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Delineation of Traditional and Modern values in Kamla Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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Abstract

Kamla Markandaya is one of the eminent Indian-English novelists of the modern age. She has been known for her close observation to traditional, cultural, historical, emotional, psychological, and behavioral changes in human beings. The novel, *The Coffer Dams*, deals with the theme of traditional vs modern values in the modern age. It finds the idea that there can be a way of cooperation between the technology of the Europe and labour strength of India. The new area of cooperation between them is related to the building of the coffer dams across a turbulent river somewhere in the hills of Maland in South India. The dam-construction requires a good deal of planning and technical skill. To complete the construction work in time, the entire project is handed over to the Clinton-Mackendrick Company, a British Company whose chief engineers are Howard Clinton and Mackendrick, by the Government of India. Though the engineers are British, their assistants and workers are Indians. The people of two countries come together in this novel for the techno-economic development of India, for its scientific expansion and modernization. Here in this novel, the nucleus of focus is on the relationship and behaviour of Clinton, his wife Helen, and Bashiam (an Indian tribal working with Clinton-Mackendrick Company).

Keywords- Diaspora, Tradition, Modernity, Technology

The Coffer Dams depicts the close cooperation of the Britishers and the Indians aiming at the development of a nascent nation in the aftermath of its independence. The close cooperation between the two races, having different values of life, does not necessarily imply a warm relationship. This may be said about the Clinton-Bashiam relationship. But the Helen-Bashiam relationship is definitely warm. Even Mackendrick is warm and sympathetic towards his workers and assistants.

Clearly, there are two sets of characters in this novel. One set of characters consists of the Britons—Clinton, Mackendrick Rawlings, Lefevre and Galbraith (forming the team of chief

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engineers), and the second set comprises Krishnan (the chief of the Indian group), Bashiam and other Indian workers and assistants. They are assembled together near the site of the dam-construction, with the sole purpose of completing the assigned work in time. It is a matter of testing their technical skill and expertise. While the role and relationship of various characters will be examined in the second section of this chapter, here we are concerned with the tracing of the storyline in the novel, which is thin and intangible.

The Indians and the Britishers are engaged, with all their skill and ability, in the task of building the dam (-s) in time, before the onslaught of the next monsoon. Going through the novel, we feel that the relationships of Clinton with Bashiam and of Helen with Bashiam are of utmost importance. Of course, Bashiam is at the centre of both relationships. It is he who connects the two threads of the plot—one connected to Clinton-Bashiam relationship and the other to Helen-Bashiam relationship. Bashiam is actually one of the tribals of a nearby village who is well-trained in the handling of cranes. He is a mechanic skilled in operating the machines. If Clinton represents the group of modern engineers, Bashiam stands for traditional tribals. Clinton is a hard task-master whose only concern is the dam and Bashiam for him is a cog in the wheel in the building of the dam. Clinton fixes his attention on brushing aside the doubts of the weather-experts like Krishnan and getting his work done despite the untimely arrival of the rains, but the Indian assistants like Bashiam and Gopal Rao know well the turbulence and the wild sweep of the river in the rainy season.

Though Bashiam has been provided a two-room flat in the colony of Indian operators (which is as luxurious as any flat/apartment allotted to their British counterparts), he feels more comfortable in a hut built by the tribals near his work-site. Moreover, he can join his duty as the crane-operator within no time. It is to this hut that Helen comes one evening (at around 8 p.m.), after getting bored in the company of Clinton. Before coming, she tells her hubby that she is going out for a walk. He reminds her of the deep dark outside lest she should saunter into the nearby jungle. And she tells him that he need not bother about her. She goes straight to the hut of Bashiam and makes intense love to him.

Very clearly, Helen Clinton is attracted towards Bashiam for his warmth and strength. Being fed up with her husband's coolness and negligence, she goes to Bashiam, as they are 'no freaks' to each other; they are rather kindred souls. In this matter, she takes the initiative. She feels fulfilment in getting united to Bashiam,—the kind of fulfilment she does not feel in her love-making with Clinton. She reaches, in the hut lying on the string bed, complete consummation in the sexual relationship with Bashiam.

Helen's sexual frigidity with her husband is replaced here by her utter abandon, to the satisfaction of both. There is every reason to believe that Mr. Clinton has an inkling about the intimate

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relationship of his wife with Bashiam. Later events prove it, as Mr. Clinton deliberately conceals the information about the defective crane, in the handling of which Bashiam is permanently crippled.

Even in the midst of such amorous bouts, Bashiam is not forgetful of his duty. He gets up in the midnight, takes up his lantern, wakes up the sleeping Helen, and goes out to the dam-side when it starts raining. The village headman is there along with his men to control the damage to the dam. Their common concern is the safety of the dam. Clinton and Mackendrick along with their British team of engineers and assistants are also worried over it. At a time when no British engineer or operator is ready to take the risk of handling the giant crane called the Avery-Kent in order to extricate the dead bodies of the two Indian workers lying under the huge boulder of the dam, Bashiam offers his services to do so. As a result, he becomes a victim of the hidden defect in the lugs of the crane and suffers a lasting injury. He is crippled for the whole life, and this marks the end of his affairs with Helen.

Not one tragic incident, but two, takes place at the construction-site of the dam. One is mentioned above (in the form of the death of the two Indian workers), and the other is the death of the two British assistants, Bailey and Wilkins. The treatment given to the British dead and the Indian dead is different, and this generates a controversy between the Britishers and the Indians. The two dead Britishers are given a decent Christian burial; their bodies are put in coffins and then interred into the cemetery. But when it comes to the burial of the dead Indians, Clinton suggests that “Their bodies can be incorporated. Into the structure” (p. 172). This is the height of British apathy, and Indian workers led by Krishnan oppose it tooth and nail.

Bashiam is called a jungly, a man of the forest or an uncivilized man, by the Britishers. Though he is warm and sincere towards them, especially towards Helen, he is not reciprocated by them. When no engineer or technical operator is ready to handle the crane to bring out the dead bodies of the two Indian workers, he offers his services, to the risk of his life. In the process, he is seriously injured and becomes a cripple for the whole life. He is truly a symbol of 'selfless service' (*niskama karma*), as extolled by Lord Krishna in the *Bhagavadgita*

The greatest danger to the task of dam-building comes from the impending monsoon. All the engineers and workers—British and Indian—are aware of it. Clinton and his partner Mackendrick are worried over it. What will happen if it arrives earlier?; this question haunts everyone concerned with the dam-construction. The tribals and their chief (an old yet seasoned man) are troubled with the sad prospect of their lands getting flooded, resulting in the huge loss of lives and property. They keep their gaze fixed on the quirks of nature, the early outbreak of the monsoon.

The rising of the river in a threatening fashion is reported here in a surcharged language. It has already been mentioned that this novel is remarkable not for its storyline (or its plot) but for its

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powerful language and narrative technique. This has happened because of the novelist's involvement in natural descriptions and also because of her efforts in making psychological revelations of her characters. In this respect, one has to mark the presence of long descriptive passages on natural scenes and sights—forests, rocks, ridges, the tribal village, the dam-construction on the river, the rains and their ravages, etc. As contrasted to them are the short and crisp dialogues between characters that tend to reveal their inner motives, their fears and aspirations. Here in *The Coffey Dams*, the East-West contact is in the form of a technological cooperation between the British engineers and the Indian labourers and assistants for building the coffer dams (to support the main dam) over a river in the hilly regions of South India.

The Indian delegation is led by Krishnan, an honest man and a plain speaker. It is he who speaks on behalf of the Government of India. He agrees with the British team that the dam be built within the fixed time. He is of the view that "The whole reputation and prestige of the government is at stake" (p.12). On hearing the statement of Krishnan, Mackendrick understands his sentiments, and sympathetically observes and says, "But then the Hindus were thin-skinned: bled at a touch, even before you applied the needle" (*The Coffey Dams*, 12).

In the course of the novel, only a few characters are fully developed; Clinton, Mackendrick and Rawlings are among them. Of course, Bashiam and Krishnan are among the Indian characters of flesh and blood. Though there are not many women characters, but two British women—Helen and Millie—are portrayed in some detail. It is worth noting here that the Britishers are in a commanding position in this novel. Of all British characters, Helen is the most interesting one. She is half Clinton's age, very young indeed. She jokingly tells Clinton that she was born in India in her previous life. She loves her husband and wants to live with him, "She was in love with him, she wanted to be with him" (*The Coffey Dams*, 7). She is not interested in bidding goodbye or welcoming him back home while living in India. She has the knack of walking into the jungle for fresh air or visiting "one or other of the settlements strung along the course of the river" (*The Coffey Dams*, 20). This shows that she is not a typical memsahib who spends her day and night in a water-tight, air-conditioned compartment in her bungalow. Though Rawlings has warned her "not to drink their (tribals') polluted water, reminded her they were in tiger country, and thereafter saw no danger—certainly not in the tribesmen...." (*The Coffey Dams*, 20-22). But as the novel progresses, we see that Helen falls a prey to one of tribesmen, to Bashiam, for her physical and mental fulfilment.

The Helen-Bashiam relationship is certainly very significant in furthering the action of the novel and in keeping human values atop. It is this relationship that imparts warmth and understanding to the theme of East-West contact in the novel. Helen is, in fact, the connecting link between Eastern sensibility and Western technology.

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Helen is, thus, an invaluable link between the East and the West, between the two distinct races and cultures. She swings between tradition and modernity, between conformity and non-conformity, between her loyalty to marriage and her violation of its sanctity. She does not want to lead a closed life in the British bungalows, and hence walks out into the huts of the tribals built along the river bank. The tribal chief lives here. She and Mackendrick learn a lot from him about the monsoon and its unpredictability, about the swelling of the river in the rain season, about the sudden outburst of storms and the significance of the clearing of the ridges. The end of the novel is marked by the meaningful statement of the tribal chief, "The ridges are clear" (*The Coffey Dams*, 235). And this suggests the end of the rains and the clearing of the weather. Helen and Mackendrick become happy with the dispersal of the monsoon. They join their hands in exultation and go out with a sense of satisfaction. The water-levels are falling and the coffer dams are safe. This marks the completion of their project.

To conclude, the East-West contact in *The Coffey Dams* comes out clearly in the form of cooperation between the Britishers and the Indians in the joint venture of constructing the coffer dams in support of the main dam across a turbulent river in South India. Taken as a whole, the novel under review, deals with the theme of East-West contact. The East is represented in it by Bashiam and Krishnan, while the West by Clinton, Helen, Mackendrick, Rawlings and Millie. Of all relationships developed in the novel, the Helen-Bashiam relationship is the most important one because it brings to the fore the East-West understanding and cooperation in the backdrop of India's industrial growth. The dam itself is a symbol of the industrial advancement of India through the technological collaboration of the West. Even Nature plays a vital role in it—the thick green forest, the deep valley, the hills, the river and the rains. According to A.V. Krishna Rao and Madhavi Menon, "The advent of the rains is the symbolic backdrop for the quelling of passions. The rain becomes the cleansing agent for bitter prejudices and ill-gotten notions" (Rao and Menon, 98). The message of the novel is that the industrial development should not blur our vision of human values, of mutual love and understanding.

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