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Modern Development in Conflict with Ecology: Kamla Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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ABSTRACT

The bond between nature and man is visible in the literature throughout history, regardless of their culture, language, nation, or time period. The depiction of nature and its relationship to humans in the literature not only illustrates the mental, social, and cultural status of the characters, but also reveals the author's attitude toward the environment. In this paper, an effort is made to examine *The Coffer Dams* by Kamla Markandaya from an ecocritical standpoint. The researcher has examined how the chosen novel represents the influence of industrialization on environment and humanity. This paper also focuses on the extent to which eco-criticism theorizes not only the connections between literature and the environment, but also the relationship between the characters in the texts and their environments, as well as the nature of language, textuality, and the perception of space, boundaries, class, and power.

Key Words: Eco-criticism, Nature, Mankind, Industrialization, Textuality, Class, Power

Introduction:

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) was a renowned Indian women author and journalist. Markandaya, who was born into a Hindu Brahmin household, received Hindu culture and customs. She was fortunate to have a western education. She moved to London when she was twenty-four years old. Markandaya is most recognized for the popularity of her first published book, The Nectar in a Sieve, despite having written eleven novels. The majority of her works deal with diverse topics such as poverty, hunger, east-west encounters, homelessness, etc. Her writings feature many allusions to Indian customs and ceremonies, yet some critics argue that her writings pander to the Western audience. Her novels include: *Some Inner Fury* (1956), *A Silence of Desire* (1960), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *Pleasure City* or *Shalimar* (1982), and *Bombay Tiger* (2008) (published posthumous).

A Theoretical Introduction of Ecocriticism:

Ecocriticism would undoubtedly come out as simplistic, and the ecocritical method would seem to be simply another method of reading and analysing a literary work. However, ecocriticism is not simply another theory of literary analysis like formalist, structuralist, Marxist, deconstructionist, feminist, and so on; ecocriticism has explicitly political goals. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines ecocriticism as

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> …a new subfield of literary and cultural enquiry that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, devoted to the investigation of relations between literature and the natural world and to the rediscovery and reinterpretation of 'nature writings' sometimes categorised as 'environmental literature' (Baldick 101).

Eco-critics concentrate on the study of literature from an ecocritical viewpoint because they understand the importance of addressing environmental challenges and the vitality of linkages between nature and culture. In its missionary mode, ecocriticism emphasizes the need of preserving ecological balance and bringing about cultural change via the examination of literary works' depictions of the interaction between humans and environment. Therefore, analysing a text from an ecocritical perspective in order to uncover its cultural implications and ideological stance toward the environment is known as ecocriticism.

In fictional tales, the author's interaction with the landscape serves as both a background for the story and a way to show her awareness of the environment, the effects of the weather, and the sociocultural and political responses to environmental issues. Ecocriticism, in its most complete form, is a hermeneutic method that is intricately entwined with politics. Binaries including nature-culture, man-woman, power-powerlessness, local-global, tribal/pastoral/rural-urban, caste binaries in the context of India, and class dynamics are all addressed by ecocriticism. So, it wouldn't be incorrect to say that interpretations of ecocritical texts are profoundly influenced by politics.

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

The Coffer Dams by Markandaya, published in 1969, deals both implicitly and overtly with the effects of modernization and industrialization on the lives of individuals who rely on their lives in rural areas for their livelihood. It paints a complete picture of everyday life for simple people who rely on the natural world for their survival. The tale illustrates how modern interference in customary ways of life produces many disturbances and tends to drive people farther away from their original cultures and natural environments. They are forced by the ensuing turmoil in their lives to adopt contemporary lifestyles, which requires them to make several concessions.

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Markandaya starts the narrative with a scathing commentary on the human propensity to acquire property and give it their own name. Clinton's lines are a community formed in the lap of nature after clearing a wide swath of woodland and displacing the tribal people who were the original residents. The tribes are compelled to migrate upriver so that the location may be utilized for the building of Clinton and his team's town. The natural environment is now under the control of Clinton and his staff. Clinton, the head engineer who believes in the physical power of machinery and enjoys man-made constructions, arrives to Malnad, the construction site of the dam, with his wife Helen. He is a typical British technocrat whose primary objective is to finish the dam on schedule.

> He saw himself only as a builder, a man whose conceptions of concrete and steel his highly polished and perfected technical skills could translate into reality . . . . . seeing not the welter of men and machines but only his vision, the dam that would arise with blueprint precision at this point, exactly as they had planned it. (Coffer Dams 2)

Clinton values doing his task precisely and effectively. He is satisfied and proud of his concrete and steel constructions. While pointing out that Clinton despises war because it destroys man-made buildings, which are among the things he values most, Markandaya also highlights how his project causes a lot of explosions in the valley that result in worker fatalities. The conflicting character of contemporary man, who despises the damage caused by battle but yet himself wages war against nature, is illustrated by Clinton's loathing of war and his love of his constructions.

In a little amount of time, Clinton's associate Mackendrick is able to clean the place. He plans the route, secures a road to be built in the hills for the movement of supplies and equipment from the job site to the base camp and back again. He also organizes for labour force and communication lines. To dam the raging river within the allotted period, the surface installation of workshops and other structures is also built promptly. The differences between indigenous' and outsiders' ecological ideals may be seen in how locals and western engineers like Clinton interact with rivers.

Tribal people who have a strong connection with the river and who see themselves as part of nature are aware of how to live peacefully with it. Their interaction with nature doesn't harm the environment in the area. The newly independent Indian planners, on the other hand, who want to modernize the nation, are eager for the dam project and want to control the raging river for their requirements. Despite his disinterest

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in the dam project plan, Clinton is drawn to it since it would allow him to demonstrate his mastery of nature and provide him a chance to outbid his rivals for the project. The dam, in Clinton's eyes, is evidence of his might and ability. But it also serves as a symbol of scientific advancement and growth in post-independence India, demonstrating Clinton's power and will.

The government needed high-tech projects, which need the competence of the English. This gave the English the right to seize control of the Indian territory where such enterprises would be set up.The colony built for the British employees, which was built after colonizing nature, reflects Clinton's pride and enjoyment of the tidy landscape. The Englishmen get uneasy due to the awe of the forest, the cries of jackals, and the terrified deer, and they often seek solace in wine to regain their English pride. The Indian laborers and the forest are difficult for Clinton and his English staff to interact with. Clinton is perplexed by the Indians' propensity to disappear into the forest, but he never tries to cross a line separating them to find out why they have joined forces with nature. He doesn't want to go beyond what his work requires of him professionally. Helen, his wife, disagrees with him on this point and does not see skin colour as a marker of distinction, which is a sharp contrast to his behaviour. Clarifies to Clinton: “You’ve got to get beyond their skins, darling. It’s a bit of a hurdle, but it is an essential one” (6).

Helen believes that people are more important than technology. She is aware that technological advancements and construction projects are necessary for a higher quality of life for people, but she does not see why the original residents of the area would have to move in order to provide water to distant locations. In addition, she is far less Eurocentric than most people, which allows her to embrace the local "others" on their own terms. Clinton's greatest achievement is directing water to the appropriate locations. He obtains the necessary government clearances before working with his group, which includes Mackendrick, Henderson, Rawlings, Lefevre, and Galbraith, to develop the building plan. The coffer dams were expected to take a year to complete, while the main dam would take two years. However, Indian laborers refuse to work on the project despite its precise layout and official sanction. They protest the layout and the time restriction since they have first-hand knowledge of the terrain and the environment.

The Indian laborers' boss, Krishnan, warns that the project timeline may be affected by natural occurrences including monsoons, cyclones, and solar flares. Krishnan's argument illustrates both his awareness of climate change and his care for the natural world, as well as his refusal to accept an Englishman's evaluation of the Indian environment and ecosystem. Although Bob Rawlings, the chief

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engineer, is shocked to find that a competent engineer like Krishnan is seeking to make modifications in the meticulously planned project at this level, Mackendrick is able to comprehend the motivation behind Krishnan's worries. He does so, nonetheless, with the justification that Indians exhibit "diminished reasonable behaviour" (13). Despite agreeing with Krishnan's assessment of the unpredictable nature of the environment, he refuses revising the plan because of pride in his English heritage.Only Helen and the Dam are the subjects of Clinton's love and aspirations. He believes that both are connected to the river. He feels insignificant in the scheme of nature when he hears the sounds of the river and the forest. The river's bubbling sound gives him the romantic notion of being swallowed up in its roar. Clinton is fascinated by the river's power and channels it because of this. Perhaps this fear of the river's wild, unrestrained force is what drives him to control it by building a dam.

The working hours are split into two shifts, and plans are established for the site-specific machine maintenance. Between the building site and Clinton's lines, the maintenance shed extends farther and further into the jungle, claiming an additional acre of forest property. The region's beautiful and tranquil environment is disturbed by the frequent explosions. The devastated valley of Malnad starkly illustrates the ecological destruction brought on by construction efforts. The lines that follow provide a picture of the devastation in the valley:

> In the phased rhythms of the day the boreholes had been drilled and explosive charges laid. The valley lay empty now, the jagged cavities torn in its rocky flanks exposed, open to the sun and deserted except for a handful of men checking the fuses. . . . A great silence began, suspending itself like a gong over valley and hill until absurdly dissipated by a shrill piping of whistles. (Coffer Dams 49)

A smirk spreads over Clinton's face as twenty explosions tear the valley apart. The destroyed valley being levelled to make room for the dam reaffirms Clinton's faith in his technical prowess. Numerous issues are caused by Clinton's disregard for the local nature and the employees. Jackson notifies Mackendrick that thefts from the reserve store are occurring often and that the situation is becoming more urgent. All of the Indian laborers are fined one week's wages by Clinton as retribution for the theft. He is certain that doing this will identify the true offender. Although he agrees with him, Mackendrick considers this approach to be inhumane. Even if it comes at the expense of ethical and human concerns, Clinton believes that anything that prevents the dam from being finished is wrong and should be punished severely. Clinton does not

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believe that punishing the whole workforce for the mistakes of one or a few is inhumane. He shows no consideration for potential obstacles to the proposal. Clinton is astounded by how Indians revere animals, birds, and the natural world as their deities. The idea that Helen too thinks deadly snakes are harmless makes him scowl. He is irritated by the tribal impact on Helen. He also chastises Bashiam for spending so much time with Helen while bird-trapping. He wants Bashiam to concentrate on the crane and fix it as soon as possible so that the project may be finished on schedule.

Similar to this, Jackson has a pair of hill mynahs on his veranda and is happy to show them off to guests. He separates from one of them so the lonesome one may sing in honor of the other. Even though he raises the bird as if it were his own kid, the bird needs its companion to thrive. Every time he goes by the bird, he chats to it and addresses it affectionately. Jackson's treatment of the mynah may be compared to that of a colonizer who restricts the subject's freedom and establishes the demands and requirements that serve the colonizer rather than the colonized. Mynah's death in the cage sends a powerful message about the effects of human colonization of nature.

Helen disagrees with Jackson's possessive and colonial behaviour, which ruined the pleasant relationship between the mynah couple, and thinks the birds should be allowed to remain in the wild, free to occupy their natural niche rather than being confined. In contrast to Jackson, Helen believes that having a personal, unrestricted niche in the biosphere leads to pleasure. She opposes human intervention in the environment as well as in one another's lives. Helen is a free spirit who enjoys living without any obstacles or constraints. Clinton is aware of this, and his admiration for her unexpected behaviour encourages him to give her some leeway in remaining an independent spirit. However, as long as Helen stays true to him, Clinton can keep allowing Helen to be creative. Similar to this, his affection for the river depends on his capacity to manage its course and direct its water. He causes the destruction of the valley because of his passion for the raging river that flows under his power. The lovely green woodland patch has been transformed into a raucous mess of dust and rubbish. The area's stillness is irreparably damaged. Every explosion creates a tremor in the ground. The valley's beautiful and tranquil environment is irretrievably gone. Nature also responds angrily to the destruction that the dam causes. Inches at a time, the water begins to rise. The water rushes at full speed to the space between the coffer dams, carrying with it clumps of green brush that have been uprooted from their usual location, “through the narrow gap that still remained the river forced its way, foaming and churning around the coffer dams that were rising to block its path” (Coffer

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Dams 112).

To close the gaps and regulate the river's flow, the full mechanical strength is used. Unfortunately, the loaded barge capsizes and swings with the water, taking Bailey and Wilkins with it. In order to give Bailey and Wilkins a proper Christian funeral, Rawlings wants to remove their remains from the river. Rawlings opposes Krishnan's suggestion to leave the dead in the creek. Krishnan's view that a floating dead "body is nothing, it is the spirit that matters" (117), suggests his belief in the Hindu philosophy of body and soul. It maintains that human body which is made up of five elements of nature and once soul leaves the body, the body merges in nature. However, Rawlings belief in the Christian philosophy of "the dust thou art/ to dust thou returns" makes him want to bury the dead bodies. Even though the Christian and Hindu philosophical systems have distinct approaches to dealing with deceased individuals, both contend that the human body is an essential component of nature and that, after passing away, it reverts to nature once again.

Because of his resolve to finish building the coffer dams before the monsoon season, Clinton works day and night on the project. The night shifts cause overexertion, and the worn-out employees, whose tolerance level has fallen woefully low, finally snap. This is why Clinton thinks that people have a remarkable potential for rejuvenation whereas Mackendrick claims that they need a break to reflate. He has faith in his staff, his plans, his calculations, and the scenario analysis reports that will alert him in the event of an emergency. Bashiam acknowledges and respects the dominance of nature while simultaneously welcoming technological development as a critical requirement for the nation. He admits that building initiatives like the dam are vital for a higher standard of life and might work a miracle for his nation's citizens. To all the tribal men, including Bashiam, the coffer dams seem to be miracles:

> Twin dams whose solid thickened arms were seen, and seen to be holding the river across the whole of its width less a narrow pass, the last exit through which the jumbled waters poured. Twin quadrants of the bypass channel, cut between rock, its walls of towering granite, the broken rock bed fifty feet below the void and dry in its new creation, awaiting the droughted waters. Double sand blocks, constructed but awaiting destruction, one at each end of the curved channel reinforcing the natural rock barrier they had left to seal off the river from its new course. And between them all, visionary but marked, the piebald flags which showed the founding line of the main dam. (Coffer Dams 161)

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Clinton chooses not to halt the building project in order to retrieve the remains. Like Krishnan, he believes that bodies are just composites of bones comprised of calcium, the same chalk used to construct both cliffs and the skeletal framework of humans. While Rawlings and Henderson agree with Clinton's position, Gopal recoils at the choice. Despite the fact that everyone wants the dam to be finished as quickly as possible, their perspectives on the project, the environment, and human existence are significantly different. The ruin of the scenery pains Gopal, Bashiam, and the elderly headman. They take issue with the frequent explosions and brutal removal of the lush woodland section. Helen chastises Clinton for the extensive extinction of both human and ecological life.

More than the return of the remains, according to Markandaya, the Indian workers' strike is motivated by a feeling of equality, power, and respect. Krishnan, who serves as a metaphor for the text's political and power struggle, believes that now is the ideal moment to get the upper hand on the English. He orders them to move the rocks and retrieve the corpses. As a result, Clinton agrees to let Bashiam move the boulders. To preserve his people, Bashiam accepts the task with ease. Bashiam believes that Avery Kent, the crane, is an extension of himself as he works on it, and this is how, against all odds, he manages to collect dead victims. However, when he attempts to place the rock back on the dam, the crane's jib breaks, causing it to crash and trap him within its crushed cabin. Despite suffering grave injuries, Bashiam is still able to restart the building project.

Clinton's triumph over the river is projected by the turbulent water that rushes through the waterway. However, everyone is terrified by the tumultuous water rushing at full force. Going mad is Millie, who throughout the whole book has attempted to preserve her English identity by attending events and gatherings with other English men and memsahibs while keeping a distance from the tribals. She feels overwhelmed by the searing anguish caused by the impending storm. She runs to the woodland to offer her assistance after assuming that Helen must be there. In the end, Millie finds herself among the tribals, who assist her in overcoming her psychological distress. Helen, on the other hand, flees into the forest as a result of her distress about the uprooting of the tribal people, the damage of the ecosystem, the worker deaths, and the disaster with the Bashiam. Helen is more familiar with the jungle than Millie. She has now assimilated into the local ecosystem. She is not terrified of the jungle. Clinton, on the other hand, views the buildings she built as an ecological crime.

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Helen is distressed to see the eradication of the indigenous peoples and the devastation of the environment from the very beginning of the narrative. She gets along with the indigenous people, their traditions, and their beliefs. What Clinton admires most about her is that she is just as unexpected as nature. In the beginning, Helen goes on her own exploration of the forest so she may assess the area for herself. Through Helen's forays into the forest, Markandaya transports her readers to the hidden corners of the forest. She feels at home among the indigenous people because of their warmth, colourful way of life, and graciousness. Helen may be dissatisfied of the very refined and sophisticated English way of life since she finds the flamboyantly dressed tribal people to be attractive. She is happy to see that the tribal settlement does not negatively impact the local nature. They believe in a single harvest each year rather than becoming encroachers who remove the forest to obtain a cyclical pattern of development. The meddling of the State and the development funds provided by the World Bank to developing nations may be to blame for the devastation of nature and subsequent environmental catastrophes.

The Coffer Dams demonstrates how the frantic pace of technological development and the mechanization of life have ruined people's lives. Unfortunately, the tribal groups that have strong ties to the natural world are not included in any decision-making that affects the growth of their own area. The authorities dismiss their worries, fears, and anxieties.

Conclusion:

This demonstrates how intricately Markandaya's The Coffer Dams approaches the issue of development and the environment. The western paradigm of development, which is shown by the building of coffer dams and the exploitation of natural resources, stands in contrast to the tribal perspective, which is clearly founded in the Indian culture that prioritizes nature. The book demonstrates how these two frames of view are incompatible, but Markandaya's essay also makes the case that development is necessary for life. Reconciliation may be the solution, even if it seems difficult. Despite this, it is the only path to the sort of equilibrium that is sometimes referred to as sustainable growth.

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