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Clash of values in Kamala Markandaya's novel '*The Coffe Dams*'

Aabid Hussain Mir, Phd. Research Scholar ,Glocal University, Saharanpur U.P, India

Abstract:

Kamala Markandaya probes deep into the swift changes of culture. Her novels depict the realistic picture of the Indian society which is continuously changing. She explores the conflicts and trends of Indian society and puts readers on the direction of resolution. She does not portray the dogmatic ideology rather. She projects the drama of life and holds mirror to the society. She explores the human psyche in the context of intricate cultural values. Her novels skillfully manifest the concept of cultural continuity in the social, economic and political changes in modern India. The present paper attempts to show the conflict between old and modern values and how spirituality assists to resolve the Clash.

Key words: tradition, modernity, conflict, impact.

The countries which have tasted colonial rule experience loss not only of their material wealth but also the loss of customs and tradition values. The effect of westernization created havoc and turmoil in the conventional set up of values. They were looked down upon and begin to disappear from the aboriginals and were replaced by the new ones.

The given paper tries to describe the tussle between modernity and tradition presented by Kamala Markandiya in her novel *The Coffe Dams*. The novel was written in 1969. It is the work which depicts how the life of natives is affected by the western technologies in a tribal village of south India. The novel gives a deliberate account of how the life of aboriginals underwent a whirlpool of volcanic flux with the coming of western technology. The conventional setup, culture and the way of living is under constant threat not only in Markandaya's this novel but also in another novel that is nectar in a sieve.

The novel provides a general idea and outline of human ability of human ability to understand deep feeling

and relationship in view of advancement of technologies. It is an interesting narrative about mechanical toughness and spiritual impotence, material beliefs and ethical doubts. Set in modern India but conflict of values at its heart is universal. The plot of the novel revolves around the construction of a dam in a hilly area which is inhibited by tribal people.

Clinton ,patron and head of a firm of international construction engineers arrives in India to build a dam, bringing with him his young wife Helen and a strong team of aided and skilled workers. They are faced with a formidable project which involves working in daunting mountains and jungle terrain, within a time schedule dictated by the extreme tropical weather, inevitable setbacks occur, accidents and frictions among the mixed labor force present further complication. But to Clinton the building of the dam is more than a challenge; it is an obsession – not, however shared by his better half Helen.

Appalled by her husband's concern with structures rather than with men, she turns to local Indian tribesmen, and finding in them the human values she lacked in British camp. With relation between the Clinton become increasingly raw edged the first rainfalls and as the torrents swap the valley and the level of river raises so, does the tension in the beleaguered camp. The vital question looms to breach the coffer dams or allow them to stand, there by placing the lives of tribes' men in jeopardy. It is a fundamental question that splits the camp exposing the lingering prejudice of bygone colonial era. Conflict of western technologies moves with various striate of old and new India. Helen in jungle is increasingly drawn to those intimately human realities which are bypassed by machines and planners.

Two chief engineers, Clinton and Mackendrick of a British construction company work under the pressure and tension caused by contentions outlook of Indian workers and technicians. Work is done under various obstacles. There occur accidents on the working site, the labors work under the stress, official hindrances. With

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such kind of working atmosphere Clinton neglects the human regards and altruism. For him completion of work is more important even if it is at the cost of human values. He is so over carried by his project of dam construction that he believes that work must go on even if dead humans have to be cremated. he could not tolerate any sort of interference in his work even if it is his wife. He remarks, *“my work, he said, from mounting conviction which loomed tall a mountain now; my dam, my business”*. (p.123)

There arise certain crises and conflicts in the novel on certain levels. One conflict is between the white people and the Indian aboriginals. The dispute between the two groups arises over an accident. First two Christians Wilkins and Bailey die and the company decide to suspend the suspend the work to give them a proper burial. Then forty two persons fell into the river and their bodies get jammed in the boulders. One English engineer Mackendrick discuss about the possibilities of recovery and other engineer that is Clinton that the work must go on and the *“bodies can be incorporated into the structure”* (p. 163).

The spokesperson of the workers that is Krishnan warns that workers would go on strike unless the bodies are recovered and given proper last rites. This event leads both groups to realization that the basis of modern progress should keep human values intact. There may be a cultural difference but human values should be guarded. The manner in which Clinton refused to entertain Indian worker’s demands shows his racial bias and disregard of human values. Markandaya employs the shifting point of view to show Clinton’s point of view which E.M. Forester describes as the *“power to explore and contract perception, this right to intermittent knowledge...”* (p. 78). The project of the coffer dams continues at the price of feelings of humans.

Clinton’s wife Helen also faces the conflict, the conflict of east and west, beliefs and attitudes, humanistic concerns and technological progress. Her story presents the *“forward-surgling motion”*. Helen found her husband obsessed with the construction of the dam and hardly concerned with her or others. Helen diverted her attention towards the aboriginals to find the human values that were missing in his native country men. Helen gets close to Bashiam who initially was related to her professionally. She had the desire for freedom, to love Bashism she didn’t care about her married life. She was driven by the spirit of

discovering new things and adventure. Her free nature led her to cross the limits of nuptial knot. Clinton reckoned that she is moving away from him. This creates a wide gap between the two. He is informed by his colleagues at the end of chapter six that Helen has not confined in him. He says,

” it would be, it seemed to him, a sleazy parading of the privacies of marriage, a disloyalty to her for him to reveal there were areas in her life from which she shut him out.” (p. 35)

He feels deeply worried but he remains dumb and grew envious towards her. Though he deemed that she is living a detached emotional life , yet he could do nothing about it. He has his own concept of happiness. He remarks,

” it only you, would ,he thought , keeps away from those bloody aboriginals and behave like the other women on the station do. What these of these of the non conformity the unpredictability he had loved in his wife?- well , these qualities were still important to him, it was just that they belonged elsewhere, to another time and country.” (p.78)

Clinton’s description depicts his alienation from his own self. Helen on the other hand drifts away from the British camp. She contemplates British conduct with the aboriginals as racial.

She develops a gradual awareness about the need for bridging the gaps and developing an understanding between the natives and the Britishers. She understands the tribal connections. For her they were sensitive people and not black apes and *“black opacities of total incomprehension”*. (P.35)

She felt disgusted when the tribal where forced to leave a place just to built bungalows for the British engineers to have a better view. She felt the pain of evacuated people. She considered it an unpardonable sin to make fellow human beings suffer. But to her fellow countrymen they mere nothing more than apes.

Helen moves to the tribal to gain a sense of complete life not for any public acceptance but to seek authenticity. Her closeness to Bisham may not have given her sense of fulfillment of social commitment .but in the search of oneness with her liberal self she achieves real freedom.

Helen Baisham relation is complicated. She is attracted to Baisham because is yearning for freedom and the later on the other hand is sensuous for Helen. She is attracted to

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him by his sense of dedication and responsibility to his profession. Baisham on the other side though is learned but is not attached to his roots. He is content with his professional achievements.

Kamala Markandaya promotes neither traditional nor modern values. She doesn't consider any of them bad or harmful. To her, traditions are the values of harmony and co-existence that symbolic Indian way of life. Traditions that teach women to behave like Sita, Sakuntala and Savitiri tempt them to be called ideal. Markandaya has very keenly observed the East and West cultures so her depiction of both the cultures is unbiased.

A.V Krishna Rao who was the Professor and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, comments on Markandaya's achievement like this:

"Markandaya's contribution to the Indo-Anglican fiction his essentially in her capacity to explore vital, formative areas of individual consciousness that project the images of cultural change, and in her uncanny gift of inhabiting the shifting landscapes of an outer reality with human begins whose sensibility becomes a sensitive measure of the inner reality as it responds to the stimulus of change".(p. 67)

Markandaya like other Indian English writers takes up the issue of East-West encounter and social relation. She analyze both better and worst the humor and hunting aspects of East-West encounters. Markandaya in her novels present the issue of tradition and modernity in such a way focus remains on the tussle between modern or modernized and conventional people. She spent most of life in London but her soul and imagination and her content product wondered in her native country. Her

novels depicted social realism. Markandaya through her characters draws the picture of modernity that exists even during those days. She through her novels represents the demerits of extreme modernity. She gives picture of both the cultures and how they affect the life of individuals as she has remained part of both the cultures. Her characters show lost of spiritual and traditional values and their replacement by the modern western values. Through her fictions Markandaya portrays the values of both East and West, the problems they face, but they have gained or lost. The tussle remains between western or modernized Indians and their counter parts that still believe in traditional values and hold them firmly. She represents characters like Mera, Valmiki, and Rukmani who are influenced by the western values. They are influenced by people like Richard, Caroline and Helen. These western people left their impact on the eastern traditional people who initially get carried away by the western notion, but return to their roots ultimately. Markandaya shows the triumph of eastern values over the modern values. She displays a deep understanding of personalities and female sensibility.

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