



Eco-critical Outlook of Subalterns in *Nectar in a Sieve* of Kamala Markandaya and in *The Hungry Tide* of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

This paper deals with the outlook, thoughts and approach of the subalterns towards ecology and environment that Kamala Markandaya and Amitav Ghosh present in their novels “Nectar in a Sieve” (1954) and “The Hungry Tide” (2004) respectively. An analytical method is used to deal with this study. Kamala Markandaya and Amitav Ghosh are great environmentalists who with a deep sense of ecological perspectives presented the subalterns’ lives that they lead in the lap of nature and laid down their indignant approach towards growing industrialization, deforestation and unethical act of killing animals. This study will show that how subalterns are more sensitive to nature, the more environmentalists and contribute to the protection of nature which is getting devastated day by day. According to Cheryll Glotfelty Eco-criticism studies the relation between the physical environment and the literature. Here, the focus is how these two novels present the relation of the whole environment and the literature through the life and thoughts of marginalized people and areas where Subalterns live. The agrarian culture, Rukmani’s love of nature, birds and animals; Nathan’s love of farming; introduction of tannery and its adverse effects upon the life of the Subaltern are presented in “Nectar in a Sieve” by Kamala Markandaya. Amitav Ghosh, in “The Hungry Tide”, presents the lives of the Subalterns in Sundarbans, the beautiful and healthy atmosphere of Sundarbans, and the attitude of Subalterns towards saving the life of the animals in Sundarbans.

Keywords: Devastation, Ecocriticism, Environment, Nature, Subaltern.

Human beings, non-human beings, trees, different species, non-living things together make nature. Nature is vast and everything is the part of the nature. Everything is depended on the nature. Nature creates, nourishes and brings up each and every part that existed in the universe. A study of relationship between man and nature unveils the existing temperament of the people towards nature. However, the materialistic life style of the people especially the people of the city area are unable to see the darkness that they are incurring upon themselves by devastating the nature. Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya substantially advocate the earnest need to brood over the growing careless, unethical act of the people towards nature and the people to bring about the vast change in the thinking, attitude and behaviour with respect to the subalterns, the marginalized people, the poor people, the animals, the trees, the



flora and fauna etcetera. The subalterns are the people who are marginalized and are neglected by the so called higher caste of people and the rich people. In the both novels entitled *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) the subalterns are shown to be leading the life in the lap of the nature, they are shown to be loving the animals, flora and fauna, birds, and also their indignation towards growing industrialization and devastation of the nature. This paper deals with the Subaltern's affectionate relationship with the trees, animals, birds and even with the men. It also deals with Subaltern's views about growing industrialization and modernization. In *Nectar in a Sieve* of Kamala Markandaya Nathan, Rukmani, Ira, are marginalized people. Nathan, the marginalized character loves farming and leading a life in the lap of the nature. Rukmani loves birds, animals, farming plants, and expresses her anger towards introduction of the tannery in the village. In *The Hungry Tide*, Fokir, Kusum, Moyna are marginalized people who lead their whole life in Sundarban, in the lap of the nature, with the animals, birds and the trees. They love the nature and contribute indirectly to the protection of the nature. The study is done analytically. The focus will be on how the subalterns present their relationship with the other parts of the nature, their unwillingness towards establishment of the factories and their indignation towards people's destructive minds which think of devastating the nature.

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of relationship between literature and physical environment.” Ecocriticism is known by various terms as “Green Studies”, “Ecopoetics”, and “Environmental Literary Criticism”. The aim of ecocriticism is to find out environmental concerns and issues presented by the writers in their works. There are many journals as *ISLE (International Studies in Literature and the Environment)*, the *British Green Letters*, and the *Australian Environmental Humanities*. which promote the conservation and preservation of the nature. The term ‘Ecocriticism’ first, is coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in the year 1978. However, Swarnalatha Rangarajan says that “various schools of critical theory since the 1960s have participated in the project of denaturalization of nature, the revision of which is one of the primary aims of ecocriticism.”(P.166). As Swarnalatha Rangarajan mentions in her book entitled *Eco Criticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* the statement of Lawrence as:

In various schools of criticism, such as formalism, psychoanalysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, and even Marxism, it has become obligatory to declare that there is ‘no such thing as nature’ since nature has been reduced to a term within a cultural discourse, a sign within the signifying system. (Lawrence. p. 172)

The Eco-criticism emphasizes on finding disasters, havoc, pollution, famine, drought, extinction of species, growing industrialization, deforestation, relationship between man and nature, global warming, nature as preserver and the destroyer, the life style of the people. The people of the rural area are so closer to the nature and especially the poor, underprivileged and the marginalized people. The Subalterns are the marginalized people. The term “Subaltern” developed by Ranjit Guha is used especially to refer to the peasants who are aloof from the capitalist world. However, currently, this term is used to refer to any kind of person or any kind of group who are considered inferior in rank due to their class, race,



religion and gender. In the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Amitav Ghosh the subalterns figure extensively. Amitav Ghosh explicitly presents the subaltern history in his novels. Kamala Markandaya eminently portrays the subalterns, their lives and their concern with the nature.

Rukmani, the chief character in *Nectar in a Sieve* of Kamala Markandaya, is obsessed with the feelings and emotions of love and fascination towards the birds, plants, and the animals. Rukmani describes astonishingly the environment, the birds and the plants. It seems that she has a close bond with the nature and the words of eulogy come out through her mouth spontaneously which explicitly shows her deep and wholehearted attachment with the nature. She appreciates when she gazes at the refreshed and walking animals, the ringing of the bells that are hung to the bullocks. She also praises the fluttering sound of the birds, sparrows and bulbuls, mynahs, parrots and also the eagle's cry. She even describes the planting of the seeds, watering the plants, watching the birds flying and animals' playing. She likes to do the work of farming. Her love and close kinship with the nature is also found when she names her daughter as Irawaddy, however, Irawaddy is the river of Asia. The family of Rukmani leads a life in poverty. They live in a hut which is thatched, the water sips in the monsoon season. They in regular intervals repair the thatched hut.

Nathan and Rukmani both repair the roof with fronds of the coconut palm and it is strengthened with the clay. They have very little to lead a life in satisfaction, but they have much for the nature. Nathan is landless, he hires the farming land and toil to earn the livelihood of his family. Ira, Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Raja, Selvam are the children of Rukmani and Nathan. They have a big family. It is very significant that though being penniless and work strenuously to have a single day meal, they have not forsaken their ethical values, love to the animals, birds, plants and farming. Poor, marginalized Rukmani intuitively visualized the harm and destruction in the introduction of the tannery in the village. The tannery not only destroyed the life of so many people but also destroyed the farming, devastated the nature. Rukmani was against the tannery from the beginning, it destroyed their life. The owner of the tannery bought the land, gave job to the people in the tannery which resulted into young people's negligence towards the farming. The youngsters lost the connectivity with the nature and started their work in the four closed walls which has adverse effect upon the nature.

Arjun and Thambi the sons of Rukmani and Nathan joined the tannery, but later on they had to lose their lives as they died. Rukmani insisted them many times for not doing the work in the tannery, but their fascination towards tannery, means their fascination towards machines and modern ways of working, was hardening their steps towards farming. Due to tannery in the village the prices of the vegetables, groceries hiked, many subalterns borrowed money from the money lenders, many of them have left the farming and joined the tannery. Tannery brought along with it the misery, the havoc in subalterns' lives and devastated the natural environment.

The problems in the life of the subalterns continue to exist though toiling much to detach themselves from them. Two time meal of each day becomes difficult to manage and in



such strenuous and effortful life, the disastrous attribute of the nature that is caused to it by the unnatural act of the people, started to show her anger against the people by way of the wind, the storm and the heavy rain. The big havoc of the nature destroyed the crops of the farmers which caused many problems in their lives. Rukmani lost the vegetables, the shoots and vines were battered and broken, the field of the corn and paddy was lost. Several people became homeless and many of the people died of the lightning. The hut of Kali had been entirely demolished. The trees were uprooted, sticks and the stones dispersed. But among them tannery stood stagnantly without any loss. As Kamala Markandaya writes in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954)

In the village the storm had left disaster and desolation worse than on our own doorstep. Uprooted trees sprawled their branches in ghastly fashion over streets and houses... The tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds; but workers' huts, of more flimsy construction, had been demolished. (Markandaya, p. 45)

Nature's fury washed away the huts, crops, trees, small plants, paddy of the poor people. The tannery due to its strong construction could not be moved away. But the poor people never detached themselves from the field, birds, animals, crops rather they preferred to live in countryside.

Rukmani cares for the environment. She does not like the people to waste money on the crackers and make sound and air pollution. She is never seen to be liking to set bonfire and to watch the smoke of the bonfire flying towards the clouds and thus pollute the atmosphere. Even, she follows the culture and celebrates the festivals but with the conscience of keeping the atmosphere clean and taking care of animals, birds and the plants. Nathan's love for the farming and attachment with the soil, paddy, vegetables and the crops is implicitly visible in the novel. He never likes his sons to work in the tannery though he knows that they can earn more there. Rather they were more attracted towards the farming when they lost the hired land and went to city where their son Murugan lived for living with their son and doing some works. There, they feel isolated and only remember their village, its atmosphere, soothing life in the lap of the nature.

Kamala Markandaya has presented in a skillful manner the nostalgic feelings of Rukmani and Nathan that they were missing everything of their village in that city. There, they were humiliated by many of the people, were reviled and were expelled from different places by considering them to be the beggars. They could not meet Murugan in the city, for which they had come there. They had decided to return to their village which was very close to their hearts, but they had no money to pay the travelling charges. Therefore, they had to live in the city to earn money. They decided to halt till they earn sufficient amount so that they could pay at least the travelling charges up to their village. They worked hard of breaking the stones and started earning little amount of money in the city. Even, when Nathan was ill, unable to stand, Rukmani continued her working of breaking the hard stones. Their disheartening poverty could not let them rest. Rukmani at last returned to her native village but without Nathan, because Nathan was no more. Nathan died because there was no



house to rest, no money for hospitalization and the medicines, no money to eat healthy food. His wish of leading a life in the village, in the lap of the nature could not be succeeded due to their worse financial condition, and social negligence. Rukmani went back to her village with Puli, the small boy who was orphan.

Amitav Ghosh is the greatest environmentalist who presents his thoughts through his novels. However, his several novels are present the history, especially the history of Asia. The major incidents of the history he portrays in the novels. He emphasizes on how these events have brought about changes in the lives of the people. The novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is crucial in handling the issue of ecological imbalance, environmental pollution, and the social issues particularly related with the local people who are poor, marginalized and neglected. The novel is set in Sundarbans island. This novel is divided into two parts as ‘The Ebb: Bhata’ and ‘The Flood Jowar’ The island is called Sundarbans because of the mangroves plants which look attractively beautiful. From the word “Sundari” the word Sundarbans is formed. The island is very beautiful. There are tigers, snakes, crocodiles, the flow of water, thick bushes. This area has two features as beauty and danger. He blends the life of the human and non-human beings in this novel. The residents of the island are marginalized people, the subalterns, who are very poor and landless. However, these people have come from different regions as East Bengal, Orissa etcetera.

The region of Sundarbans is also called “the tide country” where many refugees are settled, who were marginalized and were harassed by high class of people in the city areas. The people, their culture and the nature are main concern of this novel. In this novel, there are the characters like Kanai Dutt, the translator; Piyali Roy, the cetologist, who comes in the tide country for her research on Orcaella, the dolphins; Fokir, the fisherman, though, being illiterate he possesses huge knowledge about environment and that area; Nilima, known as “Mashima”; Nirmal who has written a letter. In this novel, Amitav Ghosh has shown the subalterns’ honesty, their strength of facing the dangers, their attachment towards the nature, as trees, animals, plants, birds, the river. However, the region of Sundarban is dangerous to live because of the assault of the tigers, crocodiles; the life may fall in danger at any time on this island. But Fokir, the subaltern, likes to live there on the water, in the mangroves plants, in the thick forest; his attachment with this natural world is real life source for him.

Fokir represents the subalterns, who not only care for the nature but also respect the people. He helps Piyali Roy in her research work by taking her on the water and describing many natural things, giving knowledge about the fishes, dolphins, mangroves trees, the dangers of tiger. Fokir and Piyali Roy show their love for the birds and the tiger who is gazing them with the purpose to attack upon them. Fokir and Piyali Roy sit at the safe place to save themselves from the cyclone; at that time they gaze the birds and feel deep attachment and love for them and even when they see the tiger, who is furiously gazing them to attack upon them, Fokir and Piyali feel also sense of deep attachment and love for the tiger. This is true love for the animals and the birds, even when they are caught in a dangerous situation their hearts feel affectionate kinship with the tigers, birds and the surroundings. However,



Fokir sacrifices his life to rescue Piyali Roy from the danger and thus this shows his humanitarian approach.

Amitav Ghosh has shown in the novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) that, how the subalterns are leading their lives in Sundarbans, their effortful ways of life, their humiliation, their poverty and also their strength, honesty and caliber are shown in this novel. There is the danger of the cyclone, nature's fury, direct attack by the tigers, danger from crocodiles and the snakes. Amitav Ghosh writes that every year several people have lost their lives due to the attack by the tigers, the crocodiles and biting by the snakes. Such hazardous assault by tigers, tidal floods, cyclones make the life of the poor people very hard to live. There is constant clash between the man and the nature as conflict between man and aquatic and wild animals, between man and cyclone, floods. This has hazardous effect upon the life of the subalterns which make their life dangerous, strenuous and hard to live. It was the purpose of Amitav Ghosh to show the world how dangerous life the subalterns are living in the Sundarbans, but yet they are so close to the nature that because of their attachment with the nature and their strength they can face any problems.

Fokir, Moyna, Kusum, the subalterns, have been shown totally different from the people of city area as Piyali, Kanai Dutt. Fokir, having the knowledge of marine life seems to be backward before Piyali Roy, Kanai Dutt. Fokir, Moyna, Kusum are local, poor, neglected and underprivileged, but cultured. Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt are educated person, using new technology as mobile, GPS. However, Piyali Roy needs his help to continue her research work. Though, Kanai Dutt worked for her as translator but further he could not help her in research due to his lack of the knowledge of the marine life. The diary, which is written by Nirmal, and to read this Kanai Dutt comes to Lusibari from Delhi, consists about Kusum and Fokir. The subalterns are the real heroes of Sundarbans who lead their lives in such area which is filled with the beauty of the mangrove, rivers, different dolphins, fishes, different birds and different animals but other side of this area is hazardous and dangerous to live. As Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Hungry Tide*:

The green fields that quilted the island were dotted with clusters of mud huts and crossed by many well-trodden pathways. The broadest of these paths were even paved with bricks and shaded with rows of casuarina trees. (Ghosh, p. 59)

The technology is being developed in the world, the luxurious life, the different kind of facilities, growing educational institutions have brought about huge change in the life style of the people throughout the world. But, the subalterns are yet poor, underprivileged and neglected. They are far away from the luxurious life, technology, higher education and different kind of facilities. Rather, they are facing a number of problems. Their efforts for the survival are presented in the novels of Amitav Ghosh. Along with the efforts which they make for the survival they cherish the love for the plants, trees, animals, birds, soil and directly or indirectly protect the nature. Thus, they contribute to the worldwide issue of saving the nature as it is being devastated and destructed by the people in the name of the development. Their life teaches and motivates the people to have humanitarian approach, to love to the animals, birds, trees, and to protect the nature.



The thought of bringing about worldwide revolution for the conservation, preservation and protection of the nature, Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya have evidently and effectively brought into action by presenting the actions, attitude, attribute and behaviour of the people towards nature. They urge the readers through their writings to feel deep sense of love for the nature. Both the novels as Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* present the life of the subalterns as strenuous, difficult, miserable, and challenging at one side and at other side it is presented as natural life, which they are leading in the lap of the nature and directly or indirectly are contributing to the preservation, conservation and the protection of the nature. Rukmani, Nathan are representatives of the subalterns who in their poverty, and miserable life feel deep attachment for the nature, though the nature's fury that is shown in the form of the storm that destroyed their huts, and crops. Rukmani loves the plants, birds, animals, trees, mountains and farming without any negative approach towards nature though a number of financial and domestic problems come in their life. They face various adversities and simultaneously they cherish love for the nature in their hearts and all these make subalterns the real heroes, who preserve, conserve and protect the nature with their direct or indirect deeds, attitude and thoughts. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004) the global and the locals are picturized forming the relationship among such figures. Fokir, the subaltern, shows his honesty, affection towards the human being as well as towards non-human beings. The relationship between Piyali Roy, the American girl and Fokir, the local man built up new aspect by keeping aside the barriers of the norms of the caste and creed. The Island Sundarbans has two sides, first it is dangerous to live owing to the attack of the wild animals, nature's fury as flood and cyclone; second it is very beautiful and fascinating.

Fokir, Moyna, Kusum represent the subalterns who after facing the problems in their life maintain the balance of the nature and cherish humanitarian approach, they love both human and the non-human beings. But the contrary thing has been found as the politics does not let the subalterns to lead their life in the lap of the nature. The efforts are being made to keep the subalterns away from these beautiful natural areas as Morichjhampi, which is tiger reserve place and other places of Sundarban Island. Thus, the novels *The Hungry Tide* and *Nectar in a Sieve* deal with ecological as well social issues.

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