

Whim of Nature - a Comparative Study of Louise Erdrich's Tracks and Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

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Abstract: *The paper compare Louise Erdrich's novel **Tracks** and Kamala Markandaya's novel **Nectar in a Sieve**, both describes about the futuristic life of the people after the exploitation of the environment and focuses on their own particular community and their life controlled by nature. Ecocriticism takes an earthcentred approach to literary criticism. It is said to be the study of the relationship between environment and literature. Since literature has always conditioned the philosophical understanding of nature. Louise Erdrich captures passions, fears, myths and doom of the Indian tribes struggling to keep the little that remained as their lands. The author tracks down the hardships borne by the men and women of North Dakota who ceaselessly fought against the weather who were pushed to the brink of their endurance.*

Key words: *endurance, environment, nature, relationsm struggle*

I. Introduction

The paper compare Louise Erdrich's novel **Tracks** and Kamala Markandaya's novel **Nectar in a Sieve**, both describes about the futuristic life of the people after the exploitation of the environment and focuses on their own particular community and their life controlled by nature.

Ecocriticism takes an earthcentred approach to literary criticism. It is said to be the study of the relationship between environment and literature. Since literature has always conditioned the philosophical understanding of nature. Literary theory is very useful in understanding the hidden resources of literature. Ecocriticism is one of the popular theories of literature. Environmentalism is permeating the global culture. It is becoming a revolutionary movement at the social and political levels in almost all the countries of the world. The environmental crisis today haunts mankind like a nightmare. It is no longer a mere regional problem; it has already acquired global proportions. The planet's support systems – land, water and air seem to have been damaged beyond the possibility of redemption. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between the human and the non-human world in a literary work. This implies that ecocritical theory assumes that there is a world out there that is represented in a literary work.

Louise Erdrich captures passions, fears, myths and doom of the Indian tribes struggling to keep the little that remained as their lands. The author tracks down the hardships borne by the men and women of North Dakota who ceaselessly fought against the weather who were pushed to the brink of their endurance. The people living in the best place of harmony were driven to snow and suffering when their living space was invaded by gun and power. The paper concentrates on the struggle of the people who aimed at establishing a space, which was frozen emotionally and geographically.

In the field of American Literature, Louise Erdrich contributed significantly and she is an Award-winning novelist. Louise Erdrich brought up in North Dakota began her career from the year 1970. The filthy situation of environment is the main issue on which she gave importance in her writings. She has written number of novels in which the author tackles the issues regarding power, gender and language.

Louise Erdrich's novel **Tracks** published in 1998 does not give the feel to the readers in first reading that the novel can be considered as an ecology concerned piece of work. The pattern of the novel gives a view to the readers about the thought regarding justice and environment. Epidemics and Famine is not the only thing one can see in the interrelated stories in the novel; in addition gives an idea about the historical actuality of deprivation, dispossession and genocide.

The novel begins from the narrator's point of view, the novel starts from the year 1912, and that was exactly twenty-five years from the division of Indian lands according to Dawes Act. The main purpose to pass the act is to promote the self-supporting farming and ranching among American Indian society according to the Government. In real, the intention behind the Dawes Act is to provide detailed provisions to reduce the Indian lands in Chippewa community and they planned to sell the unallotted lands to whites. The society changed a lot due to the bill passed, which caused the huge amount of deficiency and starvation that weakened the indigenous communities and made people of these communities more vulnerable to sickness. The incredible number of

deaths disturbed the tribal social relations forever and led to the sale of unclaimed allotments to whites, and those whites became the owners of land within reservation boundaries.

Tracks have two narrators Nanapush and Pauline. The dual narrators in the novel show two conflicts in society regarding the same issue. As of Pauline a mixed blood successor makes it her task not to go hand in hand with her own people and community to support the administrators. She pays no attention to whatever does not fit into the official landscape forced on the Chippewa community and on their earth by church and state. When Pauline visits Fleur and her family, she takes no notice of the starvation that they are visibly suffering. The Europeans changed the Native American's life to the worst condition. Pauline and the Morrissey's family comments that "lands lost to death with no heir and lands foreclosed because starving people cannot earn enough money to pay their taxes should be put on the auction block" (Tracks 173 – 174).

Nanapush is not like Pauline he opposes the annoyance of the Europeans and their dreadful conditions brought by them. The native people suffered from the initial stages of sickness that were common in the region but the Indians had no immunity to go against the diseases brought by Europeans. Nanapush survived from pox, spotted sickness, fever, broken treaties, and deficiency in his life span of fifty years.

Native Americans never came across illness that developed in the old world because they were separate from Europe, Asia and Africa when ocean levels rose following the end of the last ice age. Diseases like measles, pneumonia, smallpox, influenza and malaria were strange to the Native Americans until the Europeans brought these diseases to them. This caused the largest population decline in history. Nanapush makes a very clear connection between sickness and land loss associating with wrecked treaties and the Dawes Act. He realizes that the entire family died from diseases contracted after they forced into reservations. It is a belief that millions died of measles, smallpox, influenza and whooping cough.

Erdrich deals with the Chippewa community's scarcity and destruction through disease. While narrating his story Nanapush tells his granddaughter Lulu Lamartine that how they had undergone such a hard time during the Dawes Act:

Starvation makes fools of any one. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred pound weight of flour. Others, who were desperate to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like a pattern of straws. (Tracks 8)

Erdrich's writing insists that there is a strong sense of physical and spiritual interconnectedness of all things on earth where all are equal to one another. Land and people are of one entity and people should show deep respect to nature in order to maintain the ecological balance. In every breath, the Native Indians had to fight to save their own land from degradation.

The tribal people lead their life without destruction tools of advancement. They lead a life of harmony with nature. For them nature is god given and each element and form of nature are worshipped as gods and goddesses. When men invade such regions with machinery, exploitation of nature begins and the conflict arises between people of nature and people of machinery.

The another writer in whose work one can witness Eco feminism and a reference to the Bengal famine is Kamala Markandaya and in her novel **Nectar in a Sieve**, it has very well described the control of nature over human beings. **Nectar in a Sieve** is a story of a poverty-stricken Hindu family in a rural village in southern zone of India. Despite fearless efforts, the family failed to get out from poverty caused by hardships of nature and economics. This poverty forced the only daughter of her into the dim of prostitution and the three sons to leave the village to look for job. It was a miracle the family remained alive with very little to eat. In spite of their hardships, the family showed love, satisfaction and hope that their situation would improve.

Nectar in a Sieve runs in the first person narration told by the protagonist-narrator Rukmani, a peasant woman suffering almost all the time within the duration of narrative. Her family consists of her husband Nathan, a poor tenant farmer, a daughter, Ira, and six sons. Although poverty-stricken, they are happy and mutually compromise with the conditions they are put into by fate. But the establishment of the tannery initiates miseries for them. Capriciousness of nature accompanied by cruel dealings of their landlord bring their apparent peace to disaster. The unwelcome entry of industrialization not only "invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maiden where our children played, and made the bazaar prices too high for us,"(31-32) but also intruded the complete innate atmosphere and the village economy causing devastating social calamity. Rukmani stands in thorough opposition to even a thought of tannery, since according to her, it has been tempting the simple village folk into greed and immoral acts. Her fears come true as not merely the society, but her own family gets dislocated, initially with two of her sons joining the tannery as workers and thus disappointing their father's much awaited desire of farming. However, this separation brings in a thin layer of happiness – perhaps the best period in their lives – to the family and temporarily they get rid of perpetual fear of starvation until both the brothers are dispelled from the tannery and go to Ceylon as labourers, never to return. Apart from the man-made misfortunes, the family suffers at the pitiless hands of nature which was never merciful to them. Drought and flood destroy crops one by one. Rukmani painfully recalls:

It was as if nothing had even been but rain... Nathan and I watched with heavy hearts while waters rose and rose, and the tender green of paddy field sank under and was lost... There will be little eating done this year (43-44). The whim of nature shifts its form again, but the result is same: (Drought) continued until we lost count of time. Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water (81).

The tragic picture of hunger is pointed by Markandaya. Rukmani divides rice into twenty four small parts to feed the entire family for an equal number of days. Such starvation leads to human degradation. Ira, seeing her family starves during the famine turns into a woman of the streets and gives birth to an illegitimate albino child. Hunger makes Ira a prostitute. Hunger leads to the suspected theft of calfskin by Raja and his subsequent death. Starvation forces Kuti's death. The problem of poverty has been realistically depicted by Markandaya.

The landless farmer Nathan, in particular, is held in the grasp of constant fear; or the land being snatched away, the failure or excesses of rains and droughts. Markandaya gives a realistic and touching description of such fear:

"The calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creations. To those who live by the land there must always come time of hardship, of fear and of hunger."(181)

A farmer has no hopes for the future. But yet he keeps hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment. Rukmani sums up the life of a peasant, when she says:

"Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and then in another, and which one was stronger no one could say... Fear, constant companion of the peasant... fear, fear of the dark future; fear of the blackness of death."(110)

Kamala Markandaya clearly disapproves of superstitious practices of the rural people. On the failure of rains, Rukmani threw herself on the earth, prayed, offered a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to the goddess, but no rains came. **Nectar in a Sieve** dramatises the tragedy and trauma of a traditional Indian village and a peasant family whose livelihood depends on rain, rice and land.

The title alone reflects the theme of the novel. Nectar is a lovely liquid that eventually drain away when put into a sieve. The title is a beautiful way to talk about the certain draining of life in the face of suffering and death. The title shed the beauty and the misery of life next to each other and raises the question of which has the upper hand, the nectar of life or the sieve of destruction.

Thus Louise Erdrich's **Tracks** and Kamala Markandaya's **Nectar in a Sieve** has drawn attention to the fact that in the present world the more important problem is exploitation of land rather than the exploitation of race and class. The problems of social ecology have their roots in the problem of ecology. There are interconnections between nature, gender, race and class. One cannot separate the social and the ecological.

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