

**Ecofeminism: A Contemporary Approach perpetuated in *The
Coffer Dams***

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Abstract

The eminent novel of Kamala Markandaya, *The Coffer Dams* (1969) once again engages with the East-West theme. It deals with the encounter of diverse cultures and the menace of industrialization leading to oppression of nature and the underprivileged members of society primarily woman. The novel very aptly portrays the theme that the process of industrialization leading to deterioration of environment is consequent to man's hegemonic attitude of exploiting nature and natural resources for the accomplishment of his economic goals. Hence, *Coffer Dams* is a manifestation of the approach of the British society that mimics culture whereas the subjugated class of the tribal people symbolizes nature in being more allied with the natural environment.

Keywords: Industrialization, Environment, Oppression

Introduction

The alienation of man from nature and the consequences of this estrangement on woman and the environment ooze out from the initial statements of the novel:

IT WAS A MAN'S TOWN. THE CONTRACTORS HAD BUILT, WITHIN
HAILING distance of the work site, for single men and men who were virtually

single by reason of being more than a day's walk away from their women and villages. (Markandaya, *The Coffey Dams* 1)

The plot starts with the introduction of a construction site of a huge dam on a river in a tribal area of India. The male British engineers are shown as the advocates of industrialization and the poor tribal male community supports them as labourers for no choice is left with them. The female counterparts of both the Western and Indian communities are however aligned towards nature and its homologous entities. Throughout the novel, the author depicts the disgust of the women protagonists directed towards industrialized development projects sponsored and flourishing due to male patronage at the cost of the environment. Clinton, the male protagonist vivifies indifference towards the tribal male labourers who are estranged from their natural home. The females of the tribal community feel equally alienated in the newly created town in the realm of this jungle. The author uses appropriate words for portrayal of their ideology:

There were no women either. It was no place for women. The men were promised home leave, all expenses paid, at the end of each two- year term, and in the meantime fended for themselves. Clinton saw them roistering off down the hill at weekends, packed like sardines into commandeered contractors' lorries. He had no notion where; it did not concern him so long as the work schedule was maintained. (Markandaya, *CD* 6)

This man-made dam is considered superior to the natural assets in terms of materialistic profits and gains. Hence, the construction of this dam is a highly ambitious project of the British engineers as well as the Indian government portrayed as a 'powerful heart' (Markandaya, *CD* 3). The dam would to furnish the needs of the future generations and the power generated from the vivacious water of this turbulent river will be used for other development purposes. The progress of humans is believed to be achieved through this materialistic harnessing of the natural resources rather than through a compassionate approach to the natural landscapes. The following lines from the novel efficiently describe the western philosophy of growth and development embraced by man (symbolized by Clinton, the Chief British engineer) who gives prime importance to the commercial goals and shows apathy towards the environmental treasures:

A builder: The world ran through his mind with a dear keen pleasure as he walked briskly past the living area to the busy work site, seeing not 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. (Markandaya, *CD 2*)

The root cause of change in the ideology of Indian community towards nature as stated by Vandana Shiva is colonization which puts nature and its inhabitants on the margins of economic growth. Colonization, it is contended, underestimated the environmental methods for understanding the participatory courses in which nature was comprehended and adored, the multiple and differing convictions, knowledge and substantially more. Shiva correctly emphasizes that Indian perspective about nature and ecological surroundings is theoretically not the same as the western view that considers nature to be an asset to be utilized. She further elucidates that prakriti is venerated in diverse ways, “as the primordial vastness, the source of abundance, as adishakti, the primordial power” (39). The “western” idea of detached/exploitable form of nature is different from “Indian” ideology which represents nature as holistic as well as dynamic. “The nature of Nature as prakriti is activity and diversity. Prakriti is everywhere—in the form of stone, tree, pool, fruit or animal” (Shiva, *Staying Alive* 39). In the present novel also the Indian tribal people convey respect and gratefulness towards this river, perform many rituals to express gratitude for the natural resources essential for their survival. Their faith doesn’t get shaken due to any natural calamity they face. The subsequent quote from the novel confirms this perspective of ecofeminism:

The people who lived by its waters were grateful, but. They propitiated it with sacrifice and ceremony, and strengthened the banks with clay when the water level rose. Sometimes when the rains failed there was no river at all, only a trickle that did not percolate through to the shallowest irrigation channels of their parched fields. At other times the land was inundated; they saw their crops drowned beneath spreading lakes, their mud huts dissolved to a lumpy brown soup and carried away on the flood tide. At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed him. It was their fate. (Markandaya, *CD 3*)

The female protagonist, Helen, some other associates of Clinton like Mackendrick and some knowledgeable union leader of the tribal labourers, Krishnan try to make him aware about the plight of the displaced tribal people. They are coerced into work for unlimited hours to complete the project within scheduled time which is mechanistic and inhuman. The local people who are more familiar the various seasonal tribulations of the river as compared to the theoretical knowledge of the Western people warn them about the catastrophe that may occur due to this negligence. But the materialistic motto overrides all other thoughts and concerns about to sustainable growth and development. The following lines are illustrative:

The construction program, he said, in their united view needed modification. The building schedule was too tight. The leeway allowed for natural hazards was wholly insufficient. Allowance had been made for the south-west monsoons but not for the north-east which followed. Cyclones, as anyone who was Indian would know, could make havoc of this kind of preemptory British planning. The question of solar flares had not even been touched upon. And labour troubles were endemic. (Markandaya, *CD* 12)

However, Helen (wife of the British Chief Engineer) has been shown to be much closer to nature while displaying complete indifference to the mammoth sized modernized and industrialized coffer dam. She doesn't enjoy the well built bungalow but likes wandering in the natural surroundings and tries to connect and embrace the miseries of the tribal people. The relationship and belongingness of this white woman towards nature, human and non-human creatures is evident at many places in the novel like:

She played with the children, rubbed flea powder into the dog's yellow coats, watched the crops grow, watched men and women at work, sated herself with watching, and most of all she marvelled that such full and rounded out living could go on, on so feeble and flimsy a footing. (Markandaya, *CD* 39)

She completely counterbalances her husband for his apathetic attitude towards the displaced tribal people and nature. Her husband also compares her mentality with that of the poor Indian people as she shows emotional attachment with the environment in a non-commercial

way. She charges him for behaving in an inhuman manner toward these major ecological sufferers of the development project as depicted in the subsequent lines:

Helen, his wife, had no such blocks. Was it, he wondered, because she was half his age? When he asked her she laughed. 'It's nothing to do with age. I just think of them as human beings, that's all. (6)

Her resistance against this subjugation increases day by day and it bursts with severe anger in front of her husband. She questions his motto about the construction of this dam and contradicts his ideology which imparts supremacy to pride, scheduled completion of the project and commercial profit more than to human lives. "With words that her mind repeated, coldly. Make or break, she said, chilled; make what, break what? Dams, lives, men? Pride, time, money?" (Markandaya, *CD* 127). Helen feels distressed about the sufferings of the poor tribal community and the broken pieces of their belongings make her disturbed and poignant. She finds some pieces of the pottery used by the tribal females at the backyard of her bungalow and feels the pain and troubles these people might have faced due to the construction of these bungalows. The following lines very well describe her concern towards the sufferings and discomfort of these displaced people:

Helen sat on alone in the darkness, turning over in her hands the broken bits of pottery. It had been part of some woman's life once, not very long ago: she had filled it with water and scoured it, cooked in it and fed her family-the earthenware was pebble-smooth from use. Then they had all gone away and the vessels had been broken and left behind. Not one or two: enough for several families, the cooking post of the whole community. (Markandaya, *CD* 24)

Therefore, she turns out as an 'environmental activist' fighting for the rights of nature and its inhabitants. The environmental awareness exhibits itself in the compassionate concern and distress of this white woman, in her craving to intermingle, commune and have a sturdy relationship with the tribals as well as in her struggle for their rights. Her dynamic involvement in making her relationship with the tribal people stronger, in acknowledging the origin of their

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misery, she takes herself away from the comfortable bungalow. She is so concerned about these Indian people that she thinks maybe she belonged to this land in her preceding life. Helen appears to be the voice of the oppressed i.e. nature and the tribals against the exploitation caused by the colonizers/British people. She vocalises the author's ecofeminist perspective.

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