

# Racism and Environmental Concerns in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

Anuradha<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Awdhesh Kumar<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Guide

Department of English, Meerut College Meerut 250001

## Abstract

The Indo-novelist Kamala Markandaya writes novels that deal with social issues relevant today. Most of her novels have a theme of east-west conflicts. *The Coffer Dams* is a brilliant example of cultural clash and colonialism, showing the tension between tradition and modernity and the impact of colonial rule on local community. The novel draws a comparison between traditional Indian life style and modernity by colonial influence. In the novel technological innovation by the British, symbolizes the clash between new, foreign system and established local practices. Modernity in an Indian village inhabited by tribal people, with its cultural values, and the subsequent changes brought about by modern Western industrial culture. In this novel there is a conflict between Indian and English engineers. Here the dispute between thoughts and behaviours of the people takes grounds from two opposite poles namely eastern and western. The industrial setup disturbed the ecological harmony of the hill place. This paper is an attempt to study the socio-economic inequality that is prevalent among eastern and western, and highlight the environmental issues like urbanisation, deforestation and impact of technology on environment.

**Keywords: Racism, Environment, Cultural Clash, Ecology, Deforestation, Technology.**

Kamala Markandaya's novels are deeply concerned with social issues of her time. Her novels often depict the harsh realities of rural India. Her novels highlight the deep-rooted inequalities of Indian society. Her novels expose the exploitation of poor people. Kamala Markandaya is one of those novelists who portray the conflicts and tension between two opposite ways of life. Her novels are not just the social critiques; however they are also deeply compassionate and human stories. She portrays her characters with empathy and understanding, and shows how they struggle to survive and maintain their dignity in the face of adversity. Social concerns that rise in her novels are still relevant today. She writes about the issues such as poverty, hunger, exploitation, inequality, and discrimination in a realistic way and bounds the readers to think about the human cost of social injustice. She believed that literature could be a powerful tool for social change. She hoped that her novels would inspire readers to work towards a more just and equitable society. Her novels are also deeply personal and introspective. She explores complex themes such as love, loss, identity, and belonging. Her novels offer insight into the human condition that is both universal and timeless.

The novel *The Coffer Dams* is a brilliant example of racism. In this novel, we see that the characters are caught between two different systems of values, beliefs, and attitudes. The novel is set in southern India, where a group of Western engineers comes to build coffer dams. The dam is constructed under the supervision of the chief engineer, Henry Clinton, and Mackendrick. According to the agreement, the Western engineers, along with several Indian engineers and staff, will complete the project with harmony

and cooperation. But the novel highlights the hate of British and even the Indian engineers towards the hill tribesmen of India. The tribesmen are humiliated and exploited by the British employers. The chief engineer Clinton, who is the western pragmatist having no humanist concern in professional task. His work mania makes him so inhuman that neither the huts crumbling in the ravines, nor the death of the forty people in explosions affects him. His colonial sense of superiority does not allow him to build good relations with the dark skin tribes. Here is a glimpse of his character:

“He had hated the war, who hadn’t; but it was especially hateful to him because he was a builder, a man who drew his satisfactions from building what would last, who had brought a grim distance to task of destruction set before him like a dish of hemlock. It had not destroyed him, this war he had come out alive; but it had savaged him in ways of which he was hardly aware. When it was over he repatriated himself as soon as he could, turning his back with relief on inept colonies and the succession of shabby little outposts of empire he had been called upon to serve, where he had encountered a chaotic medievalism that offended what was most vulnerable in him, his of order and efficiency: where he had learnt to raise his voice at the natives, and sampled the piquant flavours of disdain”(The Story of War123)

The novelist shows a sharp contradiction of human values and technological progress. The European, the new colonist, has a very different attitude to India. From within the invisible stockade thus thrown up, the new colonist peered at vast sprawling enigma that they felt India to be. Some like Helen Cliton, with a great,

“Consuming curiosity and effortless identification; some uneasily, reluctant to advance into territory whose strange codes and values made them an unsure of themselves as pigeons roosting on anti- pigeon jelly; but most of them with rising tides of superiority lined and laced and made heady by fear, a nameless unvoiced fear, that to step outside was a hazard whose culmination would be a total, terrifying absorption of identity in an unknown ocean” (Rhys32).

As the novel starts we see that the numbers of treble people has been displaced from their ground for the sake to build the bungalow for the western engineers on the place. And the village turned into a town. We see Henry Clinton’s hats towards the tribe people when her wife Helen asked about them. Here we see that Cliton has no concern for the tribal whose lives are dislocated and disrupted because of dam. The Indian and British engineers both are working for the construction of the dam, but there they are opposite to each other on using the technologies. When the chief leader of Indian engineer put his concern and view on the natural hazards in dam construction, then Rawaling grumbled about Krishnan. You’d think he’d know,’ he complained sourly,

“He must know we’ve gone into it one hundred times before. But no, he’s got think they all have’ that he known his country better than anyone else—as they dam well ought, but they don’t. So brings us this thing and that thing and expects us to build round them—what the hell does he think we’re building a cowshed?” (Krishnan 15)

Cliton represent the post-colonial England and its advancement in science and technology, his treatment of the Indian are closely resembled the former ruler. During the construction work, two fatal accidents take place. In the first accident, Baily and Wilkins die and work is suspended to give them a decent Christian burial. In the second accident due to the premature blast of the dynamite forty men – most of the tribe people were killed. When the Mackendrick and the others discuss the possibilities of the recovery of the corpses Cliton ruthlessly suggests that, rather than delay the work, the body could incorporate into the structure. This suggestion provoked the workers to demand that the bodies should be recovered. Krishna, the leader of Indian engineers threatened to strike work to solve the problem, Bashiam

decide to operate the crane but the crane was damaged of a mechanical problem. He tried again when the level smashed under the huge rock and he injured and a nun comes to treat him. Helen also spends some time with him and shows her compassion. But he could not survive and died. The work starts again and finished. The rains start failing heavily and river floods threatening to destroy the dam. The English characters in the novel are known for their superiority over Indians.

The use of technology in the affairs of nature has destroyed the concord of nature because in the ecosphere everything is in a balanced manner and related to each other through food chain. William Rueckert says, “Interconnectedness is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process with another” and “the mutual interconnected development of all earth’s life system” (Rueckert112). In the novel Markandaya reveals the hazardous consequence?

In the novel Kamala Markandaya depicts the misery of poor south Indian tribe and how they are deprived from their home by the British engineers who come to India to build a dam. Clinton gave importance of technology advancement rather than Nature, Environment and Indians. On the other Clinton’s wife Helen is sympathetic for the tribal and labourers whose life gets dangerously affected by the construction of the dam. The construction work of the dam forced the people to leave their homes for the sake to give the space for the houses, cabins and bungalows and a tribe people inhabited place turns into an industrial town.

“It was a man’s town. The contractors had built it, within the hailing distance of the work site. There was a coffee club and a soft drink stall and a tin shack where they showed the films that the Madras Picture corporation sent by truck” (*The Coffer Dams* 01).

The construction of the dam disturbs the peaceful life of the residents of the area on two sides of the river. In the one side the construction of the dam has destroyed the calm beauty of nature, on the other hand, due to the construction of the dam displaces the tribal people. The river, on which the construction work is going, is like a goddess for the tribal people, which they worship according to their tradition and culture. The chief engineer Cliton does not have any concern for the tribal people. He does not pay any attention to the Indian weather. He is completely a foreigner to the Indian environment. Here the novelist shows the enormous clash between the Western and Eastern. The transformation of a virgin forest into a town is an important environmental concern. The introduction of technology is into the forest has adulated the virginity of the forest.

The blind construction of the industries in the hilly side not only degrades the environment but also causes many other problems like, flooding in the rainy season, landslides, deforestation of the tribe peoples, etc. In the novel Kamala Markandaya has emerges the deforestation environmental issue. For building the engineers bungalows, workers quarters, the water tower, ice filtration plant, pumping and power stations a large portion of the forest has been cut down. Mackendrick has selected the site across the river from Clinton’s line to build the road, footbridge and bungalows. The bungalows construction has done by using the woods. And for this purpose trees are looped and trimmed to given the natural look of the bungalows. Here Markandaya has highlight that in the fictional southern Malad, an English firm has cut forest for its commercial profit. The construction of the dam to tamed the river has consumes the huge portion of the forest.

Dams are hazardous endeavour for ecology. Due to dam construction a vast area of land had drown into the water. Apart from this the natural flow of the river is also affected. As consequences the ecosystem

of the river has badly affected, and the animals of the river side are bound to leave their habitant places in search of water. The developed are destroying the big dams due to their harmful effect on ecology. In a famous article by Arundhati Ray, she has raised her voice against the big dams and their effect on the onenvironment and the habitant people, who lives in the path of dam construction area. According to Arundhati Roy, “greatest planned environment disaster”. Arundhati Roy has observed aptly and exposing the reality of big dams and comment,

“The fact that they do harm than good is no longer just conjecture. Big dams are obsolete. They are uncool. They are undemocratic. They are indefensible ecologically. They caused floods, water logging, salinity, they spread disease” (Roy 06)

In the novel *The Coffer Dams*, the construction of the dams has smashed the harmony between the tribe people and the river and create the dangers of landslide, water logging, Deforestation, etc. Dam construction has snatched the medium of livelihood from the villagers, as they catch the fishes from the river. Lefevre, who run the soil mechanics laboratory in Cliton’s project is very well aware the bad effect of the big dams” (*The Coffer Dams* 01). He says to Gopal about dam “they have created their own dangers”.

In the novel Markandaya has raised the social concern which is relevant in the present time too. *The Coffer Dams* provides a poignant commentary on the effects of colonialism and clash between tradition and modern values. Sheexplores the complexities of cultural interaction and the disruptive consequence of colonial intervention. The effect of human activity on the natural way of ecosphere disturbed the nature and shows its anger in the various forms. The path of technology in the forest area leads to the path of destruction. Kamala Markandaya refuses and refute the mechanisation at the cost of human health and welfare. The excessive use of technology is far reaching negative environmental effect. Abbey comments, “we are caught in the iron treads of a technological juggernaut” (Abbey 64). Kamala Markandaya convey the message that there should be a harmony between the western and eastern values as well as, we should have a sense of gratitude and respect towards nature.

Markandaya’s *The Coffer Dams* presents a profound exploration of the intersection between racism and environmental concerns within the context of post-colonial India. The novel, set against the backdrop of a dam construction project, illuminates the socio-environmental impacts of modernization and the inherent racial and cultural tensions that accompany it. She effectively uses the construction of the dam as a symbol of the larger forces of colonialism and industrialization, highlighting how these forces exacerbate environmental degradation and disrupt indigenous ways of life. The novel portrays the destructive impact of the dam not only on the natural landscape but also on the local communities that are marginalized and exploited in the process. Racism is embedded in the power dynamics depicted in the novel, reflecting the broader colonial attitudes and the often overlooked environmental injustices that accompany such projects. The clash between the traditional, harmonious relationship of the local people with their environment and the imposed, exploitative practices of the colonial powers underscores the novel’s critique of both environmental destruction and racial discrimination.

In conclusion, *The Coffer Dams* serves as a compelling critique of how colonialism and technological advancement often disregard the environmental and cultural well-being of marginalized communities. Markandaya’s narrative urges readers to reflect on the intersections of race, power, and environmental stewardship, advocating for a more equitable and respectful approach to development that considers both human and ecological welfare.

## Works-Cited

1. Markandaya, Kamala. *The Coffer Dams*. Penguin Publisher of India, New Delhi, 2008.
2. Abbey, Edward. *The MonkeyWrench Gang*. Harper Perennial, 2000.
3. Smith, John. *The Story of War*. Example Publisher, 2020.
4. Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1966.
5. Rueckert, William. *Ecocriticism: New Perspectives on Literature and the Environment*. University of Virginia Press, 2005.
6. Branch, Michael P., and Scott Slovic, editors. *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*. University of Georgia Press, 2003.
7. Howarth, William. Eco-criticism. "Ecocriticism in Context." *Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, edited by Laurence Coupe, Rout ledge, 2000.
8. Love, Glen A. *Practical Criticism: Literature Biology and the Environment*. Virginia UP, 2003.
9. Murali, S. "Environmental Aesthetics: Interpretation of Nature in Akam and Puran Poetry." *Indian Literature*, vol. 185, edited by S. Shiva Prakash, SahityaAkademi, May-June 1999.
10. Roy, Arundhati. "The Greater Common Good". India Book Distributer, 1999.
11. Rao, A.V. Krishna. "Continuity and Change in the novels of Kamala Markandaya." *Perspectives on Kamala Markandaya*, International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities, Issue, Jul 2016.