

Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* : An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract. Kamala Markandaya expresses her worries about nature and human's virginity in the sense that both are to harmonize with each other and live in peace, so that none of them attacks the virginity of the other. Once humans or nature lose it, they become different elements i.e. entirely different from the one it used to be before the attack takes place. In present era, human beings are more inclined towards excessive growth and development that could be accounted for the theorizing of the interlinking between man and nature. The present paper is an attempt to discuss, analyze and examine some of the major concerns and issues underlying the theory of ecocriticism in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*. It highlights the impact of science and technology on human beings. It further brings into light weak human bonds and materialistic upliftment.

Keywords : Human's virginity; human bonds; interlinking between man and nature; materialistic upliftment.

Floods, earthquakes, storms, droughts are the parts of the natural environment. The paper examines ecocriticism as the study of interconnectedness between man and environment. The climatic change has become a matter of ecological concern and public awareness. Yet, the use of 'ecology' in such a plethora of contexts begs the question, what does ecology really mean, and what has it come to symbolize? The struggle between the two of them is fierce and full of harm and losses. Sometimes, the struggle becomes humans themselves when they cause each other pain and suffering in different ways. Markandaya feels that it is her duty to portray these continuous struggles for the purpose of attracting the attention to the risks of having them go on and on. She succeeds in presenting characters such as Rukmami of *Nectar in a Sieve* and Ravisham of *A Handful of Rice* who experienced agony and suffering in their homelands when nature showed them its mercilessness.

In this novel, Markandaya gives another story about the going on misery of the poor Indians and how they are deprived of their homes by the British engineers who come to India to build a dam. The events of the novel take place in the post-independent India, yet it is a new type of Colonialism. The British team's job is to build the dam in the tribal area called Malnad. After it wins the bid, the British company sends its engineers and technicians to do the job in cooperation with their Indian counterparts. Howard Clinton, the chief engineer and his assistant Mackendrick are at the top of the team. The construction works force the tribal to leave their homes just to give a space for the houses and cabins that the British build of the Indian engineers and workers to reside in and for the British to stay in

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bungalows. Whereas the Indian workers do nothing for their families. Clinton and the other British engineers do.

Helen, Clinton's wife is highly passionate and tender. Increasing the work hours, Clinton is keen to finish the construction of the dam before the attack of a fearful monsoon that is about to arrive. The pressure of working for long hours increases the number of accidents at the construction location. It also increases the tension between the British and the Indians. Helen shows much sympathy to the Indians while other British couples are happy making parties to enjoy their time. Problems are not far away from Clinton and Helen. His goal is to finish building the dam on time, while she does her best to help the tribesmen and women. Her relationship with Bashiam, only tribal man who can speak English and start the construction machines, begins to develop. Helen is attracted to the Indian Jungle where the tribal live. She cannot resist such attraction. Markandaya writes, "its rampant furious growth affected her in a way that the ordered charm of a restrained civilization would never do." (*The Coffer Dams*, 35)

As the chief engineer urges the construction team to complete the work before the season of rains, an accident happens when two British and forty tribal workers are killed. The bodies of the two tribals are buried under the rocks. Clinton decides to leave the bodies where they are. The Indians insist to have the bodies removed and to be buried according to the traditions. To solve the problem, Bashiam decides to operate the crane but the crane was damaged because of a mechanical problem. He tries again when the leveler is smashed under the huge rocks and he is injured and a nun comes to treat him. Helen also spends some time with him to show her compassion. He could not survive the accident and dies. The construction works are resumed and are finished. It starts raining heavily and the river floods threaten to destroy the dam. People go to the head of the tribe asking him whether he approves breaking the dam to prevent the river from flooding in the tribal settlement. He gives them the signal that indicates rain and death. The tribe chief announces that people need to be patient as it will stop raining. Things happen exactly like the chief described, and the dam resists the destruction.

The rise of science and scientific rationality to the pre-eminent position in the western civilization produced two strands of interrelated ideas which have had serious negative impact on human values. For Clinton, enjoyment of material comforts and sensuous pleasures are recognized as the main components of the good life. Human beings are treated as material objects obeying physical laws of nature. Clinton is best illustrated as "man is nothing but a bio-chemical organism or man is nothing but a random collection of atoms". (41) This concept belittle man and robs him of his dignity. Ecological thinking is altering the understanding of human-nature-relationship.

The sum total of the consequence of science on human personality has tended to be a reduction of the inner man while his outer being flourished. Thus, the purpose of this paper to address question about the 'nature' which roused curiosity since time immemorial. For what and why are conundrums to which there are no simple answers. The world today, despite the growth of technology and its awareness, is groping with issues of loss of empathy, corruption and dishonesty. The interpersonal relationships seem to be crumbling.

Thus, Kamala Markandaya uses contrasting characters to measure the depth of each and makes conscious use of landscape and nature as a means to influence their moods and motives. It discusses the ecological destruction caused by the human world to nature and human beings alike. It is obvious that the virgin girl keeps her virginity as a part of her honour that she defends with her life. Nature, just like the virgin girl, also defends its virginity by various means against the aggressors and rapists. In her two novels *The Coffer Dams* and *Two Virgins* Kamala Markandaya proves that Indian women are just like the Indian nature in their desperate defence of their virginity, honour and existence, despite the losses they may suffer at the hands of bad people who do not care for honour or virginity when they are interested in getting their purpose met and achieved. Markandaya proves that the Indian woman is an excellent human being in her morals and she does not rush behind the temptations of life despite the urgent need for money, food and drink. She does everything but not at the expense of honour, dignity and humiliation. The above mentioned novels also demonstrate that the Indian nature is like a virgin girl who refuses to violate her virginity by intruders, and that it does not hesitate to show force and violent reaction if its virginity is subjected to any humiliation and aggression. Nature welcomes any person who preserves its dignity even if he/she is a foreigner. It treats him/her as part of it and one of its elements to whom it is a mother. It offers him/her all her wealth and makes him/her feel the warm welcome to its motherly bosom that holds its little child who needs his / her mother to sponsor and protect.

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Work Cited

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