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Beneath the Progress: Development and Ecological Crisis in the select novels of Kamala Markandaya

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Abstract

This paper explores the ecological disruption caused by development in Kamala Markandaya's novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffer Dams*. It argues that development has led to the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation, driven by a male, capitalist, patriarchal mindset that prioritizes profit over the intrinsic value of nature and the essential roles women play within the ecosystem. Diverging from the traditional conception of ecofeminism—which typically attributes ecological harm to androcentrism—this study foregrounds postcolonial ecofeminism. It suggests that the relationship between South Asian women and their environment is complex, shaped more by material realities and social hierarchies than by notions of innate care or compassion. This dynamic is vividly portrayed in both of Markandaya's novels. Ultimately, the paper contends that development must not come at the expense of human lives or environmental integrity.

Key words: Maldevelopment, Postcolonial Ecofeminism, Feminist Environmentalism, Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to explore ecofeminism within the Indian context and to examine the distinctions between Western and Indian ecofeminist thought. It aims to contribute to the development of the framework of postcolonial ecofeminism and to trace its foundational elements in Kamala Markandaya's novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffer Dams*. Western ecofeminism often generalizes women into a singular, universal category, portraying their relationship with nature as inherently nurturing and spiritual. However, this perspective overlooks the experiences of women in the Global South, where the connection to nature is frequently shaped by material realities rather than abstract spiritual ties. Scholars such as Cecile Jackson, Janet Biehl, Meera Nanda, and Bina Agarwal have critiqued Western ecofeminism for being ethnocentric and essentialist, arguing that it neglects the intersectional influences of class, caste, ethnicity, and other socio-economic factors. In her influential essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", Sherry B. Ortner underscores that "the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture

and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions" (67). Furthermore, critics have pointed out that such ecofeminist frameworks often ignore the possibility that men, too, can foster a caring relationship with nature – particularly in postcolonial contexts where the material conditions of men and women are not always significantly different. In response, the emerging theory of postcolonial ecofeminism challenges the binary opposition of nature and culture that traditionally associates women more closely with the natural world.

2. Significance and scope

The purpose of the study holds relevance in the context of India because there is a need to understand what Postcolonial Ecofeminism means and how it is different from Western Ecofeminism. Both are usually understood in the same breath without realizing the social shifts over the years and areas in which women's rights need to be addressed in the Indian context.

Through the study, light will be thrown on how the very idea of 'women' is different in the context of India in many other ways than the West. Apart from this, the material conditions of men and women in the post-colonized societies are most of the time not extremely different from each other, which leads to the notion that even men can have a similar attitude of caring and nurturing towards nature.

3. Methodology

The proposed research adopts a qualitative approach centered on the close textual analysis of multiple Indian literary works, with particular emphasis on Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffer Dams*. The methodology involves a comprehensive examination of these novels through the lens of contemporary literary and cultural theories. A triangulated critical framework will be employed, drawing on the principles of Ecofeminism, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, and Postcolonial Feminism. This interdisciplinary lens is aimed at contributing to the formulation of a nuanced theoretical construct – Postcolonial Ecofeminism.

The study will engage in interpretative analysis, synthesizing both textual evidence and critical discourse to explore the intersections of gender, ecology, and postcolonial identity. A key component of the methodology will involve a review of critical writings by prominent ecofeminist theorists, with particular attention to the works of Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal. These thinkers provide culturally and materially grounded perspectives that challenge the essentialism found in Western ecofeminist discourse. Their insights will serve as foundational tools in the effort to contextualize and theorize an Indian variant of ecofeminism that addresses the unique socio-political and ecological realities of postcolonial societies.

4. Discussion

4.1 Nectar in a Sieve: Impact of tannery in pastoral rural life

Kamala Markandaya is a prolific post-independent Indian novelist and short-story writer. Her novels talk about various themes such as the conflict between the East and West, tradition and modernity, the impact of industrialization, rural and urban life, etc. Her novels are broadly termed as belonging to a realist genre as they are determined to expose social injustice in India.

Her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, is a classical pastoral tragedy. The establishment of the tannery disrupts the lives of village people; not just women but men are firsthand victims too. The tannery symbolizes progress and development that promotes economic profit for the elite class without benefitting the marginalized section of society. Tannery can be compared with the monster that gulps their joys and peace of life.

Markandaya projects the transition of the idyllic village that is turned into a crowded noisy town. The birth of a town in the village drastically changes the landscape of the village and the lifestyle of the villagers, who just experience demolition, frustration, and continuing poverty.

Due to hunger and less opportunity for work, many of the peasant women are forced to take up prostitution. Kunthi, Rukmani's neighbour, starts the business of prostitution to feed herself and her family, as Markandaya anticipates:

I thought of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted mouth and scented thighs that had held so many men, and I wondered if after all these years he had not at last found about her. Perhaps the truth has been forced upon him, I thought, looking at her with suspension, and I gazed upon that ravaged beauty (84).

Not only Kunthi but Rukmani's daughter, Ira, abandoned by her husband because of her infertility, has to take up this profession to feed her younger brother, who is dying of starvation. Once Ira was a decent girl, but now she is ready to become a prostitute at the cost of one rupee per day to save her brother's life. The tannery has not only devastated the village's pastoral land and agrarian culture but also disrupted moral values.

In this paper, we will critique ecofeminism and its tenets, which generalize women as saviors of nature and blame patriarchy as the root cause of the exploitation of women and nature. Rukmani, the protagonist, represents major ecofeminists who highlight that women are closely related to nature; therefore, they have a nurturing attitude towards it, whereas, men act indifferently because of their close inclination to culture. Rukmani's association with nature is portrayed in the novel, where she fosters the field like her own child.

Rukmani's disapproval to the construction of the tannery can be viewed akin to that of Vandana Shiva's conception of 'Maldevelopment'. Vandana Shiva thinks that the oppression of women and nature is due to a developmental attitude that has been taken up in the form of the scientific revolution, which she resonates with maldevelopment: "Development has meant the ecological and cultural rupture of bonds with nature, and within society, it has meant the transformation of organic communities into groups of uprooted and alienated individuals searching for abstract identities" (99). Some of the rural women in the novel like Kunthi, Janaki, and Kali welcome the tannery as a source of progress, modernization, and employment, which negates the ecofeminist principle that women are saviors of nature. But in this novel, it can be seen that indeed men can act as the custodians of nature as well as the first-hand victims of the manipulation of nature. Nathan, Rukmani's husband equally cares for their land, which highlights the point that Indian ecofeminism is gender-neutral. This novel leads us to conclude that the main cause of ecological destruction cannot be patriarchy and environmental problems are not due to an androcentric attitude but rather an anthropocentric attitude.

4.2 The Coffor Dams: Dam construction and its Environmental impact on tribal people and their idyllic life

Kamala Markandaya's novel *The Coffor Dams* critically explores the ecological and social consequences of dam construction, particularly its impact on tribal communities and their environment. The narrative exposes the destructive practices associated with modernization, where the deployment of advanced machinery and engineering technologies leads to the degradation of natural ecosystems.

Clinton, the Chief Engineer and protagonist, symbolizes patriarchal dominance—an embodiment of the capitalist ethos that prioritizes efficiency and profit over ecological balance and human welfare. His insistence on completing the dam project within the scheduled timeline, despite being aware of the risks it poses to tribal lives and the environment, underscores his disregard for both nature and marginalized communities.

Alongside Clinton, characters such as Mr. and Mrs. Rawlings and Mackendrick contribute to the ecological devastation by harnessing modern technology to manipulate natural resources. Indian engineers and technicians – Krishnan, Gopal, and Bashiam – become complicit in this project, reflecting the complexities of postcolonial participation in developmental agendas. Heavy machinery is used to excavate hills, alter river flows, and construct the dam – activities that disrupt the ecological harmony of the hilly tribal region. One particularly tragic consequence is a premature explosion in the valley, which claims the lives of twenty-eight people. Clinton's indifference to this catastrophe reveals the dehumanizing effects of technocratic ambition.

The novel vividly illustrates how dam construction takes a severe toll on both the environment and local communities. It begins with the erection of an industrial township – lavish bungalows for officers and basic quarters for laborers. The daily blasts, pollution of air and water, and destruction of forest habitats underscore how developmental projects often privilege urban interests at the expense of rural and tribal livelihoods.

In contrast to Clinton, his wife Helen expresses deep empathy toward the tribal people and their environment. She forms a bond with the forest, its animals, and local traditions, and voices her discomfort with displacing tribal homes to make room for officers' bungalows. Markandaya captures Helen's emotional response to her surroundings:

"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. Sunbirds, bulbuls, finches, hill mynahs, a kingfisher or two – a dozen other kinds she could not name" (82).

The novel subverts traditional gender binaries by illustrating that both men and women can exhibit care and compassion toward nature. The tribal headman fears the loss of his people's bond with the land. Krishnan's remorse over the destruction of pastureland reflects his inner conflict between professional duty and ancestral values. Characters like Bashiam oscillate between modernity and tradition, while Krishnan and Gopal, despite their roles in the project, still advocate for cultural preservation and community welfare.

Bina Agarwal's theory of "Feminist Environmentalism," as discussed in her article "*The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India*," supports this depiction. She asserts that "women's and men's relationship with nature needs to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment" (126). Markandaya's novel thus challenges gender-essentialist ecofeminism and presents a more nuanced portrayal of environmental ethics – one grounded in lived experiences and shared struggles, rather than purely gendered divisions.

In sum, *The Coffer Dams* serves as a powerful critique of unchecked development, emphasizing that ecological concerns in postcolonial India transcend gender lines and are deeply tied to material conditions, community bonds, and traditional ways of life.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how development adversely impacts both people – particularly the marginalized – and the environment. In the two novels analyzed, *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffer Dams*, the destructive consequences of unchecked development are portrayed as devastating to both human lives and their immediate ecosystems. Kamala Markandaya, as a writer, captures the complexities of modern life and acknowledges the unavoidable demands of modernization. However, the study emphasizes the urgent need for sustainable development practices that safeguard both nature and humanity.

Furthermore, the paper distinguishes Indian ecofeminism from its Western counterpart, highlighting the latter's lack of a postcolonial lens. Western ecofeminism often attributes environmental and gender-based oppression solely to patriarchy, overlooking the nuanced material conditions and

socio-cultural factors unique to postcolonial societies. This paper advocates for a reconsideration of such essentialist frameworks. As reflected in Markandaya's novels, men, too, are portrayed not only as contributors to environmental degradation but also as victims and even protectors of the natural world. Thus, the analysis concludes that environmental crises stem more from an anthropocentric worldview than from an exclusively androcentric one.

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