

ANTHROPOCENTRICISM AND ITS HAZARDS: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S THE COFFER DAMS

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Abstract:

Anthropocentrism refers to a human-centered, or “anthropocentric,” point of view. In philosophy, anthropocentrism can refer to the point of view that humans are the only, or primary, holders of moral standing. The term can be used interchangeably with humanocentrism, and some refer to the concept as human supremacy or human exceptionalism. From an anthropocentric perspective, humankind is seen as separate from nature and superior to it, and other entities (animals, plants, minerals, etc.) are viewed as resources for humans to use. Anthropocentrism encourages the separation of man from nature and the exploitation of the environment for human benefit. Because it believes that humans are the only center of reason, anthropocentrism is morally flawed. This way of thinking ignores animals' capacity to interact with one another and exist in accordance with ecological rules. The current environmental catastrophe is largely the result of anthropocentric thinking in the form of economic progress, which frequently comes at the expense of the environment and natural resources. In this paper a humble attempt has been made how Markandaya has tried to highlight the hazards of anthropocentrism in her novel *The Coffey Dams*.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Hazards, Dams, Nature.

Human consciousness has been caught by the interaction between man and nature, which depicts man as either controlling or subduing the natural world or as a helpless victim of its whims. The universe was reframed during the Scientific Revolution of the 17th and 18th centuries as a vast system created by God for use by man. According to Lynn White Jr., the dominance of this most anthropocentric religion resulted from the overthrow of paganism by Christianity in its Western form. “Christianity in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religion’s (except perhaps Zoroastrianism) not only established the dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White 10). According to Charles Darwin, species exist as ends in and of themselves. The logical conclusion is that it is only natural for man to act in a way that will help him survive. Thus, it can equally be said that man is free to use nature for legitimate purposes.

When reading *The Coffey Dams*, Kamala Markandeya’s sixth book, it is important to consider these Western ambivalences and attitudes about how people interact with environment. The book, which is set in a newly independent India, tells the story of the debates over building a dam across a river in the Malnad region of southern India, which is encircled and ruled by an

unnamed tribe. The novel's premise revolves around the conflicts brought on by this building project and how they affect both the westerners carrying it out and the tribal people whose habitat it threatens.

From Human-centred to Holistic Ethics: Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

According to the anthropocentrism notion, humans are the centre of the universe. Its central tenet is that all events are assessed through the prism of human consciousness, are driven by and serve human goals, and that nature should be valued for its usefulness to humans. Early iterations of this theory were influenced by Immanuel Kant's concepts, particularly his belief that only rational beings are morally deserving. It is regarded by non-anthropocentrists as the cause of the environmental problem. Given our current ecological scenario, anthropocentrism that consistently valued human interests above those of other living forms is no longer tenable. Environmental ethics is supposed to be founded on ideas that give nature intrinsic value, separate from human value. The key anthropocentrism proponents, on the other hand, claim that environmental ethics cannot be deduced from the rights and interests of non-humans. One example is Brian G. Norton, who makes a distinction between anthropocentrism's unacceptably strong form and its more acceptable weak version. Strong anthropocentrism as defined by Norton takes "unquestioned felt preferences or interests of human individuals as determining value. Therefore, if humans have a strongly consumptive value system, then their interests dictate that nature will be used in an exploitative manner" (135). Norton clarifies that a felt preference is a desire or need of an individual prompting him to act in accordance with the same without any rational assessment of the desire. In contrast, "a considered preference is a desire or need that one expresses after careful deliberation. Weak anthropocentrism recognizes that felt preferences can be either rational or not (they can be judged not consonant with a rational world view" (135). Hence, according to Norton, weak anthropocentrism provides a basis for criticism of value systems which are purely exploitative of nature. It also makes a case for the ideals of human behavior extolling harmony with nature. These ideals are then available as a basis for criticizing preferences that merely exploit nature.

The Man- nature dualism that is emphasized in anthropocentrism disallows the basic equality of all life forms. Non-anthropocentrists assert that all life forms have equal rights, but this can be too idealistic. Sometimes the killing of certain bacteria becomes necessary for the preservation of human life. Despite this, anthropocentrism recognizes that an individual's well-being is dependent on the well-being of the whole ecological system. W. H. Murdy observes that with the increase in knowledge of the biosphere comes the realization that all events in nature are interconnected. Therefore, all items in nature should be valued. This stance refutes the earlier notion that man was the only source of value. However, this view also emphasizes that though all species have intrinsic value, human beings should behave in a manner that ensures their survival rather than the survival of any other species.

Despite these gestures towards the recognition of the value of non-human entities, environmentalists believe that unless the discourse of anthropocentrism is overcome the formulation of an authentic environmental ethics is a faraway reality. Among the earliest proponents of a biocentric or holistic environmental ethics was Aldo Leopold who in his *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) advocated the adoption of a 'land ethic' which demands that we stop treating the land as a mere object or resource. Instead of seeing land as merely soil, Leopold asserts that it is a fountain of energy, flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and

animals. Food chains conduct the energy upwards from the soil and it is returned to the soil by death and decay. Thus, the flow of energy relies upon a complex structure of relations between living things. Though due to the process of evolution all living things gradually change, Leopold argues that human interventions have been more violent and destructive. So as to preserve the integrity and stability of the land, Leopold suggests that humans must move towards a 'land ethic'.

Several ethical thinkers have questioned Leopold's formulation of the 'land ethic'. They observe that he moves too quickly from a descriptive account of the land to a prescriptive account of how humans should treat it. Leopold does not offer an adequate justification for the preservation of the land. The lack of a systematic ethical theory or framework to support his ideas concerning the environment present a challenge to moral theorists: can an ethical theory be devised to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the land that he advocates? Leopold's idea that the 'land' as a whole is worthy of moral concern stimulated others to call for moral obligations toward ecological wholes, such as species, communities and ecosystems.

Colonial Mindset and its Impact:

The British company Clinton Mackendrick receives the contract for building the dam. The Chief Engineer, Howard Clinton, was a man who took pride in his capacity to construct towering structures that would rule the area and are, in theory, impervious to the effects of nature. He had a natural dislike for the people there and the run-down outposts of the former British Empire, where he had spent the majority of his life working. Despite the fact that the novel is set in a freshly independent India, Clinton exhibits the traits of a stereotypical colonialist. His attitude towards the land, the natives, and the other Indians who work for him shows that his consciousness is informed by the teleology of control. His ecological philosophy is in line with the predominately anthropocentric Western worldview. The dictatorial and exploitative nature of Clinton's relationship with the land and his treatment of the tribal people make them seem like a parody of the British occupation of India. The capacity of the Westerner to tame the forest in this former colony using his highly developed technical talents to deny the agency of the tribes people and the power of nature filled Clinton with satisfaction in his technological superiority.

The text constantly emphasizes Clinton's indifference and feelings of superiority: "It did not really interest him, this dreary saga of a hapless peasantry" (Markandaya 3). Though during negotiations, he had been sorely tempted to walk out, Clinton was intrigued and inflamed by the project. Most importantly because it was a test of his strengths and his technological capabilities and his ability to subdue nature and the local populace it was irresistible to him. The bracketing of nature and the local populace reveals his racial superiority and his view of nature and the indigenous people as purely instrumental, existing to help him fulfil his vision of a modernized India-albeit one created by him and people like him. The text underscores his desire to conquer and impose order and efficiency on what he saw as chaos, which in fact was nature. What this schematic retelling cannot capture is the vital role the marginalized tribals and the nonhuman elements play in framing the readers' perceptions of the logic of dominance. Throughout the novel, where Clinton's expert yet violent actions are foregrounded, the subliminal presence of the tribe and other nonhuman elements subtly undermines his dominance. Perhaps, most tellingly, the novelist describes the dam company's site and housing

as a 'colony' in the midst of the dense forest that surrounds it, a colony that operates by the conventions and social mores of the 'home' country.

The novel, therefore, is a critique of colonial attitudes that are based on binary notions of civilized and uncivilized. Colonialism, a product of human struggle over the environment and geography is in its very nature a hegemonic discourse as it is premised on the domination of the indigenous people by the colonizers. It is a narrative that silences other narratives, in this context, that of nature and the tribal people.

Land is of primary importance to indigenous and tribal communities, for a range of reasons, including the religious significance of the land, self-determination, identity and economic factors. For a variety of reasons, including the land's religious significance, one's ability to exercise one's own self-determination, sense of identity, and economic considerations, land is of utmost importance to indigenous and tribal societies. A significant economic asset is land. The majority of tribal people who live in forested areas are reliant on and revere the land since it provides for their basic necessities. The majority of these tribes are hunters and gatherers who have small agricultural plots where they grow food for their daily needs. They place more value on having access to and control over land than on actual ownership. They are now more exposed as a result of industrial-capitalist efforts to seize their land for construction projects. The novel's two tribal generations stand in for the conflict between tradition and modernity. The chief is a representative of an elder generation that values living in close connection with nature and relying on the forest for food. Through professions like working on the dam project, the younger generation believes in embracing modernity's advantages, such as better living and working conditions, higher levels of education, faster methods of communication, and longer and healthier lives. Helen Clinton, in contrast to her husband, shows compassion for the indigenous people. Helen is drawn to the tribe's eco-conscious way of life. She makes an effort to learn their language, pays them a visit, and becomes acquainted with their customs. When Clinton questions her about the origins of her affinity, she responds that there is no conflict between herself, her husband, and the tribal people because she respects their traditions and ties to the land that go back generations. She stands in contrast to Clinton and his exploitation of both the tribal people and the ecosystem because of her connection and identification with the tribes people.

Hazards of Anthropocentrism in the Coffey Dams

Urbanisation:

Urbanisation is one of the important environmental issues. Agrarian land is being transformed into the forest of cement and concrete. In *The Coffey Dams*, Markandaya firmly brings up the subject of urbanisation and its detrimental effects on the environment. In the imaginary setting of the book, it is mentioned that the Indian government contracts a British construction company to build a dam across a river in Malad, a hilly region populated by tribes. The project's head contractor is Clinton. He takes thousands of workers and equipment with him to start this endeavour. The novel's beginning describes how the construction of a dam urbanises the entire community. The development of a tranquil tribal village into a little town is the novel's central theme. The building company brings tonnes of equipment and tens of thousands of workers. The village's entire environment underwent a radical shift. Markandaya comments, "The plains and the hill country people, who had watched with awe the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle" (2). Soon the population of the village multiplies. Markandaya writes, "It was virtually

a small industrial town, gouged and blasted out of the hill side" (2). A road is constructed from the worksite to hill side. Urbanisation swallows the countryside and forest. The villagers see the gradual transformation of the seat of nature into a town.

Deforestation:

The anthropocentric mindset of the builders of the dam in the tribal village of Malnad also resulted in mass scale deforestation. We cannot undervalue the value of forests. We cannot survive without forests. Our ability to breathe comes from the creation of trees. Forests provide us with the food we eat. Several creatures, from chordates to non-chordates, rely on the forest both directly and indirectly. Biodiversity is stimulated by dense woods. Human survival depends on the diversity of life forms, and afforestation encourages biodiversity. A large number of biological processes that are crucial for the survival of both humans and non-human animals involve complexity and diversity of life forms. Bees, butterflies, bats, and hummingbirds, for instance, are essential to the pollination process. The merciless chopping of forest to quench the commercial thrust causes environmental deformity. Trees supply oxygen into the atmosphere through the process of photosynthesis. They absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen. In a way, trees purify the atmosphere by consuming carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen. The reduction of forests distorts the balance of atmospheric gases and generates ecological imbalance.

The environmental issue of deforestation at The Coffey Dams is strongly brought up by Markandaya. To construct the workshops, work buildings, car maintenance facilities, worker housing, engineer bungalows, amenity structures, water tower, ice and filter plant, pumping and power stations, a sizable area of forest was felled. A sizable area of the jungle is cleared in order to construct a colony and provide housing for the officials and employees. Mackendrick selects the location for the road, footbridge, and bungalows, which is across the river from Clinton's Lines. In a forest setting, he builds homes. To give bungalows a more natural appearance, the trees have been pruned and lopped.

Noise Pollution:

Moderate noise is harmless, but if it is too loud it can have a detrimental effect on our health. Exposure to excessive noise causes stress, hearing problems, communication difficulties, poor concentration, fatigue from lack of sleep and a loss of psychological wellbeing. The Coffey Dams places a lot of importance on the problem of noise pollution. The novel talks on the negative effects of noise. A temporary dam called a coffer dam is built across a river to change the river's course and create a dry area where the main dam may be constructed. In Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams* two coffer dams, upstream and downstream coffer dams were proposed to be built. The coffer dams are built by dynamite blasting. It was a hilly terrain, therefore to make a water channel, 25 tonnes of dynamite were employed, shattering the hilly area's unbroken calm. Clatter and clamour are produced by the constant bombardment. Markandaya states, "Twenty explosions, close on twenty-five tons of dynamite splitting open the valley in symmetrical calculated pattern" (50). Helen, wife of Clinton assumes the calmness of the rural area before the advent of the dam project. Helen says to Bashiam, "It must have been quiet, before we came before the blasting began" (43). In *The Coffey Dams*, the ceaseless clamour of men, machines and blasting disrupt the peaceful atmosphere of the hill country. Markandaya writes, "The silence was now permanently fractured. At dawn, at noon, by night, machines thundered and pounded; land and air vibrated spasmodically to the dull crump of

explosions” (105). The shock waves after the explosion tremor the barracks, the bungalows, the leisure blocks and tribal settlement. The whole area shivers with the noise of the working machine and explosion. The dust, the noise and the fretfulness spread all over. The river located the upriver feels the onslaught most. The base of the hill on which the displaced tribals are settled is peculiarly affected. Helen suggests the headman to shift somewhere else to protect the huts from the wind and the tremor but the headman refuses to shift because his people are depending on water, they are tied to the river. Helen thinks about the displaced villagers, “They had been pushed as far as they could go” (107). When the moving waves from the blasting shack the bed of the valley, the dust flows through their rickety huts and settles gritty in every nook and cranny. Helen is very sympathetic towards the pangs and problems of the forest dwellers. She discusses with Clinton the impact of the shocking waves on the huts of the tribesmen. She explains to Clinton how they are suffering due to intolerable noise created out of blasting and the clatter of the machines. Illustrating the miserable condition of the huts amid powerful ceaseless noise, Helen says to Clinton, “They're rattled around like peas in a tin” (107). Thus, the peak level of sound creates instantaneous damage to village people.

To sum up it can thus be said that, Anthropocentrism promotes the division of man from nature and the use of the environment as a means of human gain. Anthropocentrism is ethically imperfect as it sees humans as the only loci of reason. This thinking fails to take into account the abilities of animals to live according to ecological laws and to communicate with each other. It is largely anthropocentric thinking in the form of economic development, often at the expense of the environment and natural resources, that has led to the current environmental crisis which has been highlighted by Markandaya in her novel *The Coffey Dams*. We have a moral and ethical imperative to pass on the Earth in a pristine condition to future generations. Therefore, it is essential that we transcend anthropocentrism.

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