

Omniscient Narration: A Study of *The Cofferdam*

Preeti Choudhary

Research Scholar
Department of English & MEL,
Allahabad University, Allahabad, India.

Abstract: Story telling is one of the oldest recreation activity. It is part of our culture, tradition and literature. A bond is created between the story teller and the reader. It is not easy to hold the interest of the reader. In literature writers employ different devices and techniques to create the effect of their story. In this paper i'am going to take novel *The Cofferdam* by Kamala Markandaya. Novelist has used Omniscient narration in this novel. Narrator is someone who is like a pilot of plane. Every characters gets filter through his/her eyes. I will discuss in this paper how through omniscient narrator novelist frames the story? And How much she succeeded in justifying all the characters.

Keywords: KamalaMarkandaya, narrative techniques, narration, Omniscient narration, story telling

Narration is intrinsic part of any story. It is important to know the voice of the story whether the story is coming from the first person narration, second person narration or the third person narration. Readers find it convincing when they know from which direction point of view of fiction is. Most popular narration, frequently used in literature is first person narration. When the story is told by the protagonist himself, this is called first person narration, this makes the reading of the fiction more reliable. Second person narration comes from a person who is part of the story but he or she is not the protagonist. It is not his or her story, they are in the story as supporting role. Next comes the third person narration, when the story teller is neither the protagonist nor any of the character of fiction, this is some anonymous narrator which we can take as author's voice. There is three types of third person narration, omniscient, limited and non-omniscient narration. In omniscient narration, story teller (narrator) becomes the spokesperson for the writer. Identity of narrator is not clear, we can take it some anonymous person telling story, but he knows everything about the characters, their thoughts and their life. Narrator jumps from one character's mind to other, to give a broader vision to readers. In the third person limited narration, narrator tells the thoughts and feelings of only one character only, readers fail to interpret the perspective of other characters. In non omniscient narration, narrator is the part of the fiction, but he or she is a distant person, story does not revolve around him or her.

The novel i am going to analyse is *The Cofferdam*, written by Kamala Markandaya in 1969, where novelist has employed omniscient narration. Omniscient narration is more like multiple accessibility to interpret the text. A fresh and new approach is always welcomed. Through this technique even readers also get an insight in to the story with more than one understanding. Readers get entry into the thoughts and emotions of characters. Third person omniscient narration gives the characters voice out their opinion. In *The Cofferdam*, third person omniscient is infused with stream of consciousness. In nineteenth century, writers has utilized this technique to take full liberty in expression of their thoughts. Some examples are *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

The Cofferdam is the story about the construction of a dam in a village by one of the British company. All the Engineers and technicians from British comes to India and all the workers are taken from India. Major voice of the story is of Clinton, he is main engineer in construction of dam. Alongwith him Mackendrick, Helen, Bashiam and Millie Rawling, these are important characters of the novel, their perspective also reach to the readers through omniscient narration. Novelist has used this technique of narration to invade and explore the perspective of all the characters. This makes the story to have a three dimensional approach because here readers can filter out the author's perspective, character's perspective and reader's perspective. In Omniscient narration writer uses third person noun "he", "she" or "they" whereas in first person narration "I" is used. Though the story comes from anonymous narrator, major voice coming in the novel is of Clinton. Clinton being a haughty, boorish and stubborn person, he does not have sensitive heart towards Indians, contrary to his wife, who being a humble and a sensible person, she has inclination towards Indians. Through Clinton's inner consciousness, novelist has drawn other characters also. We are seeing them, filtered from Clinton's eye. At the start of the story only, narrator has kept Clinton's perspective at upperhand. It is through his inner consciousness readers will get to know about his personality, let's take one excerpt from the novel,

"He hated the war, who hadn't, but it was especially hateful him because he was a builder... When it was over he repatriated himself as soon as she could,... his sense of efficiency: where he had learnt to raise his voice at the natives and sampled the piquant flavor of disdain." (Markandaya 1)

This excerpt from *The Coffer Dam*, shows inner consciousness of Clinton. He himself delineate about his love for beauty, architecture, and that's why he hates War, which give only destruction. His behaviour towards Indians, is the result of his stay at War, where he learnt to ridicule natives. He is not the one who will actually mingle with Indians but irony is in some part of the novel, he became aloof from his own people (Britishers) also. In one of the party thrown by Millie Rawling, he isolated himself from everyone out there. Instead of enjoying party, he becomes an silent observer, noticing everything. Novelist here used Clinton as a camera which silently rolling, takes video without even being noticed. Here novelist uses her craft and introduces readers to the era when the novel was timed. A clever way of detailing behaviourism, mannerism of Britishers. Clinton pin points everything, be it Millie Rawling's "driving energy", what is the effect of liquor on Henderson and Bob Rawling. He beautifies her wife, praises her dressing sense. It is through his eyes reader's can visualize Helen, as a very beautiful woman. He enjoys watching her. Her shiny skin under peachy tan. Novelist glorified Helen, not only externally but internally also. Helen's inclination towards Indians, her sensitive behaviour towards downtrodden, this quality of her is not liked by her husband Clinton. He likes her unpredictable behaviour doing things going out of the way but her visiting huts of poor workers infuriates him.

It will be injustice to other characters, if their mental state, perspective, thoughts and feelings is not presented so narrator jumps from one head to another to shape all the characters. Narrator plunges into the mind of not only Clinton but also into the minds of Helen, Mackendrick, Bashiam and Millie Rawling.

Kamala Markandaya has used third person omniscient narration efficiently, as she has used it as a two way process. Clinton's detailing forms an opinion about the characters present in the fiction. And on other hand Mackendrick who is a close companion of Clinton, he gives more information about Clinton's disposition, which we as a reader will fail to notice. Following excerpt from *The Coffer Dam*,

"...there was in a quality of imagination that he had not believed Clinton possessed except for structure other than humans."(Markandaya 28)

This explanation of Mackendrick shows Clinton is lover of beauty, he has no inclination for odd people like Indians. It was a surprise for Mackendrick that Clinton took effort to even think about people whom he do not like. Narrator has shown what Mackendrick thinks about everyone around him, through omniscient narration. It gives readers a broader vision as it surfaces the insight and psyche of two people who has same origin, same country but have different way of dealing with Indians. If we look Indians through Clinton's eyes, they will only look poor, unsettled, illiterate, undeserving but if we look them through Mackendrick's eyes, they are progressing breed, who are on their way to development.,

"...they've been sprung from stone age to space age."(Markandaya 51) and at another place "coelacanth to human being", both these phrases shows the growth Mackendrick has seen. Before Britishers invaded India, they were living a backward life, after imperialism, there is an effect of westernization on them and their standard of living increased. Novelist's choice of words justifies the effect she wanted to create in the reader's mind. Insensible behaviour of Clinton is brought to us by Mackendrick, as he says,

"...he seemed to miss out somewhere on the human level."(Markandaya 52)

There are many instances in the novel, where insensitivity of Clinton is surfaced. One of the instance is death of the mynah, it's death does not touch him. Helen was effected by the bird's death. Only thing effected him is the unsymmetrical curvature formed due to cremation of mynah, hampering the view from bungalow.

Another important voice in this novel is of Helen. Narrator peeps into her mind. Through her, novelist has tried to show humble side of Britishers. Her relation with Indians or servants who works in her bungalow, is different from other of her fellow countrymen.

"Millie's advice seemed to Helen redopent of the suburbs; stiff little fences erected by silly old women afraid of the rape of their minds."(Markandaya 34)

Millie shares same temperament towards Indians as Clinton. Above line shows self erected, propensity of her behaviour which we get through Helen's perspective. They are in a complex state of acceptance towards Indian.

Helen is someone in novel who actually searches for humanity. Being a memsahib, it does not let her be away from mingling with Indians. Their simple life style, genuine behaviour attracts her. Following excerpt, betrays her nature,

“Something in England had starved her. It’s limited tones perhaps or the softened edges of it’s living which she registered with the same cool detachment as she did Millie’s...” (Markandaya 39)

She is the one who needed emotional compatibility, which is the loose end of her marriage with Clinton. Artificiality of behaviour, show off, she is far from all these. She is not like other memsahibs. She needed someone real, earthy, authentic who exactly fits in the slaught of her nature. Bashiam’s entry into her life and their growing friendship becomes the turning point of the novel. He is one of the technician in Mackenrick & Co., helps her to go for bird trapping adventure. She finds in Bashiam something which is lacking in Clinton. Through Omniscient narration, novelist while keeping her thoughts, has also contrasted the nature of Clinton and Bashiam from a women’s perspective. Narrator also jump into the Bashiam’s consciousness. Kamala Markandaya has tried to give a two way process. She has shown Indians through eyes of Britishers and through Bashiam’s eye, reader will see Britishers. It is him who understands Helen and gives more elaborate picture of her. He finds her different from all other memsahibs, as she loves nature, her fond of watching bird trapping and her undaunted behaviour. She does not hesitatae to meet and mix up with Indians. From Bashiam’s perspective, Clinton emerged as a person who has hidden thought, which does not come to surface. Clinton is a very dedicated to his work, all his focus is on the construction of dam.

Mere words and dialogic conversation fails to bring out the real characterization of any person. Omniscient narration makes narrator to visit into the mind of characters and give the most objective and reliable point of view. This is like narrator knows everything about the life of characters in fiction, their thinking, feelings, everything he can explain to readers. Narration here is unbiased, an honest account of positive and negative both the aspects of all the characters is given. It is not necessary that everyone carries same perspective towards any given situation, different people sees the situation with their own intellect. So, it becomes important to know what others think about any given situation. This is possible through omniscient narration. In nineteenth century, writers employed this technique most.

When the protagonist is the narrator of the story, for example Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*,

then a one sided approach is created in the minds of readers. But to see and bring in other’s perspective also, gives readers an lawful narration that gives justice to growth of every character present in the novel. Kamala Markandaya has utilized narrative technique of omniscient narration. Because here narrator knows everything about the characters, like God-like figure, whom readers listen and start believing. Every character is given equal depth and meaning. This is more important where writers uses story with so many characters and to justify all, this is the best narrative technique to use. Here narrator gives information about the characters, that characters may not know about each other but readers will come to know. This makes scripting of difficult and complicated story little more easy and engageable.

Conclusion

Kamala Markandaya has made a pedestal status in English literature. Her craft in framing a story through her narrative skill gives readers pleasure to read. Her genius lies in choosing a proper narrative technique for her novel. In our concern novel *The Coffer Dam*, Britishers and Indians, she achieved to show the point of view of both the countrymen. She through omniscient narration, developed the characters without any biasness. Her characters are framed in such a way that their actions, whether good or bad, still they seem right in their situation. It came as a two way process, we will see Bashiam and Helen through eyes of Clinton and Clinton and Bashiam through the eyes of Helen, how Helen is different from other memsahibs, Bashiam’s interpretation tells this. Growth of Indians is also measured differently by Clinton and Mackendrick. Both have different view towards Indians. Omniscient narration gave more depth and meaning to characters and Kamala Markandaya jusrifies with her narration in this novel.

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