Planting Seeds in Kamala Markandaya's
Nectar in a Sieve

Beth Zeleny

ABSTRACT: To date, little theoretical and methodological research has been published in the field of literary geography. This paper shows that literary and feminist theories facilitate the geographical interpretation of woman/land experience, through analysis of landscape description and symbolization. South Asian novelist Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve describes a rural Indian village landscape wherein the female protagonist resists and then is reconciled to change in her environment. Analysis of Markandaya's created landscape reveals her affection for traditional rural life, as well as her belief that women enjoy harmonious, intimate relationships with their physical surroundings. Further, Markandaya conveys her post-Partition political ideology that conservative-national Indian women who challenge modernization will maintain order in a chaotic social milieu. Markandaya communicates these ideas by creating a pastoral landscape, and by braiding images of "seed" and "woman."

Researchers have long recognized that women's and men's spatial ideas and experiences are different (Fryer 1986; McDowell 1988; McDowell 1989), however woman-centered geographical research has progressed slowly. Geographer Janice Monk (1984) lamented the persistent lack of feminist landscape research in terms of how women respond to and creatively express landscape, how time- and place-specific landscapes affect women, and how women interact with landscape to integrate production and reproduction. Analyzing the settings in woman-authored literature is a starting point for addressing these issues. Such analysis reveals a female author's subjective perception and experience with her environment.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it provides the foundation for a discussion of feminist literary geographical criticism (Rundstrom 1995), which is a framework for analyzing fiction for woman's geography or sense of place. Second, it applies the frame-
work in the context of Kamala Markandaya's novel about post-Partition rural India, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). "Feminist literary geographical criticism" is the name given to a method for interpreting woman-centered and woman-authored fictional literary landscapes. It draws from numerous contemporary feminist and literary theories. Several facets of *Nectar in a Sieve* are examined, including the role of Hindu beliefs in human/land relationship, and the effects of Western materialism on traditional Indian society.

**Theoretical Considerations**

The earliest feminist literary theories were born of the Women's Movement of the late 1960s, wherein feminists struggled against the politico-economic systems that discriminated against women and minorities (Moi 1989; Showalter 1990). Literary critics noted that language systems also produced and reflected male dominance, and since the 1970s have developed several criticisms based on various theories of patriarchal oppression (Weedon 1987). For example, some feminist literary critics analyzed literature for the images of women found therein. Male authors often characterized fictional females as prizes to be won, whores to be bought, or just plain silent, static, and tranquil individuals (Fryer 1986; Coward 1989; Dotterer and Bowers 1992). They seldom portrayed fictional women as active shapers of landscape, i.e., those who own capital, make decisions regarding its use, or interact directly with the environment. More frequently, male authors hid female characters in houses, where they were safe and had no social power. Although such fiction reflects the historical reality that women have been excluded from political processes, many real women did not identify with domestic tropes (Roller 1986). Women have played an integral role in community affairs in that they have owned land, built and operated successful businesses, and affected settlement patterns and processes (Jensen 1991; Jones-Eddy 1992).

Other literary feminists sought to reinstate woman as writer because the historiography of literature largely ignores the presence and importance of women writers. Although female writers produced approximately one half of the 2,000 novels written by the end of the eighteenth century, and gained respect as storytellers, poets, and novelists through the nineteenth century, historians (predominantly male) recognized and memorialized male writers instead (Spender 1989). For all the popular support women authors enjoyed,
male critics dismissed women's works as sentimental and unacceptable, and generally resented their influence. Male writers have described women's artistic works as narrow (Gilbert and Gubar 1988), cold, pretty, or without soul (Kamuf 1980). Some feminists seek to uncover the ignored heritage of women's writing and celebrate contemporary female authors.

Other feminist critics analyzed literature for "woman's peculiar view." Such analysis is termed gynocriticism and postulates that women perceive the world in a distinct manner (Showalter 1990). Women express their peculiar view of culture, whether innate or socially imposed, in their writings. Largely excluded from participation in political processes, women experience empowerment when they write from their perspective (Faragher 1979; Ogden 1986). Feminists caution, however, that numerous women's perspectives exist and not one story represents the thinking of all women. Likewise, readers bring varied mindsets and experiences to the text, and take different meanings from the work vis-à-vis their interaction with it. Textual meanings are thus considered open-ended and may change with time and place.

Contemporary feminist and literary theories also provide varied interpretations of text; language may express an author's subjective truth, or authorial intention may be unimportant; social context may be paramount or it may be incidental to understanding. In other words, a text's meaning reflects the criticism used to analyze it. Each particular criticism has a perspective that may use the text to further its political agenda. For example, Marxist feminist critics analyze text to expose the oppression that women experience in a capitalist society (Gallop 1992). Psychoanalytic feminist critics read for the repressed feminine subject in phallocentric society (Weedon 1987). Such postmodern approaches emphasize analyzing literary language for meanings that lie beyond surface expression. Snyder (1992) illustrates this point when he writes that dungeons and garrets are metaphors for character discomfort and depression in late eighteenth-century writings. Literary landscapes are filled with symbols that signify social rules and realities beyond the words the author uses!

**Feminist Literary Geographical Criticism**

Feminist literary geographical criticism is a framework that braids gynocriticism and literary postmodernism within a geograph-
ical vein. It includes the idea that women’s unique social roles influence how they perceive, experience, and characterize place. It celebrates women’s created landscapes, and elucidates through analysis of fictional imagery their relationship with the real environment (Rundstrom 1995). Feminist writers are truthful in that they portray perceptions shared by real women. These writers are preoccupied with creating accurate fictional settings (Fairbanks 1986; Fryer 1986), and base their settings on personal experiences or first-hand accounts found in journals and diaries (Moers 1976; Fairbanks 1986; Osborne 1986).

Feminist authors create landscapes that reveal their own aspirations and ideologies. These ideas are often reflected in the fictional female/land relationship. Woman-centered literature celebrates able, intelligent women as shapers of landscape: fictional female protagonists own and manage land. Rather than dominate or conquer land, they enjoy a cooperative, harmonious relationship with environment. These women maintain strong emotional bonds with place, termed topophilia (Tuan 1974), even during difficult, hazardous, or dangerous situations.

As women are metaphor-makers (Gilligan 1982; Tannen 1990; Monk 1992), female feminist authors use symbols to represent woman on the landscape. Analysis of such symbols provides a view of the author’s geography, or, more specifically, her sense of place, as well as her assessment of a woman’s cultural roles (Rundstrom 1995). For example, in her poem, “Song of This Earth,” South Asian Indian feminist S. Usha (1993) uses earth imagery to symbolize her belief that male-dominated industrialization processes force women to be submissive and repressed:

My thighs
  gashed by a hundred plows
I, my mother, her mother, mothers,
  above all my aunt
bearing the pain
the wound drying
Husband or son, who knows
Who blazed the furrow?
And the hundreds of lecherous ones
warming themselves at
the light in my eyes
and the vanity
with which they renounce
their bond with this earth
saying they'll live
in caves, in their own light

Women in different places and times have written literature that resonates with earth-mother imagery (see, for example, Le Sueur 1991; Silko 1995), at times celebrating, at times lamenting, shared woman/earth sensuous landscapes and sexual rhythms. Such thinking illustrates the cultural ecofeminism movement that began in the late 1960s and emphasizes the biological similarities of females and nature.

Finally, feminist literary geographical criticism postulates that authors use their writings to advance their political agendas. Women historically have not been empowered to affect change publicly. Despite the United Nations-sponsored 1976-1985 Decade for Women and its World Plan of Action which emphasized equality, development, and peace (Huston 1979), women everywhere remain unequally educated and remunerated, especially in developing countries. Often, it is through their writings that women find voice and ability to influence policy. They share views that are available to multitudes of women. Writing literature is one way that women reach others who are sympathetic to their ideas.

Nectar in a Sieve

Kamala Markandaya was born in 1924, and grew up in a village in southern India. As a child, Markandaya learned traditional Hindu heritage and values. Her university education included training in Western language and literature at Madras University. Markandaya was a journalist before she became a novelist. She married an Englishman in 1948 and went to England to live; she returned to India often. Despite Markandaya’s change in residence, Indian ideologies that were inculcated during her childhood continued to influence her thinking and writings (Jha 1990). Her critical success as a writer is due, in part, to her ability to project an accurate image of the traditional Indian society she had experienced (Rao 1972).

Kamala Markandaya’s story about rural South Asian Indians, Nectar in a Sieve (1954), is concerned with social reform, as are virtually all contemporary Indian novels (Naik 1985; Walsh 1990), espe-
cially those written by Indian women (Rao 1972). *Nectar in a Sieve* is a good choice for analysis for several reasons. Walsh reports that the novel correctly portrays the poverty and difficulty of agricultural village life (Walsh 1990). *Nectar in a Sieve* contains numerous Indian words, phrases, and idioms, which is typical of Indo-Anglican writing (Williams 1977), and helps convey a sense of the region of southern India. Also, the novel reflects a strong sense of Indian nationalism associated with the Ghandian pre-independence movement, and addresses the cultural chaos and economic exploitation that were part of the legacy of British colonialism (Jha 1990).

*Nectar in a Sieve* is about a fictional Indian peasant woman named Rukmani. At age twelve she marries Nathan, and together they farm a tract they rent from an absentee landowner. Rukmani bears a daughter, and then four sons. Some years the family enjoys great harvests; other years, they starve. Foreigners come to the village and build a tannery and a hospital. When the landowner sells his land to the prosperous tannery, Rukmani and Nathan, now elderly, decide to migrate to the city, more than 100 miles distant, to find their son who lives there. Unable to locate him, they live on the streets and work in a rock quarry to earn money for food. After Nathan dies in the city, Rukmani returns to the village to live with her daughter.

During her life, Rukmani endures the loss of several children, devastating summer monsoons, and droughts. A meek yet strong woman, Rukmani is sensitive to the needs of people and animals. Although Rukmani respects Nathan as the head of the household, she ultimately keeps house and family together. Rukmani mends walls and roof, sews clothing, prepares meals, and because she is literate, earns money writing letters. She cultivates and protects land, the vestige of hope. Only the encroachment of industrialization, which comes in the form of a tannery that spreads across the village "like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever life grew in its way" (Markandaya 1954, 180) nearly defeats Rukmani, because she is then forced from the land she plants and loves.

Rukmani's intimate association with land is foreshadowed in the preface where Markandaya quotes Coleridge: "Work without hope draws Nectar in a Sieve, And hope without an object cannot live" (Markandaya 1954, 5). At first the meaning is unclear. What is the object without which one's hope and work is in vain? Markandaya clarifies this and reveals her feelings for Indian landscape in
Rukmani’s comment that “while there was land, there was hope” (Markandaya 1954, 182). Land is the great giver of life itself; land is the object of hope and makes work worthwhile.

Markandaya’s fictional landscape presents a picturesque and powerful countryside. Picturesque landscapes are termed pastoral or romantic, in that their aesthetic descriptions invoke the spirituality and simplicity of rural life (Short 1991). Romantic landscapes include descriptions of natural dangers and destruction as well, which generally affect feelings of awe. Rukmani’s country is delicate and lovely. As she travels in an ox-cart with Nathan, Rukmani observes the lush countryside in detail:

The air was full of the sound of bells, and of birds, sparrows, and bulbuls mainly, and sometimes the cry of an eagle, but when we passed a grove, green and leafy, I could hear mynahs and parrots. (Markandaya 1954, 11)

Rukmani’s country is also wild. Summer monsoons, sweeping in their destruction of crops and home, are no less aesthetic:

As night came on—the eighth night of the monsoon—the winds increased, whining and howling around our hut as if seeking to pluck it from the earth. Indoors it was dark—the wick, burning in its shallow saucer of oil, threw only a dim wavering light—but outside the land glimmered, sometimes pale and sometimes vivid, in the flicker of lightning. Towards midnight the storm was at its worst. Lightning kept clawing at the sky almost continuously, thunder shook the earth. (Markandaya 1954, 58-59)

A devastating drought is a magnificent “[brown] stain [that] spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us” (Markandaya 1954, 101-102). Such picturesque landscapes are literary tools that involve readers emotionally. Writers use such romantic landscapes to express their own ideologies. Markandaya’s romanticized Indian landscape praises the simplicity of traditional lifestyles. She idealizes the unsettled countryside to call attention to its demise. Though fictional, Markandaya’s idealized countryside is not inaccurate. Markandaya lived both the sweet quiet and horrific danger of village life. She describes the country using fine nuances so that readers feel it as she perceived it in her lived experience. Markandaya crafted an environment that she had encountered as a young woman.
Markandaya believes that country is a simple place where the power and delicacy of nature are in balance. This is unlike the situation in India at the time Markandaya wrote *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Ethnic and political conflicts caused social imbalance, as did encroaching Western materialism. Markandaya examines the friction between progressive Western and traditional Eastern values in other works (Walsh 1990), but it is in *Nectar in a Sieve* that she uses setting to illustrate the dilemma. For example, Markandaya shows that while Western science seeks to understand, predict, and control natural phenomena, Eastern religion teaches acceptance and appreciation for natural events that are beyond human control. Markandaya portrays the humanized environment as one that is ultimately dominated by the immensities of nature. She describes nature as a wild animal that will as quickly send destruction as aid. Storms crumble huts made of mud and coconut thatch. Corn and paddy fields shrivel in relentless sun. Rukmani believes that humans may experience, but do not change natural calamities:

To those who live by the land there must always come times of hardship, of fear and of hunger, even as there are years of plenty. This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know: that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve, . . . and if bad times are prolonged we know we must see the weak surrender their lives and this fact, too, is within our experience. (Markandaya 1954, 181-182)

To Rukmani the ultimate triumph is in accepting the forces of nature as invincible. Rukmani explains to a white doctor, who questions such submission, that spirit is given to humans to rise above misfortunes; only pitiable weak creatures bewail what always has been. She insists that the uncomplicated rural life is safer than the complexities of an industrialized environment. The Western doctor shrugs off Rukmani’s mindset as dangerous foolishness; her ignorance will lead to death. Rukmani’s and the doctor’s exchange is a metaphor for the conflict between modern and traditional ideas.

Markandaya’s and Rukmani’s traditional Hindu beliefs inform their relationships with the environment. The object is to bring one’s life into harmony with land by accepting one’s place as an interdependent part of the organic unity. Knowing one has a role may help peasants survive incomprehensible situations (Afzal-Khan 1993). Such a conservative view was under attack as Western beliefs in control over
Planting Seeds in Kamala Markandaya’s Nectar in a Sieve

nature were introduced to Eastern society. Through Rukmani’s relationship with her environment, Markandaya advocates a traditional mindset where respect and concern for all life supersedes progress.

The traditional view maintains that every thing is an integral part of the natural environment. Rukmani iterates this idea often when she says that the brown earth and brook are part of her, and that she finds greatest happiness in sunny, open fields. A successful cultivator, Rukmani takes delight in her garden, and plants and harvesting crops others have not grown. She finds that sowing and harvesting seed disciplines and uplifts her body and spirit. When Rukmani names her daughter Irawaddy after the great and precious Asian river, it is another way of connecting with landscape.

Markandaya implicitly connects woman and landscape through her recurring use of seed imagery. In this interpretation, woman is seed. As giver and nurturer and endurer of life, woman participates in the cycle of life as seed, then seedling, which ultimately becomes part of the soil that supports future seed. Markandaya braids seed / woman imagery from the outset; this conjunction continues to the end of the story. Several examples support this interpretation.

Rukmani’s first activity when she reaches her new home is to plant a garden. She marvels at the life within the seeds she sows:

... each of the dry, hard pellets I held in my palm had within it the very secret of life itself, curled tightly within, under leaf after protective leaf for safekeeping, fragile, vanishing with the first touch or sight. With each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount; winged, wondrous. (Markandaya 1954, 23)

She nurtures and waters her seedlings into vigorous plants which bear brinjals and seed-bearing pumpkins which she later described as “round and fleshy like young women” (Markandaya 1954, 144). This experience coincides with Rukmani’s first pregnancy, which likewise entralls her. When she bears a girl, Rukmani describes her much as she did the seeds that she held in her palm—tender, fruitful, beautiful, a marvel. Indeed, seedling Irawaddy becomes Rukmani’s sustenance when Rukmani is left landless and husbandless at the end of the story. Once again juxtaposing woman and seed, Irawaddy prepares rice for her mother when Rukmani returns to the village at the end of her long journey. Seeds / women are preservers of life and, therefore, future.
Using seeds to symbolize women is not an unlikely association. Indians have historically wondered at the interconnections between all parts of the universe. The Rigveda, revelations received by Brahman priests circa 1500-1200 B.C., are hymns expressing awe for elements of the natural world. Written about 600-400 B.C., the Upanishads, which means “sit down under” (Gowen 1968, 109), are philosophical commentaries on what lies beneath the surface of the elements. In essence, the Upanishads are introspective searchings for the meaning of self, the finding of which leads to relief from mortal struggles. The Upanishads are written in conversational form, and from them one learns that self is all the gods, elements of the earth, all that breathes, all that is born, or comes from seeds. If one understands the reality of the outside world, then one will understand the reality of self, because they are the same.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Third Adhyaya, Seventh Brahmana, the teacher asks a student to identify who knows and rules the worlds within and without. The student responds with a litany of answers explaining that he who dwells in the water, fire, air, moon, stars, light, mind, and etc., is the Self, has knowledge, and is ruler. The last verse states that he who dwells in the smallest of objects, the seed, is ruler:

23. He who dwells in the seed, and within the seed, whom the seed does not know, whose body the seed is, and who pulls (rules) the seed within, he is thy Self, the puller (ruler) within, the immortal; unseen, but seeing; unheard, but hearing; unperceived, but perceiving; unknown, but knowing. (Macnicol 1963, 76)

One who dwells in the seed is generally disregarded; unseen, unheard, unperceived and unknown, yet sees, hears, perceives and knows. Markandaya’s Rukmani, representative of traditional Indian women, is such a person. A meek woman, Rukmani does not demand or command attention, yet she is a heroine because she understands what is meaningful in life; she knows her Self and her relationship with her environment. In using seed imagery to symbolize woman, Markandaya suggests that women will use the strength of self-identity and self-knowledge to bring India relief from its problems. Significantly, it is a woman who is so often associated with seed in this story.

Throughout the story, Rukmani is the keeper of seeds. She bargains for grain in the market after the summer monsoons destroy the crops. Rukmani hides ten pounds of rice in her granary; during a
drought it provides many days' worth of nourishment. When Nathan wants to sell their seed in order to buy land, Rukmani persuades him to keep the seed lest they sacrifice their future. She takes the seed to a female goddess for a blessing before the next planting, which yields a bountiful harvest. While Nathan would separate the seed (woman) and land (tradition), Rukmani insists that seeds/women must remain connected to land. She knows that seeds/women encapsulate life and future life, which will be perpetuated only when traditions are maintained. Indeed, Rukmani survives Nathan because she remains tied to traditions and land.

Women also perpetuate culture (Faragher 1979; Fine and Gordon 1992; Squire 1993). Markandaya conjoins seed and woman imagery to suggest that women who preserve traditional ways of Indian life will bring order to a politically chaotic environment, just as Rukmani brings order to the rural Indian landscape when she plows her garden and plants life-giving seeds. When the real problems facing India are “uprooting” of villagers (Rao 1972) and loss of humanness beneath impersonal forces (Williams 1977), Markandaya’s Rukmani symbolizes Indian women who are seeds that will provide roots to withstand winds of modernization. In a time and place where males are given preferential treatment from birth (Anderson and Moore 1993), here is a statement affirming woman’s prominent role as national conscience.

The Indian Chipko Movement illustrates the real world power of grass roots, female-instigated environmentalism. After independence India adopted programs that stressed modernization and economic liberalization, which in turn deepened disparity between classes. Landowners exploited agricultural wage laborers and peasant farmers could not afford fertilizers and hybrid seeds. Beginning in the mid-1970s, several social movements addressed such politico-economic issues (Ormvedt 1989).

Numerous women who lived in the northern Indian region of Uttar Pradesh were particularly interested in environmental and economic issues, as they depended on the surrounding forests for fuel and fodder. When commercial and government interests began clearcutting the timber, women literally ran to the forests and hugged the trees. Their nonpartisan-affiliated, decentralized woman-based environmental movement became known as the Chipko, “to hug,” Movement (Calman 1989). Over the years the Chipko Movement widened its focus to include protests against road and dam
construction; the women also instigated such ecology projects as tree planting and forestry planning (Seager 1993). The significance of the Chipko Movement is that women empowered themselves to actively conserve and manage environmental resources, a role that Markandaya ascribed to rural Indian women in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

**Conclusion**

Feminist criticism helps us appreciate a woman’s sense of place as we analyze woman / land relationships and landscape symbols in fictional settings. Equally important is our examination of a woman’s political ideologies as expressed in her writings. Kamala Markandaya’s pastoral landscape setting in *Nectar in a Sieve* reminds people about the goodness of village life during a time when India faced great political and economic change. She intimately associates women and landscape to express her political ideology, namely that women have a role in addressing the social problems associated with industrialization and ethnic conflict because women are bearers and keepers of culture.

Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* has not gone unnoticed. Literist and critic A.V. Krishna Rao referred to Markandaya as “Mother of Rural India” for her triumphant portrayal of Rukmani (Rao 1972, 57). She was successful in depicting the need for preserving the spiritual simplicity of life in the traditional landscape (Williams 1977). Further, Markandaya shows that woman’s harmonious relationship with land empowers women. Women, singly and as a group, who value earth and its fruitfulness, and are reconciled to nature’s dominance, represent hope for a meaningful Indian future:

> When a few weeks had gone by, the seed sprouted; tender shoots appeared, thrusting upwards with increasing strength, and soon we were able to transplant the seedlings one by one, and at first they stood out singly, slender, tremulous spires with spaces between: but grew and grew and soon were merged into one thick green field of rustling paddy. In that field, in the grain which had not yet begun to form, lay our future and our hope. (Markandaya 1954, 110)

In this reading, the conjunction of land, woman, and seed is an expression of Markandaya’s belief that conservative-national women will courageously bring India safely through an era of change and confusion.
References


Beth Zeleny is a doctoral candidate in geography at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802-5011.