

**INDIA AND CANADA AS THE TWIN ECOFEMINIST SISTERS: A CRITICAL
EVALUATION OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *NECTAR IN A SIEVE* AND
MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING***

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Abstract

Ecological destruction and women suppression are the two most crucial problems which prevail in the present society. Patriarchal system or the male-dominant society is its root cause. Here lies the relevance of the theory of Ecofeminism. This paper evaluates Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing through the ecofeminism lenses to trace out the bonding of India and Canada—the twin ecofeminist sisters in suffering and exploitation. Reading the texts through the ecofeminism perspective helps to comprehend that there is no boundary of exploitation. In Nectar in a sieve, Markandaya depicts the miserable condition of a village woman Rukmani who becomes a victim of poverty, infertility, and industrialization, etc. Similarly, in Surfacing, Atwood, with the help of her ecofeminism narrator, shows how society exploits the female body for the materialistic gain. Both the novels deal with the themes related to environmentalism and feminism, thus making them appropriate for the ecofeminism evaluation.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Infertility, Asset, Liability, Masculine, Liberation, Mother Earth*

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women (1).

This is what Mary Mellor writes in “Introduction” of her book *Feminism & Ecology* about the movement of Ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a term which was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book, titled, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, published in 1974. ‘Ecology’ and ‘Feminism’ are the two words that form the term Ecofeminism. The term differs from ‘Feminism’ though it has originated from it. While citing the difference between the two terms, the celebrated ecofeminist Vandana Shiva in an interview says: “Ecofeminism is a good term for distinguishing a feminism that is ecological from the kind of feminisms that have become extremely technocratic. I would even call them very patriarchal” (*Louder than Bombs* 192).

Ecofeminism traces a link between the oppression of women and exploitation of nature. It holds the patriarchal structure accountable for the miserable plight of both women and nature. Patriarchal dimensions have a propensity to associate women with earth, emotions, unconsciousness, and nature while attributing men with the sky, logic,

consciousness, and capital. All the superior characteristics are attributed to men and the inferior ones to women. Dido Dunlop writes:

Ecofeminism adds that patriarchy devalues women, and therefore devalues nature because nature is seen as mother. Women and nature get trashed together. Anything patriarchy associates with women are also trashed: caring, compassion, mothering, emotions, looking after nature, valuing life over money. To survive the climate emergency, we need to know we're part of Mother Nature. To value nature, we must honor women too, and vice versa. (www.permaculturewomen.com)

As the female body is dominated and subordinated, the earth body is also being polluted and deforested. The male monopolised society is the basic cause of all these problems.

Literature reflects what happens in the society. An author remains an author whether he or she belongs to India or Canada. He writes what he sees, observes, and experiences. He is not confined to any geographical boundary. India and Canada who have colonial experiences are like the twin sisters. Both the countries have something to share and learn from each other. K. S. Ramamurti in his "Introduction" to *Canadian Literature and Society* writes:

Canada has evoked a great deal of interest in the Indian minds a country with similar patterns of experience...There has also been increasing realization that the two countries have a great deal to learn from each other's experience in solving many ethnic, demographic, economic, constitutional and legal problems including the problems of women. It is particularly interesting that women in Canada, for all the freedom and equality of opportunities given to them, are no happier than their Indian counterparts. (12)

The exploitation of Nature and women is still prevalent in both the countries. Hence, the need is to make a comparative study in perspectives of Ecofeminism, a branch of feminism searching for the common link between women and nature. For this, in this paper, two novelists— Kamala Markandaya from India and Margaret Atwood from Canada have been taken here. Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* are evaluated from the Ecofeminist point of view.

Kamala Markandaya's novel *Nectar in a Sieve* features an Ecofeminist protagonist Rukmani. The story of the novel is replete with suffering, poverty, sacrifice and vulnerability. At the age of just twelve, Rukmani is married to Nathan, a tenant farmer. She shares a special bond with nature. She says:

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? (*Nectar in a Sieve* 8)

Within a year she conceives a beautiful daughter, Ira. Despite being literate, this upsets Rukmani as she desires a son. While expressing her disappointment, she says: "I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born? They took the child from me" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 15). Even Nathan, her husband shares the same feelings: "Nathan at first paid scant attention

to her: he had wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a puling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 16). This is the outlook of the patriarchal society which accepts son cheerfully and daughter unwillingly. Society considers the son as an asset while the daughter is a liability. For the next six years, Rukmani does not conceive. As she has a desire for a son, she goes to meet Doctor Kenny to get the treatment of her infertility. In quick succession, she gives birth to five sons. When Ira’s husband finds that she is infertile, he returns her to her parents’ home and marries another girl. Rukmani says:

Neighbours, women... and I a failure, a woman who cannot even bear a child.
All this I had gone through—the torment, the anxiety. Now the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, and it was my daughter this time. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 50)

This shows that a woman is considered only to be a child-bearing machine. A woman’s importance mainly rests in her ability to give birth to a child. If the woman fails to give birth to a child, she becomes a matter of shame for the society. Markandaya beautifully comes up with a relevant point that a husband whether literate or illiterate cannot see his wife more educated. Men like Nathan are rare in the society. But, the point is clear from Rukmani’s words when she says: “I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was, for Nathan could not even write his name; yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure, as lesser men might have done” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 13).

Rukmani’s son Arjun brings the news of Tannery’s construction. He says “They are pulling down houses around the maidan and there is a long line of bullocks carts carrying bricks” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 25). Some villagers think that the construction of the tannery is a sign of development. But actually, tannery brings more harm to the village than help. Due to this tannery’s construction, the flora and fauna of the village get affected. In Rukmani’s words, “Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 29).

Nectar in a Sieve reveals the ecofeminist concerns of the protagonist Rukmani who suffers much due to the introduction of the tannery in the village. The tannery makes an encroachment on the cultivated land resulting in poverty and hunger of the villagers. Women like Kunti are compelled to take up prostitution and even Rukmani’s daughter sells her body to save her brother from hunger. Tannery, in the name of the development of science and technology, swallows pastoral land and agrarian culture while rupturing the moral values of the villagers.

Markandaya magnificently highlights the dualities prevalent in the society. Society prefers white over black, men over women, and human over nature etc.

“I will ask Kenny to help you. White men have power.”
“Indeed they have,” he said bitterly. “Over men, and events, and especially over women.” (*Nectar in a Sieve* 52)

When Rukmani and Nathan go to the city in search of their son, they loathe the mechanized life of the city. They start pining for the village life where they live in direct contact with nature.

With each passing day the longing for the land grew; our plans were forged against a background of brown earth and green fields and the ripe rustling paddy, not, curiously, as they were, but as we had first known them... fresh, open and unspoilt, with their delicate scents and sounds untainted, with the skies clear above them and the birds finding sanctuary in the grasses. And at the same time, keeping pace with these longings, our distaste for the city grew and grew and became a sweeping, pervading hatred. (*Nectar in a Sieve* 166)

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* lucidly presents the destruction of nature and the suffering of women at the hands of masculine forces.

In her book *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation*, Rosemary Ruether, an American feminist scholar writes:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society. (204)

Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* features an unnamed female protagonist. She, with her companions, namely her boyfriend Joe, married couple David and Anna, and a guide Evans goes to an island in search of her lost father. The novel reflects ecofeminist concerns. It deals with the growth and transformation of the unnamed female narrator from being a victim of patriarchal structure into a follower of ecofeminism. The protagonist's ecofeminist perspective is visible when she says that "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (*Surfacing* 195). Although she searches for her father but actually she does not want to meet him. She actually tries to escape from the reality and the burden of divorce and abortion. This notion is clearly visible when the protagonist says:

If he's safe I don't want to see him. There's no point, they never forgave me, they didn't understand the divorce; I don't think they even understood the marriage, which wasn't surprising since I didn't understand it myself. What upset them was the way I did it, so suddenly, and then running off and leaving my husband and child, my attractive full-colour magazine illustrations, suitable for framing. Leaving my child, that was the unpardonable sin; it was no use trying to explain to them why it wasn't really mine. (*Surfacing* 31)

In *Surfacing*, Atwood reveals the present pathetic condition of nature. As the patriarchal society prefers money to nature, nature is demolished. Industrialization is one of the major reasons behind ecological destruction. Atwood, who is herself an environmentalist, says: "...remnants of the trees that were here before the district was locked out. The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales" (*Surfacing* 51). The protagonist's journey from Toronto to Northern Quebec symbolizes an escape from the urban, artificial, and mechanized life to the Canadian wilderness in the lap of nature. Truly the narrator's hunt is not for her missing father but becomes a search for her inner damaged self. Her damaged soul recovers in the lap of Mother Nature. She gets a new birth when she comes in direct contact with nature. A glimpse of the

connection between women and nature can be clearly observed in the narrator's final union with nature. She feels:

Through the trees, the sun glances; the swamp around me smoulders, energy of decay turning to growth, green fire. I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply. (*Surfacing* 180)

The novel *Surfacing* demonstrates many instances of female and nature exploitation. Instances like 'the way Narrator is compelled to abort the baby by her former husband', 'David's maltreatment of her wife Anna', 'killing of the bird', 'death of white birches', and 'unnecessary murder of heron' mirror the patriarchal world which subjugates and oppresses both women and nature. The subjugation of women in the male-dominated society is evident when the narrator says about the baby:

But I couldn't have brought the child here, I never identified it as mine; I didn't name it before it was born even, the way you're supposed to. It was my husband's, he imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself. (*Surfacing* 37)

Her abortion leaves her guilty of killing the child. She is not able to recover from that incident. While having a hallucination of a dead child, she describes:

I knew when it was, it was in a bottle curled up, staring out at me like a cat pickled; it had huge jelly eyes and fins instead of hands, fish gills, I couldn't let it out, it was dead already, it had drowned in air. It was there when I woke up, suspended in the air above me like a chalice, an evil grail and I thought, Whatever it is, part of myself or a separate creature, I killed it. It wasn't a child but it could have been one. I didn't know it. (*Surfacing* 153)

Atwood takes a womanizer character David in her novel *Surfacing* to demonstrate the exploitation of women. David compels and bullies his wife Anna to strip down her clothes for the camera. When she refuses to do so, he threatens to throw her. "Shut up, she's my wife," David said. His hand clamped down above her elbow. She jerked away, then I saw his arms go around her as if to kiss her and she was in the air, upside down over his shoulder, hair hanging in damp ropes" (*Surfacing* 145). Atwood has not only given voice to the voiceless nature and women but also to the victimhood of Canada. As the novel introduces concern pertaining to feminism and ecology, it constitutes a representative literary instance of ecofeminism.

Men consider women and nature passive resulting in exploitation of both women as well as nature. Women have to step forward to take a stand for themselves as well as for nature. In the words of Vandana Shiva, "We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth, or we are not going to have a human future at all" (qtd. by Binuraj in *The Hindu*).

Ecofeminism is the lens which is applicable to both India and Canada. It strengthens the bond between two countries related to nature and women resulting in making them twin ecofeminist sisters. Actually, this is not the case of these two countries only but the whole

earth is suffering from the torture of this patriarchal system. The need of the hour is to eradicate the frame of patriarchal system and implant the egalitarian system. Susan Griffin, a radical feminist philosopher writes:

This earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am. How we admire this strength in each other, all that we have lost, all that we have suffered, all that we know: We are stunned by this beauty, and I do not forget: what she is to me, what I am to her. (219)

In brief, the discussion can be concluded with the words of Vandana Shiva who spoke to Amy Goodman in an interview: “The liberation of the earth, the liberation of women, the liberation of all humanity is the next step of freedom we need to work for, and it’s the next step of peace that we need to create” (www.democracynow.org).

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