

The Flow and the Dam: Indigenous Wisdom versus Technological Control in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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Mine and yours;
Mine, not yours.
Earth endures;
. . . But where are old men?
I who have seen much,
Such have I never seen.
. . . They called me theirs,
Who so controlled me;
Yet every one
Wished to stay, and is gone,
How am I theirs,
If they cannot hold me,
But I hold them?"(Emerson 26-27)

This is what the earth sings in the section 'Earth-Song' of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Hamatreia." This song clearly reveals that the earth remains while human beings who live on it repeating words like mine and thine go away from here leaving no trace. What the brook sings: "Men may come and men may go, / But I go on forever" (Tennyson 133) seems to hold the mirror of truth before human beings. These excerpts clearly demonstrate that human life is temporary while nature is eternal. The greed of man has made him too materialistic to realise this eternal truth. That is why the earth does not see those men who called her theirs, tried to control her and wished to stay forever. Men cannot hold the earth, but she holds them. Those who realise this truth reveal their love and respect to her. The tribals are the people who

show their devotion and regard to the earth and, thus, are equipped with indigenous wisdom that help them in living life peacefully and meaningfully. Such people embrace an ecocentric point of view. For these people the earth becomes all in all. They remain quite innocent and free from lust and greed while, on the other hand, there are some people who want to have control and dominate this earth. Such lusty and greedy people are anthropocentric as they take the earth to be a resource for the use of human beings. They use the modern technology to dominate nature for their materialistic gains.

The ecocentric people connect themselves to the roots of the land and show relationship with it. For them it is their sacred duty to conserve the integrity and beauty of this earth. Nature and Woman are interconnected. The earth is the mother, so is the woman. But anthropocentric people take possession of nature and thus of woman with the intention of oppression and exploitation for their benefits. Even in the *Atharvaveda* (12.1.12) it is said that “*mata bhumih putro’ham prthivyah*” meaning “Earth is my mother and I am her child” (qtd. *In Light of Indian Intellect* 184).

Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, talks of liberation of the earth and also of women. While talking to Amy Goodman in an interview, she says: “The liberation of this earth, the liberation of women, the liberation of all humanity is the next step of freedom we need to work for, and it’s the next step of peace that we need to create” (Goodman 8). Rivers are the veins of the earth. They have become the lifelines for the people. Humanity depends on these rivers. The tribesmen are very well aware of this fact. But the anthropocentric people think only of materialistic gains and, so, want to change the course of this earth by making dams over the rivers. They are quite egoistic people who do not accept their defeat before nature. They wish to possess nature and all other things related to it. Dams which are constructed with the plea that they are beneficial for human beings actually become source of trouble and displacement for the tribals. While referring to the dream of Pt. Nehru for whom dams are ‘the temples of modern India’, Sangita Patil shares their adverse effect on the tribals and environment thus:

Pt Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India said that dams are ‘the temples of Modern India’ there by referring to their many benefits such as to store rain water, to irrigate farmland, generate electricity, supply drinking water and save land from floods and draught. But this is one side of the coin; the other side has necrophiliac impact on environment and human beings. The basic and major problem is displacement or rehabilitation of tribal people, who lose their lands, homes, jobs and property. The indigenous people or tribal people are not only deprived of their culture and kinship activities that affect their whole socioeconomic and ecology-based texture, but also lose their intimate relationship with nature. Further, there is also the loss of inherited knowledge and experiences of the local people about the plants and animals of that area, which is their source of livelihood thus leading to further confrontation and multifarious agglomeration of ecological crisis and shifting of valuable biological and cultural diversity (44).

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) is one of the most significant Indian English woman novelists of the post-Independence era by virtue of her narration of the clashes of the east and the west, traditions and modernity, village and town life etc. She is “a novelist of sensitive and ethical concerns” (Arora 11). She has demonstrated the socio-ecological issue in her novel *The Coffer Dams* which is considered to be “a turning point in Markandaya’s maturing as a novelist” (Parmeswaran 164). *The Coffer Dams* is so relevant that even Kamala Markandaya’s daughter, Kim Oliver reflects over it saying that “I’m very much looking forward to the re-publication of *The Coffer Dams* by my mother, Kamala Markandaya. This novel which has an ecological and holistic theme, written more than fifty years ago, seems so topical today” (Oliver).

Kamala Markandaya’s novel *The Coffer Dams* is mainly related to the project of construction of a dam on a river at Malnad, which is a hilly village of the South India. This project is given to Clinton and Mackendrick Co. Clinton’s mission is to complete the project and for this he never allows anyone to take rest. He confronts both the wrath of nature and the resistance of Indian works and technicians over the issue of workers’ dead bodies. He does not make any connection to the

tribals who are merely workers for him. He does not hesitate to displace them from their roots. His wife Helen is compassionate and so she makes connections with the tribals and for this she takes the help of Bashiam who becomes her linkman. In the clash of machines and indigenous wisdom, machines win resulting in the completion of the coffer dams. The tribal chief and Bashiam represent the tribal people while Clinton represents the industrialization. The novel comes to an end leaving many questions related to the preservation of the environment and the sustainable development. It raises various ecological issues which come out of the clashes between the technology and the forces of nature. While tracing out the ecological related issues, Parmeswaran writes: “*The Coffer Dams* is about several different issues, but one of them is the uprooting of a tribe from the ancestral space in order to build a dam. While it epitomizes the magnificence of Jawahar Lal Nehru’s vision with its emphasis on technology building temples of modern India, it is also about a moral question of tribal rights versus urban “needs” (52).

The novel *The Coffer Dams* begins with these words: “It was a man’s town. The contractors had built it, 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” (CD 1). The very first two sentences demonstrate the technological control in the name of progress and development in the tribal area of the village Malnad. The building of a dam on the river results in “the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle” (CD 2). “Man’s town” has been created out of the jungle and the use of the word ‘town’ shows the dominance of town over village or tribal area. The decision of constructing a dam is responsible for the displacement and exploitation of the tribals who are asked to leave the place as it is quite suitable for the members of the construction team. This is the man’s town where women will not live and where nature will have no place. This is the place for men who are single or who, though they are not single, become single because they cannot go to their village and women as the distance from the place where they are working is more than a day’s distance. If

they go, they will not be able to concentrate on their work. So, man's town is constructed first and this is the first step which is taken to keep the tribals away from their village and women. For Clinton, they are merely workers or human resources who will work for wages. He has no concern for their feelings and sentiments as they are simply human machines for him for the use of building the dam. This is not ethically right. To keep away the tribals or the men from the village is to displace them from their women, land and nature, with whom they are emotionally attached. Clinton is unemotional and unconcerned as he neither knows nor wishes to know where his workers go after work. What he needs is work from them. "A man's town" defeats the tribals and uproots them from their roots. This town has the "Clinton's Lines" where there is a coffee club, a soft drinks stall, a tin shack for showing the films. Creation of such town as it is "gouged and blasted out of the hill side" (CD 2) is a direct attack on the rural life of the natives.

Industrialization and scientific advancement done in the name of progress becomes a source of trouble for the tribals. Kamala Markandaya has graphically shown the displacement and troubles faced by the tribals as a result of building the dam on the river. Helen who is the wife of Clinton is sentimental and, so, she does not hesitate to talk to the tribesmen as she has no blocks of communication like her husband Clinton. When she finds several pieces of cooking pots and earthenware in her compound, she talks to Clinton who responds to her saying that they belong to the tribals who broke them while going away from this place. Mark the excerpt for the conversation that takes place between Helen and Clinton:

'I expect they broke them up and buried the lot,' said Clinton, 'rather than cart them away. The locals, I mean . . . some of 'em were camped here before we moved in, I'd quite forgotten that little episode.'

'What happened to them?'

'They moved.'

'Where to?'

‘No idea. Just got up and went, like animals. No moving problems there—I wish to God we travelled as light, we could have done this job in half the time.’

Helen said: ‘But they live here, didn’t they? They didn’t ask to move.’

‘No. We persuaded them.’

‘Why?’

‘Why?’ Clinton repeated irritable. ‘Because they occupied a site we needed.’

‘Were there no other sites?’

‘Not suitable ones. It had to be away from labour quarters and near the river and away from the blasting—a hundred things. Then we found this spot—absolutely ideal from our point of view, except for those huts.’ (CD 23)

This conversation clearly reveals how the tribals are de-tribalised at Clinton’s order for constructing the bungalows for the British technocrats. The tribals when they moved from their roots left a few cooking pots and earthen vessels which they could not take with them. The tribals are displaced from their place and this displacement is a little episode for him. Even more than this, he compares them with animals saying: “just got up and went, like animals.” This was their place, but they were persuaded to leave the place only on the plea that the site was suitable for Clinton and the company. They do not make any protest and move away from there leaving the earthenware and cooking pots. Helen thinks about them and feels: “A whole community that had been persuaded to move” (CD 24). It was not the displacement of one or two tribal families, but of a whole community.

The technological advancement affects the indigenous people by alluring them towards the materialistic pleasures. Bashiam, who is known as “Jungly wallah” is a “a man of the jungle. A primitive just come down off the trees” (CD 19). He is so different that besides English men, the Indians also keep away from him and consider him to be “a stranger in their midst calling him jungly wallah” (CD 19). He is a man who is well

equipped with tribal wisdom as he has the knowledge of the forest, river and season. This knowledge makes him different from other people. The scientific advancement and the industrialization take him into the grip to the extent that he learns “about electricity and machines, about building and repairing and dismantling” (CD 18). There is one character who takes his help in learning the tribal wisdom from him. This character is Helen, the wife of Clinton. Bashiam becomes her “linkman” and makes her feel everything related to nature and her objects. But, he becomes a paradox for her. She finds that he does not belong to tribal huts and has “no sense of belonging” (CD 44). The allurements of machines has uprooted him to the extent that he thinks it wise to follow the machines. “Prudent men make way for machines” (CD 46). From “insider”, he becomes “an outsider—de-tribalized” (CD 81). But he realizes the significance of tribal wisdom which he has learnt from his tribal people while living with them. His birth in the tribal family makes him aware of “race knowledge and instincts” which “could never be acquired by the real outsiders, those who had never been inside” (CD 81). The outsiders come to seek his tribal knowledge and Helen is so much impressed by him that she goes with him for bird trapping and finally makes a physical union with him demonstrating the union of the east and the west symbolically. He becomes a “mixture of tribal and technician” (CD 135). He loves machine, but never becomes a machine. He is still kind and sympathetic indigenous person who does not hesitate to risk his life for the sake of his men. He operates the crane in order to recover the dead bodies. But the jib of the crane *Devi* breaks and Bashiam becomes crippled in this accident.

The character who always lives in the lap of nature is the tribal chief whose name is not mentioned in the novel. He is simply known as the tribal chief—the man who lives in association with nature and her world. He belongs to the old tradition of protection of nature and environment. He feels much pain to see the people moving towards the path of materialism leaving the lap of nature. His heart weeps when he sees the tribals moaning for money. These tribals have become “money-mad” like the foreigners. When Helen talks to him saying that money is

“a useful commodity” (CD 71), he shares with her that with the money his people buy the rubbish which include “tin cans and cardboard boots, and scented pigs’ grease to plaster their hair” (CD 72). There is a shortage of food and for this, they are themselves responsible. The tribal chief shares with Helen thus:

. . . they are short of food too, whose fault is it, the jungle is full of game, if they relied on that and not on the money which comes and goes—but what is the use of an old man talking. Keep away, I told them. . . . I am their headman, I have to say these things, someone has to say them; but no. Now they are punished and are hurt, like small children. Like fools. Whose fault, I ask— (CD 72)

The heartbreaking thing is that he believes in the jungle with full faith while his tribesmen rely on materialistic things. Hence, they suffer and get punishment from nature. The tribal chief seems to Helen “a silent figure in gnarled wood” (CD 72). At the order of Clinton, men are trying to alter the course of the river, but the dam will become “the maneater” (CD 72) which will eat them. This happens when the construction of the dam takes the lives of the forty-two people. The tribal chief is the man who remains “undiluted by progressive or atavistic proddings” (CD 72). What he forecasts comes to true in future. He is a man who can read the season. He senses what he cannot see. He foresees “the rain and the rise of the river” (CD 150). He wants to use his authority so that he may call his tribesmen back. This shows his caring nature towards his people. In the end, he tells Helen that everything will be good when “the ridges rise clear” (CD 234) and with these words he dies. His last words prove to be true as the rain stops and the ridges become clear of rain. The tragedy is that he is full of indigenous wisdom, but no one, even his own people do not take its benefit. The tribesmen are attracted to the materialistic pleasures and, thus, become under the western technological control.

Clinton wants to have control over the river and for this he uses the technological power. Taming the river is taming nature. He has to control it by constructing a dam over it. This river is said to be “the real bastard”

(*CD 30*) and “a devil (*CD 30*). Rafid Sami Majeed and Eiman Abbas El-Nour write in this connection.

The Indian virgin nature is attacked by savage British men. The British use their brutal devices to cut deep in the Indian land adding more pollution to the pollution they caused when they militarily occupied India. It seems that the Indian nature is to suffer the British military and civil occupations. (63)

Machines are taken to be sign of progress in the age of industrialization. These machines are responsible for creating noise pollution and bringing all round destruction. Machines start working in order to silence the voice of nature. The explosions are being done with the help of dynamite. “At dawn, at noon, by night, machines thundered and pounded; land and air vibrated spasmodically to the dull crump of explosions, the shock waves travelling to the barracks, the bungalows, the leisure blocks and the tribal settlements” (*CD 105*). The explosions produce the shock waves which disturb the peace of the people. These explosions with dynamite create the dust clouds. The air in the valley seems to be polluted because of “the daily pounding, blasting and drilling” (*CD 56*). The river is taken to be an animal which has to be placed in a cage. For this, two thousand men and ten thousand ton of equipments are placed at the site in order to tame the river. He wants to alter the course of the river. He blocks its flow at the upstream coffer dam and finally succeeds in building the coffer dams though he has to face the rage of nature and also the death of the forty-two men. “As the dam advanced the river began to rise” (*CD 112*). The novel ends with the victory of Clinton, but he is not happy even after he succeeds in his attempt. The end makes the reader think of environment and its related problems caused by men like Clinton for whom dead bodies are not dead bodies but simply “bones . . . calcium, the chalk that went to the making of the cliffs and the framework of men” (*CD 186*).

The tribals love nature and say nothing even if they suffer much from her vagaries. They are connected to nature through lakes, rivers, trees, animals, birds, grass, sky, clouds and rains etc. They are in the habit of pacifying nature with “sacrifice and ceremony.” They accept nature’s

laws in their lives. They do not blame God for drought or flood. These natives or the tribals remain united because of their staunch belief in nature. They remain as they are under any circumstances accepting their fate without making any complaint. “At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed him. It was their fate” (*CD 3*). Niroj Banerjee is right when he states:

The history of human civilization tells us that nature—the jungle, the river, the country side—is an integral part of the village life which is in the novel threatened by the painstaking plans and charts of the British engineers and technocrats. The dam, thus, becomes a symbol of modernity itself encroaching slowly yet steadily over the tradition bound and, unenlightened village in the lap of nature. (80)

Helen is quite right in exposing the real face of materialism, under which the western world—so called industrial and scientific world lives. This is the world which provides all the facilities meant for the comforts of body, but fails to soothe soul. Helen who never knew what nature meant comes to feel and understand in touch with the tribal people. Bashiam makes her smell rain and hear the moving grass. Under the impact of materialism, her senses got blunted. She shares it with Bashiam thus:

Our world, she said. The one in which I live. Things are battened down in it. Under concrete and mortal, 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, an 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*)

The world of concrete does not give her satisfaction, rather it has deadened all human relations wiping out all kinds of feelings. Now the touch and guiding spirit of Bashiam has reawakened the sense of belongingness. She takes a dip in the river of wisdom and breaks the dam of mechanical life. She has learnt what really nature means. Vinod Manoharrao Kukade writes: “Helen loves, respects, protects the nature and tries to consolidate her relationship with the animals, birds, flora and fauna and even she toils for making the people aware the indispensability of the affectionate relationship of the man with nature” (5824).

Kamala Markandaya has realistically and seriously raised the ecological issues, which can be better solved with the help of indigenous wisdom. She has brought the value of indigenous wisdom possessed by the tribals but the tragedy is that no one take this wisdom into consideration and embrace environmental degradation for material gain. The tribals know that they will go away from this world but this earth will remain. Hence, they love and consider nature a deity worthy to be worshipped. Man wishes to control nature and succeeds to some extent resulting in loss for future generation. He forgets that he has to live here on this earth. If he pollutes it, how will he remain here? The novel offers a serious message—the message of taking the tribals and their wisdom into consideration. Helen understands it and so assimilates the tribal wisdom with the help of Bashiam and the tribal chief. She does not make dams over feelings and allow them to flow with the river. Kamala Markandaya’s daughter Kim Oliver feels happy when she considers the novel *The Coffer Dams* which still inspires writers and people for raising voices against the degradation of the environment. This discussion can be better concluded with Kim Oliver’s remark.

My mother said that she had to be angry about something before she could write about it. I’m proud that she wrote about injustice towards the colonised; the poor; the disadvantaged and weak; the homeless, the old, the sick; minorities with dark skin; indigenous people dispossessed of their lands; women, children, and animals. Today, aided by social media, many people are rising up against

various faces of oppression. Fifty years ago, Kamala Markandaya was giving a voice to the oppressed in her writing; today her anger still rings true. (Oliver)

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