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THE COFFER DAMS AND THE MAKING OF CIVILISED CULTURE REVISITED

Abstract: *Through the analysis of Kamala Markandaya's* The Coffer Dams *and drawing on the groundbreaking works of the leading postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha, Fanon, Said and Young, this paper explores the East-West power relations in the postcolonial period that has brought about Western technological imperialism perpetuating the dynamics of Orientalism. The aim of this paper is to show how the Eastern stereotyped image is reinforced in the mechanised tech world, emphasising the fact that the binary oppositions such as nature/culture and civilised/uncivilised have survived colonialism spanning into the postcolonial tech age. Like its precursor, the neo-colonial project came to be justified by the need to bring civilisation to the Eastern world, but this time, by means of technological transformation and modernisation. This paper discloses that the Other remains the Other in the postcolonial Western mind because technology, as a new form of power, has sharpened the distinction between Western superiority and Eastern inferiority. Moreover, it is evident that the means may change but the desire to claim, control and curb the land of the Other still remains, as well as the price that has to be paid – that of dehumanisation and mechanisation of human beings.*

Keywords: *postcolonial East-West power relations, dehumanisation, technological imperialism, binary oppositions.*

1. Introduction

Many Indian authors have delved into the issue of the East-West power relations during colonialism. Kamala Markandaya revisits this topic from a postcolonial perspective, tackling the issue of the East-West encounter in the New Age, strongly

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marked by materialism, industrialism and technological development. The colonial discourse draws heavily on the conceptions of the Orient concocted by the Occident since, as Said explains (1979: 1-2), "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience". Said (1979: 3) elaborates further saying that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self". In other words, the proponents of colonialism and imperialism supported the idea of Western superiority over Eastern backwardness. Through her work *The Coffer Dams*, Markandaya clearly shows that the postcolonial discourse as well abounds in the Western conceptions of the Orient which has remained "one of…[the] most recurring images of the Other" (Said 1979: 1) – i.e., of the underground self. The West presented the East in a certain stereotyped way during colonialism, which could not be easily altered in the postcolonial era. Similar misconceptions, if not the same, have pervaded both the Western and the Westernised postcolonial mind. Thus, it is important to note that all those misconceptions sprouted from "[the] unchallenged [Western] centrality", "according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections", as well as generalisations easily transmuted into "immutable law[s]" (Said 1979: 8, 86). After all, collective abstractions and generalisations facilitated and made way for human depredation and the violent transformation of Eastern society. Patently, it is easier to exert violence over the subjects stripped of humanity and reduced to mere objects of an allegedly benevolent, either social or tech revolution.

The plot of *The Coffer Dams* revolves around the construction of a dam in the tribal area of the South Indian highlands, in the post-independence era, by a group of British engineers led by Howard Clinton and his partner Mackendrick. The successful completion of the Great Dam project requires joining forces with Indian contractors led by Krishnan, as well as tribal people – the most skilful technician of which is undoubtedly Bashiam – and resolving racial and cultural conflicts steeped in history. For fear of the advancing monsoons, the Indian and tribal labourers are pressured into working around the clock at breakneck speed by Clinton and other British contractors such as Rawlings who are insensitive to the Eastern sorrows, which consequently leads to even greater animosity between the East and the West. Slaving away at the construction site causes a terrible strain on all the workers whose lives are put in danger. When the first rains fall and the level of the river rises threatening the successful completion of the Great Dam project, both British and Indian camps are practically driven to breaking point. What remains to be seen, when the trials come, is whether bringing modernity to the hills and plains of the tribal region takes precedence over saving human lives.

2. The traces of colonialism

Undoubtedly, Orientalism – explained by Said (1979: 3) as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" – and colonial practices did not vanish into thin air the moment the colonised territories gained independence but continued to shape the Orient above all ideologically and scientifically in the postcolonial period. Along with technological restructuring and dominance, Western materialistic values have had a profound influence on the postcolonial Eastern society portrayed in Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*. The Great Dam project may be considered another Western cultural enterprise maintaining the relationship of power and hegemony between the Occident and the Orient to a certain degree. Nonetheless, Said (1979: 12) underlines the fact that [there is] "an uneven exchange [of] various kinds of power...[not only] power political, [but also] power intellectual, power cultural, power moral". It is precisely this relationship of technological and industrial domination that perpetuates the dynamics of Orientalism since the notion of hegemony seems to be identified with the industrial West, as Said notes (1979: 7). Consequently, what the new postcolonial age has brought about is intellectual or – in this very case – technological imperialism representing "a salutary reminder of the persistent 'neo-colonial' relations within the 'new' world order and the multinational division of labour" (Bhabha, 2004: 9). Intellectual imperialism, Alatas elucidates (2000: 33), implies that the West is regarded highly developed in technological and industrial terms, while the East, seen as unskilled and inept, heavily depends on Western expertise. Said (1979: 19, 26) agrees as well that Orientalism exploits the idea of Western intellectual authority over the Orient whose stereotyped image is reinforced in the new tech age. At one point in the novel, Krishnan, an Indian technician, mentions that "he knew even before they began that he was going to be overruled [by the Western contractors], not tyrannically but logically and with cogent reason" (TCD: 21). Indubitably, racism and ethnocentrism sowed the seeds of this form of intellectual dominance inasmuch as the non-Western world had long been considered inferior by the colonisers primarily in culture, religion, morality and intellect, Alatas states (2000: 33-34). In the postcolonial period, much emphasis is placed on technological inferiority, as evidenced by Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*. The intellectual relations between the Western contractors and the Eastern workers in the novel are mostly expressed by means of technology. Nevertheless, Markandaya clearly shows that the Indians in the novel are deemed not only technologically but also racially inferior, thus employing literature as a means of unveiling the ulterior backdrop of imperialism and the remnants of still pervasive imperial thought.

2.1 Dehumanisation loading again

Along with racism, imperialism and stereotypes, technology as well gives rise to dehumanising ideologies that have a bearing on the life of both the (ex-) colonised and the (former) colonisers. "[Being] woefully devoid of human interest", technology is not able to bridge the gap between the East and the West, Aithal maintains (1987: 56). This is precisely another reason why the East is still considered inferior by the West in the postcolonial period. This line of thinking has remained unaltered, only the means of superiority have changed, technology being the new God. Therefore, one cannot but resign oneself to the fact that the postcolonial division of the world is seen through the prism of technology. Nonetheless, it is technology that has ultimately contributed to Western dehumanisation. To put it another way, materialism and mechanism of Occidental culture have made the postcolonial West dehumanised. When talking about the land of the Other, even Helen herself, although being a Western contractor's wife, confesses to the fact that "its density, the rampant furious growth affected her in a way that the ordered charm of a *restrained* civilisation would never do" (TCD: 29, my italics). Being quite lifeless, the restrained Western civilisation is not only dehumanised, but also dehumanising at the same time. Who is a man and who is a machine? – that is the question looming on the horizon. Or better to say, what is man in the new tech age? A machine, an object? On the other hand, unlike the restrained Western civilisation, the river – representing the land of the Other – has a life of its own. The machines and the men of the new tech age try to suffocate the river, their sound and fury overshadowing its heart-beat; but in the end it is the colonisers of the new tech age who are at the mercy of nature. The heart of the river always beats, whether softly or loudly, whereas the sound and the fury of the colonisers slowly die out at the advance of monsoons – seen by Jani (2010: 82) as "the resistance of the land…to capitalist modernity". Just as the river is the embodiment of the East, the machine is the embodiment of the West. Geetha (1991: 173) rightly observes that "…Markandaya uses the machine as a metaphor…to bring out the dangers of dehumanisation involved in a commitment to civilised culture".

2.2 The new age colonisers: technological imperialism in place

The way the Westerners perceive the river – as something to be forced into coercion and "harnessed to the requirements of machinery" (TCD: 30) – generally corresponds to the way they perceive both the Indian technicians and the tribesmen.

The river is compared to an animal, just like the Other, while the land is called "tiger country" (TCD: 25). The river i.e., the Other shrinks before the Western machinery, that is why it "dwindle[s] to its proper proportions" during the day (TCD: 31). The use of the adjective *proper* clearly shows the (former) colonisers' attitude towards the Other; be it men or nature, the Other is supposed to be caged, curbed and forced into compliance. The Western contractors do not want to listen to the Other, they want the (ex-) colonised to remain silent, voiceless – just as the East has always been – subjected to the Western sound and fury or, in Markandaya's words, the clutter and clamour (TCD: 30). Not only do the cofferdams literally represent the means for harnessing the river, but also, metaphorically speaking, for exerting control and demonstrating power over the East. Thus, being the embodiment of the East, the roar of the river stands for the shriek of the Other. Apart from the cofferdams, the flags erected on the river banks are yet another symbol of Western control. Although "the flags [bear] no emblems of empire" (TCD: 32) i.e., although the East is no longer under the official control of the West as the Western colony, the remnants of colonialism are still present in the novel, as well as the colonial practices and viewpoints spanning the colonial and the postcolonial age. Markandaya is wise to argue that the Westerners, "afraid of the rape of their minds" (TCD: 38), frantically stick to the age-old entrenched beliefs and stereotypes, displaying "a childish obstinacy that [has] no real foundation" (TCD: 39). What's more, the author herself openly uses the terms *colony* and *colonisers* (TCD: 36) as all the characters in the novel feel that some kind of hierarchy quite resembling the one established during the colonial times is still in place. In need of a cheap workforce, the Western contractors have no choice but to employ the local workers, simultaneously preserving the old state of play taking every matter into their hands and re-establishing the sense of superiority; whereas the locals, used to being inferior and compliant, just assume the same position perpetuating the old master-slave dynamics. "[Having] lived through and been soured by imperial insolence" (TCD: 37), Krishnan – one of the living remnants of colonialism himself – cannot but perceive the Western contractors as the new age colonisers, thus misconstruing an occasional act of British kindness as condescension and striving for "the wind of change that [is] blowing across the continents, making all men equal" (ibid.). Nonetheless, the West seems to be in no need of those "corrective draughts" (ibid.), recoiling from any further contact with the East that is still, as Fanon says (2008: 3), "[sealed] in [its] blackness" in the Western postcolonial mind. Consequently, the West is supposed to keep the East on track and lead by example, whereas the East is to follow in the (former) colonisers' footsteps so as not

to slide away. This is the reason why, according to Jani (2010: 65), Krishnan sees the postcolonial period "only as the continuing denial of the promise of national liberation". Moreover, the name of the construction site *Clinton's Lines* evokes the memories of 'glorious' colonial times marked by the Western rule over the Orient, which clearly indicates that not all ties with colonialism are cut. Being in charge of the tribal land as a Western contractor rekindles those lingering memories of the colonial past, helping Clinton summon back the feeling of supremacy deeply ingrained in the Western mind. Thus, Clinton's desire to undertake the Great Dam project may be interpreted as the (former) coloniser's attempt at taking control of the Indian subcontinent once again, though this time by technological means. The means may change but the desire to claim, control and curb the land of the Other still remains, as well as the desire to come into possession of the natural resources of the Orient and make use of their financial and commercial potential.

3. The inevitability of mechanisation and objectification

As above-mentioned, the postcolonial power structures depicted in the novel *The Coffer Dams* closely resemble those of colonialism, with the power dynamics remaining almost unchanged. Namely, the Westerners dominate while the Other is the one being dominated. The Westerners encroach on the land of the Other – not just the construction site but also the tribesmen's hearth and home – assuming absolute authority over the Great Dam project, while the Indian workers are ruthlessly exploited and utilised just like machines. In Said's words (1979: 36), "their blood…[is] put at the disposal of…[the] Western power", which is exactly what happens in the novel when many Indian lives are lost due to machine malfunctions. Furthermore, as Said suggests (1979: 35), Orientalism presupposes that "a subject [non-European] race [is] dominated by a [superior European] race that knows… what is good for [the Other] better than [the Other] could possibly know [himself]". Similarly, the Western contractors act as if they knew the Eastern terrain and the weather conditions better than the locals and thus they ignore the sound advice of the tribesmen rendering it unsolicited. Additionally, the Great Dam project is supposed to improve the standard of living of the (ex-) colonised and offer them prospects for a better future just as the colonial project was supposed to "[bring] [the colonised] out of the wretchedness of their decline and [turn] them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies" (ibid.). In both cases, establishing productive colonies or a higher standard of living comes at a certain cost – that of dehumanisation and mechanisation of human beings. Like its precursor, the

neo-colonial project – disguised also as a well-meaning one – came to be justified by the need to bring civilisation to the Eastern world, but this time by means of technology, transforming and modernising the tribal land.

Interestingly enough, when Cromer, among other authors, talks about the West (Said, 1979: 44), the Empire is equated with a machine, which makes it dehumanised in a way. Likewise, Clinton and Rawlings, the representatives of the Empire in the novel, leave the reader with the same impression of being dehumanised. The explanation lies in their "human detachment whose sign is the absence of sympathy covered by professional knowledge", Said carefully observes (1979: 104). The fact that Clinton does not perceive the locals as human beings but only as a means to an end i.e., the construction aid can be partly explained by his fixation on his vision of the Great Dam project. This neo-colonial project, concerned with "the human coin of future centuries" (TCD: 9), is supposed to harness the wilderness of the South Indian highlands, which would in turn curb the wild nature of the local inhabitants as well. In that sense, the phrase *the human coin* may not only refer to the human creation of an imposing watertight structure but also to the creation of humans – those of the new tech age. Admittedly, the very phrase *the human coin* used in the latter sense gives the impression that human beings are about to be objectified and depersonalised. To Clinton's mind, they surely are since "he never knew... whether Mackendrick's efficient recruiting organisation replaced one dark wave of humanity by another. They all looked the same to him" (TCD: 12). Even Helen's remark that Clinton should "think of them as human beings...and get beyond their skins" (TCD: 12) indicates that the locals are dehumanised in her husband's eyes. Besides, Clinton is indifferent to the fact that the locals had no choice but to move houses forgetting completely about that little episode – as he calls it – which confirms that their lives are insignificant for Clinton since they "just got up and went, like animals" (TCD: 27). From the Western point of view, it was the Other who occupied the site the Westerners needed and not vice versa, even though the Western contractors were the ones who had encroached upon the tribal land in the first place, unscrupulously claiming the possession of it for the sake of technological advancement. When talking about the locals who allegedly occupied the coveted construction site, while in fact living on that land from time immemorial, what immediately crosses Clinton's mind is how many huts had to be disassembled and not how many people had to be relocated – or better to say – uprooted. This line of thinking suggests that objects take precedence over human beings in the Western postcolonial mind, namely for the sake of technological progress – the process which turns out to be quite dehumanising. As Helen reveals, "a whole

community...had been persuaded to move" (TCD: 29). But persuasion, a word not intended to sound coercive, is just another name for intellectual imperialism, just an understatement – "the brand of this century" (ibid.), its coerciveness being disguised by contracts, negotiations, mutual agreement and cooperation.

As previously mentioned, the Empire concurrently appears to be dehumanised i.e., reduced to a mere machine and dehumanising due to perceiving the Easterners as mere objects of colonisation deprived of individuality and basic human essence. However, the question that arises is whether the working of the Empire i.e., the imperial machine is truly harmonious in *The Coffer Dams*, as Cromer would argue (Said, 1979: 104). Consequently, another issue looming on the horizon, pertaining to the novel, is whether the Empire is *at all* a highly functioning machine that has improved the locals' lives or rather contributed to their even greater suffering and the feeling of dislocation and unhomeliness. In other words, do the local interests of the Other in *The Coffer Dams* match the central interests of the Empire representatives? Is the loss of the local Indians greater than their gain as they witness "the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle" (TCD: 8)? At one point, Clinton seems to be immersed in his thoughts musing about the unjustified Western colonial rule over India. His feeling of uneasiness due to the contractors' encroachment upon the Indian land may imply that he is aware of the injustice done, at least subconsciously if nothing else. However, despite feeling "as if a bit of England had strayed on to soil where it had no business to be" (TCD: 11), Clinton does nothing to rectify the unjust state of play but perpetuates it since the Great Dam project allows the contractors to "carry their Englishness into the jungle with them" (TCD: 11), just as the colonial project once did. The following lines are illustrative of the way the (ex-)colonised are treated by the (former) colonisers in the postcolonial period, disclosing the awareness of the (ex-)colonised of the unjust treatment which they received during the colonial times and which they still receive in the postcolonial age (TCD: 19):

> [They] brush us off like flies, [Krishnan] thought, hurt and insult like splinters under [their] skin, despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. Beginners, he repeated bitterly, barred from knowledge and power...and the memory of those neglectful years lay in deep accusing pools in his mind. But it's over now, he said to himself. Our day is coming. The day when they will listen to us.
>
> And:
>
> Bashiam understood what Clinton had meant him to understand: that there was a place for him and another for Clinton, and that his position was not

only far below in the power scale, but that the towering and voracious terms of modern commitment diminished him to insignificance.

Obviously, the predefined social roles stemming from the colonial past have outlived the postcolonial present, resulting in "a discursive past-in-the-present" (Bhabha, 2004: 186). Indisputably, the hierarchical relationship between the centre and the periphery has remained unchanged. Apart from that, men seem insignificant in comparison with technology. Bashiam is just "a faceless cog in complex machinery" (TCD: 91), a part of the mechanism, objectified, completely anonymous, whose existence itself is given little significance outside the collective frame. It is only when Clinton felt personally involved with Bashiam due to his close relationship with Helen that he perceived him as a man for the very first time.

4. Binary oppositions strike again

During colonialism, it was not the knowledge of the Other that gave imperial power, but rather the appropriation of the truth and the creation of the narrative on the subject race in dire need of the higher Western power or – as Said would say (1979: 1) – "the European invention of the Orient". However, in spite of being deemed "culturally, intellectually, spiritually *outside* Europe and European civilisation", the Orient had "a special role to play *inside* Europe" (Said, 1979: 71). Namely, the very essence of Easternness was misused as the Western justification of the colonial project. On the other hand, postcolonialism has seen the rise of technology, the knowledge of which gives neo-colonial power – a technocrat being the new coloniser. Just as the colonial rule was justified by Orientalism, the neo-colonial rule seems to be justified by intellectual imperialism. Yet, the East-West dichotomy is still defined in terms of binary oppositions inasmuch as the Eastern irrationality, incompetence and ignorance are juxtaposed with the Western rationality, skill and expertise. Markandaya's novel *The Coffer Dams* is replete with the above-mentioned binaries, disclosing that the Other is still "contained and represented by dominating [Western] frameworks" (Said, 1979: 40) i.e., reduced to a mere Western projection or – in Bhabha's words (2004: 119) – "imprisoned in the circle of interpretation". Clinton's i.e., the (former) coloniser's stance towards the Eastern colonies is blatantly obvious – he thought of them as inept as he "encountered a chaotic mediaevalism that offended what was most vulnerable in him, his sense of order and efficiency" (TCD: 7). Drawing parallels between mediaeval and colonial times implies that Clinton saw the former colonies as belonging to a lower degree of civilisation. The way Clinton behaved towards

the natives during the colonial times resembles his postcolonial treatment of the (ex-)colonised. "...In his youth and wrath, he had grimly promised alarmed local populations to drag them kicking into the twentieth century by the seat of their pants if need be" (TCD: 8). To the (former) coloniser's mind, the local populations "limping behind in the modern race" (TCD: 18) needed to be civilised i.e., dragged into the twentieth century which symbolically stands for a higher degree of civilisation, especially due to all the technological advances that have been made. And they still do so as to keep pace with the new tech age. Accordingly, Young (2005: 88) is wise to note that "...civilisation [has] constantly been deployed as the defining characteristic of Western modernity". Besides, Clinton's remark that "civilisation, *such as* India could offer, [is] not too far away [from the tribal land]" (TCD: 13, my italics) also suggests that the (former) colonisers still regard the East as less civilised than the West – "[confined] to a secondary racial, cultural, ontological status" (Said, 1994: 59). Additionally, while musing about Helen, Clinton confesses to not being jealous of the tribesmen inasmuch as a romantic relationship between a British woman and an Easterner is inconceivable to him; however, he cannot say the same for the British technicians since "civilised men [are] another matter" (TCD: 25). Nevertheless, it is only later that Clinton feels a pang of jealousy because of Helen's close relationship with the tribesmen, especially Bashiam, spitefully saying that "[the] tribe['s] outstanding characteristic [is] the severe retardation of its civilisation" (TCD: 35). The phrase *its civilisation* clearly shows that Clinton wants to differentiate between Western civilisation and the civilisation of the Other. Evidently, the dichotomy between civilised and uncivilised men has survived colonialism spanning into the postcolonial tech age. Interestingly enough, the opening sentence of the novel reads: "It was a man's town" (TCD: 7). Thus, it may be possible that the author uses the word *man* throughout the novel on purpose, placing special emphasis on it, so as to highlight the fact that the 'uncivilised' locals are not mere objects of the Great Western project of any kind, be it a colonial or a postcolonial one, but living, breathing human beings – dehumanised only in the Western mind. Other Western contractors as well, such as Rawlings and Mackendrick, overtly express contempt and derision towards the Indian workers, putting emphasis on their lack of technical skill, ineptness and overall inferiority, convinced that the bungalows the Indians had built would fall down since "not one...was entirely free of faults. Walls bulged, roofs leaked, doors warped and rattled in their frames" (TCD: 14). Moreover, "[those] ailing structures seemed to [Mackendrick] a poor return for his *humanity*... [as] he had deliberately relaxed his vigilance in shame and atonement of his earlier unjustified strictures"

(ibid., my italics). The author's sarcasm mocking the concept of humanity makes the reader question the nature of basic human values. Undoubtedly, Bhabha (2004: 59) is wise to argue that "the very nature of humanity becomes estranged in the colonial condition" and it surely does in the neo-colonial one as well. However, one of the Western contractors confessed to the fact that the situation at home was not always a far cry from what they had encountered at the tribal land, which proves that common sense gave way to the age-old misconceptions and stereotypes from which partiality and bigotry ensued.

Not only do the Western contractors in the novel exploit nature, but also cheap Indian labour, perceiving the unskilled labourers as depersonalised objects, the components of the Great Dam mechanism. After all, in the eyes of the West, an Easterner is "*first* an Oriental, *second* a human being" (Said 1979: 102) – such line of thought being dangerously dehumanising. As Said further explicates (1979: 108, my italics), a Westerner "believes it [is] his human prerogative not only to manage the nonwhite world [and its resources] but also to own [them]" just because "he, unlike the Oriental, is a *true* human being". This is exactly what happens in *The Coffer Dams*. The Westerners want to curb Indian nature that is considered a mere Western subject, just like the Indians, seen as a less worthy backward race deprived of human essence. Bhabha (2004: 177) underlines the fact that "dualities in which the colonial space is traditionally divided [are] nature/culture [and] chaos/civility". Indubitably, such dualities are ubiquitous in the postcolonial period, as evidenced by Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*, insofar as the Great Dam project is set up with a view to taming wild Indian nature perceived as chaos and thus simultaneously the wild nature of the tribal people cut off from the civilised culture. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Western contractors lack some basic knowledge about the ways of nature – which may jeopardise the overall project – despite being more educated, skilful and better equipped than the Indian labourers. Clinging to racial stereotypes, Rawlings thinks of Krishnan as inexperienced and ignorant in every respect, even when it comes to his own land, the very country where he was born and bred, derisively saying "what the hell does [Krishnan] think we're building, a cow-shed?" (TCD: 19). However, relying on statistics rather than the knowledge of the natives will prove to be potentially hazardous as the Western contractors realise that the Great Dam project is at stake. For the people called backward, the Indians are quite advanced, having in mind the fact that it was them, not the Westerners, who were able to take a broader picture into account foreshadowing the calamity that would ensue. Unlike the Easterners who are capable of foreseeing and adjusting to the changing circumstances, the Westerners appear

inflexible and narrow-minded, unwilling to introduce changes into their "minutely planned, intricately dove-tailored construction project" (TCD: 18) with too tight a schedule and dehumanising working conditions. "They made their plans, seduced by statistics" (TCD: 23) believing that "no modern project could advance if one had first to allay every tribal anxiety" (TCD: 24); but [Bashiam] 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" (TCD: 23).

5. Deculturation and double colonisation

Moreover, apart from being dehumanised by the West, the East also takes part in its own dehumanisation by accepting and striving for the postcolonial Western values, primarily the materialistic ones, just as the West does. Young (2005: 4) explains this shift of focus by pinpointing the fact that the East-West encounter leads to "deculturation of the less powerful society and its transformation towards the norms of the West". The tribal chief himself witnesses how the locals "are becoming as money-mad as...foreigners" moaning for "[the] rubbish they buy from the camp-shop...tin cans and cardboard boots, and scented pigs' grease to plaster on their hair" (TCD: 72). It is evident that the locals go against their own nature trading their old way of life for money, something transient, devoid of real meaning and value. By saying that "a peace full of moaning" (TCD: 73) will ensue, the tribal chief implies that there will be no peace since "the man-eater will have its flesh" (ibid.). Undoubtedly, the Great Dam has changed their lives forever, their minds have been bent, their vision distorted and there is no turning back. They have been westernised, uprooted, derailed and lost their path along the way. Metaphorically speaking, the birds arousing Helen's curiosity throughout the novel may represent the Indians, while the crafty bird-catchers may stand for the British, their sweet voice promising better life conditions tempting the Other to step into the mechanised tech world. Consequently, the Indians get caged just as those poor birds – trapped in the material mechanised net. As for Bashiam, machines are a sort of perfection, otherwise unreachable for him. His love of machines has to do with his desire to overcome the constraints of racial stereotypes, "put away his badge of tribal backwardness and take on a responsible role" (TCD: 97), a role not marred by the colonial past and the colonial legacy. However, even the Indian technicians assume some characteristics of the (former) colonisers since they are also condescending to the tribesmen, calling Bashiam *jungly wallah* – a man of the jungle – or even

more disparagingly – *the civilised jungly wallah*. The question that arises is whether power structures are a necessary evil "turn[ing] the agent of history into a stranger, a double-agent living between the lines" (Bhabha, 1992: 143) performing the role of both the colonised and the coloniser. Just as the Western contractors regard the (ex-)colonised as less civilised, the Indian technicians consider the tribesmen to be inferior. In a western-like manner, the 'more civilised' Indians look down on the tribesmen, which practically makes them subjected to some sort of double colonisation. Nonetheless, despite being offended by Helen's belief that he "could be familiar with any aspect of the half-savage hill people's life" (TCD: 43), Krishnan calls the tribesmen *our people* placing no emphasis on the distinction between the two groups, for the sake of pinpointing the injustice done to all Easterners turned into the subaltern in their own country and deprived of their rightful position in their own society. Krishnan becomes conscious of the fact that uniting with the 'savages' he himself despises – just as other Indians – is needed in order to make room for the long-awaited wind of change and power shift, rendering all men equal.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, one cannot but notice a sort of triple dehumanisation at play in the new tech world. Namely, an Oriental – still not being quite human – needs to be (neo)-colonised and (neo)-civilised. Even technology is given higher overriding power, taking priority over the Indian workers in the novel who are dehumanised and deemed less worthy than technology, which – strangely enough – makes technology more human than the living, breathing Indians. Nevertheless, it is the very technology that has led to dehumanisation of the Western world. Moreover, the East also contributes to its own dehumanisation by holding onto the postcolonial Western views and showing little regard for the tribal people. However paradoxical it may seem, a dehumaniser becomes dehumanised, while inhuman turns human and vice versa. To put it in a nutshell, the Other remains the Other in the postcolonial Western mind because technology, as a new form of power, has sharpened the distinction between Western superiority and Eastern inferiority, which lies at the heart of Orientalism. Such polarisation seems to be inevitable insofar as not only colonial but also postcolonial thought draws on hostile binary oppositions. The extent to which such polarisation has a bearing on the way we conceive reality is crucial because, as Said explains (1979: 46), "the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth". It is evident that the preconceived notions, not easily challenged by empirical evidence, have shaped

the way the East is perceived through the Western lens. Even though for Helen "history... still [lies] largely between the covers of a book" (TCD: 43), it seems almost impossible to escape the historical implications still relevant, long after the last chapter of that book should have been closed since everything still seems steeped in that very history drawing overtly, as well as covertly, on the vestiges of colonialism. The blasting, in Helen's words, did not begin the moment the Western contractors erected the construction site. It could well be heard all along throughout the colonial period, occasionally muffled or masked though, extending into the tech age, which made it burst both literally with the advancement of technology and all the machinery usurping the land and metaphorically with the awakening of the Other. The colonial past is to blame for Indian integrity "[being] eaten... away during the centuries when [the British] were the rulers and the Indians the ruled" (TCD: 71), Krishnan states conveying the feelings and thoughts of the Other; adding that there is "no place for [amiable weaklings] in the power game that the world [is] playing. Strength: one [speaks] only from strength" (TCD: 51). Thus, the Other has no choice but to (re)gain strength and assume the position of power, enabling the wind of change, so as to finally be heard and reclaim its identity with no strings attached to the colonial legacy.

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POVRATAK DINAMICI ORIJENTALIZMA U DELU KAMALE MARKANDAJE *THE COFFER DAMS*

Rezime

Kroz analizu dela Kamale Markandaje *The Coffer Dams* i oslanjajući se na tumačenja vodećih teoretičara postkolonijalizma, kao što su Baba, Fanon, Said i Jang, ovaj rad istražuje odnos moći Istoka i Zapada u postkolonijalnom periodu tehnološkog imperijalizma Zapada, koji održava dinamiku orijentalizma. Cilj ovog rada je da pokaže kako je stereotipna slika Istoka potvrđena u mehanizovanom tehnološkom svetu, naglašavajući činjenicu da su binarne opozicije kao što su priroda/kultura i civilizovan/necivilizovan nadživele kolonijalizam, opstajući i u postkolonijalnom tehnološkom dobu. Poput kolonijalnog, i neokolonijalni projekat je takođe opravdavan potrebom da se uvede civilizacija u istočni svet, ali ovog puta tehnološkom transformacijom i modernizacijom. Ovaj rad ukazuje na to da mesto Drugog ostaje nepromenjeno u postkolonijalnom zapadnjačkom umu zato što je tehnologija, kao novi oblik moći, izoštrila razliku između superiornosti Zapada i inferiornosti Istoka. Osim toga, očigledno je da se načini potčinjavanja mogu promeniti, ali je želja da se prisvoji, kontroliše i ukroti zemlja Drugog i dalje prisutna, kao i cena koja se mora platiti – dehumanizacija i mehanizacija ljudskih bića.

▸ ***Ključne reči***: postkolonijalni odnos moći Istoka i Zapada, dehumanizacija, tehnološki imperijalizam, binarne opozicije.

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