

Human Displacement and Cultural Clash in Kamala Markandaya's Novel *The Coffee Dams* (1969)

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Abstract:

Kamala Markandaya's novel The Coffee Dams (1969) focuses on human displacement as a major concern during the construction of dams. The proposals of the states for building huge multi-purpose projects often offer confrontation to nature and the inhabitants of the forests that are going to be submerged. Most of the time the negotiations between the states and the inhabitants, especially Adivasis, are met with violence if the Adivasis are reluctant to be rehabilitated to the new places. Due to their emotional attachment to forests and reluctance to relocate in the hustle-bustle towns, they usually question or confront the states. Since the states are powerful institutions, they can quickly suppress the voices or retaliations of the tribal groups. The Coffee Dams is one such novel based on an intense socio-cultural background that describes the confrontation between the authority of state and tribal groups, and the clash of western values with the traditional values of the indigenous groups in a south Indian region.

Keywords: Human Displacement, colonialism, and Adivasi

Introduction

While inaugurating Bhakra Nangal Dam, the first Prime Minister of India Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru praised, "dams are the temples of modern India." However many ecological and demographical studies in the recent past have acknowledged there is widespread destruction of ecology and displacement of the human population. In this regard, Paramjit S Judge asserts "India is a major dam builder and has constructed nearly as many dams as Canada. As a

corollary to this development, the Indian government has forced the displacement of 20 to 50 million persons, very few of whom have been satisfactorily rehabilitated” Judge, P. S. (1997).

There were largescale movements opposing the destructive models of the development i.e. constructing the dams at the cost of ecological imbalance which will have a cascading effect on the flora fauna and the indigenous groups of that region. One notable movement in the history of postcolonial India was Narmada Bachao Andolan. “In September 1989, more than 50,000 people gathered in the valley from all over India to pledge to fight ‘destructive development.’ . . . [One year later, on 28 September 1990, thousands of villagers made their way on foot and by boat to a little town called Badwani, in Madya Pradesh, to reiterate their pledge to drown rather than agree to move from their homes.” (Roy, 2010, 37-38)

Much before these movements, Kamala Markandaya brilliantly presented the issue of displacement in her novel *The Coffor Dams* in 1969 which was written on the backdrop of newly Independent India. As mentioned before, this novel portrays the devastation of tribal habitations in the forest for the construction of dams in a Southern Indian village called Malnad. The conflicts arise due to the unilateral decisions of the Britishers and their upper hand in the implementation of their decisions while constructing the dam. With the strong social realistic elements, *The Coffor Dams* the destructive models are are countered in this novel.

The responsibility of construction of the dams was given to the British engineers, chief engineers Howard Clinton and Mackendrick. Due to cultural differences, it was assumed that there could be confrontations between the British officers and the Indian workers. Despite these differences, they ought to work for the completion of the construction of the dams. Clinton is not only meticulous with his work he is also obsessed with minute details of his projects. It is well established in the novel when an Indian Technician Krishnan questions the feasibility of construction, Clinton instead of being tyrannical he gives a convincing explanation in a logical manner where all the Indian technicians were manipulated but not Bashiam. Since Bashiam has grown up in the same hills and forest he knows the repercussions of the existing model of construction.

“... that inhibited him, prevented him falling in line with the others. They made their plans, seduced by statistics: but he had seen what a cyclone could do, had covered 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. It was not easy for him to shed his misgivings, although his later training made him acknowledge that despite them planning was essential. . . .” (p. 23)

Though Clinton is portrayed to be undoubtedly a man of perfection as far as his work is concerned. However, his interpersonal relations with subordinates are strained since he gives very little priority to human relations. Clinton's obsession to construct the dam without considering the native people's concerns for their emotional attachment to that land aggravates the conflict. Clinton, as he represents the power of the state, the hapless tribal people are coerced to vacate their lands despite being the legitimate owners of that land. Mackendrick, the partner of Clinton in the construction of the dams, is dismayed with the dictatorial attitude of Clinton towards tribal people but cannot muster the courage to oppose him. Adding to this, Clinton's young wife Helen is very humane. Unlike her husband, she mingles with everyone irrespective of their hierarchy. She is very compassionate with the tribal people, and she empathises with their plight. She enjoys the company of the tribal people. She even loves to learn their languages to communicate with them. Though many English families frown upon Helen for not just being close with the tribals but ignoring the invitations for social gatherings of the white families. She is viewed as “ In the manner of a typical Lawrentian heroine, she recedes steadily from her husband and his world of technological advancement ” (Kumar, n.d., 25). When she was in England, she chose to come to India to be a free bird. "Suddenly, here, there was colour and confusion, an outflowing warmth to which she responded, matching a flamboyance on offer with a deep quiet pleasure which the tribesmen, after initial agony and heart searching, correctly interpreted as the most extrovert display open to an Englishwoman" (p.42).

Although the contribution of the Britishers in the developmental activities is attempted to be glorified on some occasions it is necessary to view that India had paid a heavy price for that in many forms, “From the point of view of Indo-Anglian writers, British "contributions11 to Indian civilization were indeed costly, for the Indians suffered a great loss of material and spiritual resources.” (Adkins, 1974, 91)

Complex Relationships

Helen completely empathises with the tribal people. She tours the jungle to meet the tribal people quite often, and it sparks quarrels between the husband and wife. Clinton as a strict, monstrous,

and class-conscious man does not like Helene mingling with tribal people. He feels his class consciousness is hurt. However, Helen continues to meet the tribals. Her sympathy for the tribals displaced from their home due to the dam's construction grows abundantly. Therefore she repeatedly appeals to her husband to reconcile the decision, but he gives a deaf ear to all the appeals made by his wife. His inconsideration towards people, especially tribals, makes Helen develop an aversion towards her husband. She slowly isolates herself from him and creates a different lifestyle of her choice. She spends more time with the tribal people. She learns their cultural practices. She befriends an educated tribal man Bashiam. Bashiam accompanies her whenever she visits the jungle. Her gentleness towards all creatures, small or big, in the jungle is palpably portrayed in the novel.

"Our animals -- we could learn from them, but we're Christians you know, arrogant people, so we deprive them of their rights. Deny them, pretend they haven't got any ... We don't allow them to (move) in case they yield us one ounce less of their flesh. Where is our instinct for pity? Blunted. We've cut ourselves off from our heritage -- We've forgotten what we" (p- 138).

Her emptiness at home is slowly replaced by the tribals, jungle, and creatures in the jungle. However, Clinton gradually grows intolerant towards Helen's behaviour. "would have preferred to sit in the darkness of his verandah, worrying at some problem in peace until the kernel of the trouble lay exposed in his triumphant palm" (p.58).

Their journey seems to be in opposite direction like "While Helen moves to the tribal world, Bashiam moves into the new machine age." (JAIN, 1975, 39). Though Bashiam is keen to acquire western knowledge he still sticks to the traditional knowledge system. "The machine means as much to him as it does to Clinton, but it has not sniffed out his instincts." (JAIN, 1975, 39). Thus Bashiam remains to be a unique personality among all the characters.

However, Helen's relationship with Bashiam seems to be superficial and confined to only quench their physical needs. This fact is well proven when Bashiam is disabled in his work, Helen retracts her relationship with him. Meanwhile, Clinton becomes more understanding and accommodative.

Clinton also apparently seems to be jealous of Bashiam for being in a physical relationship with his wife. Therefore he seems to assign Bashiam to a faulty machine to make

him crippled deliberately. This happens when a group of tribals were killed in a mishap and not regarded for the final rites by Clinton who says, "Their bodies can be incorporated. Into the structure. This creates havoc among the Indian workers tribal and non-tribals led by Krishnan and Bashiam. They demand decent funeral rites of the deceased on par with the British workers. Therefore they demand as, "until the bodies of our dead are returned to us. So that the rites may be correctly performed, and their souls depart in peace." (p. 173). They recount when the two British workers, Bailey and Wikins were killed in an accident during the construction of the dams the funeral was performed with all the honours by Clinton. And the British officials say "We like to give our dead a decent Christian burial.." (p. 130)

It is construed as inhumane and cruel on the part of Clinton to neglect the dead bodies of the Indian workers. Then Clinton sends Bashiam to operate the faulty machine, which subsequently makes him disabled. Due to the arrival of the monsoon, the dam is expected to be full because of the continuous flow of the river there. If the cofferdams are breached, the flow may not be stopped. By understanding the cold attitude of Clinton towards the tribal people, Helen and Mackendrick visit the tribal chief to solicit advice to save the lives of the tribal people. The tribal forecasts that "the ridges rise clear" (p. 22). Soon after this prediction, the tribal chief dies, everyone eagerly waits for the water to rise to the edge of the dam. When water is raised to the level of the edges, the rain stops by proving the prophecy of the tribal chief correct. At the end of the novel, everyone seems to be content, tribals for not being subjected to the fear of inundation and the British engineers and technicians for completing the task and soon reuniting their families.

Conclusion

The understanding of nature from the indigenous perspectives which is purely based on their experience is highly valued in this novel. Though the British officer based on his theoretical knowledge forces the manpower to complete the construction before the beginning of the monsoon, the indigenous knowledge prevails appropriately in predicting the arrival of the monsoon. The major characters in this novel are Britishers. Therefore the conflict between traditional practices of India and the modern outlook of England is presented in this novel. Bashiam's modern outlook which is grounded in the traditional belief system offers new insight in interpreting the nature and essence of modernity.

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