

AGRI-ENVIRONMENTALISM AND TECHNOLOGY: A STUDY OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *THE COFFER DAMS*

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Abstract:

The spread of humans throughout the world has resulted in agriculture being the predominant form of land management worldwide. Human impact on the land is increasing due to rapid population growth and rising food demand. A key challenge for the agricultural sector is to feed a growing world population while reducing environmental impacts and conserving natural resources for future generations. Agriculture can have a significant impact on the environment. While negative impacts are severe and can include pollution and degradation of soil, water, and air, agriculture can also have positive impacts on the environment, for example, by sequestering greenhouse gases in plants and soils or mitigating flood risks through the use of certain agricultural practices. Kamala Markandaya, a conscious lover of nature, addresses environmental issues in her sixth novel, *The Coffey Dams* (1969). This article examines how an industrial plant disrupts the ecological harmony of a tranquil place. This study is an attempt to shed light on the following issues. Environmental problems such as urbanization, deforestation and noise pollution caused by a dam project in a hilly area, Malnad. Tribal Area, Malnad in South India. The study highlights the harmful effects of technology on ecology.

Keywords: Environmental, Agriculture, Technology, Ecology, Urbanization, Pollution.

Content:

Environmental deterioration has emerged as a ubiquitous phenomenon which occurs in each nation, at every echelon and stratum, in diverse forms, all through the globe. It influences the Earth, its biotic as well as non-biotic elements including humans, non-human creatures and vegetation. Some facades of this catastrophe are scarcely noticeable. For instance the melting of the Antarctica sea ice as a consequence of climate change is not something most of us take cognizance of but other phenomenon such as deforestation or smog resulting due to pollution, significantly distress the communities where they happen. These ecological scuffles have become a part of everyday life in majority of the populations throughout the world. Humans are the only species accountable for devastation of the environment as well as the globalized expansion of this deadly crisis.

In this context, Man's dominance emerges out of the verity that he is the only literary creature on the globe. He is capable of using diverse natural resources for accomplishment of his economic and political goals, and social desires. However, his materialistic ravenousness has created a deteriorative effect on ecological harmony. Consequently, literature acclaimed for emulating the current issues couldn't stay indifferent to this perspective. The continuously increasing menace to the environment from incessant use of nature and natural resources has grabbed the interest of writers in the last decades. The consideration of the aforesaid ecological

issues in writings of the eminent novelists has lead to the beginning of a *de novo* literary approach, explicitly ecocriticism. According to *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, “Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation.”

The interdisciplinary gamut of ecocriticism makes it a unique stream having strong connection with both sciences and humanities. The official origin of Ecocriticism emerges from these two significant works published in the 1990’s, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell. Among these, Cheryll Glotfelty is regarded as a pioneer of ecocritics in America. As a founder in this area, she deciphers:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (18)

Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty achieved the honor of becoming the first American Professor of Literature and Environment at the University of Nevada, Reno. Glotfelty’s significant persuasion on the environmental nature-writing division of American studies represented through her many conference proceedings and networking services has affected many other people as well. Glotfelty queries as to how nature is embodied in literature, how the perception of wilderness has been distorted over time and how science has made productive intrusion in literary analysis. Ecocriticism seems to be a more political approach of study when weighed against Feminism and Marxism. Ecocritics usually link their literary analyses unambiguously to a ‘green’ ethical and political programme. In this context, ecocriticism is very well associated with environment oriented growth model in ideology and political theory. Glotfelty urges that in this postcolonial era the occupation of English Literature must reconsider the margins to redraw the lineaments of this interdisciplinary analysis. Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (1998) goes together with Buell’s work by following the template of nature in ecocriticism. Morton persuades the changing definition of the phrase nature and supporting Buell to a definite extent, proposes that nature could belong to anything. Richard Kerridge’s description in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (1998) recommends, like Glotfelty’s extensive cultural ecocriticism, that:

The ecocritics want 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 responses to environmental crisis. (5)

Therefore, the realm of ecocriticism is very wide as it is not confined to any one literary field. The prominent ecocritics who are dedicated to ecocritical paradigm, include Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, William Howarth, Simon C. Estok, William Rueckert, Suellen

Campbell, Michael P. Branch and Glen A. Love. The definition of ecocriticism by Lawrence Buell as described in his work *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) explains it as — “the environmentally oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, and to the theories that underlie such critical practice” (138). He recognizes two segments of ecocriticism, the first wave ecocriticism and the second wave ecocriticism or revised ecocriticism. The preliminary branch i.e. first wave ecocriticism emphasized on such areas as — “nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction” (138). The first wave ecocritics persuaded the ideology of organism while the second wave ecocritics oriented towards ecological justice issues weaving a ‘social ecocriticism’ that engulfs metropolitan and ruined sites just as insistently as natural landscapes. Eventually, Buell recognizes, “the orientation of western academy towards ecocriticism as environmental criticism” (Buell 28).

The human race has come into existence due to heritable changes over successive generations through a long duration phenomenon called evolution in which ecological equilibrium has played a critical role. Hence, the human species is just a fraction of this ecological armamentarium and their existence solely depends upon the ecosystem. Donald Hughes’ explanation about ecology and its relation with humans is reasonably significant:

Human ecology, then, is a rational study of how mankind interrelates with the home of the human species, the earth; with its soil and mineral resources; with its water, both fresh and salty; with its air, climates and weather; with its many living things, animals and plants, from the simplest to the most complex; and with the energy received ultimately from the sun. (Hughes 3)

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 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 Coffer 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)

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. 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 construction of this dam is like chastising a natural creation within a cage to hamper its pace and flow and the commercialization of the natural assets by the so-called cultured and civilized people of the West. The wilderness of the river is halted by this project as depicted here: "It ran deeply here, this river which two thousand men and ten thousand tons of equipment had so far assembled to tame" (Markandaya, *CD* 29). Therefore, the novel reveals the male-centric exploitation of nature and its adjoining constituents, also showing their ungratefulness for the valuable natural assets.

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 colonizers i.e. the British community exploits natural resources and tribal people for their profit with no reciprocal return. For the British people, the colonized i.e. Indian tribal people have only a perfunctory subsistence and are supposed to work like animals. The male protagonist, Clinton portrays the same ideology - he doesn't bother about the tribal labourers and the turbulent river but what makes him anxious is the scheduled completion of his dream project.

The British engineers are very conceited about their capability and evenly insensitive towards the Indian counterparts and labourers. They viciously devastate the soil and the river which are the foundation of human existence and revered by the tribal people. Krishnan, the union leader of the tribal labourers gets very upset by the response of the British and emits his anger in the following words:

... these British engineers brush us off like flies, hurt and insult like splinters under his skin, despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. Beginners, he repeated bitterly. . . . But it's over now. . . Our day is coming. The day when they will listen to us. (Markandaya, *CD 13-14*)

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)

Like his Indian labour, he saw her drift off into what Rawlings, steeped in African flavours, insisted on calling the bush. Once or twice he asked where, though he was not really interested, and equally perfunctorily she told him she had visited one or other of the settlements strung along the course of the river. (Markandaya, *CD* 20)

Ahead of the commencement of the building of the dam, the local people are forced to evacuate the adjoining region and to shift to some other place so that the British officials can construct their bungalows in place of the tribal residences. Helen on the other hand opposes this project and takes consideration of their privileges on the forest and river.

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)

Just before the completion of the project, a brutal incident happens at the site leading to untimely blast due to the mal- functioning of the signal system. This catastrophic detonation claims forty lives out of which two men are Britishers whose bodies are buried with Christian customs whereas the dead bodies of the Indians are not even searched for and are left dumped. Bashiam, an Indian engineer gets severely injured and crippled in the process of extracting the dead bodies of the Indian labourers from the river. 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. Both the works of Kamala Markandaya convey her apprehension toward the global environment whose development has been obstructed and hindered for the sake of uncontrolled industrialization and modernization. The female characters of these novels remain attached to the aboriginal traits of the natural environment demonstrating their incredible sympathy towards the nature.

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