

Ecological Concerns and Ecophilia in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams*

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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most prominent Indian novelists in English. *The Coffey Dams* delves deep into ecological concerns of the modern India with the help of the British experts that catch the advancements and progress with the pace of the world. Markandaya vocalizes cultural nuances between East and West. The novel primarily also throws light upon how the Indian and British characters are contradict in their attitude towards nature. It exhibits a shift in identity and identity diffusion through the characters of Helen, Bashiam and tribal people. The novel is about ecology, nature and human intervention in the ecosystem. The purpose of the present paper is to explore the ecophilia through the characters in *The Coffey Dams*. The present paper attempts to highlight Markandaya's ecological observations and her narrative that explicates the nexus between her characters and nature. The narrative revolves around nature, environment and the elements in nature.

KEYWORDS: ecophilia, nature and ecology.

Kamala Markandaya is one of the prolific writers, who contribute substantially towards Indian writings in English exploring the themes of Diaspora, culture, cultural identities, ecology, climate and environment. Her *The Coffey Dams* is firmly grounded in the company of secluded nature—ecology away from human interventions. The novel primarily focuses upon the efforts of human beings in constructing the coffer dams in the river in the jungles of Malnad in Karnataka. Thus, Ecology, nature, environment and climate become the major concerns of every character in the narrative. In other words, the British construction company shifts into the jungles near the river and attempts to construct the coffer dams in the river bed. This endeavour clashes with nature, creating a threat to ecology. Therefore, the writer arranges for a sequence of incidents and accidents in nature explicating the ecophilic and ecophobic canons of nature.

Ecophilia means the closeness and positive coexistence between human beings and nature. Ecophilia evokes reflection upon how people do towards nature and fostering of the reconciliation between humans and nature. According to Hung (2010), "Although the nature cannot act like a human teacher; instead, nature is silent and wordless guide. Nature cannot 'speak', 'act' or 'teach' intentionally or actively; what people can learn from nature is to pay attention to the interaction between humans and nature. The virtues of modesty, attentiveness, humility and mindfulness and the ability to appreciate and respect nature are the best fruits gained from this learning process. This learning is invisible, but, sensible." (LN 225) This cultivates the term of the ecophilia. *The Coffey Dams* is intertwined the ecophilia and ecological concern through the characters like Helen and Bashiam. The British technocrats and their chief Clinton arrive India to construct a Coffey Dam. The novel is about a construction of the coffer dams which are primarily focus on destruction of nature.

Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams* delves deep into ecological concerns of the post Independent India who with the help of the British experts tries to catch advancements and progress. This also showcases the need and greed of the colonizers to achieve scientific and infrastructural advancements. Before the team of Clinton and Mackendrick Company arrives to the site of Malnad in the hills of Karnataka, the indigenous people of Malnad lived harmoniously with the nature. For them, ecology like the hills, jungles, the plains, the waters are liked deities of the nature. They worship this ecosystem without any complaints. Both, in happiness and in difficulties they worship and pray the Almighty. The author portrays the assimilation of the indigenous people of Malnad:

The people who lived by its water were grateful, but wary. They propitiated it with sacrifice and ceremony and strengthened the banks with clay when the water levels 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 hunts 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. (CD 3)

The author introduces Clinton, Mackendrick, Rawlings, Lefevre and Galbraith as planners of postcolonial India. The novel is also about the complex as well as the delicate aspects of East—West Cultural conflicts and racial approaches brought in the jungles of Karnataka that attempt to bridge their differences. At the same time, it is also about exploring the ecology of the natural habitations in India. In the opening pages of the novel the author introduces the calmness of the forest where the ecology is ruling in every pore, making the humans aware of its supremacy. As these Londoners reach the site; they are in the company of nature and forests. During day, they enjoy the natural beauty and the epiphany of environment in the forest. But, during night, the same serene nature threatens the outsiders creating phobia. Kamala rightly explicates:

By night it was different. The jungle crept back, closing in as the shadows of the huge trees fell across the line where the clearing merged into scrub, and advanced and deepened; and the men grew restless; listening to the yelp of jackets, or the soft furtive sounds of frightened deer, and lurched out to herd together in the canteen or cinema or the shanty- town-style saloon bar, where the familiar noise and thick blue air, and in the end alcohol, restored the illusion of England. (CD 5-6)

Kamala Markandaya introduces Helen Clinton—a reverse Diaspora, as a more vibrant and natural human being without the awe of authority and the superiority of her white skin. Discarding her English 'Memsahib' identity, she mixes with nature and the tribesmen by visiting their settlements alone. She develops her own interests of moving into nature, exploring the natural hamlets of the tribes in the forest. Helen is interested in observing the primitive and barbarous people with their native ethnicity in their space. Therefore, she visits there natives and spends time with them. These instances exhibit Helens ecophilia. On the contrary, Clinton, her husband is ecophobic. "He warned her not to drink their polluted water, reminded her they were in tiger country..." (CD 20) These views showcase Clinton's prejudice about the people and India. Juxtaposing to the views of her husband Helen submerges with the culture of the tribes. Her assimilation with the native culture is, in a way, ecophilic. She is very much like the elements of nature. Kamala Markandaya observes, "Helen

got on well with the tribesmen. He had seen groups of them gathered round her in their compound, or accompanying her if she returned after sunset from her wanderings. But then, Helen got on well with most people". (CD 21) Helen is so fascinated by the nature that she vanishes into the jungle anytime from her bungalow as if she the child of nature. She is so natural and instinctive that she disappears in the forest even without instructing her husband with a note behind her for him. Juxtaposing to Clinton, his wife Helen represents the child of ecology who is much concerned with the tribal people and their lives. She is attracted towards the hills and forests.

Kamala Markandaya introduces the character of Bashiam, an outsider but adopted by the tribals-an act of natural adoption like plants and soil. He represents a bridge between the tribals and the civilized, the traditional and the modern. He is, in true sense, a child of ecology. As the dam construction begins, Bashiam gets employment as one of the crew, and learns the operations of the new equipments. Though he operates machines, his ecological knowledge does not allow him to adopt the Western, modern and technical knowledge. He believes in planning and modern technology but being the native of the ecological set up, nature which is unpredictable creates ecophobia in him also. For instance, the author enunciates:

It was this older knowledge that inhibited him, prevented him falling in line with the others. They made their plans, seduced by statistics: but he had seen what a cyclone could do, had cowered before the storms that swept down the hills to burst in the valleys, knew that mincemeat a rough monsoon could make in one night of the most careful design. (CD 18)

The autor makes the narrative inclined more towards nature by making nature an inseparable part of human existence. The Construction Company and tribal people are in the lap of nature, remote in the jungle of Malnad below a hill near river. Nature in this novel becomes an inseparable entity. Like Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native*, Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* also projects nature with all human attributes. Like Egden Heath in *Return of the Native* the nature in *The Coffer Dams* breathes, pleases and coerces people. As Egden Heath crawls in the night to every window, the river in this narrative breathes. For instance, Bashiam listens to the heartbeat of the river as if the river has a human heart. The author narrates Bashiam's ecophilia –"At night when machines and men were silent one heard the river. Like a heartbeat: insistent, unceasing, soft when you took no notice, loud when you listened". (CD 26) Bashiam has been listening to the rhythm of the river since his birth. This very rhythm is so soothing that it works as a lullaby for him. Being a part of the ecology, he can listen and assimilate easily with the nature in the jungles of Malnad. Here, Bashiam's existence in the nature is that of an insider who assimilates with every changing phase of the ecology.

Subsequently, the author portrays the character of Helen very minutely and vividly. Helen rejects relishing in her bungalow, enjoying all the luxuries. She is natural and vibrant like the nature, prefers to explore nature around her, alone. Almost every day she arranges for excursions in the forest and the upriver villages, settlements and the tribes. For her nature is fascinating. The natural settlements, half-naked people and the megre settlement attract her. Without any harm to the ecology, she makes her way to reach her destination and satisfy her curiosity to reach the people. In other words, these half-naked people and the settlements are part of ecology. Without any alteration, she accepts nature and keeps exploring the ecology

with its harmony. Markandaya observes, “But there was this path, which led over the brow of a hill to a shallow dip in the land beyond, an inhospitable rock-strewn basin within sound of the river, and because it was there she took it”. (CD 38) Helen follows a rough track without breaking a single branch of any tree. She approaches a huddle of weak huts that exhibited their temporality in ecology. She also meets brown, pot-bellied children, pigs and chickens. The men and women are also half-naked as the children. Helen greets them in order to understand them and their culture. This effort indicates Helen’s love for nature, with its vivacity and her acceptance of nature as it is. The author portrays Helen’s ecophilic observation minutely:

Brown, pot-bellied, they surged on her from all sides, their shining faces clearly expressing gratitude for any break in their ordinary day, even the timid thumb-sucking ones turning out in their anxiety to miss none of the fray. Helen liked children; she smiled at them amiably, leaning against the perilous bamboo palisade while she waited for her day to develop.

Very soon dogs, hens and children were cuffed aside by enquiring adults, men and women almost as naked as the children who started at her in vivid surprise, slaking their curiosity without a vestige of embarrassment until from somewhere a well-submerged sense of hospitality surfaced, and then with a good of chattering goodwill they ushered her in. (CD 39)

Kamala Markandaya presents Helen an incarnation of nature as Helen desires desperately to do something for the tribesmen. She was not able to do any such thing in England. The sophisticated culture and space in England had all the rigours that had confined her to fixities. After coming to India, especially at the dam site in the forests of Karnataka, she gets a chance to explore natural tribes in the company of nature. Her visits give her a greater sense of satisfaction as she meets natural people - an inseparable part of ecology. On the other hand, the tribals greet her with an amalgamated feeling of confusion and affection like nature. The author narrates, “Suddenly, here, there was colour and confusion, an outflowing warmth to which she responded, matching a flamboyance on offer with deep quiet pleasure which the tribesmen, after initial agony and heart-searching, correctly interpreted as the most extrovert display open to an English woman.” (CD 39)

Gradually, the author shows the increasing fascination of Helen towards nature and the tribes in the mountains of Karnataka. Frequently, she visits these tribes and mixes with them as if she is a member of their settlement. She forgets the differences of her elitism, high class upbringing and education. She is no more the memsahib or a representative of the colonisers. Of course, the writer is trying to showcase the postcolonial scenario wherein the rift between the colonisers and the colonised disappear. Helen visits the tribes with fragile huts and plays with the children, becoming one way nature. Kamala pens down the ecological setting of the tribes and Helen’s assimilation with the natural habitation:

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 fall and rounded—out living could go on, on so feeble and flimsy a footing. The fragile huts, that a man and a boy could put up in a day or determined wind demolish in less: the primitive patches of surface root crops of a community with one harvest in mind, rather

than the recurrent cycle of growth: the haphazard clearing, overshadowed by encroaching forest: on these impermanent, flyaway fountains, whole people built whole lives. (CD 39)

The author develops the character of Helen as a motherly figure like nature who attempts to assimilate with nature with all its nudities and rawness. Gradually, the author portrays Bashiam as a parallel to Helen who is the child of nature with whom Helen feels to connect. As she finds Bashiam alone, she begins to inquire about nature, environmental set up, climate and inhabitation before their arrival for the dam construction. She is keen in knowing the virgin forest with all its tranquillity. The following conversation between Helen and Bashiam throws light upon the ecological set up of the space before the intrusion of the British technocrats for the construction of the coffer dams. The author observes:

‘It must have been quite’, she amended, ‘before we came, before the blasting began:

‘It was’, he agreed. ‘Naturally’.

‘More tranquil’, she pursed, crushing the mocking minions her mind so liberally conjured up.

‘It was he said, ‘in patches’. (CD 43)

Kamala Markandaya develops a crystal clear picture of ecology in *The Coffer Dams*. The nature in India is so rich and healing that one forgets any sort of ill elements like anger, enmity, disgust, dislike and frustration. Clinton forgives Jackson and Smith not because he is wise and sympathetic but because the environment plays a charismatic role in transforming Clinton. The climate makes sinner a saint, Clinton says, “One can forgive a man anything in this climate”. (CD 51) This transformation in the nature of Clinton is possible as he is in the company of nature. The natives as they worships trees, plants, birds and beasts; as for them, the flowers, plants and leaves are deities. Here, nature establishes a concord with the tribals. Consequently, Markandaya highlights Helen as the best friend of ecology as Helen not only amalgamates with nature, but she dares to go in the dark along with the natives to catch birds also. In a way, Helen acclimatizes with nature and people as she establishes a bond with the tribes and the people in the tribes without any iota of her cultural supremacy. She goes with the jungly men in the late night to catch the birds. Bashiam helps her to watch the birds and differentiate them with their features. She never likes caging the birds. On the other hand, the settlement of labourers is full of varieties of birds. The author portrays Helen’s love for birds and the ecology:

Helen had seen the birds, flapping frantically in the onion - shaped split bamboo cages that they suspended from a pole near the cote where the fighting cocks roosted. Sunbirds, bulbuls, finches, hill mynahs, a kingfisher or two -- a dozen other kinds she could not name. The mynahs were very popular with the British; the men bought them and put them in cages near their bunks and lovingly taught them to swear in English. The bulbuls went to them too, for their sweet voices, they sang their sweetest just before caging killed them. The labour block was full of birdsong. (CD 82)

Gradually, Helen develops a very healthy concord with the tribes and the tribesmen by participating their life like a natural member of the tribe. With the help of Bashiam, she goes into the unknown forest in the darkness. The natives know the land very well but Helen who is a stranger follows them in the unknown dark spaces of the forest. This act highlights how Helen becomes one with nature. They walk for longer distances to catch the birds. She also knows how the animals are disturbed in the nights. In other words, the native dwellers - the animals are disturbed in the dark forest. Kamala records, "Here and there from all round them came the squeaks and rustlings of disturbed animals, but the night was vast, it swallowed them all sucked them into its absorbent vaults as if they had never been even their footsteps: she could not hear the man in front or the man behind, and even her own, clumsy from inexperience, were muffled". (CD 85)

Subsequently, Helen becomes a member of the group in the night to catch birds. The darkness smears identities and differences. All of them become some obscure shapes without physical features in the darkness of the night like the preying animals. In the early morning the singing of cuckoo makes her emotional as she tries to assimilate with the emotion the little bird wants to pass on to her. Along with the tribesmen, Helen lies in the ground motionless in the dust, just to catch the birds that resembles with a wild animal who is ready to pounce upon the prey. Kamala Markandaya projects Helen as her mouthpiece who assimilates with all the strangeness, mysteries and nudities of nature without any hesitation. She finds the warm weather soothing her mind and body. The author, through Helen, projects ecophilia, "The soft warm March weather Helen found delectable. It came as a surprise, after the long session of brilliant cut-glass days and freezing dawn and nights: another surprise that the country seemed to hoard and suddenly drop like a jewel into one's lap." (CD 100) The author narrates marital discord of the non-native couple, Clinton and Helen who are equal opposites. Clinton always considers himself a foreigner in India whereas Helen becomes one with the ecology of India as she goes into the jungle fearlessly during night. The following conversation highlights the contradiction view:

He said, querulously, 'You'll get lost. It's pitch dark.'

'I'm used to it', she said.

'Jungle', he said, thickly, 'not a park to play in.'

'I'm used to the jungle too', she said. 'I'm not afraid of it.'

'You're too damn familiar with it', he said, and felt something beginning to bolt, his strength, or control. 'What you don't understand is that what lies out there is verboten. Not our counting, not our people. Nothing to do with us.' (CD 129)

Helen is not a hypocrite like her other counterparts. Markandaya aims to educate her readers about the realities of life through Helen who assimilates with the Indian environment. Kamala Markandaya projects the character of Bashiam as a bridge between East and West—with his roots strongly and firmly fixed with the tribes and their culture, and his knowledge of technology. He finds himself suffocated in the two-roomed concrete house. He feels the ceiling coming down,

suffocating him in the quarters. He keeps his doors open to avoid suffocation. In a way, he keeps tied himself with nature. On the contrary, the tribals construct a hut for him with much adoration which Bashiam finds more comfortable. This shelter is situated in nature that soothes him. The writer narrates the soothing effect of Bashiam's hut:

His own hut stood aloof, on the outer perimeter, similar outwardly to the other huts. The difference was inside, in the furniture, which consisted of a table, a string bed, a folding Canvas chair, a hinged cane door: comforts unknown to the others which, now, were indispensable to him. From the doorpost hung a small hurricane lantern. He felt for it in the darkness, lifted the visor and lit it, looking round the interior by the light of the steady yellowish flame. It was familiar with a clay wash that kept down the dust. A plaited rush mat lay beside his bed. (CD 137)

For Bashiam the jungle is his companion, an inseparable mate. The ecology for Bashiam is harmonious that soothes him with motherly affection. The author enunciates the pleasure of nature for Bashiam.

He lay quietly in the darkness, waiting with patience and the jungle, which were intertwined, while the hours went by. At length he felt the strain beginning to ease, grain by grain like the yielding of sand to water, and listened for and heard the note of the river change, and knew that somewhere, perhaps only in his mind, the rains had started to fall. Then he slept. (CD 138)

Furthermore, the author projects the ecological grooming of Bashiam as he senses rain at a distant place. In the night, Bashiam senses rain on the upper area of the hills. His senses are strong like an animal that highlights his oneness with nature. On the contrary, Helen fails to sense the rain. Her modern Western entity has shunted her senses towards nature. The following discussion between Helen and Bashiam throws light upon their relationship with ecology which juxtaposes their environmental understanding:

'Smell', he said.

'What?'

'Rain.'

There was the smell of eucalyptus and leaf mould, the faint tang of pine that came in on the wilder gusts.

'I can't', she said.

'It's there. Try.'

'I have tried. It's no good.'

'It's far away. Two thousand feet up.'

'But you can and I can't, she said. 'I wish I could. But my senses have been blunted.'

(CD 143)

Kamala Markandaya, being a Diaspora subject, just after Indian Independence, knows the British sensibilities very well. She witnesses both the cultures as a member in both societies and their socio-cultural canons. England stands for modernisation, urbanisation and Colonialism. The British culture is advancing with rapid speed but at the same time this technologically advancing generation is distancing itself from ecology and nature with the same pace. They are cut off from culture, past, ecology and heritage. They have lost the concord with ecology and the colonial rule has made them arrogant towards nature. And as a result, they are destroying nature. Helen expresses her frank opinion about the loss of the connectivity between the British and the nature:

‘Our world,’ she said. ‘The one in which I live. Things are battened down in it. Under concrete and motor, all sorts of things. The land. Our instincts. The people who work in our factories, they’ve forgotten what fresh air is like. Our animals - we could learn from them, but we’re Christians you know, arrogant people, so we deprive them of their rights. Deny them. Pretend they haven’t got any. Then they don’t know about sunshine or rain either. Sometimes they can’t move, poor things. We don’t allow them to, in case they yield us one ounce less of their flesh. Where is our instinct for pity? Blunted. We’ve cut ourselves off from our heritage. We’ve forgotten what we knew. Where can we turn to, to learn? A million years accumulating and we know no better than to kick it in the teeth. Now I can’t even sense rain although it is there.’ (CD 144)

Markandaya illustrates the gradual development of the construction process of the coffer dams. On the parallel lines, the author shows the development of Helen in constructing a bond with ecology. Though she is a reverse Diaspora, a non-native, she develops a concord with nature. Her expression indicates her ecopsychology as she says, “But here—now—I don’t feel that any more. I belong, I’m not alone. Everything is a part of me, and I’m a part of everything—not just a pop-up cardboard figure.” (CD 144)

Consequently, Helen does not find comfort in her bungalow. The accident makes her restless; hence, she goes on the settlement of the tribes and becomes a co-mourner along with the tribals. Bashiam attempts to take out the bodies from the water by using a crane by lifting the huge granite boulder in the water. The British representatives of Clinton and Mackendrick company—Galbraith, Lefevre, Betty, Henderson, Rawlings and Scott who are non-natives like Clinton who do not acclimatize with nature. Rawlings says, “It’s the weather,’ he said, ‘that depresses us. Rising and falling, you never know where you are with it.’” (CD 175) This remark highlights the capriciousness of nature in Malnad Even after eighteen hours the dead bodies are not recovered. With the attempts of Bashiam and Clinton the boulder is removed and the dead bodies appear on the water. Subsequently, the dead bodies are cremated.

Similarly, Helen walks into the silent forest with her blood-caked shirt alone. Her blood-caked shirt symbolizes that the nature is wounded. The ecology is destroyed. For her, India and the jungles of Malnad are foreign but she is so struck with grief that she prefers to be natural without human sensibilities. “So she turned to

the jungle, opening her turmoil to the stillness in which it was wrapped, and entering part way saw the strange burning light, and the leaves of trees, worn to fretwork but cupped upwards, it seemed, in the certainty of, the rain which would come.” (CD 204) She reaches the hut of an old headman of the tribe. The old headman is injured and he is lying on his deathbed. Helen sleeps on a pallet in the hut. Within no time she sleeps sound. This signifies her anticipation with nature and the simplicity of tribal life. The forest has made her uncaring and numb towards the pompous human identities. She does not care for her status and her husband. Kamala pre-empts the ecophilic relations of Helen as she suffers in both ways:

Since feelings were reviving, and she could not stride as she had done, numb and uncaring through the forest. But walked with an enlarged awareness, of oils and essences that the season distributed, eucalyptus and arum and broom whose particles were suspended it seemed in the flying globules of moistures; and awareness of the endurance of structures, webs that clung, and trees whose supple stems could arch and bend without breaking, and inhabited anthills, the conical earth scored and fretted by rain into gothic edifices but persisting providing shelter for the creatures the scurried in before each fresh onslaught. (CD 213)

The writer showcases her environmental concerns and awareness through the changing phases of ecology during monsoon. The characters in the novel suffer through the environment—the ecological devastation and as a result, they experience grief, despair, depression and alienation. The author chronicles:

Running to escape the fears that had shaped into wings, in her thin slip and house shoes, whimpering, into areas of jungle she had never entered before. As presently she recognized, through the blown grey curtains of moisture and dripping coagulated green, and stopped to retrace but the trees had closed. Stood round her, she saw, thickly, in a sameness of bare trunks and soaked bark that rejected all monks of civilized identity. (CD 220)

Gradually, as the monsoon reaches its peak, the rain water from the hills of Malnad pours down. The coffer dams, which stood up as human pride blocking the course of rainwater in the river, begin to immerse in the river water. The ecology is always beyond the reaches of human capacities. Human achievements seem tiny in front of nature. The grandeur of nature, the writer narrates:

All this time the river level rose.

Three feet, five feet, eight. The crests of the coffers, which had ridden high and proud over the flow, no longer seemed so mighty. Nor did the river banks, whose walls had been built up into canyons. Reduced, they said, or dwindled, assigning reality to illusion as they watched the waters mount, reaching and engulfing mark after mark that was notched in the granite, the inches and centimetres and yards and metres by which they had measured their achievement. (CD 223)

Conclusion: Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffers Dams* deals with the nexus between human beings and nature. The entire narrative is about the jungles of Malnad, the nature of the Malnad jungle, the river, ecology, clouds, rain, water, trees, sun,

darkness, insects, stones, soil, animals and the people. The author draws ecology, nature and environment so vividly that the human existence and human interactions seem meagre. The characters struggle with nature as some of them succumb to the greater forces of ecology whereas some assimilate with nature very well.

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