



## Damned Nature, Silenced Women: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams*

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**Abstract:** Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams* offers an ecofeminist critique, exposing how patriarchal capitalism drives the parallel exploitation of women and the natural world. The author juxtaposes the character of Helen Clinton and the symbolism of the hydroelectric dam project to reveal colonial-modern development as a system of patriarchal domination that renders nature "damned" and women "silenced." Using the ecofeminist frameworks of Vandana Shiva, Karen J. Warren, and Maria Mies, this article argues that *The Coffey Dams* exposes the structural link between environmental degradation and gendered oppression. Ultimately, it highlights Helen as a primary figure of ecofeminist resistance.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Nature, Environment, Women, Damned, Silenced

Ecofeminism is a social movement that links women and nature, recognising their deep connection and seeking solutions that address the challenges faced by both. It is not just a philosophy, but also a way of viewing the world through the combined lens of ecology and feminism. This unique approach brings together two distinct fields into a single, unified perspective. Greta Gaard strongly defines ecofeminism as calling "for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1). Coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), ecofeminism emerged as a critical framework linking women's oppression directly to the exploitation of nature. Ecofeminism was developed through numerous workshops and conferences and was profoundly influenced by the Environmental Justice movement. In the Indian context, Vandana Shiva's theories in *Staying Alive* (1988) and *Ecofeminism* (1993, co-authored with Maria Mies) rooted the ecofeminist movement in grassroots activism, as in the famous Chipko women's tree-hugging protests in the foothills of the Himalayas. This movement aimed to restrict commercial logging and deforestation, causing soil erosion, floods and loss of livelihood for local communities.

Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffey Dams* anticipates many of these concerns. Set against a British-led hydroelectric project in a tribal region of post-Independence India, the novel stages a confrontation between two value systems: one rooted in technological progress and material gain, the other in ecological harmony and human dignity. At the heart of this confrontation stands Helen Clinton, whose evolving consciousness and ethical resistance position her as an ecofeminist subject within the text. This article offers a nuanced ecofeminist analysis of *The Coffey Dams*, exploring how Markandaya intersects environmental exploitation with the "silencing" of women. Through this lens, Helen's trajectory serves as a potent critique of patriarchal capitalism's systematic violence against both landscape and the marginalised.

Ecofeminist theory argues that the subjugation of women and the destruction of nature are not interconnected results of a patriarchal worldview built on hierarchical dualisms: culture/nature, man/woman, reason/emotion, civilized/primitive. Karen J. Warren (1990) framed ecofeminism as a critique of these binary dualisms, demonstrating how they are used to justify the oppression of marginalised "Other," be it women, indigenous communities, or the nonhuman environment. Focusing on India, Vandana Shiva's research illuminates the vital link between women and nature, showing how the subsistence practices of rural peasants and forest dwellers



embody true ecological sustainability. For Shiva, the “feminine principle” is an ethical stance, not a biological essence. It defines a way of living that values care, reciprocity, and sustaining life over extraction and dominance.

Crucial to decoding Helen’s character in *The Coffer Dams*, this ethical principle positions her as an ecofeminist force resisting the patriarchal logic of the dam project. Her husband Clinton, views the river as a wild force, uncontrolled, and wasteful: “. . . the turbulent river that rose in the lakes and valleys of the South Indian highlands and thundered through inaccessible gorges of its hills and jungles down plains with prodigal waste” (Markandaya 3). He wants to conquer, mechanise, and subjugate for industrial progress: “It ran deeply here, this river which two thousand men and ten thousand tons of equipment had so far assembled to tame” (Markandaya 29). To him, the jungle is not a living ecosystem but as a construction site: “A builder: The world ran through his mind with a clear keen pleasure as he walked briskly past the living area to the busy work site, seeing not welter of men and machines but not only his vision, the dam that would arise with blueprint at this point, exactly as they had planned it” (Markandaya 2). Even the surrounding people and machines fade away, replaced by his “vision” of the dam. His imagination is already reshaping the natural landscape into a structured engineering design. To him, the jungle is a trackless wilderness. The author writes, “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” (Markandaya 6). His failure to recognise individual workers also mirrors a colonial mindset that reduces the tribal people and their environment to anonymous objects within the project.

Markandaya exposes Clinton’s disregard for the workers’ lives and their connection to the jungle: “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” (Markandaya 6). Driven only by the work schedule, he subordinates both nature and humanity to the mechanical rhythm of construction. Clinton’s warning to Helen “not to drink their polluted water” effectively portrays the jungle as dangerous and contaminated. His reminder that “they were in tiger country” (20) underscores his deep-seated fear of the non-human world. Unlike Helen, who is drawn to the jungle and its wildlife, Clinton treats the natural world as a hostile territory to be resisted.

Clinton fails to see nature as a living system with intrinsic value, viewing it instead as an obstacle to the dam. This perspective stands in stark contrast to Bashim’s intimate knowledge of the river, forest, and seasons. Unlike Clinton, Bashim acknowledges the impossibility of fully controlling the natural world: “They made their plans, seduced by statistics: but he had seen what a cyclone could do, had cowered before the storms that swept down the hills to burst in the valleys, knew what mincemeat a rogue monsoon could make in one night of the most careful design” (Markandaya 23). Thus, Clinton symbolises technological arrogance, whereas Bashim embodies an ecological wisdom rooted in lived experience. This contrast critiques the colonial mindset that falsely assumes modern engineering can conquer natural forces without respecting local populations or environmental rhythms.

Helen Clinton ultimately becomes the novel’s moral and ecological compass. She rejects her identity as an English Memsahib to assimilate into the native culture. Identifying with the tribals and the natural world in stark contrast to her husband, the epitome of patriarchal, technocratic rationality. The novelist describes Helen’s preference to enjoy

watching animals, birds in the forest, “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, finches, hill mynahs, kingfishers or two -a dozen other kinds she could not name” (Markandaya 82).

Her ecophilia is evident in her closeness to with the local tribal community, the natural landscape. Markandaya narrates Helen’s quiet visits to tribal settlements, and her bond with the natural landscape:

There were other settlements too, to which over the months word spread, where she found herself welcomed; but they were too distant for regular visiting, and her first incursion became her stamping ground. She played with



the children, rubbed flea powder into the dogs' yellow coats, watched the crops grow, watched men and women at work, sated herself with watching, and most of all she marvelled 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. (Markandaya 39)

The following passage reveals Helen's deep empathy and sense of kinship for displaced tribal communities:

Helen sat alone in the darkness, turning over in her hands the broken bits of pottery. It had been part of some women's life once, not very long ago; she had filled it with water and scoured it, cooked in it and fed her family -the earthenware was pebble-smooth from use. Then they had all gone away and the vessels had been broken and left behind. Not one or two: enough for several families, the cooking pots of a whole community. (Markandaya 24)

Helen's journey exemplifies active ecofeminist resistance against oppression, moving beyond passive endurance to directly reject Clinton's technocratic dominance. By prioritising tribal workers' safety and respecting monsoon rhythms, she champions a philosophy of coexistence. Her action exposes the stark, life-denying limitations of her husband's colonial and patriarchal worldview.

Despite being dominated and exploited by her husband, she fiercely resists the patriarchal systems that oppress both women and the natural world. By recognising the indigenous population as equal human beings and actively voicing the shared struggles of women and nature, she attempts to awaken her husband to the vital need for a deeply compassionate relationship between humanity and the environment. Through this lens, Helen's screen persona champions the core tenets of ecofeminism -fostering empathy for nature and marginalised communities, resisting patriarchal domination, and demanding intersectional ecological justice. Her character arc charts an evolving connection to her identity and environment, defining her as a reverse -diaspora figure who rejects colonial superiority to integrate into indigenous ecologies.

The coffer dam itself serves as a potent ecofeminist symbol. While materially a temporary structure built to exclude water for construction, metaphorically, it represents the containment of natural forces—and, by extension, female bodies and voices. Just as the dam disrupts the river's flow, patriarchal modernity constrains both women's agency and ecological balance. Markandaya demonstrates that such developmental interventions are far from neutral; driven by male patronage and colonial power, they prioritise material gain over spiritual and ecological well-being. The novel thus critiques the myth of progress, revealing how state-led development fundamentally entails the displacement, dispossession, and silencing of women and marginalized communities.

The dam project epitomises the ecofeminist Karen J. Warren's concept of the "logic of domination" -a patriarchal, capitalist worldview that reduces both women and nature to manageable resources rather than recognising them as subjects with inherent rights. Clinton, As the project's chief engineer, Clinton instantiates this logic by reducing the landscape to a problem to be solved, the indigenous population to obstacles to be overcome, and his wife to a subordinate to be controlled.

The novel foregrounds the precarity of tribal women whose ancestral lands and ecosystems face industrial erasure. Their voices are systematically marginalised within a discourse of modernisation that pathologises resistance as backwardness. Helen's empathy, however, bridges this ideological chasm; by centring their concerns and amplifying their subaltern struggles, she consciously divests from the dominant narrative of inevitable progress. Thus, the title "silenced women" represents more than individual characters; they embody everyone whose knowledge, labour, and connection to the land are erased by patriarchal capitalist development. Markandaya's narrative thus aligns with Shiva's ecofeminist framework, highlighting how grassroots women embody the "feminine principle" by resisting ecological destruction through localised, ethical praxis.



The novel exposes the male impulse to dominate both women and the natural world, illustrating how the exploitation of women mirrors the destruction of nature. In contrast, Helen represents a female community that cherishes and protects the environment, reflecting its intrinsic qualities.

Markandaya contrasts two conflicting worldviews: a system based on spiritual and ecological harmony versus one driven by material extraction and control. The dam project perfectly embodies this exploitative approach, offering electricity and modernity at the cost of environmental disruption and cultural erasure. Nature is ultimately “damned” by this mindset -cursed by human intervention, robbed of its sanctity, and reduced to a commodity.

Helen’s resistance is both ecological and ethical. She views nature not as a resource but as a living entity bound to human dignity and cultural identity. This biophilia—her deep reverence for nature—positions her as a stark counterforce to the dam’s oppressive logic. In *The Coffer Dams*, Helen’s journey serves as a powerful archetype of ecofeminist resistance against patriarchal and colonial oppression. Through a sharp critique of capitalism’s complicity in the exploitation of women and the natural world, Markandaya positions Helen as the vehicle through which the novel’s ecofeminist subtext is decoded. Rather than offering a passive or purely reactive resistance, Helen champions a constructive alternative centred on the ethic of care, mutual reciprocity, and environmental balance.

By prioritising sustainability, community, and life-preservation over resource extraction, this ethic mirrors global ecofeminist calls to re-examine traditional metrics of development. control. Helen’s advocacy for both women and nature thus establishes her as a powerful model of ecofeminist praxis within the novel.

Amid escalating ecological crises and entrenched environmental marginalisation, *The Coffer Dams* retains an enduring, prescient relevance. Markandaya’s ecofeminist vision prompts a foundational dismantling of modern developmentalist models, arguing instead for a paradigm centred on care, reciprocity, and eco-social justice. Through the paired marginalisation and ultimate resistance of Helen and the tribal community, the narrative disrupts the exploitative impulses of capitalist patriarchy, charting a path toward a liberatory future where neither nature nor women are suppressed. Ultimately, Markandaya’s novel transcends a mere critique of colonial-modern development; it functions as a call to action. The text urges readers to adopt an ecofeminist ethic that honours the interconnectedness of all life while actively resisting the structures of domination that endanger both women and the environment.

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