

REAPERS OF LAND: KEEPERS OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT: *Literary geography examines an author's sense of place as expressed in fictional setting. We may come to know a place and its meaning through analysis of the literary landscape an author creates. Kamala Markandaya and Willa Cather, two twentieth-century female novelists, experienced and wrote about distinctly different landscapes. Markandaya celebrates the Asian Indian rural Indian village in Nectar in a Sieve, while Cather's O Pioneers! portrays the prairies of Nebraska. Their settings are as dissimilar as they are difficult in terms of topography, vegetation, and natural hazards, yet each author chose to create a romanticized pastoral landscape. Their protagonists enjoy harmonious relationships with picturesque environments; earth is fruitful in their hands. Although separated by 10,000 miles and four decades, their optimistic portrayals reflect the authors' shared perspective that "country" is source and substance of future, and that woman has an active role in shaping landscape.*

INTRODUCTION

Literary geography examines the relationship between landscape and literature. A humanistic endeavor, literary analysis involves interpretation of a writer's perceived and re-created spatial environment (Tuan, 1978). When authors create a setting in imaginative literature, they express geographical perceptions based on emotions, histories and mindsets, as well as the empirical reality of a place. Fictional literary settings elucidate the human-land relationships authors observe and experience. Thus, analysis of literary setting helps us understand a writer's geography or sense of place.

Literary settings serve numerous functions. They may portray places realistically, as in the case of Chinua Achebe's (1959) *Things Fall Apart* which describes Subsaharan Africa's wet-dry tropical climate, swidden agriculture and periodic markets, or Eudora Welty's (1942) fairy tale, *The Robber Bridegroom*, which envelops the reader in wild and deep Mississippi woods. Popular novels may actually define places if they are consistent enough with a place, and are distributed to and received by the general public (Shortridge, 1991).

Artistic works may also redefine one's perception of place. Since ancient times, nature and landscape were marginal subjects in Western artistic expression; human condition and activity held dominant position (Janson, 1973). Painters and writers portrayed wilderness and mountains as fearful and sinful (Short, 1991), perhaps because Old Testament writers noted that idol-worshippers practiced pagan rituals in wooded groves and on hills. By the sixteenth century, however, poets praised the beauties of forests and mountains, and human interaction with wilderness was deemed a dignified and spiritual experience (Janson, 1973). This vision persists today in many environmentalist movements (Merchant, 1980; Seager, 1993).

Literary settings may reflect cultural conditions, values and norms. Sample (1991) showed that Bessie Head used a deep, calm river to signify unified Botswanan tribespeople, while a ruffled river indicated conflict. Tuan (1974) cited several landscape features that have been used as social metaphors in literary setting: city - privilege, wealth, corruption; seashore - security; water - adventure; island - innocence; wilderness - destiny. Town and frontier can invoke feelings of fear and violence (Tuan, 1979), while gardens summon feelings of the pleasurable and good life (Tuan, 1986). Analysis of such literary symbols helps us

better understand a society's attitudes and mores.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the created landscapes in Kamala Markandaya's (1955) *Nectar In a Sieve* and Willa Cather's (1913) *O Pioneers!*. Though dissimilar in terms of topography and climate, the settings are alike in that each is a picturesque portrayal of an idealized rural environment wherein women manage the landscape successfully.

NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Born in 1924, Kamala Markandaya lived in a southern Indian village and attended Madras University. Her background included training in traditional Indian heritage and values, as well as Western language and literature. Markandaya worked as a journalist before she wrote novels. She matured at a time when India was torn politically and ethnically. After centuries of Islamic and European invasions, Britain took control of India in 1857. The numerous peoples of India never unified, and as the country prepared for independence, the chasm widened. During the 1930's, Muslims desired a separate state, Sikhs were anti-Muslim, and Hindus comprised the most populous group. In August 1947, when partitioned India became independent as Hindu-dominated India and Muslim-dominated East and West Pakistan, killings and massive migrations resulted. Most of India's population lived in rural villages and practiced subsistence agriculture. British-built transportation and communication infrastructure supported burgeoning industries, however, and India was poised to become a major power. Markandaya wrote *Nectar In a Sieve* at a time when India confronted problems associated with urbanization and industrialization: loss of jobs in the countryside, over-crowded cities, conflicts between traditional and progressive values, and growing materialism.

Nectar In a Sieve follows the life of Rukmani, a literate Indian peasant, from the time of her marriage at age twelve to Nathan, a landless tenant farmer, into her forties. During this time, Rukmani bears and loses several children, and

survives summer monsoon deluges and droughts that devastate the countryside and family. In the midst of poverty, she glories in the freedom of open fields and sky. Rukmani has seemingly endless stamina and strength as she cultivates and protects the land, vestige of hope and future.

Rukmani lives in a place where the brown, clayey earth is soft and fertile. Jasmine and roses scent the air; mangos and plantains grow wild. The main crops are corn and rice, which are sown by hand. Two bullocks pull a plow which Nathan guides, while Rukmani walks behind sprinkling corn seed from a basket on her hip. Rice cultivation is a labor-intensive process, also. Nathan builds clay dams around terraced fields, fills them with water, then transplants paddy seedlings. When the terraces are filled with green, heavy-headed rice plants, Nathan and Rukmani drain them and gather and thresh the paddy. Rukmani plants beans, yellow pumpkins, sweet potatoes, purple brinjals, and green and red chilies in her garden, which she sells at market.

Water is important in several ways. Rukmani washes clothes in the brook that runs near the paddy field. Other women join her at that spot and it becomes a place for social interaction. Rukmani thinks the flamingoes in the river have a beauty not of this earth. She wonders at the tasty fish that spawn in the irrigated terraces, and the kingfishers that dart after them. Rukmani reveres water so much so that she names her daughter for the great Asian river, Irawaddy.

Nathan builds their home, a two-room mud and thatch hut, outside a small village. One room is stone-lined and used as a granary, the other as living space. Rukmani smears the walls with dung cakes to protect the home from insects and moisture. She pounds, sweeps and strews leaves on the dirt floor. Sleeping mats hang on the wall. A tin trunk stores the family's prized possessions: wedding clothes, brass vessels, pots and pans. Though strong in sun and wind, it is not uncommon for roofs and houses to wash away during summer monsoons. The storms destroy all fields and crops, and the family lives on roots, leaves and dried fish until the next harvest. As destructive as rains could be, famine is certain if they fail. Markandaya wrote of the devastation wrought by the deadly and cruelly

calm, cloudless heavens:

"Each day the level of the water dropped and the heads of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a trickle, the well was as dry as a bone. Before long the shoots of the paddy were tipped with brown; even as we watched, the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us" (Markandaya, 1955, 101-102).

Finally, the baked earth cracks and splits open. Cattle and sheep, lizards and squirrels perish in the blazing sun. The goat stops producing milk; Rukmani's youngest son dies.

The village consists of several huts surrounding a field where children play and hold festivals. There are only a couple of shops; most bartering takes place in the streets of the bazaar. Sellers offer a variety of goods: guavas, peanuts, curds, vegetables, clothes, tools and cooking implements. Rukmani walks to the village once or twice a week to purchase sugar and butter. She especially likes the people she meets there.

Industrialization then changes the village forever. Foreign workers tear down the houses around the field and build a tannery. Muslim workmen bring their families to live in new houses that are separate from the rest of the villagers. The tanners attract new businesses and shops. As more property owners sell their land to the growing tannery, it sprawls across the landscape. A foreign doctor constructs a hospital. A manufacturing town now stands where the farming village had been! Sellers raise prices on all goods, such that villagers and farmers can no longer afford to purchase goods in the market. Children go to work in the tannery rather than help on their family's farm. Rukmani notices that sparrows no longer sing in the village, which has become filthy and noisy.

Markandaya creates a pastoral landscape setting, a finely-featured and invincible countryside where people live in harmony with each other, and nature is revered. Such a setting is termed pastoral or romantic, and celebrates simplicity, spirituality and wholesomeness of rural life (Short, 1991). Pastoral landscapes evoke positive feelings for environment and community life. Through Rukmani's eyes we experience a wild, yet delicate and always awesome environment. As she travels by ox-cart with Nathan after their marriage to her new home, Rukmani introduces us to the lively and lush countryside:

"We rested a half-hour before resuming our journey. The animals, refreshed, began stepping jauntily again, tossing their heads and dangling the bells that hung from their red-painted horns. 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, 1955, 11).

Markandaya uses such picturesque landscape description to depict hazardous situations as well. 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, 1955, 58-59).

Picturesque landscapes are literary tools that involve readers emotionally. We hear the frightening thunder and vicious wind. In other passages we see the ashen-edged, glowing heap of embers and smell the incense at the Deepvali Festival of Lights. We feel the fear of hunger and the hope of rustling paddy. We get the idea that Rukmani's life is simple and exquisite in its simplicity. She lives close to nature, dependent on the earth.

While it may be argued that Markandaya idealizes the Indian landscape because she was influenced by her university training in English romantic literature courses (Afzal-Khan, 1993), her created landscape is not inaccurate and does reveal her perception of her childhood home. Markandaya considered herself a village girl (Jha, 1990) and chose to express her memories of India in a literary setting.

O PIONEERS!

In *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather (1913) used her childhood memories of immigrant pioneers on the prairie to create literary images wherein "country is hero" and "the story came out of the long grasses" (Sergeant, 1992, 102). Cather was born in Virginia in 1873, and moved with her family

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to a ranch in the Nebraska mixed-grass prairie when she was nine years old. By age 22, Cather read five languages including Greek and Latin, and edited the literary magazine for the University of Nebraska. Regarding her well-known prairie-based stories, Cather said she wrote best when she wrote from her experience and heart (Cather, 1953).

Cather grew up at a time when the quickly urbanizing northeastern United States created population and economic pressures. After the Civil War, the United States industrialized at an unprecedented rate. Transportation and communication infrastructure (railroad and telegraph) necessitated and facilitated growth of manufacturing industries. An increasing proportion of the working population was involved in non-agricultural labor; 37% in 1840, 78% in 1930 (Conzen, 1987). Farm laborers, replaced by mechanization technologies, crowded into American cities.

From 1880, Western, Northern, and then Eastern European emigrants traveled to the United States as Europe industrialized and its cities experienced high growth rates. With eastern lands already owned and occupied, many immigrants settled in populous northeastern cities. Unemployment, health hazards and crime increased. Migration to the frontier (Middle West and West) mitigated some of this flow, as people perceived that prairie settlement would provide opportunities to create new lives. Numerous policies and practices produced several settlement booms or surges as pioneers hungered westward. For example, the Homestead Acts of 1862, 1909, and 1916 granted heads of households free title to 160-, 320- and 640-acre plots, respectively, when they lived on the land for five years and showed proof of cultivation.

Middle Western settlers found a vast and rolling plain characterized by such distinctive natural events as temperature extremes, cyclical drought, wildfire and irregular precipitation in the prairie region. Annual precipitation, which falls mostly from April to September, ranges from less than 15 inches in the drier west (west of the 100th meridian) where shortgrass prairies dominate, to more than 31 inches in the eastern tallgrass prairies (Kucera, 1992). The fertile mollisols of the mixed and tallgrass prairies support numerous grasses, forbs and shrubs when there is sufficient precipitation.

O Pioneers! takes place on the Nebraska prairies near the town of Hanover. When Alexandra is a young woman, her father, Swedish homesteader John Bergson, dies and leaves her a 640-acre farm to manage. She faces many challenges and hardships in the form of natural hazards (fires, hailstorms, droughts) and the murder of her younger brother, yet perseveres and in 20 years has one of the most prosperous farms in the region.

Feeling a closeness with the landscape, Alexandra lives by the rhythms of nature; during winter she rests after the fruitfulness of autumn and prepares for the passion of spring. During a lengthy drought she insists on keeping the farmstead when her brothers want to forsake it and move on. Alexandra feels such a closeness with country that she decides to purchase more land against the wishes of her older brothers. She plants wheat and puts in an orchard. She combs the prairies for fox grapes and ground cherries to preserve in glass jars. She hand-waters her trees and plants when the rains fail. After two years of drought, neighbors sell their farms, but Alexandra's garden continues to produce sweet potatoes, rhubarb, asparagus and flowers. Alexandra builds a new house high on a hill to replace the low log home in which the family first lived. She carpets and furnishes the many rooms with Swedish heirlooms. Family and friends gather around the varnished wooden table and eat on china.

O Pioneers! is a story about successful immigrants written at a time when immigration rates and foreign-born population rates were highest, and Congress was debating immigration policy. Yet the most remarkable aspect of *O Pioneers!* is Cather's description of the Nebraska countryside. To her, setting is an important character that helps tell the story. Day dawns with awesome beauty that rushes through the fields:

"The dawn in the east looked like the light from some great fire that was burning under the edge of the world. The color was reflected in the globules of dew that sheathed the short gray pasture grass...Birds and insects without number began to chirp, to twitter, to snap and whistle, to make all manner of fresh shrill noises. The pasture was flooded with light; every clump of ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain threw a long shadow, and the golden light seemed to be rippling through the curly grass like the tide racing in" (Cather, 1913, 126-127).

The country is beautiful and bountiful. Drought

and famine occur, but are superseded by plenty. Earth, a living being, nurtures and nourishes its inhabitants on Cather's prairie:

"Everywhere the grain stood ripe and the hot afternoon was full of the smell of the ripe wheat, like the smell of bread in an oven. The breath of the wheat and the sweet clover passed him like pleasant things in a dream" (Cather, 1913, 258).

Alexandra feels an intimate connection with her environment, such that after fire and blizzard her

"face was set towards [the land] with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it until her tears blinded her" (Cather, 1913, 65).

When Cather went to the prairies as a child, she felt she had "come to the end of everything for the "country was as bare as a piece of sheet iron" (Slote, 1966, 48). Later Cather claimed to love the open spaces and country. She expressed her feelings through Alexandra who loved the "brown waves of earth [that] rolled away to meet the sky" (Cather, 1913, 307).

PASTORAL WRITING

Cather's literary paradisiacal prairie, like Markandaya's Indian rice paddies, is part of the pastoral or romantic tradition which describes and praises natural landscape. Hailing from ancient writings of Theocritus (Greek, ca 300BC) and Virgil (Roman, ca 70BC) who idealized the rural lifestyle, western pastoralism celebrates the "agrarian Utopia" (Unruh 1982), wherein agriculturalists' values and virtues salve and save the society. Pastoral writing was revived during the Renaissance and continued to be popular for the next two centuries as writers created idealized imaginary landscapes. Beginning in the 1700s British writers created romanticized settings, but they were based on actual landscapes. The purpose of such literary settings was to bring sense of simplicity and order to an otherwise disruptive society that was experiencing rapid industrialization (Bunce, 1994).

Although Markandaya and Cather write of different places and in different times, each woman creates a landscape setting that made readers feel

good about country. Each author creates a sensuous landscape to express her own ideology, namely that the country is source and substance of the good life that is quickly changing as society modernizes. Markandaya and Cather respond similarly to the loss of country: they idealize and praise it. It is important to note that an idealized pastoral landscape is not necessarily inaccurate. Typical of Indian authors writing in English, Markandaya includes Indian words, phrases and descriptions that portrayed Indian village life (Williams, 1977). Cather, too, was concerned that her writing be accurate, and was delighted when reviewers said *O Pioneers!* was true to western country and people (Slote, 1966). Numerous journals and diaries express settlers' landscape perceptions that were similar to Cather's (Moers, 1976; Schlissel, 1982; Fairbanks, 1986).

Markandaya idealizes the unsettled countryside and community life to call attention to its disappearance, and sound a warning against increasing urbanization. When businessmen build a tannery in Rukmani's village, the village grows and changes spatially and economically. Tenant farmers can no longer afford rent and landowners sell their land to the tannery owners. Rukmani and others were forced from the land they cultivated and loved. She remarks that the once-peaceful village is now all clatter and din. When one loses touch with the land, one is no longer grounded.

Rukmani's experience is not unlike what happened in Markandaya's countryside. *Nectar In a Sieve* addresses the cultural chaos and economic exploitation that were part of the legacy of British colonialism (Jha, 1990). Encroaching Western technology and industrialization conflicted with Eastern traditions. Modernization ushered in materialistic attitudes. Although Markandaya examined the dilemma between Western/Eastern values in other works (Walsh, 1990), it is in *Nectar In a Sieve* that setting illustrates the dilemma. Markandaya's country is a simple place where the power and delicacy of nature are in balance. Wet and dry seasons pass. People depend on nature, and accept hunger as well as plenty. Balance was sorely lacking in post-partition India as political parties and religious groups vied for authority. Markandaya's use of pastoral landscape suggests that one must flee to country to escape the

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complexities of human environment.

Likewise, Cather uses a pastoral setting as a nostalgic reminder of an idealized way of life. When railroads connected the Middle West and East (by 1850), speculators purchased adjacent lands and held them for profitable resale. Railroad and industrial monopolies set high interest rates on mortgages which further alienated farmers. The Populist Movement of the 1880s protested this exploitation of rural Americans and revived interest in the agrarian way of life. *O Pioneers!* is Cather's response to destructive capitalism and modernization in general. Country is refuge from the filth and distrust associated with cities. Cather was aware that natural grasslands were all but gone by 1913. She wrote, "The shaggy coat of the prairie,...has vanished forever" (Cather, 1913, 75). It had disappeared under the plow. Lamenting the loss of a place she experienced and loved, Cather invokes pastoralism to say that true America, its freedom and creative will, is in the countryside (Randall, 1960).

Markandaya and Cather also emphasize the need to live in harmony with nature, a characteristic of pastoral tropes who tend to be calm, self-reliant, accepting and intuitive. Living by their hearts rather than reason, Rukmani and Alexandra enjoy intimate associations with environment and acknowledge their dependence on land. In *Nectar In a Sieve* the Western doctor chides Rukmani for her irrational beliefs. He feels that her long-suffering and acquiescent enduring are stupid. She replies that she understands things about the land that he cannot, and that bearing sorrows in silence cleanses her soul and helps her rise above her misfortunes. In *O Pioneers!* Alexandra tries to assure her brothers she is certain about a decision regarding their farm. When they press her for a rational explanation, Alex replies, "You have to take my word for it. I *know*, that's all. When you drive about over the country you can *feel* it" (Cather, 1913, 67). Clearly, Rukmani and Alexandra are attached emotionally to the land.

Although Rukmani and Alexandra are fictional constructs, their creators imbued them with thoughts and characteristics of real women, and they relate to their environments in real ways. Indian author and critic Rao referred to Rukmani as "the mother of rural India" (Rao, 1972, 57) in that she

represents the Hindu woman's great love for nature and earth. Uma (1989) noted that Rukmani's devotion and endurance are typical characteristics. Likewise, Cather's Alexandra reflects homesteading women who actively interacted with their environment. Recent research efforts show that pioneer women cared for farm animals, managed profitable butter and egg businesses, and plowed, seeded and harvested fields (Jensen, 1991; Jones-Eddy, 1993).

It is significant that Markandaya and Cather use female characters to praise and glorify nature; they show that women enjoy close associations with land. In each novel, a female protagonist successfully manages and cultivates the earth. Rukmani and Alexandra revel in the wonders of the outdoors and express their admiration and respect for nature. When Rukmani names her daughter for a river, it is an example of woman finding identity in the landscape. Conventionally, women did not have power to affect political and social processes. Much literature reflected this inertia and stereotyped them as docile women at home (Fryer, 1986), or prizes to be won or bought. Rukmani and Alexandra differ from those stereotypes in that they are active individualists who enjoy harmonious relationships with their environments. They are sensitive to nature's signals and put their faith and trust in land, knowing that all seasons pass. They accept that misfortune and fortune are intricately braided, one will surely follow the other, and that nature's destructiveness does not diminish its beauty and bounty. Psychoanalytic feminist literary critics explain such a view in terms of sexual identification. Women and earth experience similar seasonal/menstrual/childbirth rhythms, reach out to and are responsive to others, and each is sensitive virtually every place she is touched (Benjamin, 1986; Weedon, 1987). In other words, Rukmani and Alexandra successfully manage the natural landscape because they are intimately related to nature: they are nature.

Markandaya and Cather use female protagonists to say that women have an active role in shaping the environment. As perpetrators of cultural insight and heritage (Faragher, 1979; Fine and Gordon, 1992; Squire, 1993), women use environment to reflect their traditions. Rukmani's

garden and Alexandra's farmstead are visual reminders that women alter the landscape in ways that are beneficial to society. When they plant and harvest life-giving crops, Rukmani and Alexandra metaphorically preserve culture. Markandaya and Cather are suggesting that women would bring their respective countries safely through the confusion of change and modernization because they understood things of value: land, country, community, connection with environment. Their women know they will eventually be sustenance for the very earth from which they sustain their households. In the ultimate connection with landscape, Cather describes country as "fortunate" that would

"receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (Cather, 1913, 309).

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the settings in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar In A Sieve* and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* reveals a similar response to the problems of exploitation that are associated with industrialization. Each author creates a pastoral landscape that accentuates the wholesomeness of agrarian lifestyle. Although natural hazards bring death and destruction, Markandaya and Cather extoll the virtues of dependence on land and closeness with environment. The novels were written 40 years apart and describe different places; this analysis suggests that idealizing rural landscapes is a common reaction to the processes of modernization when traditional ways of life are threatened. Further, topophilia, the bond or sentiment between people and place (Tuan, 1974), is neither place- nor time-specific. Indian tenant farmers feel connected with the landscape, as do Swedish-American landowners. In each novel, land provides security in terms of sustenance and identity; the protagonists live the creed, "while there was land, there was hope" (Markandaya, 1955, 182).

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