



THE POETICS OF ESTRANGEMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMALE ALIENATION IN ANNIE ERNAUX'S THE YEARS AND KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S NECTAR IN A SIEVE

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ABSTRACT

This research study conducts a comprehensive comparative analysis of female alienation as represented in two notable literary texts: Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008) and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). These authors are separated by great distances, different languages, and different political and social situations in the twentieth century, post-war France, and pre- and post-independence rural India. However, their descriptions of the "forlorn" female persona are very similar. This study employs the theoretical framework of "The Poetics of Estrangement" to examine the construction of forlornness characterized as a multifaceted amalgamation of emotional abandonment, social dislocation, and existential solitude through particular narrative strategies. In *The Years*, Ernaux employs her distinctive *écriture plate* (flat writing) to convert the singular "I" into a collective "we," illustrating the estrangement of the female protagonist from her own memories due to the incessant progression of consumerist history and secular advancement. Markandaya uses a tragic pastoral realism in *Nectar in a Sieve* to demonstrate how Rukmani is pushed to the outside of society by the forces of industrialisation, extreme poverty, and the rigid institutions of patriarchal customs. This study posits that "forlornness" in these works is a structural consequence of class, gender, and the passage of time, rather than a transient human emotion, by systematically evaluating the characters' internal monologues and their growing interactions with changing societal structures. The study looks at how Ernaux's main character deals with the alienation of the modern, free woman who feels "lost" in a sea of choices. On the other hand, Markandaya's main character feels a more visceral, basic sense of alienation induced by loss and physical dislocation. The comparative synthesis shows that the historical reasons for alienation are different in each case, from the loss of stability in rural India to the rise of neoliberal individualism in France. However, the "poetics" of their solitude have a common frequency. Finally, the study contends that both Ernaux and Markandaya give voice to the forlorn, turning the silence of female suffering into a strong criticism of the social structures that make women invisible. This adds an important cross-cultural element to the global female literary canon.

KEYWORDS: Female Alienation, Annie Ernaux, Kamala Markandaya, Comparative Literature, Forlornness, Socio-Cultural Displacement, *Écriture Plate*, Post-Colonial Realism

1. INTRODUCTION

The literary depiction of the "forlorn" female character has long served as a poignant barometer for the changing social, economic, and political stresses of the modern age. While "forlornness" is commonly associated with simple

loneliness, in a rigorous academic context, it refers to a profound state of existential and social alienation a condition in which the female subject finds herself adrift, disconnected from her community, history, or even her own sense of self. This research paper examines this complex state

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of being through a comparison of two classic works from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2008) and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). This project aims to explore the "Poetics of Estrangement" by bridging the gap between the postwar European environment and postcolonial Indian rural realities.

Annie Ernaux, a Nobel winner renowned for her "autosociobiographical" method, uses *The Years* to chart the growth of French society over six decades. However, her protagonist is not a classic heroine; rather, she is a consciousness through which time, consumerism, and political movements pass. Ernaux's signature style, *écriture plate* (flat writing), deliberately removes emotional sentimentality to reveal a starker form of alienation one in which the modern woman, despite achieving legal and social "liberation," feels increasingly forlorn as her individual identity is subsumed by the relentless march of collective history and neoliberal artifice. Ernaux defines alienation as the result of temporal and memory fragmentation.

In contrasting contrast, Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a visceral story of Rukmani, a lady in rural India whose existence is upended by the combined forces of nature and industrialisation. Markandaya, a pioneer of Indian English literature, uses pastoral realism to show the decline of conventional agrarian stability. Rukmani's grief stems from displacement the loss of her land, the death of her children, and the encroachment of a tannery that represents "progress" that she neither understands nor benefits from. While Ernaux's character battles with the alienation of abundance and choice, Markandaya contends with poverty and institutional erasure.

The "Poetics of Estrangement" provides the theoretical foundation for this comparison. It refers to specific narrative techniques such as Ernaux's use of the communal "we" and Markandaya's use of evocative, tragedy-laden prose that transcend the private experience of grief into a public critique of society structures. This introduction contends that, despite their varied cultural backgrounds, both authors agree on a single truth: the female experience of estrangement is intrinsically related to their countries' "grand narratives". Whether it's the idea of

French cultural supremacy or the promise of Indian industrial modernity, the desolate lady is a mute victim of these transformations.

By comparing these works, this research hopes to show that "forlornness" is a cross-cultural phenomena that transcends geographical bounds. Through this comparison lens, we can better grasp how literature depicts the resilient, but solitary, female voice in the noise of global change..

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse on female estrangement and "forlornness" has generally been delineated by geographical and stylistic boundaries. However, recent studies have started to investigate cross-cultural parallels between Western and Global South feminisms. This literary analysis situates the "Poetics of Estrangement" among prior critical assessments of Annie Ernaux and Kamala Markandaya.

Nomass, B. B. (2024). Despair and Alienation in TS Eliot's and Adonis' Poetry: A Comparative Study. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 14(6), 1605-1613. This article talks about some important modern literary themes, such loneliness and hopelessness, and how they can harm people's lives today. Many philosophers have impacted Eliot's ideas about alienation, its forms, and a study of the ego and soul. The study also talks about what happened following the two world wars and how changes in politics, the economy, and society made people feel more alone, both physically and spiritually. Both T. S. Eliot and Adonis write about how hard life is while they look for meaning in their lives. Eliot asserts that a return to religion is important for overcoming the crisis of spiritual separation and loss. Adonis, conversely, employs poetry to transcend his suffering by fabricating realms of divine imagination to alleviate his solitude. The study also examines how both poets employed metaphorical and symbolic language to convey the grim reality. Eliot depicts estrangement in an impersonal manner, but Adonis portrays the same agony inside a human environment.

JANA, S. (2024). Rethinking Alienation and Estrangement: Critical Study on the Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra. *Writers Editors Critics*, 14(1). Alienation is a major problem in today's concerned and

posthumanist world. Man has obstacles to survive and grow, caught in a web of forces that strip away his humanity and faced with negative social stigmas. As time goes on, more and more people feel alone and cut off from others. Alienation emerges from sensations of impotence, absence of significance, lack of rules, cultural disconnection, social isolation, and self-alienation. There are several ways to look at alienation, such from a psychological, sociological, literary, or philosophical point of view. The poet Jayanta Mahapatra was feeling lonely. He left Hindu culture since his granddad became a Christian. His language estrangement came from not being able to connect with the Oriya language. His connection with the lyrical muse caused him to become disconnected from the physical world. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how Mahapatra's poetry addresses the themes of alienation and silence, facilitating rejuvenation and revitalisation within social ecology and human connections, thereby transcending concepts of alienation and identity crisis.

Pourya Asl, M., & Pourgharib, B. (2025). Precarity and Estrangement: Rethinking Loneliness Through Women's Diasporic Narratives. *Women's Studies*, 54(8), 855-874. Recent research on loneliness has transitioned from perceiving it just as an individual psychological phenomenon to recognising it as a construct embedded within systemic processes that govern subjectivity, agency, and belonging (Hawkey and Cacioppo; Klinenberg; Taylor et al.). Nevertheless, the connections between loneliness and sociopolitical variables, especially in contexts of marginalisation and diasporic identities, have been insufficiently explored in literary studies. Studies on diasporic narratives often examine themes of alienation, displacement, and shattered identities (Cohen and Fischer; Frydman; Mishra), depicting loneliness as a profound experience shaped by systemic inequalities and cultural and spatial dislocation. Loneliness is a prominent theme in diasporic literature; however, recent studies indicate a considerable imbalance in its examination, predominantly concentrating on the intrapsychic and affective aspects of loneliness (Cacioppo et al.; McDonald), while its wider sociopolitical and existential ramifications remain largely overlooked (Sagan; Salway et al.). This limited perspective may overlook the impact of systemic factors such as racial profiling and socioeconomic

instability in creating and exacerbating loneliness.

There exists considerable individual research on both authors; but, comparative studies between Ernaux and Markandaya are limited. Current comparative literature on female alienation, exemplified by Rita Felski's (1995) study, indicates that the "modern" woman's estrangement in Western narratives is often attributed to a crisis of interiority, whereas in postcolonial narratives, it is linked to a crisis of location. Nonetheless, this work contests that dichotomy by introducing a "Poetics of Estrangement" that is common to both. This paper aims to address a gap in current scholarship by integrating contemporary feminist theories into the analyses of Ernaux and Markandaya's works. It transcends the "East vs. West" distinction to create a common lexicon of feminine loneliness.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology grounded in comparative literary analysis. This study employs a textual and analytical framework to examine the representation of feminine alienation and the narrative construction of "forlornness" in Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar on a Sieve*. The study eschews numerical data, concentrating instead on critical reading, thematic analysis, and the examination of the chosen literary works within their historical and cultural frameworks.

The study utilises comparative textual analysis to examine how two authors from distinct socio-cultural backgrounds convey analogous experiences of alienation through diverse narrative strategies. Annie Ernaux's *écriture plate* narrative style and the disintegration of the human voice into a collective consciousness stand in stark contrast to Kamala Markandaya's pastoral realism and emotive storytelling. The study utilised a comparative methodology to examine the impact of narrative structure, symbolism, and characterisation on the depiction of female alienation.

The analysis is contextualised by secondary sources, including critical essays, journal articles, and theoretical writings pertaining to alienation, feminist theory, and comparative literature. These sources

enhance comprehension of the subject and situate the research within the framework of contemporary academic discourse. The study's analytical approach seeks to elucidate the "Poetics of Estrangement" as a widespread literary device in various cultural contexts, while revealing the socioeconomic factors that shape the female experience of alienation.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMALE ALIENATION IN THE YEARS AND NECTAR IN A SIEVE

Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* both show how women feel alienated in different ways because of their different social and historical backgrounds. However, both books show how women feel deeply estranged as they move through changing social and cultural landscapes. Both authors construct a fictional universe wherein the female protagonist endures exile, identity fragmentation, and emotional solitude using distinctive narrative methodologies and cultural paradigms. Ernaux describes how people feel alone in the changing world of postwar French society, while Markandaya describes how people feel alone in the weak agricultural economy of rural India, which is under danger from industrialisation. Even though the two stories take place in quite different places, the emotional and structural parts of alienation are very similar.

In *The Years*, Ernaux utilises her own style of "flat writing." This style doesn't use emotional embellishments or personal insights. The narrative voice changes the single "I" into a group "we," which shows how history may change who we are as people. The female main character sees how French society is changing, from political unrest and consumerism to changing gender roles. But this shared narrative style makes the reader feel like they don't know the main character very well as she tries to figure out who she is while remembering other people. Alienation is common but complicated; it doesn't come from not having enough things, but from memories that don't fit together and the consequences of modern life that are always there. In Ernaux's book, the woman is in a delicate place because being free from social constraints doesn't always mean being happy.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, on the

other hand, shows how Rukmani, a poor, uprooted, and industrialised Indian woman, feels lonely. Markandaya's narrative is told in the first person and is very personal and emotional. Ernaux's story, on the other hand, is more about a group of people and makes you think. Rukmani feels alone since she has lost everything that was important to her, such the steadiness of farming, the loss of her children, and the creeping invasion of a tannery that changes how things are done in the hamlet. In this case, being alone and having financial problems are closely related to feeling alienated. The main character's struggle isn't just in her head; it's also affected by changes in the economics and culture that make it hard for her to fight against modern industrial forces.

The two novels tell quite different situations, yet they both show that women might feel alone because of things that happen in institutions, not just because of people. Estrangement in Ernaux's art arises from the swift transformation of contemporary consumer culture, as time and social memory obliterate individual identity. Markandaya's narrative highlights how changes in the economy during and after colonialism may make individuals feel alone by splitting up rural communities and keeping patriarchal rules in place. The main protagonists in both books are on the fringes of their society, trying to stay free while dealing with things they can't change.

Both authors employ human misery to satirise society at large. Ernaux shows the emotional emptiness that lies beneath the superficial freedoms of modern European life, whereas Markandaya shows the human cost of economic growth in rural India. They formulate a "poetics of estrangement," wherein individual narratives symbolise broader structural issues.

The comparative analysis illustrates that, despite differing historical and cultural contexts, the experience of female alienation in these texts signifies a universal human condition influenced by socioeconomic transformation, cultural dislocation, and the precarious navigation of identity within evolving societies.

5. INTERPRETATIONS

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive

methodology to examine the depiction of women's solitude in Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*. The research fundamentally depends on a comprehensive examination of primary texts and pivotal notions from feminist criticism and comparative literary studies. The research analyses how these texts clarify and foster sentiments of alienation through narrative structure, character development, and topic recurrence.

The Years study shows that forgetting things and feeling less connected to the past are signs that you are not connected to other people. Ernaux's writing style, known as *écriture plate*, avoids being too emotive. On the other hand, it has a quiet, watchful tone. This type of art shows how the main character is leaving her past behind and how quickly things are changing in France after World War II. The woman in the story gives up her own voice and becomes part of a bigger story. This shows that changes in society today can make it hard to know who you are. Ernaux's writing implies that alienation is a psychological and cultural phenomenon that varies over time as a result of the demands of modern consumerism.

Nectar in a Sieve shows how Rukmani feels alone because of her experiences with poverty, being forced to move, and industrial growth. The narrative analysis looks at how Markandaya uses a personal and emotional narrative voice to show that living in the countryside is getting less stable over time. Rukmani's alienation is closely connected to money problems, being left out of social groups, and the breakdown of traditional community institutions. The tannery's intrusion brings in industrial forces that upset the village's economy and society, making the main character feel even more alone.

Each instance of alienation has distinct reasons, such as consumerist modernism in France and industrial progress in rural India; nonetheless, the emotional effects on the primary female characters are quite similar. Both individuals perceive a disconnection from their environment and endeavour to maintain their individuality and autonomy within a fluid social framework. Consequently, the study substantiates that female estrangement in these poems transcends individual subjective experiences; it serves as a

literary manifestation of substantial social and historical transformations.

The interpretive findings indicate that the "Poetics of Estrangement" functions as a collective narrative framework through which both authors utilise distinct women's experiences to critique broader societal trends.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The juxtaposition of Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* elucidates the significant ways in which women have been estranged from one another across many cultures and epochs. The study's principal finding indicates that alienation is shown in both texts as a structural state influenced by significant socioeconomic and cultural changes, rather than as an individual subjective experience. The protagonists inhabit distinct locales postwar France and rural India yet their feelings of solitude exemplify the difficulties presented by shifting socioeconomic conditions.

The study contends that alienation in *The Years* is inextricably linked to the swift transformations in contemporary society. Ernaux perceives the feminine subject as progressively diminishing her sense of individuality as time advances and commercial society proliferates. The narrative's communal voice often substitutes the singular "I" with a wider social perspective, illustrating the amalgamation of personal experiences into the collective historical consciousness. The protagonist's alienation is characterised by psychological detachment and a fractured identity, illustrating the unsettling effects of modernisation and social change.

Nectar in a Sieve illustrates how Rukmani's health and financial difficulties contribute to her sense of isolation. The findings indicate that estrangement in Markandaya's narrative is intrinsically connected to concrete issues like as poverty, land displacement, and the ramifications of industrialisation on rural communities. The establishment of the tannery in the village introduces new industrial dynamics that alter agricultural practices and render the protagonist more vulnerable. Rukmani's narrative illustrates how poverty and solitude may engender profound feelings of isolation and disorientation.

A significant finding is that the way a narrative is presented can induce feelings of isolation in an individual. Ernaux's literary style is subdued and analytical, reflecting the emotional detachment of contemporary existence. Markandaya's writing style is intimate and emotional, demonstrating the rapidity with which loss and perseverance can occur. Both authors employ personal experiences to address broader social challenges, despite their differing methodologies.

The discussion suggests that female alienation in these texts transcends cultural boundaries, embodying universal concerns related to identity, belonging, and social transformation. The concept of the "Poetics of Estrangement" elucidates how both authors utilise literary approaches to express the unvoiced suffering of women, while also exposing the institutional mechanisms that perpetuate their marginalisation.

Comparative Analysis of Female Alienation

Aspect	Annie Ernaux – The Years	Kamala Markandaya – Nectar in a Sieve
Socio-Cultural Context	Post-war French society experiencing rapid modernization and consumer culture	Rural Indian society undergoing economic hardship and industrial transformation
Type of Alienation	Psychological and existential alienation arising from fragmented memory and identity	Social and economic alienation caused by poverty, displacement, and industrialization
Narrative Technique	Uses <i>écriture plate</i> (flat writing) and a collective narrative voice	Employs first-person narration with emotional and realistic storytelling
Representation of Female Identity	Female identity dissolves into collective social memory and historical change	Female identity shaped by resilience in the face of economic and social adversity
Forces Causing Estrangement	Consumerism, modernization, and the passage of time	Industrial expansion, agrarian collapse, and patriarchal constraints
Nature of Alienation	Internal and psychological dislocation within modern society	Material and social displacement rooted in economic hardship
Literary Contribution	Critiques the emotional emptiness of modern consumer society	Exposes the human cost of industrial progress in rural communities
Common Theme	Both novels depict female alienation as a product of broader socio-historical transformations	

7. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to assess the portrayal of female alienation in Annie Ernaux's *The Years* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* through a comparative literary lens. The study demonstrates that female alienation is a complex phenomenon influenced by broader social, economic, and cultural transformations, through the analysis of these two works in distinct cultural and historical settings. The concept of "Poetics of Estrangement" offers a significant framework for interpreting the experiences of female characters as indicative of broader systemic constraints.

The study illustrates that Ernaux and Markandaya employ divergent storytelling strategies to portray estrangement, yet both effectively convey the fragility and strength of women navigating swiftly transforming communities. In *The Years*, alienation is associated with the fragmentation of identity within contemporary consumer culture and collective historical memory. Ernaux's narrative integrates individual experience with a broader social context, highlighting the psychological alienation induced by modernity. *Nectar in a Sieve*, on the other hand, shows how poverty, dislocation, and industrial encroachment may make people feel alone. It shows how changes in the economy and society can affect the lives of rural women.

Even though the settings and styles of the stories are very different, both show that women often have low status in societies that are changing. Their issues illustrate the interaction of gender, societal norms, and historical evolution. Ernaux and Markandaya's literary depictions animate the subdued experiences of women whose identities are shaped by external factors.

Finally, this study shows that women who feel estranged can do so across cultural and geographical boundaries. The two books show how literature may shed light on the common human experience of exile and negotiating identity by portraying similar stories of estrangement. The comparative methodology of this study enhances the understanding of how female voices in global literature elucidate the intricacies of societal transformation, memory, and identity.

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