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Aged and Gendered Mobility in Rural Space in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

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Abstract: This paper examines the production and experience of space in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in the Sieve* (1954), a rural postcolonial narrative set amidst the intense urban development witnessed in India, through an interdisciplinary framework combining spatial criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial feminism, and feminist gerontology. It argues that space in the novel is not a neutral backdrop but a socially and politically produced entity shaped by labour, gender, and age.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space, the study highlights how agrarian life is constituted through labour-intensive spatial practices, which are later destabilized by industrialization and capitalist intrusion, particularly through the emergence of the tannery. Doreen Massey's notion of gendered spatial relations is employed to examine the unequal distribution of mobility and rootedness, where male characters migrate for labour while women remain largely confined to domestic and vulnerable spaces. Further, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is used to analyze how spatial norms regulate female bodies, especially in instances such as Ira's exclusion due to infertility and her subsequent entry into morally coded public spaces. The paper also engages Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist frameworks to situate these experiences within specific socio-economic and cultural contexts. Finally, feminist gerontology provides a lens through which ageing is examined as a process of spatial marginalization, particularly in Nathan's physical decline and Rukmani's reflective narration. The study concludes that the novel represents space as a contested terrain where gender, labour, displacement, and ageing intersect, foregrounding endurance as both a spatial and existential condition.

Keywords: Spatial Criticism, Gendered Spaces, Feminist Gerontology, Postcolonial Narratives

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in the Sieve* has often been viewed, interpreted, and analyzed from an ecocritical perspective, contributing to the extensive discussion on the relationship between women and nature in rural Indian fiction. The protagonist, Rukmani, a subservient wife and protective mother, has been central to these discussions, alongside her daughter Ira. The novel revolves around themes such as rural life, poverty, family dynamics, and parenthood. Across all these themes, space plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of the characters, especially Rukmani.

Rural life brings her from the relative comfort of her parents' home to a humble hut after her marriage at the age of twelve. Poverty forces the family to migrate and eventually tears it apart. Family dynamics change as the children move outside the village in search of survival. Those who remain behind face famine and struggle for existence, eventually being compelled to migrate as well. Parenthood is affected as the children grow older, especially when Murugan establishes a family elsewhere and Rukmani and Nathan search for him in the hope that he might provide assistance. When their efforts fail, they are forced to take up menial jobs in an unfamiliar environment.

Space, displacement, abandonment, home, homelessness, and alienation are intertwined within each of these themes. However, the contribution of space to these experiences has not been sufficiently examined through the lens of spatial criticism. The agrarian space that initially functions as a site of survival ceases to do so after the expiration of tenancy. The tannery, as an industrial space, disrupts the social and communal life of the villagers while simultaneously creating a façade of development. Gendered spaces such as the hut and the kitchen shape the experiences of both Rukmani and Ira. This study explores these dimensions while identifying how famine results in a collapse of spatial stability.

Another dimension explored here is spatial gerontology in relation to Nathan and Rukmani. As the characters age, their mobility decreases, leading to spatial contraction. Nathan dies in transit, belonging neither fully to one place nor another. The loss of territory experienced by Rukmani and Nathan becomes more evident and more devastating in old age. Rukmani is left to grieve in her former home, but in the absence of Nathan and most of her family members.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that combines spatial criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial feminism, and feminist gerontology to examine the gendered and aged experiences of space. It argues that space is socially and politically produced rather than neutral or merely descriptive.

The theoretical foundation of this study lies in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, which presents the spatial triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Lefebvre examines the role of labour in the production of social space and asks how such production occurs and whose labour sustains it. He writes: "Nature, first of all, plays a part, then labour, hence the organization (or division) of labour, and hence also the instruments of labour, including technology and, ultimately, knowledge" (69). He seeks to redefine production beyond earlier Marxist interpretations that focused primarily on knowledge, ideologies, language, symbols, and discourse. This study applies these ideas to the labour-intensive lives of Rukmani and Nathan's family and their eventual displacement when industrialization renders their labour economically irrelevant.

Building upon Lefebvre's theory, Doreen Massey's analysis of gendered social spaces introduces another important dimension. She argues that mobility and rootedness are unequally distributed across social spaces. As she observes, "The demonstration of geographical variation adds yet another element to the range of arguments that these things are in fact socially constructed" (178). This study uses her insights to examine male mobility associated with labour and economic agency and female rootedness associated with domestic labour. Such spatial divisions influence independence, visibility, and access to resources, revealing that spaces and places reflect socially constructed understandings of gender.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further enriches this discussion by demonstrating how gendered expectations compel individuals to perform socially sanctioned roles. Female mobility, particularly when connected to economic agency, often becomes subject to moral scrutiny, revealing how space regulates and disciplines gendered bodies.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty challenges Western feminist representations of non-Western women. She argues that the experiences of women in Eastern societies differ because of distinct socio-cultural and economic conditions. She writes that "colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination, and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question" (333). Mohanty emphasizes the necessity of building coalitions across race, class, and national boundaries. She further contends that "Western feminisms appropriate and 'colonize' the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries" (335). This study therefore situates the experiences of Rukmani and Ira within their specific local and cultural contexts.

Feminist gerontology, as discussed by Toni Calasanti, extends gender analysis into old age. According to Calasanti, "It encompasses men and women alike, exploring their linked experiences. For example, we see that domestic labor is part of the retirement experiences of both women and men" (306). She argues that ageing intersects with systems of privilege and oppression, producing new forms of

marginalization. Applying this framework to *Nectar in the Sieve*, the study examines how Rukmani continues to experience patriarchal constraints in old age, while Nathan's ageing body intensifies his vulnerability to poverty, displacement, and physical decline.

Review of Literature

Critical studies of *Nectar in the Sieve* have largely centered on themes such as poverty, agrarian crisis, industrialization, and female endurance. These studies situate the novel within postcolonial Indian writing in English and perceive it as a social realist portrayal of peasant suffering. Rukmani's character has also been extensively studied as a representation of rural female endurance. As Kavita Singh (2024) observes, "Markandaya has managed to give full play to a woman's self-cast in relatively unadventurous social milieu . . . She proves that within the traditional role can accommodate her other roles as a human being."

Subsequent readings have examined the novel and Rukmani's character through ecocritical and ecofeminist lenses. Rukmani has been interpreted as a nurturer and a representation of rural womanhood living in harmony with nature. As Shubha Tiwari et al. (2023) argue, "Through the character of Rukmani, the novel presents a vision of woman as a savior and nurturer of nature, living in harmony with the natural world and valuing sustainability over short-term gain."

More recent feminist readings have focused on the gendered suffering experienced by Rukmani and Ira. These studies examine female bodies within patriarchal structures, particularly in relation to reproductive anxiety, marital endurance, and the sexual sacrifice represented by Ira. They also explore patriarchal expectations and socially constructed gender roles imposed upon women.

As Markandaya writes:

The man who finds a woman in the street, raises an eyebrow and snaps his fingers so that she follows him, throws her a few coins that he may possess her, holds her unresisting whatever he does to her, for this is what he has paid for—what cares such a man for the woman who is his for a brief moment? He has gained his relief, she her payment, he merges carelessly into the human throng, consigning her back into the shadows where she worked or to the gaudy streets where she loitered (118).

While gender has been acknowledged as a significant theme, the spatial dimensions of female experience—including restrictions on mobility, domestic territoriality, and spatial confinement—remain largely unexplored. The significance of spaces such as the hut, the tannery, the agrarian fields, and urban environments has not received sustained critical attention. The interdisciplinary framework

of spatial criticism, feminism, and gerontology employed in this study seeks to deepen this inquiry and add further dimensions to existing scholarship on the novel.

Although space and mobility have become important areas of critical investigation, age remains a relatively neglected dimension in discussions of *Nectar in the Sieve*. By positioning space as a dynamic field of power relations rather than a static backdrop, this study aims to integrate feminist and gerontological perspectives into the critical examination of the novel.

Discussion

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre conceptualizes space as a social product constituted through a triad: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space). He argues that “we may be sure that the forces of production (nature; labour and the organization of labour; technology and knowledge) and, naturally, the relations of production play a part . . . in the production of space” (46).

This idea is reflected in the agrarian labour performed by both Rukmani and Nathan. Their existence is structured around continuous engagement with the land. Nathan remarks, “. . . if the land is gone, our livelihood is gone” (Markandaya 171). Although the land does not legally belong to them, as they are tenant farmers, Nathan’s statement underscores the fact that space is not inert but is produced through embodied labour. Lefebvre’s concept of spatial practice becomes evident in the inseparability of life and labour in the experiences of Rukmani and Nathan.

The conceived space in the novel is imposed upon the characters through ownership and economic power. Lefebvre critiques earlier scholarship for reducing production to discourse, signs, symbols, knowledge, and ideology. Instead, he emphasizes the relationship between production and its material outcomes. In Nathan’s case, the realization that the land belongs not to him but to the landlord becomes painfully apparent when the family is forced to vacate the space despite years of labour. Their agrarian work is displaced by industrial capital with the arrival of the tannery.

As the novel states, “The tannery stood, its bricks and cement had held it together despite the raging winds; but the workers’ huts, of more flimsy construction, had been demolished” (97).

This contrast demonstrates that space belongs to those who possess economic and political power. The durability of the tannery and the destruction of the workers’ dwellings reveal how space is politically produced and unequally distributed. Industrialization not only transforms the physical landscape but also restructures social relations, rendering the labour and lives of tenant farmers increasingly vulnerable.

Doreen Massey argues that “Geography matters to the construction of gender, and the fact of geographical variation in gender relations, for instance, is a significant element in the production and reproduction of both imaginative geographies and uneven development” (Massey 2). In the novel, this idea is reflected through the differing mobility patterns of male and female characters. Male characters such as Nathan, Thambi, Murugan, and Arjun move in search of economic opportunities. Nathan works on the agrarian land until his labour is no longer required. As poverty intensifies, Thambi and Arjun migrate to Ceylon to work on tea estates, while Murugan moves to the city in pursuit of better employment opportunities.

In contrast, Rukmani remains largely confined to the village, a condition that is similarly evident in Ira’s life. After being separated from her husband, Ira is restricted to Rukmani’s domestic space. Economic hardship eventually forces her into prostitution, a circumstance that still confines her to the village while simultaneously subjecting her morality to public scrutiny and condemnation. Rukmani’s identity remains closely tied to caregiving and endurance. Massey describes space as “an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (3). Even when Rukmani moves to the city with Nathan in search of Murugan, her mobility does not signify agency but rather vulnerability. Thus, space remains gendered in both the village and the city.

This discussion of gendered experiences can be further extended through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not innate but is constituted through repeated social acts and performances. Rukmani’s continuous role as caregiver and nurturer, as well as Ira’s social isolation because she is considered a “barren woman,” demonstrate how gender roles determine social belonging and exclusion. It must also be emphasized that public spaces such as streets, especially at night, are not readily accessible to women. Ira is compelled to enter these spaces out of desperation, revealing how gendered bodies are disciplined and regulated through spatial norms.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminism for universalizing Western women’s experiences. She argues that colonization implies “a relation of structural domination, and a suppression . . . of the heterogeneity of the subject(s)” (Mohanty 333). This complexity is evident in Rukmani’s experiences, which cannot be treated as representative of a universal female condition. Her struggles emerge from the intersections of rural poverty, caste-based hierarchies, industrialization, and economic displacement. The establishment of the tannery disproportionately affects women, while Ira’s decision to engage in prostitution results from social and economic coercion rather than individual choice. These circumstances reinforce Mohanty’s insistence that literary texts must be interpreted through context-specific feminist frameworks.

Toni Calasanti's articulation of age as a critical category of analysis offers another perspective through which to understand the spatial experiences of Rukmani and Nathan in old age. Calasanti emphasizes that gender "encompasses men and women alike, exploring their linked experiences" (306) and that systems of oppression intersect with ageing. Nathan's physical decline during the journey to the city reflects a gradual loss of spatial agency. Forced into mobility by economic necessity, he ultimately dies in transit, occupying a liminal space between departure and return. The hardships faced by the elderly couple intensify with age, while their younger children possess greater capacity to adapt and survive. During their unsuccessful search for Murugan, Rukmani and Nathan are compelled to sleep wherever they can find shelter in the city, underscoring their spatial marginalization.

Rukmani's experiences as an elderly woman, however, offer a contrasting dimension. She adopts Puli, an orphaned boy they encounter in the city, and her nurturing disposition remains central to her identity. This continuing role reflects the enduring influence of patriarchal expectations placed upon women. Significantly, the entire novel is narrated retrospectively by Rukmani. Through memory and narration, she reconstructs spaces and spatial experiences from her past. Feminist gerontological studies often suggest that ageing, while marked by marginalization, also creates opportunities for reflection and meaning-making. Rukmani's narration exemplifies this process, transforming memory into a space of interpretation and survival.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Nectar in a Sieve* demonstrates that space is a dynamic site where labour, gender, and age intersect. Through Lefebvre's concept of the production of space, Massey's theory of gendered mobility, Butler's notion of performativity, Mohanty's postcolonial feminist critique, and Calasanti's feminist gerontology, the novel reveals how individuals inhabit, negotiate, and are displaced from the spaces that define their existence. The recurring assertion that "we shall endure" ultimately reflects not only emotional resilience but also the struggle to persist within and against spatial constraints. Markandaya's novel thus foregrounds space as a contested terrain shaped by power, labour, gender, ageing, and displacement, while emphasizing endurance as both a spatial and existential condition.

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