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Eco-feministic perspective of Kamala Markandaya in the Novel *The Coffe Dams*

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Abstract---This paper deals with the Eco-feministic views of Kamala Markandaya that she has expressed in her novels, which make her in the real sense a true Eco-feminist. The novel entitled *The Coffe Dams* (1969) is studied in this paper to find out her eco-feministic outlook. The focus is on comparing the qualities of the nature with the qualities of the women, the characters of Kamala Markandaya as true lovers and protectors of nature. It has been found that the chief character of this novel named 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 particularly her husband named Clinton the indispensability of the affectionate relationship of the man with nature. The novel unveils the men's outlook towards the woman and the nature, their tendency of showing dominance over woman and the nature and how the woman is exploited at their hands and the nature is getting destructed by them. An analytical method is used to study the eco-feministic perspective of Kamala Markandaya in this novel.

Keywords--- Eco-feministic, perspective, Novel *The Coffe Dams*.

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya has been regarded as one of the best ecofeminists in Indian English literature. Her portrayal of the feminine sensibility, woman's close kinship with nature and also she delineates the close similarity between nature and woman. As Pravati Misra says, "Kamala Markandaya's novels embody a profound and sensitive understanding of the feminine and the female in Indian context." (Misra, p. 40). In this paper it is focused that how the woman is considered to be inferior to man, her position in the house of her husband, the love and respect of woman with nature and for human and non-human beings. It is also focused how the male community tries to dominate the nature as they try to dominate the woman. The commercially stricken and dominating mind of Clinton represents

the masculine gender which disrespects the woman and destroys the environment. However, Helen, the wife of Clinton, represents the female community who loves and protects the nature and also bears the attributes of the nature. Like in many other novels in *The Coffer Dams* (1969) Kamala Markandaya criticizes the unhealthy practices of valuing extra-ordinarily the use of modern technology and the use of machines in the construction of dams irrespective of the traditional and experienced based knowledge and human assistance. The modern culture and modern technology are going to be deeply rooted in the rural areas. However, the rural areas were considered to be the best for maintaining balance in nature and the conservation of culture. It is universal thought that women have yet maintained their traditional values which support to the conservation and preservation of nature and the ethical values. Kamala Markandaya's depiction of the attributes of women and their nexus with the nature takes the women to the close proximity of the nature and thus reveals that the women are the real environmentalists. In the novel *The Coffer Dams* (1969) Kamala Markandaya has portrayed Helen to be the real representative of the woman who loves, respects, and protects the nature. Helen, the wife of Clinton, is one of the main characters in the novel. Helen likes to live in the company of the tribal, in the company of the animals, birds, and the forest. She loves the birds, animals, forest, rural culture and also the nature of the tribal. Her intense indignation towards replacing the huts of the poor villagers with the bungalows of the English Officers of Construction Company shows her deep and loving connection with the poor tribal.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a theory which studies the relationship between woman and the nature. Ecofeminism is a term which is coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne, the French author, in her renowned book entitled *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (1974). However, Ecofeminism itself indicates the fusion of the ecocritical and the feminist aspects. Woman is closely connected with the nature and she is compared with the nature in terms of firstly woman takes care of the family as the nature takes care of all living beings and non-living things; and secondly as woman is dominated by the men, the nature is getting destructed by the greedy and commercially stricken minds of the men. Woman has been deprived from many rights by the male dominated society. The Ecofeminists value the dignity of the woman and the nature. Ecofeminists' intention is to promote gender equality and reshape the status of the woman. As concerned with the nature the Ecofeminists find similarity between woman and nature in terms of biology and power. According to them woman and nature are being dominated by the male community.

Helen, the protagonist of the novel *The Coffer Dams* (1969), is a stereotyped woman who is matched with the aspects of the nature. Her intensity of affection towards nature is vividly presented here when she visualized upcoming danger which was going to take place due to the indifferent, exploitative and dominating nature of the colonizers specifically some British officers of the Construction Company. Clinton, Mr. Rawlings, Mrs. Rawlings and many others started to harm the nature by making use of modern technology and different kinds of machines to construct the dams on the river at the hilly areas. The heavy machines are

used to excavate the hills, to dig the rivers, to create obstacles in the flow of the water and turn the way of the water of the river. The natural atmosphere of the rural areas was totally devastated by the construction work in which the hazardous explosion was done there. The use of bulldozers, pumps, tyres, barges, dumping trucks, bigger cranes polluted the environment and disturbed the peace of the villages. The specific focus of Clinton, the Chief Engineer of the Construction Company, was on completing the dams within scheduled time. The inhuman thinking of Clinton regarding constructing the dams in time though it may cause any harm to the life of the people and the environment, was severally criticized by Helen. But Clinton has no value for the words of Helen. He neglects her advice and considers it worthless. Kamala Markandaya presents here the difference between the man and the woman. Clinton is not in the position of respecting the sayings of Helen, instead he considers her to be fool. 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.

Kamala Markandaya has shown that just as the mother earth loves all living beings and non-living things in the same way Helen is shown to be loving the people, animals, birds, hilly areas, forest, and also the culture of rural area. Helen enjoys the company of the animals and the birds. Kamala Markandaya writes in *The Coffer 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. Sunbirds, bulbuls, finches, hill mynahs, a kingfisher or two – a dozen other kinds she could not name.” (p. 82)

Kamala Markandaya has delineated that just as nature does not discriminate between human beings and non-human beings in the same way Helen, though, belongs to the rich family and her culture is different from the culture of the tribal, respects and loves the tribal and their culture. She explains it to Bashiam, the Indian tribal, as, “It's not like that at all. 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” (Markandaya, p. 141). Helen mixed with the tribesmen and feels solace and satisfaction. The tribesmen respect her and consider her to be one of the members of their community. The tribesmen gather around her when she holds discussion with them. This amicable relationship between Helen and tribesmen indicates the true bond of the rural tribesmen with Helen as they have with the nature. It is also highlighted that the villagers used to give her company during the evening to drop her to her bungalow to protect her. The villagers live in the lap of the nature, they are the part and parcel of the nature, so their relation with the forest, rivers, hills, animals, birds are like the relations of one with their family members. Kamala Markandaya has differentiated the nature of Clinton and Helen. To Clinton the tribesmen are just creature, he never respects the feelings of the tribal people. Clinton's objection on Helen with respect to drinking water from the house of the tribesmen symbolizes the separation between two men on the basis of gap in various aspects between them.

The men are seen to be closely concerned in increasing the wealth and employing the modern machines and technically based ideas to grow their business. The indifference and apathy of the men towards the insects, animals, birds, trees, plants, rivers, hills and maintenance of the balance of the nature create enormous gap between men and women. As Helen is portrayed as the true lover of nature. Her deep affinity with the birds, animals, trees, forest, plants and the tribesmen differs her from the hard minded community of the people like Clinton, Mr. Rawlings. Clinton dislikes the animals, insects, birds and the tribesmen. He dislikes the culture of tribesmen and expresses his indignation towards the tribesmen's attitude of respecting and worshipping the animals and birds and the use of the flowers and the leaves for fulfilling their traditional rituals. The deliberate aloofness of some of the people from the animals, birds and the insects is criticized by Kamala Markandaya.

Helen laments the destruction of the nature and the disrespect of some British Officers which they feel for the rural culture. Helen, initially, could understand the upcoming ill effects of the construction work upon the environment, culture of the tribal and the peace of village area. Helen's wrath towards the going process of constructing the dams is seen when she unveils her thoughts before the tribal chief. She says the tribal chief, "When the work is done, we shall be gone, you will be left in peace." (Markandaya, p. 72). The arrival of the Construction Company in the villages of Malnad, Madan, in the rural areas has converted the peaceful and healthy life of the rural people into the turbulence and its impact upon the rural people caused the change in the minds of the people regarding their concept about the idyllic life and the modern urban life. The fascination of the villagers towards the modernity and technological development is a kind of sound unhealthy change in the thinking of the villages. The attraction towards city and modern life and indifference towards the rural life indicates the people's apathy towards natural phenomena and their carelessness towards nature. Kamala Markandaya has revealed that the modernized thoughts and technically stricken minds of the British Engineers and some personnel created negative effect in the life of the tribesmen; on the contrary the company of Helen created very positive impact in the life of the tribesmen.

The exploitation of the workers and the devastation of the environment that was being done by Clinton and other British Engineers is condemned by Helen. She consistently brings to notice to Clinton his mistake of harassing the workers and damaging the environment, but his deeply rooted male dominated attribute neglect the convincing words and advice of Helen. Reacting on the ill-treatment given by Clinton to the workers, Helen angrily asks him, "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?" (Markandaya, p. 107).

Kamala Markandaya highlighted the exploitation of Helen at the hands of her husband Clinton. Helen, being the wife of Clinton, never feels the dignity of her womanhood in his house. She doesn't receive any respectful treatment from him instead he values merely to his business. He is so immersed in expanding his financial power that he never cares the feelings of Helen. When Helen tries to bring to notice the mistake of Clinton to him regarding forcing the workers to complete the dams anyhow within time without giving them free time from the

work for taking the rest, he shouts at her in resentful manner as if he has no relation with her. When Helen says, "It is inhuman." Clinton quickly in detestation retorted as "Are you trying to teach me my business?" (Markandaya, p. 128) In this connection A.V. Krishna Rao and K. Madhavi Menon write,

"Still, there are times when Clinton dislikes her spirit of her independence and her unpredictable behaviour. His basic desire is that she would completely identify herself with his responsibility-to complete the coffer dams at all costs."(Rao, Menon, p. 93).

This kind of ill-treatment Helen receives from her husband which reveals the tyranny of the males towards the women.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya's novels delineate the similarity in various aspects between nature and the woman. She proposes that the attributes of the nature as nourishing, care taking, and treating equally to all perfectly match with the attributes of woman. The novel entitled *The Coffe Dams* (1969) presents Helen as representative of woman who is exploited at the hands of her husband and is not rendered the dignity of womanhood. The indifferent attitude of Clinton towards Helen is visible in many ways and one of them is when Helen's noble advice is considered to be valueless by him. The disparity between Helen and Clinton with respect to their thoughts about the animals, birds, insects, tribesmen, and the rural culture is brought into focus which symbolizes the general human tendency. The steps are taken by the ecofeminists to expose the male dominance and the wrong consideration of the men about the woman and the nature. Kamala Markandaya, as ecofeminist, contributed to bring about change in the thinking of the men about the nature and the woman. She unfolds the reality by portraying the contradictory characters of Helen and Clinton and advises to protect the nature and dignity of woman.

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