



Research Paper

Ecoculture Of East And West With Reference To Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffe Dams*

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ABSTRACT: From the standpoint of Environmental Critics, Culture, is viewed as a network of neighbourhoods or communities that is rooted and tended. Culture doesn't segregate Nature; culture is an entity of nature as well. Probably the diverse views of nature, industrialisation, may differ and that differentiation is plunged in *The Coffe Dams*. The vast difference in development between the East and the West from the point of nature, being a point of culture, thereby leading the East to be the supreme and the West backlogged is quite picturesquely described in the novella. The element of river is merely viewed as a thing of subjugation depicting mechanical strength through human power to out rule nature between the chaos of the sacredness and modernity.

KEYWORDS: Culture, nature, industrialisation, river, modernity

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Earlier Culture was defied to be a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals", or "skilled human activities through which non-human nature is encompassed and transformed". One of the marks of the culture of environmental criticism today is that the place of culture in relation to nature. Ecocritics like Snyder and Berry redefine culture and cultural practices so as to reconnect them more closely with nature. Hence Raymond Williams rightly calls culture "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". The novel depicts the theme of industrialism versus nativism; machines versus nature; humans versus machines, encompassing the cultures of East and West. Clinton, chief of a construction business is a remarkable and renowned constructor, from England, deriving pleasure at his work.

The constructor, a term, he vividly reconciles himself with, brings the modes of industrialisation, aspirations and more importantly a dream to be envisaged, the building of the dam. They are faced with a project of building a dam in the midst of jungle and mountain within a time schedule. 'A year for the diversion channel to take the altered course of the river. A concurrent year for the coffer dams to stem its flow. Two years for the main dam to rise'. Inevitable setbacks occur, accidents and friction among the mixed labour force present further complications. Clinton's passion in the project isn't quite interestedly supported by Helen, from the beginning.

Clinton and Bashiam represent two vast cultures, the conqueror and the conquest yet share a line where both view the change marked in nature as a challenge, to win over, racing against time playing cold ears to the setbacks. Quite Ironically they share the same woman, Helen, spouse to Clinton, but finds herself connecting more to the country and its people. A Person of strong emotional human values, Helen cannot understand what Clinton sees in the structures of the dams, rather than the human sufferings it costs. Obviously Helen misses that the Coffe dams is quite a challenge against the river to combat and hence Clinton is merciless.

The focus in the environmental encounter is on Helen, caught between two radically different systems of values, beliefs, attitudes. The forward-surgling motion of the narrative presents Helen's story reinforced with those of her husband and the wider social circle of the British encampment, and the East-West encounter. The East-West encounter is not only on the level of people but also on that of ideas. Markandaya presents the cultural clash in terms of the humanistic concerns and technological progress. The values of human relationships, and the question of integrity and communication that enters into them cannot be sacrificed at the altar of steel. This, in a nutshell, is Markandaya's concern in *The Coffe Dams*.

The symbolic experience of Millie Rawlings also expands the meaning and impact of growth of the individual in relation to an alien culture. Millie also feels the strange spell of the country. She tries to forget it at parties and in her consciousness, on which impinge the noise, the dust and the stress of living in this mysterious cultural milieu. The advent of the rains is the symbolic backdrop for the quelling of passions. The rains become the cleansing agent for bitter prejudices and ill-gotten notions. Millie comments on the growth of realisation.

The coffers would have had to be breached to fulfil the responsibility to the tribal's if necessary. The tribal chief is used as a ploy to convey possible solutions all throughout the novel. Helen, however moves away from the yoke of marital responsibility in search of an illusionary freedom. She is impelled by a spirit of exploration and adventure. Helen's movement away from the confines of the British quarters is a rebellion against the Western attitudes and behaviour. Her perception expands to an awareness of the vastness of the sustaining tribal tradition.

Helen sees beyond the British perception of the natives are mere black apes. She sees them as alive, sensitive men and women, and not blank opacities of total incomprehension. The cold inhumanity in making a whole settlement of tribals vacate a place just to make bungalows with the best view for the British engineers shocks her into a desire to rebel against conformity to the standards of the group. The tell-tale pieces of cooking pots give her, the clue to the mystery of the forceful tribal evacuation. In the interaction with the autochthonic traditions and the development of her cultural consciousness, Helen slowly begins to discover fullness.

The juxtaposition of the Dam with the village gives rise to a sense of bewilderment in the inhabitants of the area. All the people of the Maiden and the Malnad, the plains and the hill country watch with awe the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle. Like any other Indian village, this tribal village too has been enjoying the slumber of peace since generations. So far it has been only the vagaries of Nature that have interfered with their lives: but now for the first time an outward human agency is going to disrupt their life by way of the technological onslaught. The very success and strength of technology seems thus to cauterize human sensibility so much that Helen searches for an identity in a world where people have forcibly been torn from their roots.

Except to Helen, the tribals are hardly civilised in thought and feeling to the whites. Helen's exploration reminds the whites at the encampment of a probable destruction of the image they have formed of the natives. In the beginning, Clinton himself has a confused feeling which is expressed in the words "As if a bit of England had strayed on to soil where it had no business to be, in this corner site round a bend of a river in India".

In the area where there had been yelps of jackals, there now comes up a huge dam, a symbol of modern industrialism and technology. The grunting mechanical marvels of the western world first take away the sense of belonging from the hearts of the tribals. The sirens on the dam-site are wailing devils to the villagers who have not known so far the wonder works of machines. Town houses come up one after the other in the woodland setting. Clinton unconsciously seeks freedom from the restraining bonds of emotion, in fact, the obsession with the construction of the dam is his involuntary escape from a whole gamut of emotions. He is also the Western pragmatist with no use for humanistic concerns in professional work.

Emotions, however, cannot be killed, and they should have an existence apart from the intellectual. Clinton shuns his moral responsibilities to the families of the two dead Indians, to Bashiam before and after the accident. When Bashiam goes to lift the boulder, he is asked by Clinton, the cunning, who knows that the lugs of the crane are faulty, "Do you wish to go on?" out of a sense of duty, 'so that no man afterwards could accuse' (Markandaya 185). Still voices roared in derision within him, his moribund conscience. It is typical of Clinton that he does not allow his judgement of Bashiam as a crane operator to be twisted by his dark emotions as he calls them.

Although Clinton's fears about the rains are fairly justified, the most important consideration seems to be, nonetheless, the value of humanity versus materialism as well as the fact that it is men who do the work, not machines. The bond between Helen and Clinton remains disrupted until the arrival of the monsoon, obliterating racial and other man-made institutional differences between the natives, the Indians, and the British. The modern juggernaut of technological progress is on, despite the tribal attitudes. Helen persists "Don't human beings matter anything to you?" (Markandaya 105). Helen's motivation for her rebellion against group conformity is thus a positive search for meaning, but the freedom from the constraints of social structure, the negative freedom that she assumes, is not a fruitful one in Markandaya's world.

There has to be a return, in maturity, to a great acceptance of limitation. The building up of the dam is a subtle, savage struggle for domination over the men whom Krishnan, the Indian engineer presently leads and whom Clinton needs behind him. The local inhabitants become slaves of many agencies; they come under different pressures divine, man-made and natural. They have already grown fatalists either because of the failure of rains or the occurrence of floods. The Kiplingesque prophecy that East is East and West is West : the twain shall never meet is invalidated in the novel. This is important because most of the Indo-Anglian novels testify to the well-known dictum.

Bashiam, the Indian tribal technician, is another agency which precipitates the reconciliation. He is disparagingly called a civilised jungly wallah by the whites and also by the tribesmen from whom he is alienates. He represents the backward people content with natural phenomena like hills and woods, but his rationality is so upto date that he persuades the bewildered clan to accept the changing values brought about by the mechanical marvels. He appeals to the lowlanders "Only the dam, my brothers, brings us together" (Markandaya 130).

Another greater unifying force is the typical old tribal Chief who with his knowledge of seasons and the vagaries of Nature saves the risked coffer dams when the seemingly equipped western technicians become helpless. On account of heavy rains the Coffers are risked in the river course and the British technicians become utterly perplexed. The whole area is in danger of inundation unless the Coffers are breached, panicking Clinton as well. But the tribal Chief on the death bed utters in fragments 'When the ridges rise clear' and gives a clue to save the risked dams. The dams are accordingly saved. The context suggests that the old order and the primordial wisdom are not inferior to modern technology and merely ruthless technology is not the exclusive answer to all crises.

Krishna, the engineer, Gopal, Shanmugham and others like the Englishman Lefevre also serve as unifying forces. The idea of a synthesis is, thus, projected through several means and media. The dispossessed tribals, the labourers and the villagers who in the beginning resent the coming of technology to their doors, saying 'We are emotional people. The spirit has been bruised as the tribal people grew gradually prone to the blessings of technology.

Rationalism ultimately replaces emotionalism and the villagers welcome the dam's coming into existence. The dialogue between the Indian technicians, Krishnan and Shanmugham, is vitally significant. When Krishnan designates the dam as Clinton-Mackenderick dam, expressing his gratefulness to the latter, Shanmugham says 'It is our dam, what we call it, the Great Dam, the Bharat Dam'. Both accept that it is the Britisher's brain and Indians need, conception, blood and bones. In other words it is a joint achievement. The impossibility of decent relations between the races hinted at in the early part of the story is nullified by the possibility of the strong synthesis of two cultures.

The dam itself stands as a great symbol of the anticipated synthesis, be it technological, racial, cultural and even personal. The novel quite dramatically reveals the inner life of the human characters. But one can't help feeling that it is a novel with a thesis since Markandaya works into the novel, the philosophy of mechanization of life, though not so consciously and explicitly as Bhattacharya does in his *Shadow from Ladakh*. The human drama staged by the trio of Clinton, Helen and Bashiam is convincing and arresting. Personal relationships are Kamala Markandaya's forte in all her novels.

However, the complexity of human experiences that one gets in *Nectar in a Sieve* is not so prominently discernible in *The Coffe Dams*. The manner in which the plea for mechanization is made by Clinton, Krishnan and Bashiam reminds us of the manner in which Bhaskar Roy, the engineer in *Shadow from Ladakh*, advocates the case for techno-industrialization. The *Coffe Dams* is not at all a far cry from the real India. Markandaya's depiction of rural and tribal India is sincere and realistic, and her implied optimism in respect of the future of India, with a network of irrigation projects, dams, industries and factories cropping up everywhere not be a matter of fantasy as removed from reality.

The social setting limited to the tribals is most appropriate for the theme of Eastern sensibility and Western technology due to the prevailing cultural chasm. The environment is used to determine and complete the individuals who live in it and interact with it. The characters presented grow through the effect of the environment.

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