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**Deciphering Ecofeminist Script: Helen in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffin Dams***

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*Abstract*

This paper essays to trace out the ecofeminist perspectives which inform Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffin Dams*. Markandaya is an ecofeminist novelist who makes Helen decipher the ecofeminist script of her novel. Helen considers the natives as human beings, and voices her feelings related to women and nature. She realizes that living with nature lends substance and authenticity to life. In spite of being dominated and exploited by her husband, Clinton, she fights against the patriarchal setup which exploits and oppresses both woman and nature.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, patriarchal structure, possession, oppression, pollution, tribals

"Ecofeminism," Mary Mellor writes, "is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (1). Françoise d'Eaubonne, who is a French author, has coined this term in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death), published in 1974. The origin of this word has its roots in 'feminism' which nurtures the sapling of 'ecofeminism' with the help of 'ecology.' Ecofeminism aims at protecting nature and woman, and saving humanity from extinction. The humanity will be saved if nature and woman are saved from being exploited. For Heather Eaton, ecofeminism is "an enormously useful and flexible insight" (4). Susan Griffin loves this earth and becomes so emotional that she writes: "This earth is my sister...I do not forget what she is to me, and what I am to her" (219). Karen J. Warren, Susan Griffin, Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard,

Ynestra King, Ariel Salleh, Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, and Bina Agarwal are some of the ecofeminists who have endeavored to awaken the consciousness of mankind towards woman, nature and environment.

The term 'ecofeminism' reveals that women have potential enough to give rise to "ecological revolution" which, in result, can lead to human survival on this earth. Ecofeminism which tempers 'ecology' with 'feminism,' presents a feminist interpretation of nature and traces the root cause of 'environmental degradation' and 'exploitation of women' in patriarchy. The patriarchal system is the cause of the pathetic and miserable state of both woman and nature. Woman and nature are on the 'periphery' while man is in the 'centre.' Dido Dunlop holds patriarchy responsible for devaluing women and nature. She writes: "Patriarchy devalues women, and therefore devalues nature because nature is seen as mother. Women and nature get trashed together. . . To value nature, we must honour women too."

Karen J. Warren avers that "it is the logic of domination, coupled with value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms, which "justifies" subordination" What is explanatorily basic, then, about the nature of oppressive conceptual frameworks is the logic of domination" (*Earthcare: An Anthology* 248). She analyses the conceptual framework and finds that man's exploitation of women and nature, is often justified by the argument that women are associated with 'nature' and the realm of the 'physical' while men are associated with the 'human' and the realm of 'mental,' resulting in men's superiority over women and justification in subordinating women (248-49). Such an argument, she believes, is an example of oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework. She feels the need to eradicate such patriarchal structure in order to eradicate suppression and exploitation of women and nature. She feels that it is high time when feminism should critique patriarchy and embrace "ecological feminism" because "the domination of women is tied conceptually and historically to the domination of nature" (257). In an interview with Amy Goodman, Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, avers: "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 March 2013). For Sangita Patil, ecofeminism is "an umbrella term" for an interdisciplinary movement as it addresses "a broader range of contemporary social and political problem from pollution, extinction of animals due to globalization, economic development, militarism, racism, colonization, sexual violence and development of science and

technology, so it is called as biocentric environment movement on the basis of oppression and degradation of nature” (45).

Ecofeminism critiques ‘capitalism’ for creating a split between nature and culture resulting in the exploitation of both women and nature. It is usually classified into ‘radical ecofeminism’ and ‘cultural ecofeminism.’ Radical ecofeminists oppose the patriarchal structures for degrading and exploiting nature and woman while cultural ecofeminists are in favour of a kind of organic relationship of woman and environment. Carolyn Merchant calls spiritual ecofeminism as “cultural ecofeminism” and “celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system” (*Earthcare: Women and the Environment* 11). ‘Transformative Ecofeminism,’ which has recently emerged as a practical revolutionary ecofeminist approach, motivates women to be in the political action for the transformation of their connection to both nature and culture. In brief, ecofeminism aims at ending patriarchal oppression and exploitation of women and nature. This is the goal which can be realised by empowering women and nature, and identifying with them. Kokane feels that “Time has come to replace human arrogance with ecological humility and an understanding of ourselves as members of the whole community of life on earth” (93).

Literature mirrors the currents and undercurrents that obtain in a society. Indian English Literature too reflects the issues that agitate the consciousness of humanity at the local and global levels. The transition from socio-political to psychological to ecological concerns, is manifest in various genres of literature. Specially, the environmental concerns of the world are reflected in Greenham Common Movement in Britain, Love Canal Movement in the USA, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya and the Bishnoi and Chipko Movements in India which have impelled the people to seriously think about nature, woman and, above all, the future of humanity. The litterateurs across the globe have focused on the issues concerning women and environment.

Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), hailed as “a novelist of sensitive and ethical concerns” (Arora 11), has raised the environmental issues in her *oeuvre* through five thematic strands - Socio-economic (Earth), Socio-political (Fire), Socio-psychological (Air), Socio-religious (Water) and Socio-ecological (Sky) - which symbolize her female characters, a fusion of what is best in the East and the West. Her novel, *The Coffer Dams*, regarded as “a turning point in Markandaya’s maturing as a novelist” (Uma Parmeswaran 164), will be explored as an ecofeminist text of socio-ecological dimensions, against the backdrop of the conflict between the technology and the forces

of nature. The contrasting personas of Clinton and his wife Helen and their diametrically opposite perceptions about India and Indians, carry the narrative forward. Clinton and his associates are given the work of constructing two coffer dams to tame the river at Malnad, a hilly village of the South India. When he works on the project, he faces the fury of nature and the non-cooperation from the Indian workers and technicians on the issue of the dead bodies of the workers. As he does not want to stop work, he orders that the dead bodies can be “incorporated into structure” (*The Coffer Dams* 172) of the coffer dams. Helen wishes to know more about the tribal people and the mysteries related to the forest. She comes in touch with a tribal technician Bashiam, known as ‘Jungly wallah.’ Bashiam takes the responsibility of recovering the corpses of the labourers buried under the boulder. When he uses the crane, its jib breaks. It results in accident which makes him crippled. Due to the monsoon, the water level in the river rises. The coffer dams remain safe as soon as it stops raining. Clinton gets name and fame on the completion of the project but none thinks about the corpses and the devastation of nature. Markandaya, through this novel, seems to plead for the preservation of the environment for sustainable development.

The introductory words of Kamala Markandaya’s *The Coffer Dams* are quite significant about its gendered tone and temper: “It was a man’s town. The contractors had built it, within hailing distance of the work site, for single men who were virtually single by reason of being more than a day’s walk away from their women and villages” (*The Coffer Dams* 1). The words ‘A man’s town’ reveal the patriarchal structure. This patriarchal structure is used for having domination over women and nature. The beginning shows that men are kept away from the village resulting in their disconnect from their women, land and nature. The creation of a man’s town is a direct attack on the rural life of the natives who are displaced. This encroachment proves to be a slap on the face of nature. A dam is built to control “the turbulent river,” signifying control nature. Clinton represents the controlling power of the patriarchal world. The people of Malnad and the Maidan love nature and respect the river, thereby evincing complete faith in nature. This very belief makes them so united that they do not hold nature responsible if their crops and mud huts are washed away by the flood tide. They never complain and accept it as their fate.

Clinton is anti-ecofeminist while the tribal chief and Bashiam are the two male characters who seem to be ecofeminists as they are nature loving and environment friendly. The tribal chief follows the old tradition. But, Bashiam keeps balance between his love for machines and nature.

In the name of progress, machines are used resulting in noise pollution, air pollution and destruction of the objects of nature. Niroj Banerjee opines that

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)

Quite opposite to Clinton is his wife Helen who is ecofeminist to the core. Her religion is the religion of humanity, sans prejudices. Through the gift of being communicative and comfortable with the natives, she carves out a niche in the hearts of tribesmen. In her eyes natives are human beings and this spirit brings her close to nature and natives. Clinton calls her “unpredictable” and thinks that she is half of his age, has no sense of right and wrong, white and black, civilized and uncivilized, and culture and nature. When he asks her why she does not have blocks, she responds to him in a mature way: “It’s nothing to do with age. I just think of them as human beings, that’s all” (*The Coffey Dams* 6). Hoping to change her husband, she urges: “You’ve got to get beyond their skins, darling. It’s a bit of a hurdle, but it is an essential one” (6). These words of wit exude her catholic outlook.

Though Helen is ironically in “a man’s town,” she comes directly in touch with nature and natives to comprehend the dynamics of life and make it more meaningful and purposeful. She empathises with the suffering tribesmen who have been torn asunder from their roots. Vinod Manoharrao Kukade writes: “It is affection of Helen towards the environment and the poor tribal that she makes efforts to turn her husband’s mind and make him know the true value of the life of the tribal and the healthy environment” (5826). She follows her instincts. It is nature that takes her towards the “path which led over the brow of a hill to a shallow dip in the land beyond, an inhospitable rock-strewn basis within sound of the river” (*The Coffey Dams* 38). From the vantage point of her tryst with the tribal ethos, she begins to realize that there was “something in England” that “starved her” (39). In India, she loves to play with children, watches the crops grow, and sees men and women working. She sees the fragile huts which can be built in a day, but the same can be destroyed even in less time by “a determined wind.” Here, Bashiam becomes “her linkman” (41) for introducing her to the natives and nature though she is surprised to know his love for machines. She asks him about the tribal village which used to be here. On his cool response that they moved as they were told, Helen angrily tells that they moved “without protest.

Just got up and walked away, like animals” (45). It demonstrates her human concern for fellow human beings as she identifies with them: “But these people aren’t different clay, they’re like me, like people like me. What is for me, is for them, there’s no other kind of yardstick that’s worth anything” (45-46). She seems to be chiding Bashiam for his desertion of his people saying that “you are—a member of that tribe. It was their land. They didn’t want to leave it, they were persuaded. Why did they allow themselves to be? Why did you? Without even protesting” (46). It indicates her sense of indignation that the tribals did not protest when they were persuaded to leave their roots.

Helen comes close to Bashiam because of the common interest of bird trapping. She has a desire to see how the birds are trapped. When she actually sees how the birds are trapped, she develops revulsion. She likes Bashiam’s consideration and caring nature when he, without waiting for the answer, puts a shawl around her. She is grateful to him for “the rough warmth” (*The Coffer Dams* 84) that she has got from the shawl. She wonders why the birds come in “the deadly limed patch” while the whole jungle is open for them. She loves all the animals and birds. She calls snake “harmless” (76). She reacts to the words of Clinton when he showers his love on her stating that he should take care of her and lock her up. Pat comes her response: “But locked up things go mangy, like captive animals” (77). She makes it clear that she cannot remain a captive and wishes to be free to lead a life of instincts that may be in harmony with nature and her objects. On knowing that the chief and other tribesmen are in danger, she asks the chief to move when they have not much to carry. The chief tells her that they cannot move as they are “tied to the river” (106). She knows that “this modern juggernaut” is on the move and cannot go back. Clinton is astonished at Helen’s too much concern about the tribals. She reacts in the manner which he does not expect from her. She cries and says: “Can’t you care? Don’t human beings matter anything to you? Do they have to be a special kind of flesh before they do” (107). Such reaction makes Clinton bewildered so much that he considers that “the country’s affecting her, it’s getting on her nerves” (108). He wants to get the dam work completed before the monsoon. He orders to get it done even if he has to tax the labourers beyond their capacity. While Clinton is of the opinion that it is a normal place that “the weaker ones get shaken out, and that is all (128), Helen calls it “inhuman” (128). In angry mood she she moves out to go to the jungle as Clinton authoritatively forbids her to display “his control over her” (129). While using force to stop her, Clinton touches “her flesh” (130), which inflames him. Seized by frenzied longing, he takes her

to the bed, forces himself on her body, her lips, and her thighs, uttering, “She is mine, why should I let her go? What I have I hold” (*The Coffer Dams* 130) reveal his possessiveness. The marital rape reveals his domination and control over nature and the woman. Through his exploits of both woman and nature he reflects his patriarchal mindset. His attitude of being the possessor of Helen’s body unleashes a sense of claustrophobia in Helen, and for a breather she goes out to the lap of nature where Bashiam lives, and makes a candid confession by asking him: “Look at me. I’ve never been a memsahib. You’re not some kind of freak to me. We’re alike, we’re freaks only to the caste we come from, not to each other. I thought you knew. Was I wrong? If I was, I’ll go” (141). She belongs to the Western culture, but loves the Indian culture and its ways. She sees the glimpse of the Indianness in Bashiam and so wants to be in union with him. This union is not the union of the two bodies, but of two souls. The Eastern and the Western ones meet in order to have the best. Helen is nature loving and Bashiam is the fusion of the machines and nature. This very fusion makes him the right person for having the close association for the wellbeing of nature and women. He possesses the ecofeminist tendencies like her. Both of them share what they have in each other through the union which may prima facie seem physical but is, in reality, spiritual and divine. It is a union which gives a sense of belongingness, association, completeness and satisfaction to Helen who feels herself rich enough not to feel a sense of guilt. Clinton’s words: “She is mine, why should I let her go? What I have I hold” (*The Coffer Dams* 130) reveal his possessiveness. His rape is not simply the rape of his wife, but it reveals his domination and control which he wants to have, just as he is having on nature. He exploits and oppresses both woman and nature and this oppression is the result of his patriarchal mindset. To have control over body reveals Clinton’s mindset that the body is not a person, but a thing over which he has the right because the thing i.e. body of Helen belongs to him and he is the right possessor. Helen reacts to it and goes to meet Bashiam to get some relief as she feels suffocated in the patriarchal environment. Now she comes to the environment of nature where Bashiam lives. She makes him comfortable and asks him saying: “Look at me. I’ve never been a memsahib. You’re not some kind of freak to me. We’re alike, we’re freaks only to the caste we come from, not to each other. I thought you knew. Was I wrong? If I was, I’ll go” (141). She belongs to the Western culture, but loves the Indian culture and its ways. She sees the glimpse of the Indianness in Bashiam and so wants to be in union with him. This union is not the union of the two bodies, but of two souls. The Eastern and the Western ones meet in order to have the

best. Helen is nature loving and Bashiam is the fusion of the machines and nature. This very fusion makes him the right person for having the close association for the wellbeing of nature and women. He possesses the ecofeminist tendencies in him just as she possesses. Both of them share what they have in each other through the union which seems to be physical one from outside, but is spiritual and heavenly from inside. It is a union which gives a sense of belongingness, association, completeness and satisfaction to Helen who feels herself rich enough not to feel a sense of guilt.

The world in which Helen lives, is a world of concrete and mortar in which human values are at a discount, and relationships are governed by the parameters of materialism. Helen calls Christians “an arrogant people” because they have cut themselves off their roots, and got mired in material pursuits. She feels that the Indian culture is spiritually rich and rewarding. In England she felt almost dead. In India, she associates herself with nature and the people who live in nature, and has developed a sense of belonging to everything. As the realization dawns upon her, 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” (*The Coffey Dams* 144). The blissful state of mind triggers “the release” and experiences “consummation” for her body - a kind of fusion which she never felt before and never achieved before. India has shaped her so much so that she finds “acceptance, a place” (151) and even the headman notes that she has changed and calls her “a different woman” (152) who does not wish to change on her return to England. This transformation in her persona has been wrought by the fusion of the Eastern and Western culture.

In *The Coffey Dams*, Helen emerges as a mouthpiece of Kamala Markandaya for voicing the author’s concerns about women and nature as she, like the author, is endowed with the first-hand experience of both the cultures. She is fed up with the life in England as it is measured by the yardsticks of materialism. In India, she gets what she failed to get in England. She realizes that to live with nature is natural as it is soothing to the heart and adds spice to life. Though dominated and exploited by her husband she fights against the patriarchal setup and experiences that to be in contact with nature and its objects, is the only worthy accomplishment in life. Her association with nature and women augurs well for environmental protection. 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). Helen’s love for natives, land, rain, flowers, birds, animals, and Indian way of life qualifies her as a true representative of Kamala Markandaya’s ecofeminist stance about nature and women.

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