

## MAN, MACHINES AND ECOLOGY IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *THE COFFER DAMS*

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### Abstract

Ecological symphony provides stability to the ecosystem of the earth. In the present scenario, the ecological consonance is being distorted by the industrialization and mechanization. Immediate short term gratification of so-called development owing to the industrial revolution with its huge machines are proving long term loss to man and environment. Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffe Dams* (1969) is an environmental oriented piece of writing. The present research paper depicts how modern technology and machines affect the rural environment and the cultural value system. The paper studies the ecocritical issues of urbanisation of agrarian landscape. Further, it analyzes the intimate bonding of women and ecology and highlights the role of women as the saviour and supporter of ecological values and surfaces the ecological issue of displacement, deforestation, wild life conservation and diminishing nativism.

**Key Words:** Ecology, Egalitarian value, Nativism, Symbiosis

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### Introduction

Nature is an indispensable part of man's life and plays a vital role in his life. There was a time when man had regard and respect for nature's wonderful phenomena. Nowadays, the existed ancient bond of love between man and nature is being diminished due to technology and the industrial revolution. The desire to equip himself with all the luxuries of life, drawing man away from nature. The hope of acquiring economic prosperity is pushing man towards ecological poverty. Man's ambition to control the elements of nature and his intervening in the affairs of nature is creating a lot of environmental issues. The men of letters are very much concerned over the degrading environment. They are trying to strengthen the bond between man and nature through their works.

Ecocriticism is a new genre in the domain of literary criticism that is trying to raise environmental awareness among people. William Rueckert defines, "Ecocriticism is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to study of literature" (107). Camilo Gomides states, "Ecocriticism is the field of inquiry that analyzes and promotes the work of art that "raises moral questions about human interaction with nature, while also motivating audiences' to live within a limit that will be binding over generations" (16). Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells suggest, "Most of all ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis" (5).

Kamala Markandaya's novel, *The Coffey Dams* is an environmental piece of writing. The novel is the story of constructing a dam over the turbulent river near a South Indian village, Malnad. The contract for this project is given to an English company by the Indian government. A number of Indian and English technocrats and labourers are involved in this venture. The novel depicts the confrontation between technological power and the forces of nature. The major ecological issues can be summarised as below:

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## Industrialization and Urbanization of the Rural Landscape

Kamala Markandaya deals with the issue of the impact of machines on man and ecology in this novel. A dam is to be built over a river of Malnad, a hilly rural area in South India. The gathering of thousands of men and machines in the rural area disrupts the rhythm of nature as well as the natives' life. A coffee club and a soft drink stall are established there. Markandaya writes, "The plains and the hill country people, who had watched with awe the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle" (2). The novel highlights the issue of deforestation. This project of building a dam swallows immense and impenetrating greenery of the area. Markandaya describes, "It was virtually a small industrial town, gouged and blasted out of the hill side" (2). The quiet and peaceful jungle is turned into an industrial town with its workshop, work building, loading and unloading bays, the car maintenance sheds, the workers' quarters, the engineers' bungalows, the amenity buildings, the water tower, ice and filtration plant, pumping and power stations.

## Sound Pollution and its Impact on the Area

The ceaseless blasting for constructing the coffer dams defaces the natural landscape badly. Markandaya writes, "Twenty explosions, close on twenty five tons of dynamite splitting the village in symmetrical calculated pattern"(50). The ceaseless clamour of men, machines and blastings disrupt the peaceful atmosphere of the hill country. Markandaya depicts, "The silence was now permanently fractured. At dawn, at noon, by night, machines thundered and pounded; land and air vibrated spasmodically to the dull crump of explosion" (105). Helen, the wife of the chief contractor, Clinton, explains her insensitive husband, the effect of shock waves on the huts of the tribesmen of the area. She says to her husband, "Their huts rattled around like peas in a tin" (Markandaya107). Thus, the devastating impact of the perpetual high frequency sound has been well depicted by Markandaya in this novel.

## Women: Saviour of Ecological Values

In *The Coffey Dams*, Helen is the mouthpiece of Markandaya regarding raising the core environmental issues. She is the true representative of ecocritical values. She practices and professes the concept of "Egalitarian" value of Deep Ecology which lays emphasis on the equality of every entity on the earth. She does not consider the blockages and barriers of colour, caste and creed. She mixes with the tribesmen as she knows them for years. She says to Clinton, "You have got to get beyond their skins, darling" (Markandaya 6). When Clinton expresses wonder on her being so intimate with the villagers, she says to him "I just think of them as human beings, that's all" (Markandaya 6). Like deep ecologists, Helen prefers intrinsic value to instrumental value. She thinks

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that every entity of the earth should be treated equally. She says to herself, “But these people aren’t different clay, they’re like me. What is for me, is for them” (Markandaya 45). She thinks that everything on the planet has a right to exist in its own inimitable way. That is why she buys the trapped birds from the bird catcher and sets them free. In a way, she has a deep ecological sense of wild life conservation. Thus, Helen believes in the ‘Right to Equality’ and says to Bashiam, “ Look at me. I’ve never been a memsahib. . . . We’re alike. We’re freaks only to the caste we come from, not to each other” (141).

Helen is the strong upholder of ecological values of contact, communication and cooperation. She frequently visits nearby villages, communicates with the tribesmen and solves their problems. The neutrality of his husband regarding poor villagers’ problems pricks her. She cries out and says to Clinton, “Can’t you care? Don’t human being matter anything to you?”( Markandaya 107).

The essence of ecocritical studies is everything related to everything. In fact, interconnectedness and mutual interdependence are the key factors accountable for the harmony of the ecosystem and survival of fauna and flora on the planet. Modern man is egocentric and thinks that he is independent. On the contrary, the survival of human beings depends on thousands of species of plants and animals. Helen in this novel is ecocentric. She says to Bashiam, “I’m not alone. Everything is a part of me, and I’m a part of everything” (Markandaya 144). Helen knows the concept of interrelatedness and symbiosis.

Markandaya highlights that modernism is the root cause of our indifference to nature. Modern machines have turned man as a raw material. Helen says to Bashiam “our world . . . in which I live. Things are battened down in it. Under concrete and mortar . . . .The land. Our instincts.”( Markandaya 144).

It is Helen in the novel who surfaces the ecocritical issue of dispossession. The tribesmen are forcibly evacuated from their land so that the bungalows for English technocrats may be built. Helen feels spiritual agony to know the reason of displacement of the tribesmen. She thinks, “A whole community that had been persuaded to move” (Markandaya 24). She wants the tribes to raise their voice against this injustice. She chides Bashiam as, “Without protest. Just got up and walked away, like animals”(Markandaya 45).On the whole, Helen has been sketched as the advocator of multiple ecological features on the canvas of *The Coffer Dams*.

### **The Lure of Modernism and Loss of Nativism**

Ecocriticism corroborates indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Nativism is an important ecocritical aspect. Native wisdom provides adequate time for nature to

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replenish itself. The modern rural generation is discarding the old indigenous ecological oriented knowledge about the vegetation and animals of the forest in the sway of modernism. The head man of the tribal community in the novel is sad and unhappy to see the active engagement of his people in building the dam at the cost of neglecting nature. Helen thinks, “. “ The dams drained men from tribal” (Markandaya151). The headman wants his men to return to the lap of nature. Helen ruminates, “ All of them were bound, shackled between modern juggernaut and time” (Markandaya 151).

Bashiam is one of those tribesmen who is tempted by the big machines. He feels a strange attraction to modernity. He forsakes his traditional culture to settle himself in the main stream of modern technology. He learns with a great curiosity about electricity, machines, buildings, repairing, welding and dismantling. Markandaya draws attention that modern technology is uprooting the new generation from their inherited knowledge of forest, river, season and hill country. Bashiam’s maddening love for modern technology exposes more distinctly when he says to Helen, “Machines are to me what they are to your husband” (Markandaya 42). Bashiam does not like to live in the midst of his people. He builds a hut for himself in the region where the tribals rarely come. His hut is equipped with modern accessories like a table, a string bed, a folding canvas chair, a hinged cane door. Indeed the comforts which are unknown to others have become indispensable for Bashiam. Markandaya rightly states, “Bashiam’s roots were attenuated” (44).

The new generation of the tribals is not contented with the available offerings of nature. The modern machines provide them with another way of life. Modernism and mechanization create the feelings of neutrality towards nature among the youth of the tribal community. The headman is angry with the materialistic approach of his people. In his view, nature has sufficient stuff to fulfil the basic needs of man. When Helen reinforces the necessity of money the chief of the tribals irritates and says to her, “Useful you say. What for, I ask you: for that rubbish they buy from the camp shop? Tin cans and cardboard boots, and scented pigs, grease to plaster on their hair” (Markandaya72). Thus, Markandaya has been successful to delineate how the allurements towards the modern machines are creating a vacuum for nature in the heart of man and isolating him from nativism.

### Conclusion

Thus, Markandaya in *The Coffin Dams* effectively elucidates how the onslaught of machinery alters the complexion of a rural area. William writes, “She claims to be on the side of the human and life against machinery” (112). She highlights that women are more adhesive to ecological premises. She signifies the importance of nativism and messages that local, indigenous knowledge is important because it ethically conserves the

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environment. In her view, the modern machine has become a demon that dumbs the music of the earth. It is a monster that destructs the beauty of the earth.

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