



Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*: Critiquing the Perspectives of Development, Tourism and Economic Sustainability

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Abstract:

The researcher aims to analyse Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* with special reference to development, tourism and economic sustainability. The novel presents a development-driven critique of postcolonial India. Transformation of the landscape, displacement of the tribal indigenous people, labour migration, racial prejudices, exploitation of natural resources, these form the centrality of the novel. This kind of development is pseudo-development and ethically should not be manifested. The dam project depicted in the novel symbolically anticipates economic and tourism-led development; which came at the cost of ecological disruption. The primary aim of the researcher was to expose development and economic stability manifested in the novel and the extent in which they have affected nature and the lives of the indigenous tribal people of the region portrayed in the novel, along with the Western conception of modernity.

The commodification of landscape is not a development on ethical or moral framework; rather it acts as a curse for nature, which destabilises nature and natural elements. The indigenous land region depicted in the novel becomes the victim of commodification. Commencement of the cofferdam project has put environmental sustainability at stake. Clash between traditional indigenous values and capitalist modern approach in life are apparent in the novel. The prevalent power dynamics and the superior-inferior binary from Edward Said's Oriental considerations have also been taken in the proposed study. The economic sustainability and development with its possible impact on the tribal people of the jungle region which led to their displacement and eventually resulted in forced migration portrayed in the novel, these arguments remain primary to the proposed discussion. Postcolonial aspects of Racism and Oriental distinctions and ecocritical facets have given secondary focus.

Keywords: Development, Economic Sustainability, Commodification, Landscape, Displacement, Ecocriticism, Tourism, Oriental Binaries.

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Kamala Markandaya was a prominent Indian-English novelist. Her most of novels expose the struggle between traditional Indian values and Western ways of modernity, social class struggle, postcolonial conflicts and challenges of post-independent India. With her writing career, Kamala Markandaya has voiced-out these concerns in her novels. For instance, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) etc. These are some of her popular works, which resonate cultural struggle of India at large. Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* (1969) is an example of the Oriental clash and ecological loss. The novel has rich literary theoretical and critical ideas, which can be taken for further research. The researcher in the proposed study has concentrated on the critique of a development, tourism and economic sustainability presented in the novel, along with the Oriental discourse.

Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams* (1969) presents the picture of British colonial authority who had come up with the Dam Project in India. The coffer dam project has remained the central attention of the novel, which has dealt with the consequences of displacements, migrations, cultural loss and even more dangerous is threatening the nature. The ecology has been constantly challenged by Western modernity. Anthropocentrism over Ecocentrism is apparent in the novel. Westerners hold the human-centred ground, and they reject nature's coherence and centredness in human life. Thus, the struggle between Western modernity and the indigenous ways of tribal people's lives remains the primary concern of the novel. The setting of *The Coffer Dams* is in the lap of nature. The indigenous jungle region was located in rural Malnad, a hilly indigenous region of Karnataka, south-India. Kamala Markandaya has depicted the indigenous region with an ecocritical appreciation of its landscapes, mountains, rivers and other natural elements with the harmony of nature. History has proven; big infrastructural projects on agricultural lands or on indigenous regions have devastated indigenous ecologies and its people who has gone under forced migration and as a result the physical and

mental turbulence, which cannot be denied. The sufferings were not only physical but psychological also.

The prevalent West versus East conflict or to put in a literary term, Oriental distinctions are apparent in *The Cofferdams*. Postcolonial critic Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has the "Western conception of the Orient" (Said). *The Cofferdams* presents the construction of the cofferdam under the supervision of Clinton, who was a rigid British engineer. Throughout the novel, Clinton holds the Oriental binary distinctions. According to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), "...The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power..." (Said 5) power dynamic is differentiator between Western and Eastern considerations regarding ideologies. These ideologies which have been formulated with the power dynamics as a prime weapon; often one race of people have been compromised and taken as a weaker race. These distinctions in the novel have throughout troubled the tribal people of Malnad region, where the cofferdam had to be constructed, as they had been perceived as lower rank of people who did not possess any quality that Clinton had or to say which Britishers possessed: the decision-making ability, rationality, superiority. Clinton's treatment of the tribal people of that region as Other, a prominent postcolonial concept, where racial prejudices are manifested, and the treatment of intended group of people as Other, like a distinct species or being. Clinton's professional ambition for the dam construction had hindered the lives of the tribal people and the land.

Critiquing Development in *The Cofferdams*

The quest for development manifested in the novel was not a development in true sense, rather a pseudo-development, which means a false or superficial kind of progress which looks real and forms the simulation about the actual growth. Land acquisition and infrastructural expansion had performed by the dam project authority, in order to foster economic growth and sustainability. However, the consequences of this process had badly affected the lives of the

tribal people of that region. Eventually, they were forced to migrate from their homeland. Migration is always a painful process in which people or a group of people have to leave their homeland and settle to unknown place. This forceful process has also been depicted in *The Cofferdams*, where, the tribal people had become the victims of the displacement. On the one hand, the dam project brings economic stability, development and also opens door of tourism which may possibly be the essential reason behind the dam project. Tourism is considered one of the essential components of economic growth of any country. One possible interpretation would be, the dam project has commenced with long-term perspective of its tourism industry which might boost the overall economic growth of the region in upcoming years. The study of tourism often admits that large infrastructural projects pave the way for accompany tourism growth, with a view to reshaping local economies and social structures.

Ecocritical Argument in *The Cofferdams*

Ecocriticism as a literary theory often acknowledges and praises natural landscapes and elements of nature. In tourism studies, natural landscapes are often central attractions, admired and valued for their cultural significance and beauty. *The Cofferdams* suggests that economic sustainability and development derived from environmental degradation are inherently fragile and can no longer be manifest. P.K. Nayar has remarked, "...mankind is efficiently committing ecocide, making the planet inhospitable for life of any kind..." (Nayar 241) same is the case with the jungle region of the tribal people in the novel, the south-Indian region, where the cofferdam project had initiated by the British authorial power and eventually that region had undergo several unwanted rigorous changes and the ecosystem has completely neglected. A cofferdam is usually a temporary watertight foundation that allows construction-related work below the intended waterline. Cofferdam primarily uses for building a bridge or to build a dam. The nature depicted in *The Cofferdams*, losses its ecological balance and its harmony with human. There were clear signs of the loss of its spiritual significance. Ecocriticism often studies

nature as our mother and attaches spirituality to it. Therefore, in the novel, the jungle region had remained an industrial site and lost their ecological significance with the commencement of the dam project, and after that it was nearly impossible to regain what has lost. As remarked by M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham; ecocritical reading of text also analyses "...acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities." (Abrams and Harpham 98) the dam project had disrupted ecology and environment related activities. Behind this, there were potential human activities, thus, posing challenge to human-nature binary.

The tribal people had never imagined place of their land as a mere resource, but rather as coherent living entity. However, this preservation had remained intact until the arrival of British authority along with the dam project in *The Coffey Dams*. Thus, the jungle, river, landscapes and other natural elements had valued until the displacement of the tribal people, because they had preserved nature and maintained its sacredness which had completely neglected by the dam project authority. The violation of nature-human harmony is evident in the novel. As discussed earlier, Clinton was a rigid Britisher, but his wife Helen was a compassionate person. She was in favour of preservation of nature. In the novel, she had observed that "...The jungle no longer retained its earlier stillness, as the sounds of machines and labour dominated the area..." (Markandaya 73) this clearly indicates the ecocritical offense, and the rigorous industrial and infrastructural development which had altered the peace and prosperity of that region. In addition to that the tribal people of that region had suffered as the drastic change happened to their lives. They had been forced to undergo labour work which had been done by some of the tribal peoples as per the order of the officials. Postcolonial theory argues that colonizers driven by imperial ideology; they tend to control the weaker race and they inflict physical and psychological sufferings. Usually, the site of any jungle region in itself are peaceful which have no human intervention from the outside, tribal people of any jungle

region have usually adapted the ways to live peacefully to the nature and they respect the nature-human harmony, unlike the Westerners who have made every effort to violate this harmony for their own sake.

Oriental Framework in *The Cofferdams*

The Oriental discourse can be considered as one of the major themes of *The Cofferdams*; Western ideology is compared with the ideology of Orient. This distinction is prevalent throughout the novel. "...the critique of Orientalism must ultimately take us to the Orientalized spaces themselves..." (Mufti 461) the marginalised jungle region located in the south-Indian region, where the cofferdam has to build, which has remained central part of the novel to the extent in which every action and decision has manifested were directly related to that region itself. Thus, in novel, the Oriental argument had revolved around the "Orientalized spaces" (Mufti 461) and the jungle region where the tribal people dwell which has fulfilled the same in that context. The West's treatment of nature has seen as rational and authorised, on the other, the tribal people's ways towards nature as emotional and inferior. This ideological clash is nothing but related to the power dynamics of the superior-inferior binary. The Oriental ideological conflicts remain at the centre. Those practices were often one-sided; the Western indoctrination of their own supremacy and apart from them all other races including humans as Other. Ironically, the tribal people are spoken of as though they were "... objects to be moved aside ..." (Markandaya 116) for the sake of mere progress. For instance, one of the characters in the novel remarked that foreigners have used to see them as part of nature not as human beings. Therefore, the indigenous people of the jungle region have perceived as emotional and weak, they lacked their right to decision and right to choice because they were not considered individuals. The tribal people had not got any equality and they were derated by the higher authority, from this argument, Racism is also evident in the study. *The Cofferdams*, may potentially be taken to further study, for racial prejudices it possessed.

In the novel, the dam functions as a significant symbol of industrial ambition and economic modernity, which precedes the traditional cultural values of the tribal people. In the words of Clinton, dam project's work will "...stand firm against time and nature..." (Markandaya 42) this statement is driven by development and tourism-driven economic stability. His purpose can be interpreted as predefined goal and he has taken nature as inferior. On the other hand, the tribal people hold the belief that their land was not an exploitative entity but rather a sacred spiritual living entity and they share coherent relationship with their land. However, Clinton's emotionless rigorous perspective has defined economic growth and sustainability in-terms of purely infrastructural growth. This becomes the central discussion, where, traditional indigenous knowledge system has been suppressed by the fancy-looking Westernised modernity, which was technology and industrial development-driven. Sayan Roy's critiquing the economic growth and a development in the contemporary world in the research paper entitled, "A Critique on Current Paradigms of Economic 'Growth' and 'Development' in the Context of Environment and Sustainability Issues" he made an argument on the land acquisition by private enterprise for economic developments and its effects on the displaced rural communities:

...in the predominant mainstream economic rhetoric, one is used to the idea that displacement caused by rapid industrialization can be appeased and dealt with justly by rewarding compensation to those that are affected by such projects...in fact, injecting such amounts of money into rural economies in the form of compensation in order to acquire land for private enterprise may even wreak havoc among communities... (Roy 81-82)

Industrial sites of land generally violate environmental boundaries; industries mostly acquire rural lands to establish an industry at lower prices; they often reward only small compensation to the affected families by industrial projects. In some cases, globally, rural-lands

were forcefully acquired due to big projects and the affected people have displaced from their homeland. In *The Cofferdams* the cofferdam project has caused destabilisation of the indigenous livelihood. The displacement has affected many indigenous lives. The coffer dam project may provide economic development. However, the indigenous tribal people of the rural Malnad region have lost their sacred connection with the river on which the dam was to be built. The foundation for coffer dams generally takes place below the water. One possibility is that marine-ecosystem also experience resistance due to coffer dams. Imposing authority by power and displace indigenous people from their place is influenced by imperial ideology. The industrialisation has constantly differentiated with indigenous knowledge and their ancient value system in *The Cofferdams*.

Kamala Markandaya has voiced-out the marginalised people and land through her novel, *The Cofferdams*. However, the tribal people throughout the novel have remained in the state of marginalise, and they have been altered by Clinton and other high rank officials. The never-ending clash between Western modernity and the indigenous knowledge and values system remained in tension and "... dam, thus, becomes a symbol of modernity itself encroaching slowly yet steadily over the tradition bound..." (Banerjee 80) the dam hold the symbol of modern advancement in order to cope up with contemporary changes, however, in doing so, one group of people who possess power often neglect the traditional ethical and moral value systems of the indigenous people.

The dam project depicted in *The Cofferdams*, was in actual sense a commodification of landscape; in English literature and literary criticism there are many instances of commodification of landscapes, mountains, jungles etc. for the sole purpose of economic advancement and a development in order to cope up with the emerging needs of the contemporary world and as a result of high demands of almost every resource; the people who possess power, they desire only to move ahead and neglect every possible consequence,

especially, of nature. In the novel, the jungle region of the tribal people has commodified by the higher authority. Especially, the large indigenous place of the landscape to build dam. The psychological suffering and physical labour of the tribal people were real; they had undergone labour work, and the mental turbulence was additional to what they were facing. Labour migration is also one thing that can be seen in the novel.

To conclude, the researcher has analysed Kamala Markandaya's *The Cofferd Dams*, and critiqued the perspectives of development, economic sustainability and tourism. Environmental sustainability has been affected by these spheres of modernity; the material drive of the advancement in life has been fulfilled by the consequences of human-nature segregation, displacement and ecological degradation. The Oriental aspects, racial prejudices and the clash between indigenous knowledge systems and Western modernity have also been touched upon. The higher authority depicted in the novel, had not acquired land from any urban metropolitan place for the dam project, but rather from a rural ecological site of the tribal people, which had sacred and spiritual significance in the lives of the tribal people as well as animals, birds and other species of the ecosystem. In that sense, the entire ecosystem of that particular jungle region had suffered along with the tribal people. Development may boost economic sustainability and foster tourism and new growth in upcoming years but at the cost of nature and rich bio-diversified indigenous land, which was at the heart of the jungle. Therefore, this kind of development may not be considered as actual development, but rather, pseudo-development.

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