

Encroachment and Exploitation in Kamala Markandaya's novels

Nectar in a Sieve and The Coffer Dams

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Markandaya, one of the major Indo-Anglian woman novelists highlights the theme of East-West encounter in almost all her novels. The introduction of industrialization, the encroachment of western technology in the Indian soil, apartheid and identity crisis are the under currents of the East-West theme. Encroachment and Exploitation deals with the exploitation caused by industrialization which upset the life of the peasant community in a remote village in South India. In The Coffer Dams the encroachment of western technology spoils the tranquility of the tribal folks.

The fictional world of Kamala Markandaya is a world of versus-
Portraying a clashing culture of versus- the East vs. the West,
One race vs. another, colonized vs. colonizer, industrialization
Vs. ecological and ethical environment [...] and so on.

Singh

The two organic evils inherent in any social order are encroachment and exploitation. "Trespass upon the property, domain rights of another, especially stealthily or by gradual advances is encroachment according to Webster's Encyclopedia". An individual is exploited whenever advantage is taken of his ignorance or tolerance, his weakness or weariness or to seize his goods forcefully or demand his services at less cost. It is a common factor that the rich rob the poor of their land or property. Moreover the landlords draw their resources from the fertile and cultivated fields and swallow their wealth while the farmers or cultivators die of hunger and are never allowed to enjoy their booty.

Kamala Markandaya has firsthand knowledge of the troubles and turmoil's of the Indian lower rung because of encroachment and exploitation. Her novels *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Coffers* are records of the suppression and oppression of the farmers and tribal's because of the advent of industrialization and introduction of western technology.

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a realistic portrayal of the impact of industrialization on a farming community in a remote village of South India. Joseph remarks that, "Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is an artistic and realistic depiction of the exodus caused by the infringement of modern industry on the traditional village community and the age-old rural way of life and consequent rootlessness"(38). The tannery encroaches the village and most of the land is acquired for a high price by the White Sahib. The village land owners, tempted by the lure of money sell their land to tannery. By seeing this Rukmani says, "They had invaded our village with clatter and din, had taken from us the maidan where our children played, and had made the bazaar prices too high for us" (NS 27-28).

The tannery owners laid the foundations of an industrialized society based on the principles of exploitation of labour. The villagers led a happy and healthy life before the tannery encroached their soil. The atmosphere of the village is turned to be noisy, stinking and over crowded because of the tannery. It not only breaks the ecology but also the economy of the village in a rough manner. This makes Rukmani rage against the installation of the tannery in the village. Rukmani utters in anger:

Never, never. They may live in our midst but I can never accept them,
For they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to
barter and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our
children go without the food. (NS28)

Nathan angrily says to Rukmani "Foolish woman, there is no going back. Bend like the grass that you do not break" (NS 28).

Due to the establishment of the tannery, the whole structure of the village collapses. As a result there is price hike and the poor villagers are unable to buy things. According to Rukmani, the tannery exemplifies modernization, exploitation of the poor labourers and destruction of the whole village community.

Just as the tannery is the cause of dispossession of the villagers in Nectar in a Sieve the tribals of a remote village in The Coffers become dispossessed due to the dam building project. Katamble points out:

“The Coffers Dam, one of the latest novels on the theme of the ‘technological Invasion’ coupled with the East-West encounter, we find a depiction of the Conflict and reconciliation between man and machine with reference to the construction of a dam on a river near a tribal village in south India”.(54)

The rustics are forced to vacate their familiar abode because the construction engineers require the place for building their sophisticated bungalows. As the tribal colony is the suitable place to construct the English dwelling the tribals are forced to quit. They find that no other arrangement is made for their accommodation. They become passive victims and the aliens exploit them endlessly.

Kamala Markandaya makes the encroachment of the westerners in the tribal village explicit when they construct a dam across the river. The tribals are asked to leave the place where they lived. The tribals are dislodged from the site of the dam. In this context Bashiam remarks, ‘when they were told to go, they went without protest. Just got up and walked away, like animals. They didn’t want to leave it, they were persuaded’ (CD 56-57).

The innocent natives look upon Clinton as a man of wealth and sophistication. But he is typical English “builder”. For him concrete and steel are matters of concern rather than human beings with flesh and blood. Afzal Khan shows Clinton as “an arch realist and pragmatist, who has no sympathy for the mythic, spiritual propensities of local people”(124). In the beginning the villagers and tribals welcome the construction of the dam very warmly. They say that it is a boon of technology. Bashim one of the tribals tells happily to Helen” Machines are to me what they are to your husband. They have given me another way of life” (CD 54).

Later on when the natives face problems of survival they feel disgusted at the construction project. When their land is encroached they are shocked. They work day and night like animals but the British officers have no sympathy for the tribals. They treat them like bonded labourers and often they are wageless.

The simple tribals look with awe and amazement the hovering of helicopters and the constant operation of cranes in the jungle. They are too primitive to understand the need for the construction project in their hilly region. The plan for constructing a dam across the river gets finalized. “A year for the diversion channel to take the altered course of the river. A concurrent year for the coffer dams

to stem its flow. Two years for the main dam to rise between the coffers” (CD 20). The tribals are too passive even to protest against the scheme of the west. They are exploited unawares.

The sinister consequences of industrialization and modernization, fall with a bang on the farming community in Nectar in a Sieve and the tribal flocks in The Coffers Dams. Both the groups are exploited ruthlessly by the west and they are silent sufferers. Like a herd of cattle they swallow their sorrow in secret. They cannot raise their voice to question the white men who are in possession of their land. They raise their brow in suspense without knowing the course of action.

In Nectar in a Sieve, Rukmani and Nathan, the farmer couple and many families in the village are affected by the tannery. Industrialization not only upsets the agrarian economy of the villagers but also has a great impact on the lives of the villagers. The Victorian writers were opposed to industrialization when it was introduced in England. William Morris hated the advent of industrialization because it destroyed the harmony of the countryside and John Ruskin simply stood for a rural society. Kamala Markandaya also shares this aversion to industrialization because it is an agent of exploitation. She projects her view through Rukmani when the tannery causes disintegration of families in the village. Rukmani ruminates:

My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed
by its ruthlessness. And there were others its touch had scathed. Janaki, and her
family, the hapless Chakli Kannan, Kunthi even[...](NS 134)

Nathan and Rukmani suffer the pangs of hunger due to poverty. Rukmani has little rice in her store and hopes that times will be better. Kenny shouts at her, “Times are better, times are better. Times will not be better for many months. Meanwhile you will suffer and die” (NS4). The crops in the field are completely destroyed and their barn is empty. They have to wait in suspense until the next harvest. They have to live on salted fish, roots and leaves, the fruits of the prickly pear and plantains.

Another evil effect of industrialization is that the young men of the village are weaned away from the land and they seek employment in the tannery in spite of their mother’s strong opposition . When the children starve without food Arjun, Rukmani’s eldest son makes a quick decision not to work as a tenant farmer and join in the tannery. To his mother he replies, “I am tired of seeing my brothers hungry. I do not care, the important thing is to eat”(NS 51).

The tannery remains closed for two days due to the conflict between the labourers and the management. Arjun and Thambi join many meetings that take place against the officials of the tannery because they realize that they are exploited by the west. Thambi says that, “We shall not go

back until our demands are met. We do not ask for charity, but for that which is our due”(NS 65). They understand that it is capitalistic exploitation and oppression of the common labourer. Rukmani tells Nathan, “ Did I not say no good would come to it? Now look into what mess your sons have led us!”(NS 66). Due to poverty both Arjun and Thambi decide to go to Ceylon, a distant land to be lost forever. The third son Murugan goes to the city to search for his livelihood. Their pangs of hunger is so great that they eat grass. Among all the members in the family, Kuti, the youngest son suffers intensely.

Unable to bear the suffering of Kuti, Ira sells her flesh to feed him. Ira is an image of human degradation that hunger brings because of industrialization. Rukmani, the mother is pained because of the moral lapse of Ira and she utters sadly,”Ira had ruined herself at the hands of the throngs that the tannery attracted.”(NS 134).Though her parents try to persuade her against her sinful way of earning money, she clings to it, for she must save her starving brother and hungry parents.

Rukmani’s son Raja is an employee in the tannery and he is accused of stealing a calf- skin. The tannery officials are so cruel and hard- hearted, that he is beaten to death. Rukmani cannot believe that her Raja is a thief. She utters painfully,”You cannot blame my son, we live from hand to mouth, as you can see [...] there is no wealth here, such as your goods might have brought”(NS 91).

The tannery not only shatters Rukmani’s family but it also destroys other families in the village. Janaki’s family has to quit the village in order to earn their livelihood. The village cobbler is left jobless and he leaves his native abode to find pastures new. Old granny dies at the street due to starvation.

Kunti welcomes industrialization at first and later she herself becomes a victim of its destructive forces. Kamala Markandaya reveals how man is exploited by modern industrialization. She strikes both at nature and the landlordism in rural India.

Nectar in a sieve is the fictional epic on Indian life, which reveals the havoc of hunger, the evils of industrialization, the tension between tradition and modernity and nature both in its pink petals and red claws, from the matrix of human existence in rural India.

Nathan and Rukmani suffer in their village and later they are forced to leave their native soil. Rukmani’s observation is heart-rending. She ponders.

Some how I had always felt the tannery would eventually be our undoing. I had known it since the day the carts had come with their loads of bricks and noisy

dusty men, staining the clear soft greens that had once coloured our village and cleaving its cool silences with clamour. (NS 133-34)

Nathan is an average man, a simple son of the soil and he draws all his sustenance from his own land. When the agent of the landlord demands the dues that he has to pay, Nathan stands as a helpless man. When he is asked to quit the land he is baffled. He is forced to forfeit his role as a farmer and its simple dignity. He cannot think of a life away from his beloved land in which he has been sweating for nearly thirty years.

Rukmani and Nathan sojourn to the city to trace their son in vain. They are reduced to the state of beggars. They work in a stone-quarry as stone breakers, an unfamiliar job which tests their nerves. Nathan is completely broken because of the mental and physical stress. He thinks that it is better to go to the village than to suffer in a new place. He tells Rukmani, "Better to starve, where we were bred than live here" (NS 167). Nathan passes away due to starvation and sufferings

Similarly in *The Coffin Dams* the tribals suffer intensely. Clinton, the chief engineer wants to complete the dam construction according to the agreed schedule before the monsoon. He is least bothered about the tribes. Clinton is not at all drawn to the emotional and mythic suffering of the Indians, but only to the emotional and mythic suffering of the Indians, but only to the rational and scientific work mode. "In his system of business one cannot stop work even if dead human bodies have to be rescued" (Menon 165). When Helen tells him to go slow he replies adamantly, "My work, he said, from mounting conviction which loomed tall as a mountain now; my dam my business" (CD 142).

Clinton as a workaholic does not allow the workers to rest for a while. Aithal aptly remarks, "he pushes them like a slave driver" (55). Though the workers are enraged they never utter a word of protest against their white masters. Whenever Clinton hears the labour problem on the project site, he roars with anger, "Dock their pay and you will have them wrapping themselves round your feet-you know what these people are live from hand to mouth" (CD 62-63). In spite of Clinton's harsh treatment, groups of unemployed Indian labours hoard at the door of the British engineers offering their humble service to them.

During the construction of the dam there were two accidents in which many tribals lost their lives. In the first accident two labourers Bailey and Wilkins died. In the second accident forty-two men fell into the river. Two bodies of the dead Indians could not be recovered because the rock had jammed them. When Mackendrick finds possibilities of the recovery of the bodies Clinton retorts, rather than delay the work, "their bodies can be incorporated. Into the structure" (CD 188) exhibiting his nature of exploiting the Indians.

When Krishnan and his companions strike work for the recovery of the dead bodies, Clinton is indifferent. Even after their death, they are not given a proper burial. Instead of uttering a word of sympathy, he urges the technicians and other workers to continue the work without any kind of disruption. Clinton uses two different scales, one for the English and other for the Indians, to measure the tragedy at the construction site. This incident explains the nature of the white boss and how the East is exploited by the West.

Bashiam, a tribal also suffers a lot after entering into the world of western technology. At first he welcomes machines and the construction project. He willingly offers himself to work in the construction of a dam. He becomes a crane operator, rather a dangerous job. He himself has chosen to cut off from his tribe and their mythic spiritual base. Later he is doubly an outcast both from his tribe and from British for whom he has worked.

When the crane collapses Bashiam escapes with some injuries. But both the British and the Indian officers show no sympathy to him. They also shun the presence of Bashiam and call him 'Jungly Wallah'. Markandaya describes the exploited state of Bashiam as,

an outsider detribalised [...]. Sometimes, without undue, agonizing, he acknowledged the truth of it. He also knew in his bones that, however de-tribalised he might be, birth and upbringing within the tribe gave him race knowledge that could never be acquired by the real outsider. (CD 93)

The farming community in Nectar in a sieve and the tribal folks in The Cofferdams suffer because of encroachment and exploitation. Industrialization and modernization degrade and deteriorate the human values. Through these two novels Nectar in a Sieve and The Cofferdams Kamala Markandaya shows how the tradition-bound peasant and tribal culture disintegrates on the physical, emotional and moral plane.

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