along with the cheap nature theories and postcolonial environmental justice, *Nectar in a Sieve* reveals how the rural poor have become shadow citizens of modernization, yet are required to work without enjoying its benefits and rights.

The strength of this novel is that it links some of the most devastating occurrences in the environment to political invisibility. Not only is the family of Rukmani poor; it is also systematically undervalued in terms of productivity and profit by a developmental order. They are dispossessed, thus, material, ecological and moral simultaneously. Following the progressive devastation of a peasant family, Markandaya shows how the capitalist modernity slowly turns the countryside into an area of extraction and abandonment where people least capable of resisting it bear the weight of the developing process. *Nectar in a Sieve*, therefore, predetermines the subsequent arguments of the environmental justice movement by exposing the reality that the violence of industrialization is long-term, disproportionate, and social in its implications.



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