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CONFLICT OF VALUES IN DARJEELING TEA?

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ABSTRACT :

In *Darjeeling Tea?* Asif Currimbhoy presents contrasts and conflicts of past and present values. The play reflects the problem of exploitation, despair gloominess and the growing restlessness among the various sections of society. The tea club which used to be the hub of social interaction has become now deserted and dirty. In the old times, the club throbbed with life, laughter and music and that is why it is symbolized like a big Christmas tree. Asif bemoans the decline in the values of Indian society which is being corroded by growing materialism and commercialization of human values. The subtitle of the play “A Comedy on Contemporary Manners in Two Acts” succinctly sums up the thematic concerns of the play. Big Mac and Big Hugh represent the past adventurous and



romantic life of the tea planters which were always characterized by camaraderie and close kinship with nature. They always take recourse to past as a reference point in their lives which was full of parties and togetherness but these values have given way to the cheapened value systems and beliefs of the new emerging class of carpet-bagging proprietors who are symbolic of new times. The moral values of the past have now been eaten away by brass commercialization and materialism of the new masters. ging pattern of climate.

KEY WORDS :
Dimensions ,

materialism , juxtaposing, throbbed, enlivened, proprietors, shrub, smothered, prototype, atrocity.

INTRODUCTION:

Asif Currimbhoy is a prominent Indian playwright whose plays are imbued with an acute social and political consciousness. His plays reflect various dimensions of Indian society and he bemoans the fall in values in Indian society which is being corroded by growing materialism and commercialization of human relationships. In *Darjeeling Tea?*, he dramatises the fall of values by juxtaposing the past and the present. The locale of the play is tea-estates of Darjeeling

where the plantation-estates are passing from old planters into the hands of new planters. The subtitle of the play *A Comedy on Contemporary Manners in Two Acts* succinctly sums up the thematic concerns of the play. The old system is represented by Big Hugh and Big Mac and the present system is symbolised by carpet-bagging proprietors. Asif Currimbhoy shows us that the values of the past are collapsing now. In the old times, there was much social interaction between the people and that's why the club which is the centre of social interaction was very much prosperous at that time. But now the club is not as prosperous as it once used to be. Its maintenance and upkeep is now not quite upto the mark because people don't take interest in social interaction. Now a way of life is singularly outdated. In the old times, the club throbbed

with life, laughter and music and that's why it is symbolized like a big Christmas Tree. But, now the club is dead. Now it looks shabby and there is only awful loneliness here:

JENNIE: . . . Remember the parties at this club, Sally? It was like a big Christmas tree . . . and now I think of home . . . and the awful loneliness here . . . in the midst of these incredibly beautiful hills (*Darjeeling Tea ? 11*).

In the old times, the women were also very happy because there was happiness and joy everywhere. They were like queens and they held the full authority.

JENNIE : [*Musing*]Yes, we were queens in these plantations. The white memsahibs of the fearful planters who held absolute authority (*Darjeeling Tea ? 13*).

During the old times everything was wonderful. But in the present time there is only sadness and tears everywhere because everyone is just thinking about money. The old time was so good that by remembering the old times one can weep. As the greying woman says to Jennie: "The things that were so wonderful that they made you cry" (*Darjeeling Tea ? 31*).

Big Mac and Big Hugh have a haunting sense of their past adventurous and romantic lives which were always characterised by camaraderie. Their conversations always have a past as a reference point:

BIG HUGH: Yes, not like the old days (*Darjeeling Tea ? 10*).

On one side, there are Big Mac, Big Hugh, Jennie, Sally and Bunty who are symbolic of the old times, always talking about the parties, beauty of tea gardens and adventurous nature of their life. But on the other side, there are new carpet-bagging proprietors, who are symbolic of the new times. They always talk about costs, profit, expenditure, devising strategies to cut prices and rig more profit. The old planters were educated and Big Hugh and Big Mac also have a sense of artistic taste; that's why they want to present the play on the stage to bring back the happiness of the "fuddy--buddy club" (*Darjeeling Tea ? 18*). They are also interested in games and hunting along with their business. Their old lives were enlivened by hunting and golf. Mac who is a planter of the old time wants to bring back the glory of the old time with the arrival of Bunty. The old planters, Hugh and Mac think about art, games and beauty. Bunty, who is a copy of the old planters, always talks about the beauty of nature. He says that the blue hills, the coolie women picking the shrubs, the sudden sunshine breaking through the clouds give him a thrill. But the new carpet-bagging proprietors don't pay any attention towards art, games or beauty. They, all the time, think life in terms of monetary values.

The old planters' business was based on moral values. Their business was based on honesty, good quality and integrity. They not only think about their own profit but also about their social commitments. To quote Chairman of Tea Board Association, "We must maintain our standards of research and plan for the future. This is the obligation we owe to the industry and to the country" (*Darjeeling Tea ? 30*). But the carpet-bagging – proprietors' business is not based on moral values but it is based on money. They neither think about the country nor about the industry, they only think of money and profit. The old planters even treated their rivals like friends. The old planters Big Mac and Big Hugh belong to two different groups - Maclouds and Jenkins; but they have no hostility towards each other. They are rivals and in spite of this, they are good friends and even their fighting is just for keeping their friendship. As Jennie herself admits that they cannot be friendly unless they fight" (*Darjeeling Tea ? 27*). But the new carpet--bagging proprietors have jealousy for their rivals. They treat them like enemies. They all the time think how to cut their rivals. Marwari's attitude is very clear when he says, "We'll buy over the gardens, one by one, proprietors like me who know how to cut wasteful overheads" (*Darjeeling Tea ? 12*).

In the olden times, the planters were attached with the gardens and soil. They always worked and protected the gardens heartily. They were also emotionally attached with the hill people. They were loyal to the gardens as well as to the hill people. Mac sums up the attitude of old planters in the following words, "It's fire and pride, an unknown brand of loyalty, that ties soil and people alike, the hill people, the finest and loveliest creatures in this world . . ." (*Darjeeling Tea ? 24*).

But the new planters are just working and protecting the gardens only because of the profit motives. The old planters were the saviours of the tea gardens while the new carpet - bagging proprietors are the destroyers of

the tea gardens. The tea gardens which suggested a way of life marked by joy, cheerfulness, parties and adventure are now smothered by a new breed of proprietors for whom the tea gardens are like a goose which lays golden eggs. They are just using the gardens for their profit:

HUGH: Milk the god-damn gardens till there are no leaves or wood left. And when they sellout there's nothing but waste land left... (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 12).

In the old times, the planters treated their workers like the family members. Mac's hospitality towards Bunty is an evidence of it, "Mac's got his reading glasses on, is smoking a pipe and is taking a look at one of the air-flown British papers. The fire is on in the hearth. Jennie is making a dress and talking to Bunty. Bunty is sitting on the carpet. It is evident that with the usual planter's hospitality Bunty has been accepted in the family fold" (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 17).

But in the present time, the carpet - bagging proprietors treat their workers like the servants. For them, workers are merely lifeless machines who are useful only so far as they reap profits for the planters. So they are recruiting the local prototype Indians and they are paying them twice only to earn more and more money.

MARWARI: (coldly) It's not what they're paid that matters. It's what they're worth (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 14).

The carpet-bagging proprietors want that the workers should work all the time in the gardens and they don't want them to spend their time in the club: "If you spend less time at the club, you'll have more time for the gardens" (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 14). In the olden times, the labourers were satisfied and peaceful because the old planters looked after them with great care and attention. They provided them many facilities. So at that time the labourers led peaceful, contented and useful lives. But now the carpet-bagging proprietors treat them like animals. So now they resort to violence and revolution rather than negotiations. The labourers cannot tolerate the atrocities of the carpet-bagging proprietors so, "now they are creating hell all over the place" (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 52).

The situation has become so horrible that the old planters find it difficult to stay on. They are selling their estates and moving out of India because the times are now out of joint for the kind of lives they had lived:

MAC: Bound to

HUGH: No place for a foreigner! (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 35)

The Jenkins group is winding up now because they cannot face the rising costs, less profit and the unethical problems of Marwaries. Three generations of Hugh family had spent their lives on the tea-estates and that is an evidence of their love for the tea--estates. Even though Jenkins are winding up their business in India, they are offering all the dues and retirement benefits to their employees. Hugh is being given "the pension and separation benefits and all that" (*Darjeeling Tea*? 34) and apart from it he is being offered a new posting in South Africa. This kind of employer-employee relationship has totally been torn apart by the new breed of planters. Mac's love for the coolie woman is an example of steadfast nature of the relationships the old planters developed, "It wasn't a planter's role in the hay with a coolie woman.... It was a life time love affair... with a dead woman" (*Darjeeling Tea*? 46).

The element of conflict claims critical attention in the play. As W.J. Meserve and R.L. Meserve rightly observe that *Darjeeling Tea* dramatizes "a serious conflict between levels of society" (Foreword, *The Hungry Ones* 11). There is conflict in the mind of Jennie who feels that her husband led himself astray and was responsible for the birth of Didi. She does not tolerate the very sight of Didi and asks Mac to leave the country without any delay as she has been deprived of conjugal love for the last nineteen years. Jennie says:

JENNIE: Been [sic] hurting myself for nineteen years, Mac. Anybody would think. I'd be insensitive by now. But no. It keeps growing and growing...(looks at him)...like her... (beseechingly) like. . .you understand, don't you, Mac. Oh, say that you do, or else I'll kill myself.... You understand why I want you to leave, my dear. Anywhere, anywhere... it need not be England or Scotland. Away from here, that's all I want (*Darjeeling Tea*? 42).

Jennie becomes very critical of the mother of Didi and tells Bunty that she does not like her husband's

affair with Didi's mother. She asks Bunty to look at the drunken Mac who is trying to drown his affairs with Didi's mother in the country brew. The conflict between the workers and the management also takes on serious dimensions. Dissatisfied with the wages the workers attempt to kill the planters and burn the doll's house. The conflict in the mind of Didi is lacerating because she has been deprived of maternal love and care. Through gestures, the dramatist reveals the inner turmoil and turbulence of the characters like Jennie who played a leading role in the past in guiding the planters and their children. Now she "sometimes feels tired... occasionally lapses into dreaming... embarrassed, confused, at suddenly being discovered... stretching, trying to break out of the reverie" (*Darjeeling Tea?* 21). These gestures provide a peep into her unhappy state of mind.

But at the end of the play, we find a suffocating atmosphere of sadness and loneliness. Jennie leaves Mac who dies of separation. Hugh has already left and what is left is only traces of past life in the form of Bunty. The coming and going Marwarries suggest that the days of gloom have been replaced by crass materialism and commercialisation of all relationships.

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