

Man, Nature and the Advent of Technology in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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Abstract

Man wants to tame nature to have some extra benefits. He is not satisfied with what he gets naturally from nature. This 'use' of nature for personal gain has undeniably made human life better but at the same time has broken the natural status quo. What appears beneficial for humans turns to be dangerous for many others. This stands in sharp contrast with the homogeneous living of all other species. This exploitative creed of human beings is crossing every limit and nature may bounce back any moment. Kamala Markandaya in her novel, *The Coffer Dams* has very keenly presented this conflict. The clash between natural and artificial has revealed the faulty steps that proud humans are following. A dam may seem a meek example, but it has much more to tell.

Keywords- Nature, Exploitation, Progress, Benefit

The conflict between man and nature has been an issue of debate since man, in spite of having his good caring nest in its bough, started jabing the selfsame branch to get some apparent benefit. The immediate result is his betterment when compared to his previous state. But these benefits tempt him to have more. And this indulgence in temporal enjoyment makes him

forget reality. The fragrance oozing from the bleeding bark makes him insanely pixedated, and with blind hankering for more, he goes on cutting with inebriate exuberance. It almost seems like the effect of an intoxicating drug. But is the entire humanity intoxicated? Can all the people of the earth turn to maudlins? Confusion arises. The debate is on two grounds. Firstly, what progressive people are doing is nothing but ventures to make a more improved and splendid way of life. And, isn't it a right of a species to try to make his life more splendid? The answer is very simple. All efforts of improvement are praiseworthy provided that they do not harm others. One's improvement should not be on the exchange of some others' detriment. Here arises the issue of the exploitation of nature by progressive human beings. Secondly, the most intelligent species is now aware of the impending fall of its nest from the bough, and hence is being anxious to find a possible way of its recovery and if possible strengthen the bough to its former state. But for this, can he abruptly abjure the so lured intoxications? Does he have any other option except for exploitation of nature? Whatever turn these debates may take, one thing is now clear; that man has excessively exploited nature to get his benefits. And now perhaps he should think twice since nature will also rearrange its pattern to keep balance and human beings in that case may be the worst sufferers. A sudden U turn is not possible, but thinkers of the species have already started a tacit movement. Environmentalists are on the way of creating mass awareness and governments of many countries are putting a ban to pollution. Though very meager in respect of global environmental crisis, these attempts are putting a brake to the speed of deforestation and unbridled industrialization. Literature always had a role on either forming a revolutionary idea, or on

spreading a societal message in a multiplied manner. Keeping with that legacy, here also literature is taking a leading role by representing the actual faults of human beings in connection with nature. It also suggests an ideal replacement for all misdeeds by which one can guess the repairs available for the damages done. One such example is Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams*, where human exploitation towards nature is presented with an insinuating gibe.

The novel throughout its course presents a clash between technical progress and nativity. The story revolves around the project of a dam which is to be built in an area where tribal people lived for ages. To occupy the site for making the dam, the 'master' class implores the 'settled' natives to leave their home. That means the project opens with a striking blow on the natives --- evacuation and consequent homelessness. The novelist clearly suggests that what seems to be an improvement, an achievement to the progressive people of science and technology, is actually malific to natives. Here, the novelist has wittily divided human species into two categories. Clinton and his crew's endeavour is to make a dam in Malnad. This second type is the ancient exemplars of the race who live within nature abiding by all its rules and whims, a type of people who live proportionately with the natural regime like all other species do, without demanding more, without any exploitation to its preserver-mother nature. But then, is the novelist completely against improvements and progress? Never. The novel has softest corners that cover answers to every question.

Clinton, in the story is the head of a British engineering firm. His only purpose is to make a dam with absolute mastery and precision, entirely concretizing their blueprint in reality. Nothing concerns him except this. For this he expatriates a thousand natives,

rendering them homeless. His company hires a thousand tribal labourers by whom they will execute their plan. But these labourers are not seen as humans, but like machines to produce something. His mindset is presented exquisitely:

A builder: The world ran through his mind with a dear keen pleasure as he walked briskly past the living area to the busy work site, seeing not welter of men and machines but only his vision, the dam that would arise with blueprint precision at this point, exactly as they had planned it. (*The Coffey Dams*, 2)

Clinton and his British people had the mentality of a rigorous supervisor; but they awfully abandoned their human traits to task. Clinton did not think his tribal labourers as humans, he never cared for them, never enquired their whereabouts, but only sucked their energy and labour and used it for the building of the dam. About his concern about these people the novel depicts:

He had even less idea where his Indian labour went. He saw them trailing away down narrow footpaths into the jungle on their leave days, and as far as he could tell the wilderness swallowed them up. He never knew when they came back, whether they came back at all, or whether Mackendrick's efficient recruiting organization replaced one dark wave of humanity by another. (*The Coffey Dams*, 6)

The novelist has created a type in this character -- barren, devoid of any feelings and humanity whose only concern is his business. Is it called a progress? Well, Clinton in the story is the representative of the progressive society, an exemplar of western rulers who are unquestionably accepted as superiors by the natives. But does his superiority in post suggest a superiority in character? He is treating local

labourers as machines, using their energy to the fullest. But isn't he himself a machine? Hasn't he lost his human attributes? In fact he has turned himself to a mere executor of plans without any mind and brain. We get enough evidence from the novel:

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.

(The Coffey Dams, 6)

This type of complacent character was not even ready to accept new knowledge. They never thought that there exists a more colourful universe that they had not sensed before. This aggressive confidence also makes this type of character barren, devoid of any life. Clinton only reveres the blueprint, observes the implementation of it and supervises the entire act. But there is nothing except this in his life. He even doesn't understand his wife Helen and does not know her inquisitive interest in the tribal life. Her going into the wilderness is the same as he watches the home going of the natives:

Like his Indian labour, he saw her drift off into what Rawlings, stepped in African flavours, insisted on calling the bush. Once or twice he asked where, though he was not really interested, and equally perfunctorily she told him she had visited one or other of the settlements strung along the course of the river. *(The Coffey Dams, 20)*

The character of Helen in the novel is almost a foil to Clinton's. She is exuberant, jubilant, interested and acutely appreciative of different cultures. She not only takes interest in tribal life of the labourers but also mingles herself with them. She is a foreigner, as is Clinton, yet her characteristic is not of a predator's, but of

a learner's. She wants to learn how to live within nature. And to learn this she must have a tutor who himself is the dweller of wilderness. She finds Bashiam here. The novelist here very softly marked the difference. While some is entirely business minded, another is worshipper of free living; while one is mechanical, other is emotional; while wild living means nothing to Clinton, it serves as a better world to Helen. She even goes to the extent of developing a love relation and very spontaneously becomes the lover of Bashiam. Her description is always lively and in compliance with natural way of life:

She played with the children, rubbed flea powder into the dog's yellow coats, watched the crops grow, watched men and women at work, sated herself with watching, and most of all she marvelled that such full and rounded out living could go on, on so feeble and flimsy a footing. *(The Coffey Dams, 39)*

Apart from these two characters, who are representatives of a progressive society, there remain the natives, and these tribals are presented to be a part of nature itself. Exploitation of nature by the foreign developed class also adds a burden to them. By the project, they also suffer. Some loses their hut to give place to bungalow and site, some forcibly engage themselves to a work which goes against their ideologies. They respect nature; almost like a deity and accept every boon and bane with same smile:

The people who lived by its waters were grateful, but. They propitiated it with sacrifice and ceremony, and strengthened the banks with clay when the water level rose. Sometimes when the rains failed there was no river at all, only a trickle that did not percolate through to the shallowest irrigation

channels of their parched fields. At other times the land was inundated; they saw their crops drowned beneath spreading lakes, their mud huts dissolved to a lumpy brown soup and carried away on the flood tide. At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed him. It was their fate. (*The Coffe Dams*, 3)

Now here lies the difference. They accepted what they got. Whether it becomes a benefactor or not, they never thought of intervening into nature's course or dared to change it. They only prayed. In fact they lived as nature bid them to live. But the representative of an improved society showed them the way to use nature. They saw the ventures to tame a river and almost unknowingly got involved into it as labourers. Now is it good to take an attempt to change nature? Environmentalists will say that it is acceptable so far as natural assets are not harmed. But is the act of harnessing the natural flow of a river a harm? What consequences can it breed? What benefits can it make? Well from an engineer's point of view it is a great achievement. But isn't it marking a change to natural lifestyle of flora and fauna whose life is related with that river? At least they have changed the life of the tribals and they are worried about it. What seems achievement to the British engineering firm is actually unnatural and disgusting to the native tribals. Actually their arrogance in controlling a natural force knew no bounds. And it also became prominent in their behaviour towards the natives. Krisnan, the union leader of tribal labourers gets upset at this:

... these British engineers brush us off like flies, hurt and insult like splinters under his skin, despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. Beginners, he repeated bitterly ... But it's over now... Our day is coming.

The day when they will listen to us.
(*The Coffe Dams* 13-14)

Markandaya in this novel brings out the pangs of nature through tribals. Their association with nature is so deep rooted that the dishonour towards natural entity seems their own insult and vice versa. The tribal chief cannot accept this exploitation of his men for the materialistic gains. But his protests are inadequate and the use of his men goes on. This is dual exploitation. One is the use of the river's natural flow for economic and other gains, another is the use of these natural people's toil for a task they themselves abhor. The primitive here is the closest in relation with nature and the civilized furthest. What implication does the novelist give? What good is there if man cannot keep a connection with nature? Can he survive without nature's air and water? He may put a dam before the free flow of the water, can tame its velocity temporarily, but isn't it an attempt to use the water itself more virulently? What nature gives naturally is indeed a blessing, a favour to us; but if we aggressively demand more or by trick steal more, then isn't it a type of robbing? Yes, the sophisticated engineers were actually robbing a natural property by technology. Well, the technology used here may well suggest a weapon also; that is used by criminals to loot wealth. The tribals perhaps could understand it better than those progressive men. And those intelligent cast, with their arrogance cannot even feel that they are actually taming a river to loot its property, to utilize its assets for selfish greeds, against natural law. They actually could not understand nature itself, never even tried to know it and this is prominent from Krishnan's words:

The construction program, he said, in their united view needed modification. The building schedule was too tight. The leeway allowed for natural hazards was wholly insufficient. Allowance

had been made for the south-west monsoons but not for the north-east which followed. Cyclones, as anyone who was Indian would know, could make havoc of this kind of peremptory British planning. The question of solar flares had not even been touched upon. And labour troubles were endemic. (*The Coffe Dams* 12)

The representatives of the higher advanced class do not have any sense about natural seasonal cycles. They are attempting to use natural forces for the benefits of human beings but themselves do not know how a river changes its form in different seasons.

Markandaya throughout the novel has shown veneration towards mother-nature. Her suggestion is towards peaceful cohabitation within natural framework. The novel is against any commercialisation of natural assets. The dam here is symptomatic of a cage where natural entity is chastised and is used for economic benefits. Whatever profit or gain it may produce, but it is attained by putting an unnatural control over the stream. The novel depicts, "It ran deeply here, this river which two thousand men and ten thousand tons of equipment had so far assembled to tame." (*The Coffe Dams*, 29)

This taming of a natural force for personal gain is the first step towards exploitation. Markandaya here uses perhaps the most mild example of occlusion that is, indeed, prevalent in every aspect in nature, and that too, in more hideous form. Nature is exploited and natural assets robbed. Similarly suffers those who live in close proximity of nature. The unsettling of the local people for commercial site launch is never appreciable and even Helen protests this:

Her anger began to scale up, crossed and compounded by a sense of shame. She controlled it and said, quietly,

'There used to be a village where the bungalows are ... where our bungalow is. A tribal village.'

'A small settlement, yes.'

'When they were told to go, they went.'

'Yes'

'Without protest. Just got up and walked away, like animals.'

'I suppose you could put it like that.'

(*The Coffe Dams*, 45)

Thousands were homeless, many more were put to a work that they never wished to do, and even many deaths occurred while building of the dam went on. Even Bashiam became victim of cruelty. Yet the project was to be completed. Indeed, it marks a departure from wild and native life. Advent of science and technology would undoubtedly make life easier, but what is the cost of it? The loss of natural equilibrium. What will be the outcome is not the novel's issue. But it has well indicated the perils and demolitions behind this progress. Traditional Indian ethics has shown nature as the manifestation of God Himself. Generations after generations have worshipped nature and its forces as a deity but never thought of 'using' it for selfish needs. The improved and advanced people have dared to break this status quo. Vandana Shiva has explained the ubiquitous aspect of nature "The nature of Nature as prakriti is activity and diversity. Prakriti is everywhere -- in the form of stone, tree, pool, fruit or animal." (Shiva, 39)

The peaceful omnipresence of Nature is beneficial for the entire creation, if we take a broader perspective. And to break this peace is but to bring danger to ourselves. The Nature will give us scopes to rectify, to purge our misdeeds, and if still we do not ponder over it, we have to face the dire consequences. One thing to remember, science and human brain is but in its infancy when compared to the mesmerizing aura of divine creation. Shouldn't

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we keep harmony with this. If improvement is a need, we should think some other ways and should immediately stop exploitation. If we think scientifically also, by breaking the chain of eco system we are only nearing our doom; for Nature will give a chance but will not forgive us for eternity. Better we remember Newton's third law.

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