

The Onslaught of Modernism and Exhaustion of Nativism: An Ecocritical Trait in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams*

Alka Borade

Sr. Lecturer,
Govt. G.T. Polytechnic College,
Jaora (M.P.)

Article History: Submitted-20/07/2021, Revised-19/08/2021, Accepted-23/08/2021, Published-31/08/2021.

Abstract:

The ecological imbalance that has become a common phenomenon in the present scenario is posing a threat to the survival of human beings. The reason behind the disrupted ecological balance is the disturbance in the ecosystem. An ecosystem is the community of organisms interacting with each other and with their environment in a given area. The interaction between different organisms and their environment creates a synergistic complex system that provides an optimum condition for life and habitability on the earth. Each species has a unique functional role that is called ecological niche. No two species in the ecosystem share equal niche. Nativism, place connectedness and bioregionalism are interchangeable terms. Growing modernism has changed our attitude towards our local habitat. Earlier man would be aware of homocoscography. This awareness of the temperament of local fauna and flora would produce a sense of regard and responsibility towards immediate surroundings and would help in the protection and preservation of local species of plants and animals that play a vital part in several biological processes essential to maintain ecological equilibrium. Nativism, a crucial ecocritical trait emphasises conserving everything local, from culture to custom, from language to literature from flora to fauna. Kamala Markandaya's novel *The Coffey Dams* (1969) emphatically raises the issue of loss of nativism in contrast with growing modernism. Mobility of modern lifestyle reducing the sense of nativism. The present research paper explores how the onslaught of modernism destroys the local biotic and abiotic components. The study reveals that the lure of modernism dilutes the age-long bond between man and nature. It exhibits that our cosmopolitan perspective has changed our mentality towards our local habitat. The paper underscores the bulging modernism and dissolution of nativism through the character of Bashiam. The ultimate way of getting out of the ecological crisis is to make sure the safety of local biotic and abiotic components.

Keywords: Nativism, Ecology, Ecosystem, Ecocriticism, Flora and Fauna.

Nativism and bioregionalism are interrelated and interchangeable terms that occupy an outstanding place in the ecocritical study. Ecocriticism emphasises strengthening our bonding with local surroundings. The primary concern of ecocriticism is the preservation and protection of nature. The ecocritical study highlights the importance of indigenous species of plants and animals. It accentuates that the local is focal. Nativism is an ecocritical aspect. The idea behind nativism was to reinhabit the local place by becoming aware of particular ecological relations that exist between the organisms and their environment. Modernity has become a big threat to ecological harmony. Our ultramodern way of lifestyle, modern luxurious gadgets, industrial revolution, materialistic achievements and employment of machines in every walk of life are posing a threat to our native culture. Our materialistic mind set and intense desire to enjoy physical comforts are withdrawing us from our indigenous culture. Ecocritical tenets accentuate the importance of local. Local is the part of the whole without which the whole cannot exist. The first law of Ecology indicates that in this universe everything is related to everything. Interrelated interdependence is the hall mark of ecocriticism. Everything depends on each other in this way or that way. The ecocritical study depicts that we are, therefore I am. How modernism assassinates nativism has been discussed in Kamala Markandaya's sixth novel *The Coffey Dams* through Bashiam.

Ecocriticism is the study of environmental oriented issues in literature. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells refer to the aim of ecocriticism and say, "The aim of ecocriticism is to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part concealed, in a great many cultural spaces. Most of all ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as response to environmental crisis" (5). William Rueckert, the founder of the term ecocriticism states "Ecocriticism is the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (107). Ecological principles are constitutional assumptions about ecosystems. Ecological concepts illustrate and inform how the basic beliefs as well as principles of the ecosystem function. Explaining the wide purview of ecocriticism, Garrard writes, "Indeed the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, through human cultural history and entailing the term 'human' itself" (5). Camilo Gomides gives the operational definition of ecocriticism as, "The field of inquiry that analyses 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). Ecology is the branch of science

that analyzes the connection between living organisms and their surroundings. Ecology has a vast canvas on which is painted everything related to the earth, sky, water, fauna, flora and non human products of human culture. A German Zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1869 coined the term 'ecology'. Joseph Meeker is the first who used the term 'Literary Ecology' in his work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* in 1974.

Nativism, one of the important aspects of ecocriticism finds a full-blooded expression in Kamala Markandaya's sixth novel *The Coffer Dams*. Nativism is an effort to rediscover the connection between man and his surroundings. Everything local is native. It reflects man's association not only with local fauna and flora but also with his custom and culture. Nativism highlights that not only our psychological and emotional but our physical merging with our surroundings is a key concern for the safety of our environment. Stressing the significance of the physical association of an individual with a particular place, Wendell Berry states, "Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or to the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street; lilies of the field" (200). Native culture and native wisdom occupy a great place in the ecocritical field. The loss of nativism has been discussed by portraying Bashiam and the significance of nativism has been projected through the village headman.

The theme of *The Coffer Dams* is technological and economic development in contrast with ecological destruction. The novel is about a British construction firm, Clinton and Mackendrick Co. that takes the project of constructing a dam across a river in a hilly tribal forest region, Malnad. Bashiam, a tribal man lured by modernism begins to work in the project of dam building. Bashiam whose ancestors depend on the jungle for their livelihood was at once attracted by modern machines. His traditional occupation is wood cutting. He is not the product of the colleges that provide technical education. On the contrary, he has been born and brought up in the jungle. A wise foreman gives him employment. Bashiam is spell bounded by the workings of the strange powerful turbine. He is astonished to see the building of the hydroelectric station over the river that has uprooted the entire village.

Nativism is an important ecocritical aspect. Native wisdom provides adequate time for nature to replenish itself. The old indigenous ecological oriented knowledge about the vegetation and animals of the forest dwellers is being thrown to the wind. Invasion of modernity reduces the local wisdom at the level of extinction. The days of awful respect for nature have been lost due to alterations in the standards of living. The forest dwellers who are fascinated by the fancy of modernism are distanced from their culture and custom which

support the ecocentric values. The headman silently contemplates the season. What he cannot see, he senses. He knows that the level of the river is rising every day. He sees the dust from the dams like ashes on his people's faces. He feels the growing neglect of the village as more and more of his men are engaged in building the dams. He sees the visible deterioration of the village. His men overlook the ecological degradation of the village increasing day by day. Pondering over the detachment of the tribesmen from nature and their culture, Helen cogitates, "The dams drained men from tribe" (*The Coffey Dams* 151). The headman wants his people to return to the village. He wants his men to return to the lap of nature. But his efforts of bringing his men back to nature go in vain. As Helen opines, "All of them were bound, shackled between modern juggernaut and time, the ancient enemy armed with teeth and a new ferocity" (151).

Ecocritical concepts emphasise on the importance of indigenous knowledge. A native has more knowledge about the surroundings than a foreigner. That is why, when Clinton cross answers Krishnan's doubts and cancels each of Krishnan's objections regarding the monsoon and cyclone on the basis of available past data, Bashiam irritates. Signifying the importance of local knowledge that Bashiam possesses, Markandaya remarks about him, "He had been born in these hills and had seen what a cyclone could do . . . what mincemeat a rogue monsoon could make in one night of the most careful design" (18). Bashiam and his people have a more clear idea about the climate than the Britishers. They sense the mood of the river and accordingly climatic changes. Though he knows the errors of Clinton's design regarding climate even he is keenly interested in the execution of the plan. He feels a strange attraction to modernity. He leaves his traditional occupation to establish 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. Later Bashiam becomes Helen's link man and supplies her the information associated with tribal custom and tradition. Bashiam's maddening love for modern technology reveals more distinctly when he says to Helen, "Machines are to me what they are to your husband. They have given me another way of life" (42). Bashiam is the only tribal who knows the English language.

The old generations of the tribals were contented with whatever was available in the natural surroundings. They were satisfied with what nature offers them. But in the nuclear age, the new generation of the tribals hankers for materialistic comforts. This new generation is gradually withdrawing from their roots. As Bashiam tells Helen the machines give him

another way of life. He does not like the old ways of life. Modernism and the industrial revolution bring a rootlessness in the new generation of the tribals. Bashiam knows that now he no more belongs to the tribal huts nor he belongs to the ziffy towns. Industrialisation impacts the ways of life of the local people. The natives are tempted by the modern style of life. Modernism affects the emotional and psychological framework of mind. Markandaya displays how modernism alters the psyche of the tribals through Bashiam. The tribal men think a little about Bashiam. Markandaya comments, "To his tribe, he was a man who walked alone, sprung from them but no longer belonging, a man who put shoes on his feet and worked machines" (135). To his tribe, it is difficult to access the fathom of his feelings. He lives alone in his two roomed concrete box, for there is no one who absolutely matched his mixture of tribal and technician. Sometimes when he suffocates in his rooms, he opens the door to get rid of the congestion. He strays like an animal outside the concrete room in the jungle. The headman understands his feelings. He orders to build a modern hut for Bashiam. Bashiam tears the hut without considering the feelings of his people because in the company of modern man he had learnt that emotion could be a bar in progress. Thus, Bashiam ignores the feelings and consideration of his people for him. Modernism inert his emotions. Instead, he builds a hut for himself in the region where the tribal 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). Markandaya seems to state that turning to modernism dwarfs one's roots. One oscillates in the dilemma of belongingness.

The tribal chief who is the representative of the old generation is ecologically a sane person who thinks that the essential need of his community can easily be fulfilled by the forest. He is not happy with his people who have joined Clinton and Mackendrick company. He is angry with the propensity of the younger generation to chase money. He condemns the materialistic mindedness of the present generation that is isolating itself from its roots. Forest has enough to appease their needs. When the tribesmen moan on preventing their remuneration by the company, the tribal chief sharply attacks their materialistic attitude and speaks to Helen in an angry tone, "Money, money. They are becoming as money-mad as you foreigners are" (71). Helen accentuates the significance of money and describes it as a useful commodity. The chief of the tribals gets irritated and responds to Helen, "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" (72). The chief opines that the tribals

are short of food because of their own fault. They leave to rely on the jungles. He says to Helen, "They are short of food too, whose fault is it, the jungle is full of game, if they relied on that and not and not on the money which comes and goes" (72). The head man emphasises that the present generation is suffering due to their own misdeeds towards nature. He highlights the importance of the jungle. In Markandaya's view, money and materialism cannot buy happiness. Her opinion is that the basic needs of life can be fulfilled by nature's offerings. The essential elements of life like air, water and food are provided by nature. Oxygen, life surviving gas is generated by trees and harmful gas like carbon dioxide is absorbed by the trees. In a way, the jungle is the most crucial part for our survival. Money just satisfies our luxurious needs. Modernism is deteriorating the thinking of our generation and taking it far apart from nature. The onslaught of modernization is deviating the primitive races from their ecological ways of living. The chief of the tribals is unhappy with the urbanization of his village. Commenting on the toxic touch of modernism Abbey states, "We are caught in the iron treads of a technological juggernaut" (64). The head man predicts and speaks to Helen, "A score or more before they bend the river . . . the Great Dam will take them, the maneater will have its flesh" (72). His prediction proves true. In the second accident at the worksite, forty men die.

Kamala Markandaya reflects the ecological sense of the tribal generation which is nowadays is shattering due to the influence of modernism. Clinton frowns at the tribal people's belief that nature is the manifestation of God. He condemns their worshipping of birds and beasts. Indian philosophy believes that there is God in every particle of nature. Hence making harm to nature's human or non-human entity is just like hurting God. This belief is helpful to maintain eco harmony. The Indians have a sense of employing natural resources. The native knowledge of Indians is appreciable when Markandaya presents the use of natural resources in a certain limit by giving the example of the bird catcher who travels from one place to another and demarcates the jungle according to rule. His works in each section is decided by him in rotation so that none is overcropped. Nature has its own limits and secrets. Markandaya warns us not to interfere in the affairs of nature. She writes, "Perhaps even jungle dwellers set a limit to how far they penetrated into jungle" (84). Thus, Markandaya converges that the chasing behind modernism at the cast of nature asset is inviting a threat to human survival. She conveys a message that local, indigenous knowledge is important because it ethically conserves the environment

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term. The prime concern of ecocriticism is the preservation of nature. It is a multifarious approach. The multiplicity of subjects and approaches like nature writing, environmental justice, ecofeminism, bioregionalism, deep ecology, the ecology of cities, the literature of toxicity, place connectedness, nativism can be studied under the big tent of environmental literature. Ecocriticism offers an open invitation to human and non-human beings to live in accordance under the same canopy of the ecosphere. It discovers nature and ecological themes in all philosophical orientations. Nativism is the fundamental assumption of ecocriticism which appeals to save the local fauna, flora, rivers, mountains lakes etc because the protection of the local category of biotic and abiotic entity ultimately serve and save the whole. We cannot save the whole without saving parts. Nativism is part of the whole. Locus is the focus is the core motto of ecocriticism. Indigenous knowledge and ideas have immense possibility to aware people about environment.

The idea of local has become one of the favourite ideas of contemporary ecocriticism. Indigenous wisdom occupies a central place in ecocritical discussions. Modernity has changed the temperament of nativism. Ecological wisdom is being ignored under the technological milieu. Cosmopolitan perspective has demotivated the local literature, values, and technologies. Ecocriticism is struggling to establish the uprooted generation to its environment, making them aware of the fauna and flora of their surroundings. Local knowledge is immense, broader and profound having universal value. Revealing the significance of local, Selvamony writes, “The local is not international or global but universal at the same time” (63). Lucy Lippord writes “The lure of the local is the pull of the place. It is the geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation” (7). Markandaya is a vibrant eco lover. The *Coffer Dams* successfully emerges that nativism is an important thread of the whole text of ecological symphony. Indigenous techniques and knowledge have greater worth because it is the part that makes the whole.

Works Cited:

Abbey, Edward. *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Harper Perennial, 2000.

Berry, Wendell. “Word and Flesh.” *What are People For?* edited by Wendell Berry, North Point, 1990, pp. 197-203.

The Onslaught of Modernism and Exhaustion of Nativism: An Ecocritical Trait in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams*

Gomide, Camilo. "Putting New Definitions of Ecocriticism to the Test: The Case of the Burning Season a Film (mal) Adaptation." *ISLE* 13.1 Jan. (2006), pp. 13-23.

Kerridge, Richard and Neil Sammells, editors. *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Zed Books, 1998.

Lippord, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentred Society*. The New Press, 1997.

Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. U of George P, 1996, pp.105-23.

Markandaya, Kamala. *The Coffey Dams*. Penguin Books, 2008.

Garrad, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.

Selvamony, Nirmal. "Ecoregional Education." *Madras Christian College Magazine* 2003-2004, pp. 60-66.