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**Exploring Eco-Feminism through the Works of Kamala
Markandaya: An In-Depth Examination of *Coffer Dams***

Sunil H. Der

Research Scholar,

Dept. of English & CLS, Saurashtra University, Rajkot

der.sunil@gmail.com



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Abstract:

This research paper examines how eco-feminism and literature intersect by critically analyzing the works of Kamala Markandaya, with an emphasis on how *Coffer Dams* are portrayed. For an extended period, Markandaya's literary works have been praised for their intricate examination of environmental concerns, gender roles, and the relationship between the two. The purpose of this study is to analyze the meaning and significance of *Coffer Dams* in her literary works in order to decipher the eco-feminist principles that underlie her stories. By utilizing eco-feminist theory, the research shows how *Coffer Dams* are more than just physical constructions; they are potent symbols that represent how women and the natural world are subjugated in a patriarchal society. We examine the various ways in which *Coffer Dams* resemble the confinement of both the natural world and female characters through Markandaya's evocative narrative. This study examines the important topics and passages in her writings in order to show how closely ecological exploitation and women's oppression are related. In the end, this reveals how urgently eco-feminist discourse is needed in today's environmental talks. This research adds to a better understanding of the eco-feminist perspective in literature and its ability to spark important discussions about environmental ethics and gender justice by combining textual analysis, feminist literary theory, and eco-criticism. We reveal the complex tapestry of eco-feminist philosophy that underpins Markandaya's writings and invites more investigation at the nexus of ecology, feminism, and literature by looking at the metaphorical meaning of *Coffer Dams* in her stories.

Keywords: Feminism, eco-feminism, patriarchy, male chauvinism

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political movement that recognizes the oppressions that both the environment and women endure at the same time. It claims that patriarchal systems still objectify, marginalize, and take advantage of women and the environment. In her work, Markandaya advocates for the liberation of women and the environment while providing a critical analysis of these interconnected forms of oppression. A story is presented in *The Coffer Dams* that interweaves the lives of many female characters with the setting in which they are situated. In Markandaya, the deep relationships between women and nature are investigated, and how patriarchal systems are shown to exploit and destroy both women and the environment are shown. The story draws analogies between the subjection of women and the exploitation of the land, highlighting the intertwined nature of both types of oppression by



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underlining the connections between the two. Markandaya's presentation of the eco-feminist stance in *The Coffey Dams* extensively uses symbolism and imagery, each of which plays an important part. The author emphasizes the inextricable connection between women and nature by providing vivid depictions of elements of the natural world, such as rivers, woods, and animals. These literary elements emphasize the necessity of nurturing and caretaking and the connectivity of the feminine experience and the surrounding environment.

This paper aims to shed light on Markandaya's socio-environmental commentary and the importance of her work within the framework of eco-feminist literary criticism by critically investigating the eco-feministic viewpoint in *The Coffey Dams*. In doing so, this paper will critically examine the eco-feministic perspective in *The Coffey Dams*. The reader will come away from this examination and better understand how literature may subvert established power systems and fight for social and environmental justice. *The Coffey Dams* by Kamala Markandaya is an important piece of art investigating the complicated connection between women and nature, highlighting how important it is to nurture and care for the surrounding environment. Markandaya's work serves as a potent reminder of the significance of striking a balance between existing power structures and the need for a more egalitarian society. This is accomplished by the artist's representation of women as genuine environmentalists.

Exploring the connection between women and their environmental surroundings is at the core of the ecofeminism theoretical paradigm. Francoise d'Eaubonne, a well-known novelist from France, coined the phrase "ecofeminism" in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974), which also served as the concept's introduction. On the other hand, the term "ecofeminism" as a whole refers to the fusion of ecocritical and feminist concepts.

The first thing to note is that women tend to the family, like nature tends to all living and non-living things. Second, men's egotistical, economically motivated minds destroy nature because men dominate women. Because of their close ties, a woman is compared to nature in these two ways. The male-dominated culture has historically robbed women of a variety of rights. Ecofeminists believe that the environment and women's dignity should be treated equally. Ecofeminists strive to accomplish gender equality and change women's roles in society. Environmentalists who believe that women and nature are comparable to one another in terms of biology and power are known as ecofeminists. They believe that the macho culture controls the environment and women.



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)

Helen, the main character in *The Coffer Dams* (1969), is a stereotypical example of a woman who fits in with many elements of the natural surroundings. Her intense affection for the natural world is brought home as she imagines the impending peril brought on by the colonists' insensitivity, exploitation, and dominance, notably those British officials of the Construction Company. Clinton, Mr. Rawlings, and Mrs. Rawlings built dams on rivers with many other people in mountainous locations. To do this, they employed some tools, including contemporary technology. This was the first step in the ecosystem's destruction process. Heavy machinery is employed in removing hills, excavating rivers, constructing obstacles in the route of flowing water, and rerouting the flow of water inside a river to achieve the desired results.

Since the building was being done in the rural regions when the dangerous explosion occurred, the natural ecosystem of those places was destroyed. Using bulldozers, pumps, tires, barges, dumping trucks, and bigger cranes was necessary, which polluted the environment and undermined communal harmony. The dams' timely completion was Clinton's top concern as Chief Engineer for the Construction Company. Helen made some points against Clinton's callous actions about the timing of the dam construction, which she believed would be detrimental to both human life and the environment. Clinton, however, does not consider Helen's viewpoints to be valid. He disregards her counsel because he thinks it is pointless.

Kamala Markandaya addresses the distinctions between men and women in her article. Even though he believes she may have some insight, Clinton finds Helen a fool. In order to change her husband's perspective and make him understand the importance of a healthy environment and the lives of tribal people, Helen is motivated by her love for the environment and the disadvantaged tribal people. She feels a duty to these people.

Helen's love of people, animals, birds, hills, woodlands, and rural culture is supported by facts. Helen loves all living things and inanimate objects in the same manner as Mother Earth does, as demonstrated by Kamala Markandaya. Helen finds that being around animals and birds is extremely calming. Kamala Markandaya



writes in *The Coffe Dams*,

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. (Markandaya, CD 82)

In addition to sunbirds, bulbuls, finches, hill mynahs, and one or two kingfishers, she could not name a dozen other species. Although Helen hails from an affluent family and her culture differs from that of the tribal people, she respects and loves the tribal people and their culture despite Kamala Markandaya's assertion that nature does not differentiate between humans and non-human species. She explains to the Indian tribal community in Bashiam that it is not like that:

Watch me. I was never a memsahib. I do not find you odd or out of the norm. I assumed you knew that even if we are similar, our caste labels us as anomalies even though we are not freaks to one another. Am I wrong here? If I were, I would go (Markandaya, CD 141).

Helen has found solace and delight in her interactions with the tribespeople. She is well-regarded by the other tribe members, who see her as an integral part of their community. When she begins conversing with them, the other tribe members huddle close to her. The close relationship that Helen and the rural tribe members have with Helen and the rest of nature is demonstrated by the fact that they get along so well. It is also said that the locals used to drop her off at her bungalow in the evening to keep an eye on her and keep her company. Because they both reside locally and are an integral part of the immediate natural environment, the villagers' relationships with the adjacent forest, rivers, hills, animals, and birds are analogous to those one could have with members of one's own family.

Kamala Markandaya distinguishes Clinton and Helen based on their personalities. Clinton views the tribe's members as little more than animals and has no regard for their sentiments. Clinton's opposition to Helen drinking water from the tribespeople's home demonstrates the divide between the two men due to their divergent views on several issues.

The guys are represented as passionately intent on increasing their money while using advanced technology and technically sophisticated business tactics. A considerable gender gap has emerged due to men's disrespect and indifference for insects, animals, birds, trees, plants, rivers, hills, and the preservation of the natural balance. Helen is depicted as having a deep love of nature. Her close ties to the local flora, fauna, and inhabitants, as well as the trees, animals, and other forest creatures, set her apart from the narrow-minded



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group that includes Clinton and Mr. Rawlings. The tribal members, animals, insects, and birds make Clinton anxious. He displays his rage at the tribespeople's veneration, worshiping of animals and birds, and their use of flowers. He leaves to carry out their old rituals since he dislikes how the tribespeople live. Kamala Markandaya criticizes how some people avoid connecting with nature's creatures, such as animals, birds, and insects.

Helen regrets the devastation of the environment and some British officers' disdain for the native customs in the rural areas where they were stationed. Helen was first able to comprehend the impending harm that the construction operations would cause to the surrounding natural environment, the culture of the tribal people, and the tranquility of the village region. As she conveys her concerns to the tribal chief, the observer can see Helen's rage about the ongoing dam building. She assures the chief of the indigenous people that "when the work is done, we shall be gone, and you will be left in peace." (Markandaya, CD 72).

People's ideas of what an ideal existence and contemporary urban life are like have altered due to the creation of a construction enterprise in the rural villages of Malnad and Madan. For the inhabitants of those locations, what was once a tranquil and healthy way of life has changed into one that is tumultuous. The peasants' thinking has changed negatively due to their obsession with modernity and technological advancement. People's preference for urban and contemporary lifestyles and disdain for rural existence manifest their lack of interest in natural phenomena and casual attitudes toward the environment. According to Kamala Markandaya, the lives of the tribe members were negatively impacted by the technologically flawed brains of the British Engineers and some of their employees. On the other hand, Helen's presence greatly impacted the tribespeople's way of life.

Helen strongly disapproves of how Clinton and the other British Engineers handled their employees unfairly and wreaked havoc on the area. She continually warns Clinton about his inappropriate behavior, including harassing the employees and ruining the workplace. However, he regularly ignores her persuasion and counsel because of his entrenched macho power. Helen lashes out at Clinton and says angrily, Can't you care? in reaction to his callous treatment of the workers. Do you not value human life in any way? Does it matter what kind of flesh they must have for it to work? (Markandaya, CD 107).

In her novel, Kamala Markandaya exposed Clinton, Helen's husband, for abusing his wife. Helen, Clinton's wife, does not experience the respect that should be accorded to a woman while she is in his home. Since he is just concerned with the success of his business, he does not treat her with any decency or respect. Helen's



sentiments are always disregarded by him since he is so preoccupied with increasing his financial power. Helen tries to call his attention to Clinton's mistake in forcing the employees to complete the dams within the allotted time without giving them downtime to take breaks and unwind. He rants at her with a vindictive attitude, acting as if they do not know one another. The moment Helen utters the phrase, "It is inhuman." Clinton exclaimed in a hasty disdain, "Are you trying to teach me how to run my own business?" According to A.V. Krishna Rao and K. Madhavi Menon,

Still, there are times when Clinton dislikes the spirit of her independence and her unpredictable behavior. His fundamental wish is that she would fully identify herself with his responsibility—to complete the *Coffer Dams* at any cost. (p. 93)

The maltreatment Helen receives from her husband illustrates men's patriarchal attitude toward women.

Conclusion

An ecofeminist named Kamala Markandaya made a major impact on the effort to alter men's perceptions of women and the environment. This movement is part of a larger effort to change the way males view women. She exposes the truth by contrasting Helen's and Clinton's traits. She urges everyone to uphold women's innate dignity and value. Kamala Markandaya investigates the relationships between women and the natural environment via a variety of mediums and points of view. She says that the qualities of nature are perfectly matched with women's capacities to nurture, care for, and treat all living things equally. In the 1969 novel *The Coffer Dams*, Helen serves as the quintessential example of a woman who is exploited by her husband and does not receive the respect that a woman is entitled to because of her gender. One of the numerous indications that Clinton does not care for Helen is the fact that he does not consider her to be of any use to him. This is only one example of the many ways that Clinton's disregard for Helen is apparent. The viewpoints of animals, birds, insects, tribespeople, and rural life that Helen and Clinton hold differently are thrown into stark contrast. These variations are shown to be representative of the general human tendency. The essential steps are being taken by ecofeminists to reveal male domination and the false beliefs that males hold about women and the natural world. By doing this, ecofeminists are contributing to the fight against male supremacy.



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