

Eco-Critical Approach of Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya

Mr. Vinod Manoharrao Kukade

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Fule-Ambedkar College of Social Work

Gadchiroli, Maharashtra, India

vinodkukade10@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper deals with the eco-critical approach of Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya in their select novels. The focus is on finding the approach of Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya towards continuous devastation of the natural atmosphere and deterioration of the relationship between man and nature. Both the writers are called great environmentalists who criticize the inhuman behaviour and ill-treatment of the human beings towards the aspects of nature. The healthy atmosphere of the universe has been getting destroyed since long back by different illogical and unethical attitude of the people towards one another and towards the nature. Both the writers have highlighted in their novels the imperialistic tendency of the colonizers and growing modernization which devastated the healthy environment and broke the amicable relationship between man and nature. This paper studies the *Sea of Poppies* (2008) of Amitav Ghosh and *The Coffin Dams* (1969) of Kamala Markandaya. An analytical method is used to go through the study.

Keywords: Colonization, Degradation, Environment, Eco-criticism, Imperialism, Relationship

Introduction

The global issue of growing environmental degradation has affected the whole universe with its hazardous impact upon the life of human, non-human beings and also upon the non-living things. Many of the environmentalists throughout the world have been making efforts to save the earth and to save the environment. However, many of the writers have also been exposing the issue of environmental devastation through their works. Among them there are Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya who have elaborated the effects and reasons of environmental degradation through their works. The works of Amitav Ghosh like *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), *Flood of Fire* (2011), *The Great Derangement* (2016) present the change in the climate which causes the destruction in various aspects in the universe. The novels of Kamala Markandaya like *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffer Dams* also highlight the impact of colonization upon the land and people of India and also the effects of growing modernization. This paper shows how the imperialistic tendency of the colonizers, the dominance of Western culture over the Eastern culture, modernization have directly affected the natural balance, healthy environment and relationship of the human being with the nature.

Ecocriticism focuses on the elaboration of the issues of environmental degradation in the works of the writers. Ecocriticism is a critical theory which studies the literary texts to find out the description of the nature, depiction of the growing destruction in the environment, cultural change which has massive impact upon the ecosystem, natural calamities, deforestation, global warming, climate change and growing deterioration in the relationship of the human being with the nature. However, Eco-criticism is a term which is coined by William Rueckert in 1978. William Rueckert's book *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978) proves

to be the pioneer in the world of ecocriticism which advocates the safety of the environment and exposes the destruction of nature. The term “ecology” is coined by Ernest Haeckel in 1866. Many of the writers from the past have showered the eulogy on the beauty and healthiness of the nature and also lamented the environmental devastation. The greatest Romantic writer William Wordsworth was the high –Priest of nature who worshiped and glorified the nature. American writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau have expressed their love and amicable attachment with the nature through their writings.

Amitav Ghosh presents his indignation towards the apathy and carelessness of the people with respect to the protection and conservation of the nature. The exploitation of the people by colonizers, deforestation for dwelling places and earning huge profit, growing modernist thoughts, cultural change; all these are critically analyzed by Amitav Ghosh in his works. As Vineet Mehta says:

In Ghosh’s fictional world, nature is not the ‘other’ of civilization. His works show the confluence of nature and culture and also portray how the change in one affects the others. Ghosh laments the loss of biodiversity and cultural diversity due to the onset of Eastern modernity and the march of enlightenment and science and technology. He often laments the loss of a pastoral, premodern world of bonhomie and cultural conviviality. Ghosh’s story about the loss of proximal bond with nature, though at times it elegiac, does not succumb to the desire for romantic portrayal of the natural world.¹ (Mehta, p. 72)

Many of the fictional and non-fictional works of Amitav Ghosh present his lamentation for growing pollution and devastation of nature.

Eco-Critical Approach of Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* (2008)

Sea of Poppies expresses indignation towards the replacement of the natural and regular crop with the production of poppies in the fields which caused the environmental degradation, and towards the exploitation of the poor people by the colonizers which caused a big gap in the relationship of man with man and the man with the nature. The trade of the opium from India to China and the consumption of the opium through smoking had changed the pure and healthy atmosphere of the Asian countries during the nineteenth century. The British established their business of opium in India and transported it in Canton in China. Regarding the monopoly of the British in this business Amitav Ghosh writes:

“Opium was the exclusive monopoly of the British, produced and packaged entirely under the supervision of the East India Company; except for a small group Paris, few native-born Indians had access to the trade or its profits.”²

(Ghosh, p. 85)

The Sudder Opium Factory which was established in Ghazipur polluted the whole atmosphere of that area. All the living beings were affected with the smoke and smell of the factories which caused divergent problems to them as sneezing, sniffing, inhaling offensive smell, health problems. With the launching of the factory the people became addict with the opium. In addition with health problems the poor people had to face many other problems. The people, earlier, used to produce the wheat, dal, vegetables in their fields, but with the force and order of the British East India Company the farmers had to produce the poppies in their fields. Naturally, due to producing the poppies in their fields, there was the scarcity of the wheat, dal (Pulses), vegetables and they had to buy those from far distance in a high price. For producing the poppies they were paid little amount of money through which they were not able to afford the prices of the vegetables, groceries etc.

The cultivation of poppies in the fields not only brought about the problems of scarcity of the grains, vegetables, satisfactory earnings in the life of the people but also many of people became addicted with the opium. The smokers used to smoke the opium through the pipes which was hazardous for their health. One such person is Hukam Singh who was much addicted with the smoking of opium. The pipe which he used for smoking was imported from Burma, because such pipes were not available in India during those days. Hukam Singh was so addicted with the opium smoking that he called the pipe of smoking as his first wife and through that the smoking only could save him from the deadly pain of his wound. Amitav Ghosh has depicted the intensity of the intoxication caused due to smoking or eating opium. Deeti was unknowingly intoxicated with the opium by her mother –in- law during the first night of her and her husband. She had not any idea that she consumed the opium. She was so intoxicated that she could not know what was happening with her during that night. She became pregnant and during the course of discussion with her mother -in -law she could understand that she was pregnant not by her husband but by her brother -in -law Chandan Singh. Amitav Ghosh unveils the proportion of the adverse effects of the opium which can reach at the unimaginable consequences. It was the biggest shock for Deeti to come to know that Chandan Singh was the father of her child. Due to intoxication caused due to consumption of opium, which she was served without making her know about it, she was used by other person and she had to lose her purity. Though this was happened just to hide the impotency of her husband Hukam Singh and to have heir of their property, but it was inhuman treatment given to Deeti and it was the betrayal of Deeti.

Amitav Ghosh has depicted the intensity of the passion of the people for expanding their asset even by risking the life of the people and environment. Raja Halder and his relatives invested money in the business of opium that was being done by Mr. Benjamin Burnham and

increased much wealth. As there was the expansion in the wealth of Raja Halder, his family, Mr. Benjamin Halder, and the British but at other side there was expansion in the pollution, expansion in the health problems of the people, and this brought about destruction in the life of the people. As Amitav Ghosh states:

“Year after year, with British and American traders growing ever more skilled in evading Chinese laws, the market for opium expanded, and the Raja and his associates made handsome profits on their investments.”³ (Ghosh, p. 85)

Humanity based incident is depicted by Amitav Ghosh with the purpose to highlight the need of affinity and affectionate relationship among the people. Mrs. Lambert was pregnant and was feeling much pain in her womb, she was crying with the pain, her physical condition was worst. However, there were no means of transportation available to take Mrs. Lambert to the hospital. Judo's father was bringing his family back to take them to their village by boat, but due to the flow of the water they had to stay at that night at the other edge of the river Hooghly. When Mr. Lambert requested Judo's father to help him to take his wife to the hospital, Judo's mother and father helped them to take Mrs. Lambert to the hospital in a boat though there was much flow in the water of the river, they staked their life to save the life of Mrs. Lambert and her unborn baby. New girl child was born in the middle of the river at midnight, but unfortunately Mrs. Lambert died. Thereafter, the crying of the small baby could not be seen by Judo's mother and she fed her with the milk through her breasts. Thereafter, on the request of Mrs. Lambert she nursed that baby used to consider that small baby her own child. Amitav Ghosh presented this story to heighten the dignity of the relationship between the two strangers which conveys the message that humanity is the need of the day.

The changing size of the coastal area is emphatically discussed by Amitav Ghosh in the novel *Sea of Poppies*. Deeti found that the size of the landscape of the bank of the river has drastically been changed which was earlier different when Deeti was child. The change in the climate and the coastal side exposes the growing degradation in the nature. The environmental pollution is increased due to the smoke of the opium drug which caused health problems to the people. This smoke affected the health of the animals also. The whole atmosphere of the world was damaged due to the imperialism of the colonizers. Colonizers without caring the environment, the relations of the human being with non-human beings and the life of the people, tried to expand their kingdom and power.

Eco-Critical Approach of Kamala Markandaya in the Novel Entitled *The Coffer Dams* (1969)

Kamala Markandaya focuses her attention in the deterioration of the relationship of man with the nature, the impact of western culture upon the environment of the rural areas, the unnatural and careless attitude of the people which compels the nature to become destroyer. The change in the life style of the people and their attraction towards city and modern life also is shown to cast its adverse effect upon the nature. Kamala Markandaya criticizes the indifferent and careless attitude of the people towards the nature. *The Coffer Dams* (1969) is a novel which exposes the barrenness in the spirituality and the development in the technology which cause catastrophic problems in the environment and in the life of the people. The arrival of the construction company of England in India of which Mr. Clinton is the chief Engineer, cast its destructive impact upon the rural, idyllic and healthy environment of the villages and the forest area. The construction of the dams in the river gives birth to various problems in the countryside area and changed the minds of the people. The novel shows how the works of the construction changes the atmosphere of the rural area and brings about the upheavals in the village life. The

concept of the development of country is based on the technological development. But the attention is distracted from the disadvantageous side of the technology which resulted into the destruction of the traditional culture, idyllic life, rural life, environment, attachment with the village life and break in the relationship of the man and nature. Pravati Misra quotes the statement of Menon and Rao in her book entitled *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya* as:

“Merely mechanical progress cannot be the end of the Human existence. The values of relationship and the question of integrity and communication that enters into cannot be sacrificed to iron and steel. This in a nutshell, is Markandaya’s concern in *The Cofferdams*”⁴ (p. 15)

Kamala Markandaya focuses her attention in the deterioration of the relationship of man with the nature, the impact of western culture upon the environment of the rural areas, the unnatural and careless attitude of the people which compels the nature to become destroyer. The change in the life style of the people and their attraction towards city and modern life also is shown to cast its adverse effect upon the nature. Kamala Markandaya criticizes the indifferent and careless attitude of the people towards the nature.

At the outset, the construction company started to collapse the huts of the poor people to build their bungalow on that land. All the huts were destroyed and many of trees were cut down. The construction of the dams started destruction of the forest areas and damaged the healthy and pure atmosphere of that area. Kamala Markandaya further writes that the persons like Clinton, Mr. Rawlings, Mrs. Rawlings have lost the sense of attachment with the people and with the nature who are busy in increasing the wealth and are indifferent towards the protection of the

nature and maintaining the closeness in the relationship with nature and with non-living things. Kamala Markandaya exhibits on the contrary the character of Helen who is shown to be the lover of nature, who cares for the tribal, their culture and also respect them. She loves to live in the countryside area and in the company of the animals and the birds. The character of Helen unveils the dignity of the relations of the human beings with the nature which is the necessity of the day. Advice of Helen to her husband for protecting the nature and caring the emotions of the tribal becomes one of the significant factors in consolidating the relationship of the human beings with non-human beings. Helen asks her husband Clinton as “Can’t you care? Don’t human beings matter anything to you? Do they have to be a special kind of flesh before they do?”⁵ (Markandaya, p. 107) The contradictory nature of Clinton and Helen put them always in the conflict on the issue of protection of the nature and respecting the humanity.

The peaceful and wholesome atmosphere of the villages like Maidan, Malnad is converted into the noise and pollution as the works of the construction of the dams is started by the construction company of England. The roaring sound of the machines which are used for excavating the land, detaining the current of the water of river, mixing the material, such different kinds of work totally damaged the environment. The replacement of the workers with the machines snatched away the employment of the poor people and increased the pollution. To break the valley the dynamites are used. More than twenty- five explosions of the dynamites were executed which shattered the whole area and polluted the whole atmosphere. The explosion, the excavation, the forceful and man- made landslide and extra work could prove to be the dangerous for the life of many workers. Many workers came under the heap of the pebbles and concrete materials which caused them death. But some inhuman western officers’ soulless and hard emotions could not feel the pity for the dead workers. Instead, they were trying to bury

their bodies into the walls of the dam and let some of the bodies lie buried in the construction work. These inhuman feelings are criticized by Kamala Markandaya which show her wrath for such indifferent and unethical minds of some western people.

Kamala Markandaya describes the beauty of the nature and appreciates the knowledge of the villagers about the seasons and climate. The chief of the tribal had sensed the arrival of the heavy rain and had advised the British officers to stop the work for some days. But, the commercially stricken mind of Clinton wanted only to complete the construction of the dam within stipulated time even at the risk of the life of the workers. Obstinate Clinton continued the work neglecting the advice of the chief of the tribal. The massive difference is highlighted here by Kamala Markandaya. As the modern and technologically intelligent mind of Clinton could not guess the upcoming nature of the climate, but the traditional tribal chief suddenly grasped the upcoming nature of the climate. As per the statement given by the tribal chief the storm and heavy rain started which made all the people panic and the construction of the dams came in the danger of getting collapsed. Kamala Markandaya presented the power of nature. Kamala Markandaya intends to exhibit the destructive side of the nature. According to her the imperialist colonizers and many of the people have polluted the atmosphere with their unethical, unnatural and commercially filled conduct and activities.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya have been known and recognized as the best environmentalists who through their writings established the platform for making the world aware of the need and indispensability of the protection of the nature and its significance. The novels entitled *Sea of Poppies* (2008) of Amitav Ghosh and *The Coffer Dams* (1969) of Kamala Markandaya presented the colonial dominance over the Asian countries which resulted into the

destruction of the nature and attraction of the people towards the modernity and technology. *Sea of Poppies* criticizes the replacement of the regular crop like wheat, vegetables, dals, with the poppies. The East India Company compelled the farmers to cultivate the poppies into their fields. The poppies then were processed in the Sudder Opium Factory. The consumption of the opium has destroyed the life of many of the people and also polluted the whole atmosphere. Amitav Ghosh showed the effects of the business of opium and the commercial minds of the colonizers upon the relationship of the man with nature. In *The Coffin Dams* (1969) Kamala Markandaya also expresses her indignation towards the unusual importance given by the people to the technology and modernity. She revealed that how the villagers got attracted by the technological development and the city life and how the villagers have shown their indifference towards the country life. This big change in the attitude of the people indicates the degradation of the nature. The apathy, indifference and carelessness of the people towards the environment and the nature is poignantly criticized by Amitav Ghosh and Kamala Markandaya.

References

Mehta Vineet. *Ecocritical Concerns in the Fiction of Amitav Ghosh*. Patiala: Aab Publications, 2015. Print, p. 72

Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. Penguin India, 2015, p. 85

Ibid, p. 85

Misra, Parvati. *Class Consciousness in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2009, p. 15.

Markandaya, Kamala. *The Coffer Dams*. Gurgaon: Penguin India, 2008. p.107.