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Bend Like the Grass: Ecofeminism in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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In Kamala Markandaya's 1954 novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, the heroine, Rukmani, is forced onto the threshold of a rapidly changing India marked by the centralization of power, increased economic activity, and urbanization. Unlike her neighbours, who "threw the past away with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present," Rukmani "stood by in pain, envying such easy reconciliation" (29). *Nectar in a Sieve* chronicles Rukmani's attempt to retrieve and recuperate those elements of her rural life that she feels most deeply about, namely her sense of community and connection with the land. Her struggle to maintain dignity and control over her life reflects some of the complex ways in which rural women of the global South negotiate modernity. By emphasizing Rukmani's movement towards becoming an active agent in these negotiations, I reverse the standard critical reading of her as a stereotypically passive peasant woman. This standard reading is especially flawed, I argue, in light of the under-studied relationship between Rukmani and Kenny, the white doctor. It is through her discussions with Kenny that Rukmani sharpens her social critique and develops her own perspective on India's future. Here I analyze Rukmani's actions and practices in light of de Certeau's writings on the everyday, arguing that her awakened agency is a form of 'making do.' Most importantly, though, I see in Rukmani's character the opportunity to revisit ecofeminist theorizing about the relationship between rural women of the global South—and India in particular—and the environment. Rukmani and her husband are rice farmers and her relationship with nature, like his, is thus mediated through their labour. Through the act of gardening Rukmani develops the type of closeness with the land represented in early ecofeminist writing on the body and spirituality. At the same time, her acute dependence on the land for survival reveals a vulnerability that troubles the celebration of this closeness. In the end, however, Rukmani does favour this precarious direct relationship with nature over the alienation of city life. Through her adoption of a young boy, the novel ultimately forwards a land-based community ethic that emphasizes connection with the more-than-human world.

Rukmani, Her Garden, and Ecofeminism

To understand Rukmani's relationship with the land and her environment, it is important to first focus on the beginning of the novel. This is because *Nectar in a Sieve* is structured in much the same way as another early postcolonial novel, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the slow pace and predictable pattern of rural village life is suddenly and irrevocably altered by a disruption brought on by outside forces. Of her early married days Rukmani recalls: "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?" (8). The easy rhythm of her narration, and in particular the way she links the beauty of the fields with the beauty her husband saw in her, reflects a harmoniousness and fullness of life that sets the tone for the contrasts to follow. Markandaya's novel, like Achebe's, bears witness to the first arrival of white missionaries and officials, and the presence of both religious (Sikhs and Muslims) and racial foreigners is an important element of the text. Rather than emphasizing this theme of first-contact, however, Markandaya's novel portrays the eruption of large-scale industrialization that marked Nehru's postcolonial policies of development. Interestingly, Rukmani bears these changes much better than Okonkwo does.

Nectar in a Sieve begins with the young Rukmani's marriage to Nathan, a tenant farmer. The villagers gossip that the match is beneath her family, who had managed to marry their three older daughters to wealthier husbands. This unenviable coupling was indeed a direct result of her father's diminished role in the community. He was the village leader, a position that had once conferred authority, respect, and relative wealth; however, a centralization of government powers meant that his position had become little more than a figure-head: "the headman is no longer of consequence," Rukmani's older brother explains, "There is the Collector, who comes to these villages once a year, and to him is the power, and to those he appoints; not to the headman" (4). Her brother's words are the first crack in the veneer of her life and prove a hard truth to bear: "It was as if a prop on which I leaned had been roughly kicked away" (4). Markandaya thus carefully inflects the peace of Rukmani's early life with small hiccups that foreshadow the immense shifts to come. In a subtle example of dramatic irony, the reader remains alert to these changes while the characters themselves cling to a vision of the future which seems to offer the promise of equilibrium. When they relocate to Nathan's village far from Rukmani's family home, he is eager to prove himself. He holds up a handful of grain and promises that with "Such harvests as this, you shall not want for anything" (6). With this turn towards the future Markandaya successfully buries the suspicion—in her characters—that things are falling apart. The promise of a bright future is represented in the

able body of her husband, as well as the paddy that runs through his hands. A symbiotic relationship is thus established, in theory at least, between the farmers/producers and nature. The farm soon becomes the centre of their lives, and Rukmani finds her passion in tending the land.

Susheela Rao locates Rukmani's special relationship with nature in her "heightened awareness of nature's beauty" (42) as well as her connection to the rhythms of the seasons. Rao points to many passages in which Rukmani comments on the aesthetic and atmospheric beauty of the landscape. However, I think an analysis of her connection to nature needs to go deeper. If we look in particular at the depictions of Rukmani's work in the garden, we can see that this practice links her with the land through her body and her labour—a theme which will become more clear below in light of Vandana Shiva's work. The garden has a special place in her life and is closely associated with her coming-of-age. Being as young as she is, having married at twelve, Rukmani experiences her own physical, emotional, sexual and psychological development through her work in the garden and the growth of her vegetables: "I was young and fanciful then," she recounts, "and it seemed to me not that they grew as I did, unconsciously, but that 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" (13). Her first planting of pumpkins is a particularly moving process for her. In the passage describing the pumpkins what is most striking is not the mere satisfaction or pride she feels, but the *pleasure* that the growth provokes in her:

> Pumpkins began to form, which, fattening on soil and sun and water, swelled daily larger and larger and ripened to yellow and red, until at last they were ready to eat, and I cut one and took it in. When Nathan saw it he was full of admiration...
>
> "One would have thought you had never seen a pumpkin before," I said, though pleased with him and myself, keeping my eyes down.
>
> "Not from our land," said Nathan. "Therefore it is precious, and you, Ruku, are indeed a clever woman."
>
> I tried not to show my pride. I tried to be offhand. I put the pumpkin away. But pleasure was making my pulse beat; the blood, unbidden, came hot and surging to my face. (10)

There are several things worth noting about this passage. The first is the frank and open manner in which Markandaya describes Rukmani's pleasure. The sensuousness and overtones of sexuality, indicated by her blushing and experiencing "pleasure," are one of the qualities that make *Nectar in a Sieve* such a remarkable book for its time. In the introduction to the novel Indira Ganesan remarks on her own experience of encountering Indian women's sexuality in Markandaya's novel as something totally alien to the picture of Indianness fed to her during her Indian-American girlhood: "At seventeen, I believed all Indian women to be modest and old-fashioned, like my mother" (vii). It was Markandaya's depiction of Rukmani's neighbour, Kunthi, a sex-worker, which particularly stood out for Ganesan. Here, too, Markandaya is fairly frank in the way she reveals the fact of prostitution to her readers. In a struggle

with Rukmani, Kunthi's sari "fell from her shoulders. Then [Rukmani] saw that it was not tied at the waist but below the navel, like a strumpet's" (60). In contrast to the image of Kunthi as an intentional object of desire, Rukmani's garden-variety sexuality may appear naïve and banal, but taken together these two representations show that female sexuality is an important theme in Markandaya's novel. Any reading of the text as a feminist novel, or as part of the canon of women's writing, needs to take this into account. This is especially important in the case where—as we will see—critics have been too quick to label Rukmani emblematic of a certain ideal of chaste Indian womanhood.

Although the pumpkin scene uses sexual pleasure as metaphor for nature-pleasure, in other places the text uses nature as a metaphor for sex. In these scenes Rukmani comes closer to the overt sexuality of Kunthi by expressing not only pleasure but something nearing desire. In the only description of amorousness between Rukmani and Nathan, she recalls her "senses opening like a flower to his urgency" (57), a description which directly echoes the green leaves of her plants "unfurling" under her own "eager gaze" (13). The reliance on nature symbolism here does not naturalize sex itself so much as it does relationships of pleasure and connectedness. This metaphoric reversal serves to reinforce the idea that the fecundity of nature is linked to Rukmani's sexual maturation. This embodiment of nature is one of the forces that ultimately connects her to her land and that determines her commitment to it later in the text.

A second thing to note about this scene is the way it calls to mind the theorizing of women's spirituality in early ecofeminist writings. The force behind much of this writing was an attempt to purge Western thinking of the rigid patriarchal binaries that maintained the oppression of both women and non-human nature through the historic associations of women with nature and as therefore inferior to men (see, for example, Karen J. Warren and Susan Griffin). The combined effect of these hierarchies was a denial of women's direct experiences in, through and as nature. One vision of liberation to emerge from this field involved embracing this woman-nature connection, which was often described in spiritual terms and very much rooted in bodily experience (Tong 260). This valorization of the embodied experience can be seen, for example, in the way Starhawk uses the birth metaphor as a way of trying to alter Western value systems (175). This emphasis on life and in particular the female body as the giver or sustainer of life was a common theme in early ecofeminist writings and is echoed in the way Rukmani experiences a sort of embodied spirituality through her connection with the growing pumpkins.

A number of problems arise, however, when attempting to read *Nectar in a Sieve* directly through ecofeminism. Firstly, the novel predates the emergence of ecofeminism (as an intellectual field, and as a recognized movement) by at least two decades. Secondly, ecofeminism, especially its spiritual branches, has received heavy and continuous criticism almost since its inception. Of particular concern is the critique that white Western academic feminists constructed harmful romantic

stereotypes about women of the global South in their search for ecological idols. As an example, Noel Sturgeon points to how "The Chipko movement [became] a symbolic center of a discourse about Third World women that paints them as 'natural environmentalists' or 'ultimate ecofeminists,' reducing them to an idealized peasant woman who is integrated into 'nature' through her daily lived activities" (127). For this reason I have been especially sceptical about my own analysis of Rukmani and felt it was important to frame her commitment to the land in relation to larger socio-political and inter-personal frameworks. The amount of critique leveled at ecofeminism, however, has meant that the field has undergone many cycles of self-reflection and today it continues to be an important "strategic discourse," to use Sturgeon's words (139), in larger conversations about feminism, environmentalism and social change. Faced with this dilemma of how to proceed with an ecofeminist reading within the historically problematic context of the postcolonial, I will follow the lead of postcolonial ecocritic Graham Huggan and begin with the writings of Vandana Shiva, a longstanding figure in ecofeminism whose work deliberately intersects with postcolonialism.

One of Shiva's main interests is the effect of what she calls maldevelopment on rural peasants, and women in particular. In *Staying Alive* she expresses a particularly negative view of the application of Western science and technology on the processes of nature, a stance echoed by another prominent ecofeminist, Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature*. In protest to this harmful Western-scientific approach, which seeks knowledge through division and reduction, Shiva advocates a holistic approach that recognizes nature as a creative force. For Shiva this creative force is also a feminine one, based on the Hindu concept of *prakriti*, or life-force. Shiva sees the promise of ecological stewardship in the daily practices of women like Rukmani. It would thus be easy to read this novel as a simple expression of Shiva's pronouncements about the potential of rural women of the global South to act as stewards of the land.[1] However, as many critics have since pointed out, this representation itself risks being reductionist and essentialist.[2] According to Niamh Moore, Shiva continues to be what Sturgeon has called ecofeminism's "straw-woman" (137) for critiques of the woman-nature connection. In her own attempt to articulate an anti-racist ecofeminism, Noel Sturgeon points out that in the search for a salve for the perceived Western alienation from nature, ecofeminists have inappropriately borrowed from and appropriated the identities of non-Western women, including Indigenous women, historic, pre-patriarchal European women and, especially, Indian women. Moreover, by denying Western science and technology altogether, such a stance denies the fact that so-called progress and modernization represent changes that some rural women of the global South (for example, Rukmani's neighbour Kunthi) may in fact be enthusiastic about.[3]

I believe, however, that there is much that can still be recuperated from Shiva's portrayal of Indian women farmers and peasants. What is particularly useful, especially in relation to Rukmani's relationship with

the land, is Shiva's emphasis on labour. She writes that "women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*" (47, emphasis in the original), which could be read as an essentialist comment on women's reproductive capacities. However, when taken alongside Shiva's interviews with women living and working in the Himalayan forests, it is clear that the "active maintenance of life" refers to the social and sometimes domestic labour of the women instead. In these interviews it is clear that the women define freedom as the ability *to* work (in a relatively unalienated way), as opposed to, say, freedom *from* work. According to one interviewee, the three most important things in life are "freedom and forests and food" (249). "Our freedom to work in the forests and to farm," she says "is very important" (249). Another woman claims that their *shakti*, or strength, "comes to us from these forests and grasslands, we watch them grow, year in and year out through their internal *shakti* and we derive our strength from it. … we eat food from our own fields. All this gives us not just nourishment for the body but a moral strength, that we are our own masters, we control and produce our own wealth. … Our power is nature's power" (250). These are clearly descriptions of the kind of creative, productive and non-alienating forms of work lauded by Marx as a necessary expression of a full humanity. Hooks has called this "humanizing labour" (133).It is this commitment to a certain mode of rural labour, and this belief in the value of labour to themselves that motivated the women to advocate on behalf of the forests against deforestation. I argue that this same commitment moves Rukmani. The satisfaction and pleasure she gets from nature is not defined by leisure or recreation, as William Cronon argues is more typical of the Western/North American expression of environmentalism (78), but rather through work and production. Rukmani describes work and fulfilment in the same breath: "The sowing of seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit, but there is nothing to equal the rich satisfaction of a gathered harvest, when the grain is set before you in shining mounds and your hands are whitened with the dust of good rice" (102). It is clear that her perspective on labour is becoming outmoded when her sons mastermind a strike at the tannery where they work. Their discourse on rights, labour and power is foreign to Rukmani: "I do not know what reply to make—[my sons] are strangers. Nathan says we do not understand, we must not interfere: he takes my hand and draws me away" (64). Her experience of working the land structures her ideas of labour relations and she is unable—at this point, at least—to divorce the worker from the work she does. For this reason she cannot grasp the idea that her sons would take a contradictory stand towards their work.

What is most striking about Markandaya's novel, from a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, is the ways in which her text first offers, and then resists, the pastoral. The descriptions of the farm, for example, evoke ideas of an unspoilt, fecund, provincial landscape that is at peace with, and always nostalgic for, its even more harmonious past—all features which Lawrence Buell variously associates with the pastoral. On the other hand,

the text is not shy about the downsides of country life. The following description of the storm-ravaged farm defies the idea that the rural countryside is a place of refuge: "Uprooted trees sprawled their branches in ghastly fashion over streets and houses, flattening them and the bodies of men and women indiscriminately" (41). This tension between the pastoral and the anti-pastoral is, according to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, a common theme in postcolonial writing. They discuss some of the complexities of the postcolonial pastoral in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, where they write that it "affords a useful opportunity to open up the tension between ownership and belonging in a variety of colonial and postcolonial contexts: contexts marked, for the most part, by a direct or indirect engagement with often devastating experiences of dispossession and loss" (85). Markandaya's novel reflects on this loss directly through the land-grabbing machinations of the tannery. Patrick D. Murphy further notes that when writing about nature in the postcolonial context, "the environment cannot be treated without attention to violence, warfare, government corruption, and transnational corporate greed" (68). In developing the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, most critics agree that the contextualization of the text within particular (environmental) histories is crucial. Through my reading I have found that many postcolonial writers are doing this work themselves. Consider, for instance, how Epeli Hua'ofa's *Tales of the Tikongs* engages the histories and politics of indigeneity and development with the environment of the coastal South Pacific. Another example can be found in Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain,* in which the history of coal production leaves its mark on the narrative landscape of the play. In postcolonial literature itself, environmental concerns are often very visibly tangled up with the politics of daily living to the extent that "nature" is fraught from the outset with social meanings. This prevents a clean pastoral, and perhaps invites the more negative sides of nature that Markandaya portrays.

When *Nectar in a Sieve* is read in the context of the post-Independence Indian "hunger-novel," the necessity of politicizing the environment becomes clear. For although there is much to celebrate in the way Rukmani understands and values the world around her, the unrelenting cycles of flood and drought are a reminder of the material reality of living on the land. It is this dire reality that Indian and Indian diasporic writers like Markandaya have sought to expose. S.Z.H. Abidi writes that "After the Independence the novelists were free from the moral obligation of voicing the political aspirations of their people in throwing away the foreign yoke and the national freedom had brought their revolutionary activities to a standstill. Naturally enough, they diverted their attention to the internal problems of India" (5). These problems included the fact of hunger and near-starvation for millions of peasants. Uma Parameswaran agrees that it is primarily hunger and the subsequent will to live that drive the plot and theme of Markandaya's text (56, 57). The novel focuses on the debasements brought on by hunger: starvation,

prostitution, emigration, the splitting-up of families, cheating, blackmailing, and so on. Rukmani's family's absolute dependence on nature is so severe as to be pitiable for most of the novel. Her survival is so often tested and tried by rains and droughts that the reader cannot help but despair at what she calls the "mighty impotence of [the] human endeavour" (42). It is this struggle that leads Parameswaran to argue that "In *Nectar in a Sieve* [nature] is neither the all-intimidating protagonist found in early Canadian or Australian literature nor a mere backdrop, but a character, as it were, in the action" (56). To say, however, that "Nature" is a character risks reducing the complexity of the representation of nature in the novel into one single force, capable of acting, in Parameswaran's words, as "saviour/tyrant" (56). At the same time, to suggest that nature is a character in the novel does open up the possibility of developing relationships with other characters in the novel, and is thus a useful way of imagining the role of nature in this text.

Rukmani herself, in what Rao calls the most important passage in the novel, describes nature thus: "Nature is like a wild animal that you have trained to work for you. So long as you are vigilant and walk warily with thought and care, so long will it give you its aid; but look away for an instant, be heedless or forgetful, and it has you by the throat" (39). There is a sense in this passage that Rukmani is trying to come to terms with her own role in this very meaningful yet strangely ambivalent relationship. Although in this passage she appears to speak from a position of power and control, throughout most of the novel she seems to accept her position at the mercy of nature. She expresses fear and hope, but rarely anger. For the greater part of the novel she and her family are undernourished and over-worked. In one prosperous season following a year of brutal drought, she depicts the conflicting feelings that arise as they watch over their crop: "Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen. We watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it be snatched away; or as a mother her child, with pride and affection. And most of all with fear" (93). The sense of loss of control is palpable in this scene. The family is hungry; their youngest dies of starvation while outside the harvest ripens, ever so slowly—"indifferent to [their] need" (71). It is almost as painful to watch the death of her son as it is to watch Rukmani's apparently passive acceptance of her situation. She is barely even roused to anger by this turn of events; rather, she accepts the situation as part of her way of living: "This is one of the truths of our existence as those who live by the land know," she writes, "that sometimes we eat and sometimes we starve … Still, while there was land there was hope" (132). The land offers the opportunity for self-sufficiency—it does not guarantee it. Most importantly, the land represents self-determination through owning (or at least being in charge of) the means of production, that is to say, the land. Without this one avenue of power and promise, life loses its meaning and runs, as the title suggests, like nectar through a sieve.

Changing Relations: the Tannery

The industrialization of her village changes these dynamics and eventually robs Rukmani of the comfort of her land. For her, the first crime of the tannery is that it is built on the *maidan*, an open field shared by all. "They had invaded our village with clatter and din," she recollects, "had taken from us the *maidan* where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us" (4). Here Markandaya is, intentionally or not, echoing a pattern of the division and privatization of land that has been the hallmark of industrial development. Shiva and Mies demonstrate that the loss of the commons is a symptom of neocolonialism in the postcolonial context, arguing that "colonialism and capitalism transformed the land and soil from being a source of life and a commons from which people draw sustenance, into private property to be bought and sold and conquered; development continued colonialism's unfinished task" (105). The intrusion of industrialization brings with it the commodification of land and bodies. Without this free space, and with the imposing presence of male strangers in the town, Rukmani keeps her young daughter Ira close to her. Indeed, the arrival of the tannery marked "the end of [her] daughter's carefree days … She had been used to come and go with her brothers, and they went whither they wished" (29-30). Rukmani's daughter was not the only one whose freedom was disrupted by the presence of the tannery. Rukmani noticed the way the animals avoided the village now, too. "At one time," she recounts, "there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingos, striding with ungainly precision among the water reeds, with plumage of a glory not of this earth. Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close" (69). The significance of the tannery also lies in its consumption of animals. In addition to disturbing the local wildlife, the main function of the tannery is to transform animals into leather for consumer goods. Rukmani describes it as a sort of mass (post)killing machine:

> Not a month went by but somebody's land was swallowed up, another building appeared. Day and night the tanning went on. A never-ending line of carts brought the raw material in—thousands of skins, goat, calf, lizard and snake skins—and took them away again tanned, dyed and finished. It seemed impossible that markets could be found for such quantities—or that so many animals existed—but so it was, incredibly. (47)

Rukmani appears to object to the speciesist nature of this industry that profits from the slaughter of non-human animals. When taken alongside Rukmani's fears for her daughter's safety, Markandaya's novel becomes an exemplar of the feminist theorizing of Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, among others, who have worked to highlight the connections between the subordination of women and the subordination of animals, often in terms of direct physical harm.

Of course, when Rukmani's son is killed by the guards at the tannery, it becomes clear that Markandaya's critique is not only about gender; class and caste vulnerabilities are also her concerns. Despite what may look like a growing lower-middle class because of the wage-work that the tannery offers, Markandaya shows that its real effect is to exacerbate the existing gaps between variously positioned people, making the vulnerable even more so. This shift is evident in the local marketplace. Rukmani had always sold her vegetables—those nice enough to fetch a price, "leaving the spoilt or bruised vegetables for ourselves" (22)—to Old Granny to trade in the market, but with the rising prices of goods the petty moneylenders had begun to seize greater control of the buying and selling trade, able to pay growers like Rukmani a little more for their goods. Yet, as Rukmani astutely points out, the benefit was outweighed by the higher costs of goods. "No sugar or dhal or ghee," she explains, "have we tasted since they came, and should have none so long as they remain" (28). Despite their hunger, Rukmani remains fixed on the idea of acting according to caste dictates. When her son says he will work in the tannery to earn money to buy the food they desperately need, she admonishes him: "You are not of the caste of tanners. What will our relations say?"(51). Her prejudices are further revealed when she discusses the wives of the high-ranking Muslim men who run the factory under its white owner. She is unable to see past their differences, calling the women "a queer lot" and expressing pity for the way their veiled lives "deprived [them] of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their skin" (48). On one occasion one of the women calls Rukmani into her home to buy produce from her. Rukmani's observation that "Her fingers, fair and slender, were laden with jeweled rings, any one of which would have fed us for a year" (48), is invested with the multi-layered ways in which class, caste and religious difference are exacerbated by the tannery; or, that the tannery, by bringing those of different class, castes, and religions into one place, at least, showcases the existing hierarchies and power differentials between the groups.

The end result of the tannery's existence, however, is the displacement of vulnerable groups such as the small farmers who do not even own the land they farm. Eventually, after too many bad seasons, and after her sons have all been lured off the land by paid work, she and her husband can no longer pay their dues; the landowner sells the land to the tannery, thus confirming Rukmani's fears that "the tannery would eventually be our undoing. [For] it had spread like weeds … strangling whatever life grew in its way" (18). Still, even in the heat of her disappointment, she cannot sustain this rage. The same acceptance with which she put up with starvation drives her to concede that "whatever extraneous influence the tannery might have exercised, the calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather" (132). She has once again suppressed her anger in favour of tolerance.

Rukmani's philosophy of acceptance mimics nature's disinterest in her own fate. She may have cursed the "cruel, blue skies" when they

refused to give rain, but at bottom she knew this was an impersonal act on the part of the skies, that they were "indifferent" to her need, rather than spiteful towards it. Rukmani takes this same approach to the social world, acknowledging its injustice, but never being roused out of her tolerance. Of her hungry children, she says, "their faces faded; the two younger ones began crying listlessly from hunger and disappointment. I had no words to comfort them" (42). When the landowner's man comes to collect the dues following the drought from which no harvest was produced, Nathan tries in vain to plead with the man that they have nothing to give; Rukmani merely says that he is just doing his job. This is the aspect of Rukmani's character that most critics focus on when they call her a "typical Indian woman. … an upholder of Indian tradition" (Abidi 94). In this reading Rukmani embodies values stereotypically associated with Hinduism and Hindu women in particular, including a philosophy of fatalism, acceptance, cautious optimism, and a devotion to family (Jha). Rekha Jha remarks that in contrast to Western cosmologies, Indian values often come across as conservative (58). Indeed, Rukmani does express a keen dislike and distrust of the changes being wrought in the name of modernization. Yet what may at first be perceived as a static conservatism reveals itself instead to be a tactic of negotiation, encapsulated by Nathan's advice to "bend like the grass, that you do not break" (28). Diverting from the standard literary interpretation of Rukmani's character as traditional, I focus instead on the ways in which she can be seen to interact with and even embody modernity. Here I build on Uma Parameswaran's work of trying to reintroduce Kamala Markandaya back into the postcolonial canon from a new perspective. To this end, I will examine the relationship between Rukmani and Kenny. Her intellectual affair with the worldly white doctor reveals a different dimension of her character and represents one of the important steps she makes in asserting control over the conditions of her own life.

Rukmani versus Kenny: Negotiating Modernity

Rukmani develops into a stronger, more assertive character through her interactions with Kenny. Her boldness in this relationship can be read as a gesture to something larger than the local, an indication that she is not a victim of modernity but is rather in dialogue with it. I am particularly interested in avenues of power adopted by Rukmani to make this change. De Certeau's writings about the politics of everyday life, particularly his essay "'Making Do': Uses and Tactics," offers a useful perspective. De Certeau is interested in the way in which people, through their repetitive, daily experiences, actually succeed in actively navigating the immense and nearly flattening systems of authoritative power that govern the world in which they operate. According to de Certeau, these systems of power, or strategies, do not render subjects powerless. Instead, he writes that

people "make do" in these strategic spaces by employing what he calls tactics: the manoeuvres of the weak. To put it differently, tactics are the avenues of power accessible to the ostensibly powerless—people like Rukmani. One of de Certeau's more interesting examples of a tactic is taken from the French, *la perruque*, also known as poaching. This is the practice of workers using work time, or spare workplace resources, for their own creative production. "It is different from absenteeism," he writes, "in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room" (25). His theories of everyday resistance have great potential for resonance within postcolonial theory. Here, I use his concept of "tactics" and "making do" to help us transform our understanding of Rukmani. She is participating in everyday resistance through her relationship with the doctor Kennington. Here she comes into relation with a representative of the colonial power—the foreign white doctor—and instead of employing mimicry she tries to enter into a somewhat egalitarian, or at least human, relationship with him. She sees herself reflected in his eye as a stupid peasant, but this neither frightens nor dissuades her. Instead she continues to determinedly be herself.

Kenny first enters Rukmani's life when he helps to ease the death of her ailing mother, and Rukmani later consults him for treatment. At first she is intimidated by Kenny; because of his foreignness but also because of his gruff manner and his impatience with her cultural customs. But very quickly she becomes used to his presence, and comes to appreciate him for his honest yet compassionate bedside manner as he tends to her dying mother. Over time their relationship grows, and it is clear that theirs is a different sort of friendship than he has with other villagers. Perhaps it is due to the fact of Rukmani's literacy; she was taught to read and write by her father, and she values these skills very highly. This prized education may be what gave Rukmani the confidence and initial encouragement to relate to Kenny on a different level. Theirs is not a romantic relationship, but is instead what I might call an intellectual affair. Rukmani seems to enjoy conversations with Kenny that she never engages in with her husband, who can neither read nor write and who shows little interest in the world beyond their village. She and Kenny are both adversaries and collaborators. They share secrets that Nathan does not know and would not necessarily understand—such as the fact that he helped her and her daughter overcome their infertility.

It is perhaps on this point of their collaboration that I can most easily demonstrate my argument for Rukmani as an active negotiator. When Rukmani finds that she is having trouble conceiving after the birth of her first child, she and her mother visit the temple regularly to make offerings and pray for a child, all to no avail. When Kenny learns of her difficulties, he offers to treat her. His intervention makes it possible for her to have many more children. However, fearing that Nathan would be upset that she had put herself "in the hands of a foreigner" (21), Rukmani never tells

her husband about this. By seeking out his help and concealing it from her husband, Rukmani is exploiting gaps in the system; she is subverting what she understands to be the limiting patriarchal control over her life by taking charge of her body in accessing the medical services she needs to create the family that she wants.

In order to explain Rukmani's medical visits as tactical, I borrow from Claire Colebrook's interpretation of de Certeau. Colebrook writes that "A tactic works metaphorically: rather than returning the logic to some ground, it thinks the logic from a different point of view" (546). Referring to the idea of *la perruque* again, she explains that: "from the point of view of the worker—who both recalls his home and anticipates the relocation of the [made] object into the home—it is the nonpresence of this other time that transfigures the object. There is nothing disobedient in his action (yet). What renders the object as an instance of the tactic of *la perruque* is its anticipated relocation, the thought of another site, a metaphorical shift that takes this present object as the sign of something other than itself" (547). Likewise, what I am trying to say about the doctor's visit is that it is not so much the fact that she sought medical treatment that signifies her adoption of tactics—there was 'nothing disobedient in that action (yet)'. Instead what matters is what that visit says about her relationship to the strategies of the local patriarchy—namely, that she is willing and prepared to circumvent its control where it does not suit her needs. The doctor's visit has meaning outside the visit itself. In addition to resisting the constraints of the local patriarchy, Rukmani's visit to the doctor, as an assertion of her own agency over her body, is also a way of undermining Kenny's perception of Indian peasants as "meek, suffering fools" (43). This is the "metaphorical shift" that makes the visit a "sign of something other than itself."

As an adversary, Kenny acts as a pessimist to Rukmani's complacent optimism (often read as fatalism from the outside). At the end of a particularly bad drought Rukmani insists that she has a little rice stored away that will last "until times are better"; the doctor lashes out by responding "Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die …Why do you not demand—cry out for help—do something?" (44). Kenny believes that his worldliness gives him the ability to see the larger picture and to pass judgement on the attitudes of the peasants he treats. At times his diatribes against the Indian people verge on racist and are at the least paternalistic (such as when he says "I can only take you people ... in small doses" (70)). It must be said, though, that his frustration at the plight of the Indian peasants often reflects that of the (white, Western) reader: his frustration, for example, over Rukmani's fatalistic attitude and her refusal to demand more from the State, especially as her family suffers from severe malnourishment, reflects the reader's desire for a particular kind of heroine—one who will fight blindly to succeed; Markandaya resists this easy characterization of Rukmani, though, by positioning her instead as neither victim nor hero (much in the

same way that Markandaya allows Rukmani to be a product of her times, with all the class and religious prejudices that entails).

Although Rukmani and Kenny have markedly different perspectives and priorities, it is just as clear that there exists a closeness between them. For her own part, Rukmani can often be found reaching out to the doctor, or longing for his presence as she does at the birthday celebration of her first son. On one occasion, when she hears that the doctor has returned after one of his long absences, she goes to welcome him, as others have done, with a garland of marigolds and some limes. Finding herself alone with him her curiosity finally overtakes her shyness and she begins to ask about his home-life, whether he has a wife and family back in England and so on. When she presses him about why his wife does not accompany him, they enter into a debate about gender roles and the concept of duty. She says it was his wife's duty to follow him to India: "a woman's place is with her husband" (106). He responds to say that she simplifies everything, because her knowledge of the world is so limited. At first, then, he seems as dismissive of her as ever. But she finally speaks back to him, defending her own intellectual standing, saying that her knowledge is "Limited, yes … Yet not wholly without understanding" (106). At this act of self-defence she notes a change in him: "For the first time since I had known him I saw a spark of admiration in his eyes" (106).

This encounter is thus a turning point, not only in their relationship but in Rukmani's ability to speak up for herself. When she is cast adrift in the city, she relies on these newly developed skills to set herself up, first as a letter-writer and then, with the help of a street-wise boy, as a stone-breaker in a quarry. This ability to "make-do" sets her apart from other characters, like her neighbour Kunthi. Although at first Rukmani envies her neighbour's ability to "[throw] away the past with both hands that they might be the readier to grasp the present" (29), it becomes clear through the novel that blindly changing with the times is not necessarily the best response. Kunthi, for example, ends up working in the sex trade to service the town men that the new tannery brings to their village—this is not the path Rukmani would have wanted to choose.

By the end of the novel Rukmani has lost nearly everything. After being evicted from their land, she and Nathan head to the city in hopes of living with one of their sons who had left the farm in search of work years ago; they never do find him. Immersed in the chaos of the city, they feel alienated. They are suddenly without a home, a community, or means. Rukmani then makes two significant responses to this downturn in her life. The first, her decision to return to the land, can best be understood in the framework of de Certeau's tactics, but the second, her decision to adopt a homeless boy, takes us back to ecofeminism through her commitment to an expanded notion of community.

By rejecting the aimlessness and anonymity of the city in favour of the hard life on the land, Rukmani reverses one of the greatest narratives of the 20th century—the rural exodus towards urbanization. This move is perhaps her cleverest tactic of all. De Certeau writes that "a tactic is

determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (38). If we understand urbanization and industrialization as strategies—that is, ways of organizing people and resources and space that therefore produce power—then turning her back on property, paid labour, and the city becomes a way of embracing her own *absence of power*. To return to Achebe's Okonkwo, we might say that by rigidly ignoring his own absence of power in the new order of things, he was unable to see the gaps in the system that he could exploit (not to his own immediate gain maybe, but to some form of advantage). This is precisely what I argue Rukmani did, and what her relationship with the white doctor helped pave the way for. She "manoeuvred" her way through the various limiting practices of power until she found a space for herself in its undercurrent; and for her this space was back on the land she had never owned to begin with.

By reconverting the rural into her own place she exemplifies the idea of resistance as "escaping without leaving." That is to say that the grid of strategies cannot be exited, but it can be subverted through "trickery," through manoeuvres. Ian Buchanan focuses on this phrase of de Certeau's (this "escaping without leaving") as a means to explain how the colonized is never in a state of fixed powerlessness vis-à-vis the colonizer, but is rather in a position to exercise power (again, within the gaps opened up by the strategic or institutional power). Buchanan goes farther to show that the "weak," here the colonized, are actually the ones who "define the limits of strategy, and inform its modes of operation in a fundamental sense, thus forcing the strategic to respond to the tactical" (paragraph 21). By extension, Rukmani's position becomes not only one of an agent of her own will (as I at first suggested), but as a force that the postcolonial state must respond to. Although Buchanan seems to suggest that this power to shape the strategic forces can be seen at the level of the individual, his own examples tend towards the collective (saying, for instance, that "prisoners determine the level of security required at a particular [penal] institution" (21)). If it is difficult to see Rukmani's impact on the postcolonial state, we can at least see her impact on the broader community.

In the city, Rukmani and Nathan find that they are forced to compete with many other newcomers. Changes in agricultural economy were forcing people off the land and into the cities in droves. Many of these people ended up, like Rukmani and Nathan, living on charity in the city's temples. If hunger and fear marked the country life it also marred life in the city. Resources were few and with each new arrival the tension in the temple grew: "A few [of the residents] were antagonistic and openly so … they saw their share of food shrinking with each additional mouth" (165). Ever industrious, Rukmani sets up a stand as a letter-writer and reader, but competition is stiff, and the prejudice against a female letter-writer means she earns very little money. When Puli, the young boy who acted as their guide when they first arrived in the city, enquires about her wages, he tells them they could be making more working in the quarry. This type of

piece-meal, hard physical labour not only signifies their lack of social position, it is also quite the opposite of the way they laboured on the land that they were forced to leave. Moreover, the quarry, like the tannery, represents a direct assault on nature which is, again, in opposition to the productive work of their organic farm. Although the job provides income and some sense of direction, it is hazardous and highly stressful, for they have to be on constant watch for dynamite blast warnings. The strain is too much for Nathan and he dies in the street one rainy day after work.

Throughout these tribulations, Rukmani continues to demonstrate her new found resilience. Instead of becoming mired in the hopelessness of her situation, she diverts her energies towards the creativity and maintenance of life. Although destitute, she takes pleasure in passing on this creative force to those more vulnerable than herself. And, as is not surprising from one whose connection with the land was so important, Rukmani is quick to demonstrate this ethic of care to non-human animals as well. Her care and concern for the welfare of animals is apparent from the beginning of the novel. Riding on the bullock-cart with Nathan to her new home, she comments that when they stopped by a river for lunch the "poor beasts … seemed glad of the water" (5). Her own condition is often mirrored in her descriptions of the enduring but crest-fallen animals: "The raw patch on the bullock I had noticed had begun to fester … As soon as the animals drunk [their keeper] put the yoke back. The bullock cringed, but accepted the torment and as soon as the whip fell it began to pull again" (141). Towards the end of the novel when her only meals are handouts from the temple, she still takes the time to ensure the well-being of animals: "When we had finished [eating] we threw the empty leaves to the goats that had gathered, expectant but patient for their meal, and that too was a satisfying thing, to see them eating leaves and cups, crunching them in their mouths with soft happy movements and looking at us with their mild benign eyes" (147). That she takes the time to enjoy watching the goats munching on their leaves suggests an ongoing desire for a connection or even a communion with nature that she continues to nourish even within the urban environment.

Rukmani's care for Puli can be read in the context of this sense of communion with her fellow creatures. The connections between her affection for Puli and her care of animals are made clear in the novel through a few key references. First, Rukmani remarks that the children living on the street behave "like animals" around food (152). Second, the child announces that he "is called Puli [tiger] after the king of animals, and I am leader of our pack" (153). As a lost newcomer to the city, Rukmani takes pity on the orphan who suffers leprosy; moreover, though, she admires Puli's bravado and his refusal to be the underdog. Together, by pooling their resources and their labour, Rukmani eventually saves enough money to return to her village, for "with each passing day [her] longing for the land grew" (166). She recognizes the futility of this move, knowing that they "left because [they] had nothing to live on, and if [she] went back it was only because there was nothing here either" (175). By

deciding to go back home to the land that had deserted her, Rukmani reverses the fate of rural migrants everywhere. She chooses not to accept the jarring cityscape as her fate.

Rukmani does not go alone, though. Knowing that eventually leprosy would rob Puli of his independence, she asks him to come with her. Reflecting on his sad fate, she muses that "there *is* a limit to the achievement of human courage" (176, my emphasis), but in her there seems to be no end in sight. Rukmani extends the limited conception of care to her non-biological family and even to the non-human animals in her life. She takes Puli back home with her and although in truth she knows she has little to offer the boy, by bringing him to live near her old farm she is sharing the greatest wealth she has ever known—the nearness to the land; "life to [her] starving spirit" (186). Her son and daughter welcome them back onto their small plot of leased land and the reader is left to imagine the difficult continuation of their efforts to support themselves both through and against the new order of things.

Conclusion

By revisiting ecofeminism through an early postcolonial classic a few things become clear. The first is that although Rukmani may initially appear to embody a simplistic Western-defined ecofeminist standpoint she is in fact a deeply layered character with a complex relationship to an un-romanticized nature. The challenge then becomes reading beyond the dismissal of this stereotype towards a genuine acknowledgment of her relationship with the land. To do so I balanced a reading of her love of nature with the reality of crop failure and starvation. In addition, by focusing on labour as an important aspect of her relationship with the land, and by contrasting it with her sons' strike and her employment in the quarry, I hoped to problematize the tendency to separate reproductive labour from other forms of labour. It also became clear that it is necessary to situate her experiences of/on the land alongside other aspects of her character, suggesting that an ecofeminist analysis can be productive as long as it is used, as Sturgeon suggests, as a "feminist intervention" rather than "a set of new, independent theoretical arguments" (145). In leaving the garden to focus on her relationship with Kenny, for instance, another side of Rukmani's character was revealed. Her ability to advocate on her own behalf, and on behalf of the Indian people, in the face of Kenny's pessimism was an important complement to the experiential work on the farm and in the garden. Her final (re)turn towards the local must be read, then, as an active, positive choice and not a retreat to the relative safety of her village. Her negotiations with Kenny can be read in reverse as practice for this last chapter when her determination would be most needed. What is striking about this last transformation, though, is that in many ways her life at the end resembles very much her life at the beginning of the novel.

In this sense, then, the novel privileges a concept of transformation that emphasizes recuperation over linear progression. Rukmani's journey is an example of 'making do' in the face of industrial, social, political and economic changes. Her decision to return to the land, and her desire to share that life with those she cares about constitutes her response to these changes.

Notes

1. "Third World women," argues Shiva, "whose minds have not yet been dispossessed or colonized, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of. It is not only as victims, but also as leaders in creating new intellectual ecological paradigms, that women are central to arresting and overcoming ecological crises" (46).

2. For critiques of Shiva see Agarwal, Biehl, and Leach and Green.

3. See Arif Dirlik for the failure of postcolonial theory to account for the attraction of Western modernization.

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