

**From Green to Grey:
Ecological Consequences of Urbanization and
Industrialization in Kamala Markandya's Novels *Nectar in a
Sieve* and *The Coffey Dams***

Aastha Bhatia
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Dyal Singh College, Karnal
Email: bhatiaaastha96@yahoo.com

Abstract

*Environmental degradation is the bitter truth of today's technologically advanced world. As the temperature of the planet rises, we are forced to reconsider our role vis-à-vis the earth. Literature has raised this poignant issue through ecocritical works. The contribution of Indian English fiction in this direction is immense. One such writer is Kamala Markandya, who, through her works, voices the issue of ecological crisis and its impending consequences. The present paper is an attempt to analyse Markandeya's novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffey Dams* using ecocriticism. *Nectar in a Sieve* takes up the problems faced by tenant farmers in the wake of industrialization. Through the lives of Rukmani and Nathan, the novelist takes us through the journey of struggle, helplessness, poverty, starvation and endless miseries that the villagers have to confront because of the setting up of a tannery near their village. The resultant chaos, dislocation, taking away of land and utter helplessness show that urbanization and industrialization bring their own share of problems. *The Coffey Dams* deals with the problems faced by tribal people living in a hilly village, who are at a crossroads when a dam starts getting constructed on their land. They are forced to evacuate as bungalows need to be built for the officers of the British construction company. Although they get work as labourers in this project, eventually they realize that they are being severely exploited as cheap labour. Two serious accidents aggravate the situation and they are left wondering whether their lives will ever take a better shape. Thus, Markandya has very skillfully portrayed the evil effects of urbanization and industrialization in these works.*

Keywords

urbanization, industrialization, ecology, ecocriticism

Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 02.12.25

Approved: 15.12.25

Aastha Bhatia

From Green to Grey: Ecological Consequences of Urbanization and Industrialization in Kamala Markandya's Novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffey Dams*

Notions July. - Dec. 2025,

Vol. XVI, No. 2,

Pg. 122-127

Article No. 16

Similarity Check: 06%

Online available at :

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/notions-vol-xvi-no2-july-dec-2025>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/notions.2025v16i02.16>

Human beings are considered to be the supreme creations on the Earth. With new discoveries and the advancement of science and technology, we have really come a long way. However, in this process of making progress, we forgot that we have a responsibility to keep this planet clean and green. Although science has made our lives easy, the evil effects of modernization are not to be missed. Urbanization and industrialization have put man in the rat race of earning money and accumulating material comforts. This unending greed has harmed the environment immensely. Deforestation, the setting up of industries, increasing use of automobiles and pesticides, and the creation and use of nuclear weapons have led to grave consequences like a rise in temperatures, thinning of the ozone layer, climatic extremes and natural disasters like floods and famines, and melting of glaciers. This suicidal tendency has made scholars all over the world ponder over the nature of this crisis and the ways to manage it effectively. Writers from across the globe have created works that propagate the idea of environmental conservation. The emergence of Ecocriticism is also a development in this direction. Cheryll Glotfelty explains ecocriticism as:

Despite the broad scope of inquiry and disparate levels of sophistication, an ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and being affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture. Understanding how nature and culture constantly influence and construct each other is essential to an informed ecocriticism. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and non-human. (Glotfelty 19).

Thus, Ecocriticism studies the relationship of human beings with the environment and its portrayal in literary works. This term was coined by William Rueckert in his famous essay published in 1978, namely, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Some famous ecocritics are Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, William Howarth, Harold Fromm, Suellen Campbell, Glen A. Love and Michael P. Branch.

Indian English Fiction has contributed a lot to writings on the environment. Authors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Ruskin Bond, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai and Indra Sinha are some prominent names in this area. Kamala Markandaya is also a famous novelist who has penned novels that raise burning issues related to the environment. Born on June 23, 1924 in Mysore, Karnataka, Markandaya was educated at Madras University and later relocated to Britain. She has authored a number of novels and short stories. Her prominent novels include *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Coffin Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*,

Two Virgins, The Golden Honeycomb, Pleasure City and Bombay Tiger. An ardent lover of nature, Markandya is greatly concerned with the emerging ecological crisis and environmental degradation, particularly in rural India.

Markandya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* was published in 1954, a century after the first steam-powered cotton mill was established in Bombay in 1854—the first sign of the onset of industrialization in India. Like every developing country, India also witnessed sea changes in the environment due to industrialization, particularly in the rural areas. This phenomenon is shown by Markandya through the story of Rukmani and her husband Nathan who is a tenant farmer. Joseph remarks: “Kamala Markandeya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is an artistic and realistic depiction of the exodus caused by the infringement of modern industry on the traditional village community and the age-old rural way of life and consequent rootlessness.”(Joseph 38)

Married at 12, Rukmani has a deep attachment to the land as it is their only source of livelihood. In fact, she sees beauty in all objects of nature—land, clouds, rivers, flowers, animals, etc. Her sense of belonging with the land is evident when Rukmani recalls her days as a newly married woman: “While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for?”(Markandeya, NES 8). Her daily chores as a housewife also associate her deeply with her natural surroundings.

These words show her sense of contentment with her idyllic rustic life, where she is happy with the basic necessities only and the greed for money has not touched their lives yet. Her love for nature is evident from the fact that she names her daughter Ira after the famous river Irrawaddy. However, as a tannery is set up near the village, their lives begin to change very fast. The sweet scents of nature are replaced by the stinking smell of calf skins from the tannery. As the setting up of the tannery attracts new jobs, people from neighbouring areas throng to the place to settle down there. The idyllic tranquillity of the village is totally disturbed. Rukmani says: “It will not gladden me. Already my children hold their noses when they go by, and all is shouting and disturbance and crowds wherever you go. Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us” (31). The setting up of the tannery leads to dire environmental consequences. There is a great ecological imbalance, resulting in incessant rains and floods.

The houses around the fields are demolished to make space for the tannery and new houses for workmen and their families. As the population increases, there is a consequent opening up of new professions and shops in the village. However,

prices are hiked so much that the poor people are not able to secure even the basic necessities comfortably. Helpless in the face of starvation, they are forced to eat roots and grass like animals. Many people sell their land to the tannery for exorbitant rates. However, those who do not want to part with their lands, are forced to sell them. Thus Rukmani and Nathan eventually lose their land and are forced to leave the village and move to the city in search of livelihood. While leaving the village, Rukmani ruminates: “

Somehow, I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour.” (133)

The family life and social life of the villagers are also impacted by this new development. Because of poverty, the new generation is tempted to turn away from tilling the land and start working in the tannery. Rukmani’s sons Arjun and Thambi join the tannery, thinking it would be a good source of income for the family. However, it turns out to be a source of exploitation for the workers. On leading a labour strike, both of them are fired and have to move to the alien land of Ceylon in search of greener pastures, never to come back again. Thus the tannery becomes the cause of their separation from their family. The younger son Raja is caught stealing a calf skin to put off hunger, and is beaten to death. The thoughts of Rukmani on her family’s situation reveal her anguish: “My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness. And there were others its touch had scathed. Janaki, and her family, the hapless Chakkli Kannan, Kunthi even [...]” (134)

Rukmani and Nathan receive the greatest setback of their lives when their daughter Ira turns to prostitution so that she can feed the family, especially her youngest brother Kuti. However, all her efforts are in vain as Kuti dies of starvation. Thus, the novel is a poignant cry against the so-called developmental practices that eventually harm the environment and the people, particularly the underprivileged sections of society.

Markandya’s sixth novel, *The Coffer Dams* depicts the plight of the tribal people of a hilly region in Malnad, South India. Published in 1969, the novel shows how the tribals lived in complete harmony with nature. They revered nature and its elements, particularly the river, on the banks of which they had built their dwellings. The novelist describes their attitude towards the river in the following words: “The people who lived by its water were grateful and wary. They propagated it with significance and ceremony and strengthened the banks with clay when the

river was at all, only a trickle that did not percolate through to the shallowest irrigation channels of their parched fields.” (Markandya, CD 9)

Things change with the arrival of Clinton, an engineer, who, with his associates, wants to construct a coffer dam in the region where the tribals live. His mindset is based on pure profit, and he does not care about the effects the construction would have on the lives and future of the locals. In fact, he cares more for buildings than for people, as he believes that buildings are going to last on the earth for a longer period of time. In the beginning, the locals are in awe of the new development and some of them even welcome it warmly, as a sign of progress and modernisation. However, it is later that they realise that this so-called agent of modernisation is more of an agent of exploitation. In the words of Niroj Banerjee: “The history of human civilization tells us that nature—the jungle, the river, the countryside—is an integral part of the village life which is in the novel threatened by the painstaking plans and charts of the British engineers and technocrats. The dam, thus becomes a symbol of modernity itself encroaching slowly yet steadily over the tradition-bound, and unenlightened village in the lap of nature.” (Banerjee 80)

Since the engineers have to build their bungalows in the area, the tribals are forced to leave the place, with no alternate arrangement being made for them. The area left for them is too risky to build their huts. The South-West monsoon winds can blow the roofs away any time, but they have no other choice. Now they are faced with the problem of survival and realise the sinister consequences of technological advancement. Moreover, they are unable to raise a voice as their lands are in the possession of the white men. Bashiam remarks: “When they were told to go, they went without protest. Just got up and walked away, like animals. They didn’t want to leave it, they were persuaded.” (56)

The project also becomes a reason for bringing about conflicts between the old and the new generation of locals. Young people like Baisham favour the arrival of modernisation and urbanisation. On the other hand, the older generation despises it as it has taken them away from their land and traditional ways of life. Old Chief is disappointed at the younger generation’s greed for money and warns: “But before they will learn what is real and mourn what is lost. A score or more before they bend the river....The Great Dam will take them, the man eater will have its flesh.” (72)

The CEO of the construction company, Clinton, is an overly pragmatic man, with no sympathies for the locals or their love for the land. His wife Helen, however, aligns herself with their traditions, myths, simplicity and sincerity. Thus the husband and wife are at loggerheads with each other over the issue of construction of the dam and the consequent dislocation of the tribal people, as well as the rights and

dignity of the labourers. But Clinton pays no heed to her arguments and tells his associates: “Dock their pay and you will have them wrapping themselves rounded your feet, you know what these people are, live from hand to mouth.” (62) Thus, the workers are kept wageless and besides that, two major accidents take place and several of them lose their lives, but no proper burial is provided to their bodies. In addition to this, two bodies are stuck in the river upstream but Clinton is reluctant to “waste time” in searching for them. He bluntly tells the labour leader: “We don’t have time to bring up the bodies, the rains are due, the dam is at risk.” (178) However, workers keep on insisting and the bodies are rescued by Bashiam, the crane operator. The crane is defective and crashes, leaving Bashiam seriously injured. However, as he had shunned his tribe, no one sympathises with him: “an outsider detribalised.... Sometimes, without undue, agonizing, he acknowledged the truth of it. He also knew in his bones that, however de-tribalized he might be, birth and upbringing within the tribe gave him race knowledge that could never be acquired by the real outsider.” (93)

Thus, both the novels bring about the conflict between technology and ecology, between materialism and spirituality, between machines and humans, between culture and nature, and advocate that while modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation are important, a middle path has to be followed where ecological conservation and balance are also taken due care of.

References

1. Banerjee, Niroj. *Kamala Markandaya: A Critical Study*. Kitab Mahal, 1990.
2. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm. Eds. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens: Georgia UP, 1996.
3. Jaseph, Margaret P. *Kamala Markandaya*. Arnold Heinemann, 1980.
4. Markandya, Kamala. *Nectar in a Sieve*. Penguin Books, 2009.
5. Markandaya, Kamala. *The Coffer Dams*. John Day, 1969.