CHAPTER-IV

- THE COFFER DAMS
- TWO VIRGINS
- POSSESSION
THE COFFER DAMS

The novel is a subtle complex study involving issues of socio-psychological and cultural implications which destroy the emotional aspect of a woman's life and destroy her identity. The locale is not shifted but the cast changes. The novelist shows concern with the predicament of the identity of a European woman, Helen, who is drifted away from her husband, Clinton and seeks fulfilment in the company of a native tribal engineer, Bashiam. What does the union of the two persons of different race and colour signify? The truth is that it is not the socio-cultural and racial considerations to bind a man and a woman in togetherness. If it had been so then Helen-Bashiam affair would not have been a possibility.

What separates Clinton and Helen, is their respective scale of human values and personal, not cultural incompatibilities. Clinton's obsessive hysteria to complete the project depersonalises the whole gamut of emotions thereby rendering him the illustration of the western ethics of pragmatism and unfeeling professionalism which sanctions no regard for human concerns. The rise of a dam, if symbolic of the commercial and technological progress, also acts like a sinister force destroying their sociological pattern of existence.
The book from chapter-2 onward intends to show the growing mistrust between Clinton and Helen. The two have their own world outlook and their attitude to the Indians: Clinton represents the imperialistic greed of the Britishers which is hideous to keep the two races separate. The Indians look all alike the same to him, "are dark wave of humanity by another", whereas Helen thinks "of them as human beings, that's all". The sight of the broken bits of pottery on the site from where the whole community of the tribes was removed is analogous to war-brutalities to Helen. But its monstrosity and beastliness is diluted in the coinage of a new word 'persuasion':

"What happened to them?"
'They moved.'
'Where to?'
'No idea. Just got up and went, like animals. No moving problems there - I wish to God we travelled as light, we could have done this job in half the time.'
Helen said: 'But they lived here, didn't they? They didn't ask to move.'
'No. We persuaded them.'
'Why?'
'Why?' Clinton repeated irritably.
'Because they occupied a site we needed.'
'Were there no other sites?'
'Not suitable ones. It had to be away from labour quarters and near the river and away from the blasting - a hundred things. Then we found this spot - absolutely ideal from our point of view, except for those huts.'
'How many?'
'How many? Do you mean huts?'
'People."...
'I don't know how many people,' he said with a cold distaste. 'I didn't count
Clinton married Helen later than most people do. She is handsome and has her interests which hardly fascinate Clinton. And he hardly knew “where they lay”. She develops intimacy with the tribesmen. She sometimes disappears deep into the darkness of the jungle (symbolic of the primeval instincts) without leaving any note for Clinton. She comes in contact of Bashiam, the tribal engineer and chooses him to be her interpreter. She picks up the native dialect within no time to Clinton surprise. It could be a symbolic departure from her original roots but it reflects Clinton’s over-domineering nature and jealousy born of conformism and individualism.

Helen’s intimacy with Bashiam develops into a mystifying bond of relationship, which finds expression in her passionate utterance: “Sometimes we just gape at each other”, she said to Bashiam. “It’s a shame really, there is so much one could talk about.” Clinton’s bourgeois outlook to man-woman relationship is largely responsible for creating the crisis of identity for Helen. He fondly calls her ‘Lennie’, but hardly cares of her comforts.

2. Ibid., p. 45
"Lennie, you look delicious,' he said. 'You ought to wear these things more often.'

'Perhaps,' she smiled. 'But if I did you wouldn't notice.'...

'I ought to take more care of you. Lock you up, as wise men would.'

'But locked up things go mangy, like captive animals.'

Halen's imagery of captivity in regard to animals is suggestive of her own state of servitude to Clinton's male-egotism. The imagery throws Clinton into serious reflections and analysis of the factors responsible for creating feelings of misalliance.

"... we're double talking, she doesn't mean what she says, she means something else and she knows I know, we're like people tied in an uneasy marriage... but the thought was unreal, without cause or foundation as far as he could see and he put it down to the imaginings that had plagued him of late. I'm run down, he thought, wrestled with the proposition and abandoned it, substituted another. The country's getting me down, he said to himself."2

The situation gravitates towards escalation when Helen, Clinton learns from the servant, Das, has gone into the jungle for 'trapping birds' and the man to accompany her was no other than Bashiam as, in the words of the novelist, the interest of the two coincided and 'it coincided over bird-trapping.'3 A secret passion of hostility grows into Clinton's heart thinking that

1. Ibid., p. 77
2. Idem
3. Ibid., p. 91
Bashiam was, "the man with whom Helen went, someone with whom one had to reckon. It was a queer sensation: he had not thought to come face to face with what had been a faceless cog in complex machinery, or to find it impossible of dismissal as a ludicrous adversary."¹

Helen is the image of the wounded femininity which comes on the fore in the expression of anguish and pain over the wretched miserable existence of the tribes man in their ramshackle huts being "rattled around like peas in a tin." and the noise of the blast and the machines make the site a dungeon horrible to live in. She questions Clinton’s attitude to the tribal community. "Can’t you care? Don’t human beings matter anything to you? Do they have to be a special kind of flesh before they do?"² Helen feels lonely in her despaired cryings but this form of violence is not new to Clinton since without locating the cause of Helen’s anger at the Britisher’s inhumanity and finding remedy to assuage the injury caused by the machinery interprets it as a cause of indigenous pollution that has so naturally affects many in the path. Helen is one such victim: "The country’s affecting her, he told himself, it’s getting on her nerves: well, she’s not the first person it’s happened to nor by any means the last. Get the job done, he thought,

¹. Ibid., p. 91
². Ibid., p. 105
The note of misalliance is apparent in Clinton’s authoritarian attitude to Helen: humanism confronts Clinton’s professionalism. Clinton’s willful distancing of himself from the natives and the jungle representing the Indianness and Helen’s familiarity with it assumes a scale of confrontation between Helen’s humanism and Clinton’s professionalism. Helen is not pessimistic about Clinton’s idea of progress and materialistic concerns but what she is critical of is its dehumanizing impact which converts men into automatons. Clinton can hardly appreciate Helen’s humanity and this gesture of his makes the place suffocating. “It’s stuffy in here”, she said, “I think I’ll go out for a bit.” It is nine O’clock in the night and Helen’s refusal to stay in is her protest against Clinton’s male-dominance and authority which he wants to “control over her as he did over his men”. But he could not do so and speaks querulously.

“You’ll get lost. It’s pitch dark.”
‘I’m used to it,’ she said.
‘Jungle,’ he said, thickly, ‘not a park to play in.’
‘I’m used to the jungle too,’ she said.
‘I’m not afraid of it.’
‘You’re too damn familiar with it,’ he said, and felt something beginning to bolt, his strength, or control.

1. Ibid., p. 105
don’t understand is that what lies out there is verboten. Not our country, not our people. Nothing to do with us.’
‘Then we shouldn’t be here.’
‘I bloody well wish we weren’t.’

Clinton’s egotism feels hurt. It seems as if the citadel of male-chauvinism were crumbling. In the subconscious the ego keeps the murmur alive, “She is mine, he said, stubbornly; why should I let her go? What I have I hold.” They exist like two antagonistic selves, knowing that “something, some restraining line, had been severed.”

Bashiam’s accident, while operating a 15 ton Avery-Kent mobile crane is an artistic twist of the novelist to reflect the agnostic view of art in a bid to imitate the inexhaustible mystery of nature. Helen takes it a game of Clinton that the machine had some concealed defect and if Bashiam had known before setting it to work, perhaps he would have withdrawn. There ensued a stony silence, both were converted to stone but “something was struggling which could not be allowed to die, which presently emerged.

“I did not wish to destroy,’ he said.
‘If you are sure,’ she replied.
And he could not answer that.”

That ‘something’ is the invisible wall of mistrust.

1. Ibid., p. 125
2. Ibid., p. 126
3. Idem
4. Ibid., p. 195.
between the two which destroys the understanding and reciprocity that assures conjugal happiness. Our mind is also assailed by the thoughts if it is an accidental failure of the machine or a devilish sinister man-made design to destroy the operator. Helen's query 'why did you do it,' is responded by Clinton's shady words, "There are some things which one has to do" which emanates the final message of the book: the racial discrimination working as evil to split humanity and generate waves of distrust, cynicism, hatred, revenge and conceit which gradually perverts man and also threatens a woman's individuality.
TWO VIRGINS

The novel seeks to explore the possible hazards of the romantic liberation of self without the acceptance of its limitations and how they destroy a woman's individuality. As the title indicates, it describes the adolescent awakening of the two sisters, Lalitha and Saroja, belonging to a lower-middle class family of a South Indian village. The two sisters are poles apart from each other in nature and temperament and both start early on their search for their individual identity. The artistic juxtaposition of the reactions of the two sisters bring into clear light the fundamental dissonance between them, and while making the novel dramatic, it also arouses us to a clearer awareness of the female characters involved and the forces influencing their predicament. The basic pattern of the novel is a kind of Christian version of the pastoral: from the corruption represented by the city to the state of virtue and innocence represented by the village. How the failings of man-made society destroy innocence, simplicity and naturalness in a woman is illustrated by the Gupta-Lalitha episode and his assistant, Devraj - Saroja story.

Lalitha and Saroja are the daughters of Appa, an erstwhile freedom-fighter, who has got a grant of land from the government and whose status is a little above that of ordinary peasant or labourer of his village. He
is an educated man, and has attraction for western ways. His two daughters are poles apart from each other in character, nature, outlook on life and ways of living which is a part of the novelist’s design to assert her faith in Heraclitus’s dictum that ‘a man’s character is his fate.’ That is much of the suffering in life outside the operative mechanism of the biological and cosmic forces is man-made. Markandaya has kept balance between the two opposing views of life, she has given full opportunities to the two daughters to make their own choices and if they meet failure, they alone are to be held responsible for any moral, psychological or spiritual ruination.

The stages in their growth are conditioned by their inherent temperament. Lalitha is swept away by her own temptations and passions while Saroja resists them, although she too has the same feelings. Lalitha is born and brought up in the conservative society of the village. She does not want to bring any rural touch in her. She avoids tending the buffalo and leaves the task for her younger sister, Saroja. She does not submit to her mother’s moral discipline and answers back when she is rebuked. She is determined to leave the village and enjoy the glamorous life of the city.

The novelist from the start has stressed Lalitha’s unconventionality and moral rebelliousness. Once when
she was to bring back the buffalo from the river, she danced naked in the rains and when Mannikkam's wife reported the matter to the mother she said that perhaps they had seen the ghost of a naked woman.

Lalitha is more beautiful than the younger one, Saroja. More conscious of her beauty, more knowing about sex and more free in her responses to life, she is easily lured by visions of her conquests which materialise in the opportunity of her becoming a film actress. Her fear of sex disappears after her first abortion and makes her bold for facing the city life with all its snares and vile temptations. She breaks all shackles and restraints and advises her sister to follow the path which she herself has chosen. If she loses her virginity, and considers the sacrifice worth the freedom she has gained, it is she alone who is responsible for the blight of her identity.

Lalitha is her father's favourite, and shares most of his advanced views. She is admitted to Miss Mendoza's Three Kings' School, where she learns to love Western ways and to look down upon the Indian ways of life. She learns music and dancing. Her father is proud of her and admires her for her high class tastes and opinions. The family is occasionally invited to school functions, where Lalitha proudly shows her talents in maypole dancing and other festivities. She has status, which means that she
is wanted by many young men of the village and their families in marriage. But her sights are higher. She does not want to waste her beauty over some village youngman. Lachu is another source of their knowledge of sex. Saroja is afraid of falling into his hands, but her companions know how he dallies with girls by putting his fingers inside their skirts. Jaya has experienced it. Lalitha is also not afraid of him. When on one occasion, her mother objects to it she says, "He is a simple man, he wouldn't harm a fly, he just dallies with girls, didn't Krishna dally with girls?"¹

Miss Mendoza takes Lalitha to the city. Her dancing is approved by the film director, Mr. Gupta, who comes with his Assistant Devraj to attend the school function. The film director stays on to shoot a documentary film on an Indian village. They filmed "the village market, and the funeral of a young man who had obligingly died before his time, and the beggars who queued at the temple, and the monkeys that were plaguing the countryside."² They filmed the school with Miss Mendoza standing on the top steps to welcome the unit. There are several shots of Lalitha:

She danced one of the Indian dances she had been assiduously practising, and posed

¹. Ibid., p. 20
². Ibid., p. 105
After completing the film they all along with Lalitha go to the city. Lalitha is fascinated by the bright atmosphere of the city and Mr. Gupta's life style. When she comes back, she talks only of Mr. Gupta and the films. She dreams of herself as a film actress. When Saroja asks what the city was like, Lalitha says that it was her spiritual home. Lalitha tells her father that, she has accepted Mr. Gupta's offer to work in his film. Every time she thinks and talks of Mr. Gupta, she repeats the sentences spoken by him. He has three telephones, but she has not even one. "It is so primitive. Lalitha said not being on the phone. It hampers one's career. It would have been simplicity itself for Mr. Gupta to have kept in touch, if only..."²

The next day she disappears to face the world on her own leaving a note tucked in her bedding that tells: "She couldn't face going back to the village: it stifled her, her talents, her ambition. She intended to stay in the city where she belonged. She could look after herself. They weren't to search for her, which in any case would

1. Ibid., p. 105
2. Ibid., p. 133
be a waste of time because they would never find her." However, Lalitha's parents search frantically for her in the city but could not find her and came back to the village. After sometime they received an unaddressed letter from Lalitha telling about her living in a three-piece suite, with satin cushions and an arbour covered in grapevines. The arrangement is made by Mr. Gupta who himself has gone to America.

Lalitha has developed the attitude of a rebel. She hates the uneventful lack-luster life of the village and wants to live in the glamour and the lime-light of the city but what she loses during her adventure is the essentials of womanhood. All her courage and spirit, her beauty and artistic sense, her craving for a life better than that of sheep ultimately lead her on to identifying herself with a whore and remain contented with it. But is it the identity she intended to attain in the beginning. No, certainly not.

The younger, Saroja is her alter-ego who is less a victim of romantic day-dreaming that destroyed Lalitha's identity. She is a plain country girl who does not respond as vibratingly and thrillingly as Lalitha does to the shows of art of wealth. Saroja has as much interest in sex, shows as much predilection for learning the

1. Ibid., p. 236.
mysteries of sex life as Lalitha. Her opening out to life comes through various sources through her observation of her own body and her parent's bodies and their actions, through Manikkam's wife, Chingleput, Lachu, Miss Mendoza and others, and through her close association with and participation in the life of her sister, Lalitha. Saroja has an irresistible curiosity to know things and she is a close observer of persons, actions and events around her. She had seen her mother "bare from the waist down when she stood on a plank and washed... She liked Amma's body which was plump and soft and as comforting as a cushion... Appa's body was hard."1 After a quarrel in the night, Appa and Amma make love and Saroja hears the charpoy creaking.

"...it disturbed her, made her thighs flutter and her inner lips moist; she longed to know what it was like for Amma, who was constructed like her, same openings only larger, Manikkam's wife told her, because of the babies pushing out, not to mention what was pushed in."2

In order to give expression to her individuality Saroja discards the traditional norms of the old world but under the influence of Aunt Alamelu she holds on to those values and resists all those temptations which lure and ruin her sister. That is why Saroja just manages to remain a virgin in spite of all the passions and desires

1. Ibid., p. 12
2. Ibid., pp. 24-25
which are bottled up in her. What 'saves her perhaps is the attitude of fear, revulsion and distrust she has developed towards the city and its people after Lalitha's tragedy.

In spite of the physical, mental and biological reactions, Saroja does not succumb to the temptation. When at a later stage, Devraj lovingly comes near her and touches her hand, she jumps up. She knows where it ends. The bloody pulp of Lalitha's baby comes before her eyes. "Take your hands off me, she cried, and Aunt Alamelu of all people loomed up, put words she was fighting for into her mouth. What do you take me for, she screamed, a virgin in your whorehouse? She couldn't stop screaming. They couldn't stop her."1 The city is associated with seduction and whoredom, so she returns to the village, knowing what she is. There is a lyrical joy in her memories of the village, its fields, its seasons:

"The tender green of new crops, the tawny shades of harvest, the tints of freshly turned earth... The wells, the fields, each had its name: the well beside the water meadow, the well by the banyan, the field next to the mill. You always knew where you were. You knew who you were."2

Thus Saroja is the balanced and placid younger sister, while Lalitha represents the impetuosity of the youth. Mr.Gupta symbolises the fast-changing, super-

1. Ibid., p. 245
2. Ibid., p. 243
ficial and immoral exploitative system of the city which Lalitha loves and Saroja hates. "The tragedy of Lalitha can be best appreciated in the light of Saroja's internal monologue in the city after a futile search for Lalitha:

"At home there were fields to rest your eyes on, colors that changed with the seasons... you could have told the week and the month of the year by these alone. You knew each grove, each acre, each homestead on it, who owned them, and the owners of the names. You knew every pathway. No one could ever be lost, not by trying. The wells, the fields, each had its name."  

The continuity and identity in a rural community are completely lost in the flux and anonymity in the clatter of the city life. Lalitha's tragic disillusionment with the ethics that dictate the pattern of living in the city serves as a practical lesson in growing up for Saroja. Lalitha represents Don Juanism on the inverted scale, Saroja learns the lesson from her sister's fate and saves herself. The pity is that all the good things and the high ideals of life are sacrificed at the altar of money and misconceived social values which blights a woman's predicament. Markandaya has shown that the women, being the weaker sex, suffer more than men; they possess less resources than men to face their fate because their bodies are frail, their struggle for survival will bear fruit only when they keep away the sharks roaming about in search of their pray.
Possession is a powerful diatribe against the acquisitive thrust and over-possessiveness which destroy the essence of humanity and perverts basic human values: the instinct to possess what one is not born with is old and has its own philosophy but what devalues its merit is 'overreaching' the limitations nature has condemned man to. The fact is illustrated by the protagonist's frantic efforts to seek fulfilment by way of possessing what the West has denied to her. Her failure is of her own-making for want of developing a cogent view that it is not through the espousal of individualism but by celebrating the individual within the whole that one can come closer to the vision and realise for wish for goal in life.

Caroline Bell takes away a shepherd boy, Valmiki, a painter of genius to London where his talent, ironically, gets blunted by the touch of alien culture, he tries to renew it through the nurturing influence of love of Annabel, a distant relative of Caroline and Ellie, a Jewish girl. But soon this blissful phase of genuine human contact ends, Ellie destroys herself and Annabel is betrayed by Caroline's vile manoeuvrings to desert Valmiki. At the end, he returns to the Swamy to re-cultivate his genius that had been almost obliterated for
a while by Caroline's aggressive individualism and possessiveness.

Caroline Bell is the daughter of a British Resident in one of the Indian states during the period of the British rule. She is a rich and a divorced English lady of beautiful looks. She descends from a long line of men who have ruled India in the days of the British Raj. She is formidable and has 'Iron and steel'\(^1\) in her. She can have her own way for she has the attributes of the British to fare extremely well wherever they happen to be:

"Wherever the British go, as the whole of the East knows, they live on the fat of the land, though the British themselves have no inkling of it."\(^2\)

Describing Caroline's character, Anasuya, the narrator says:

"She was supremely confident, born and brought up to be so, with as little thought of fallibility as a colonial in the first flush of empire, as a missionary in the full armour of his mission, dogged by none of the hesitancies that handicap lesser breeds."\(^3\)

Caroline takes Valmiki to London to sophisticate him and develop his artistic talents under the wholesome influence of the advanced Western civilization but underneath it is an attempt to overcome the crisis born

1. Possession, p.
2. Ibid., p. 14
3. Ibid., p. 15
of spiritual rootlessness. Caroline's attitude signifies the changed role of the 'whiteman's burden' to maintain control over others-to substitute political dominance by cultural dominance with a view to alienating the Indians from their own roots. Anasuya's reaction when she sees Val being transformed into a sophisticated young man with his uncouthness gone is very significant:

"Did it make him more acceptable? In this polished Western world, obviously yes. The east was too strident, too dissonant, too austere, too raw; it had to be muted, toned down, tarted up—its music larded with familiar rhythms, its dances made palatable by an infusion of known idioms, its people taught to genuflect before understatement: - before a measure of acceptance came. Undilute East had always been too much for the West, and soulful East always came lap-dog fashion to the West, mutely asking to be not too little and too much, but just right."

Caroline provides a counterpoint to Anasuya. The Indian woman is reticent, cultured, talented, helpful and spiritually enlightened. The English lady is cold, intolerant, selfish, mercenary and manipulates everything and everybody to suit herself and to attain her desired ends. She does not recognise the human element in Val, she ignores and sweeps aside the human ties he makes. Caroline takes pride in Val assuring Val an identity, which is a myopic view of spiritualism as the West understands: 'I discovered him in a cave. Oh yes, a real

1. Ibid., pp. 109-110
one. In India. Hideously bare and uncomfortable, except for those superb walls. And Val of course.¹

In spite of the big difference in their age, she takes the handsome Val as her paramour and luxuriates in his company. Caroline had never lacked attention and had several love affairs which she described as her 'nymphaean needs'. Here is as Anasuya remarks, "the piquant combination of looks and talent-their looks, his talent, her talent in recognising it."² The possession of an Indian as a lover has another advantage for in the post-independence period India had come into fashion—"fashionable to know of India, fashionable to know Indians, fashionable to know Indians, fashionable to admire its art, fashionable to welcome its women and even, at a pinch, its men."³ Her concept of Val's art is 'essentially bourgeois': she 'looks at his paintings merely as commodities to be bartered in the market'⁴ rather than an expression of his communion with the divine. Her Western culture makes it difficult for her to understand Val's identification with India. She overestimates the power of her influence or of her

1. Ibid., p. 125
2. Idem
3. Idem
sophisticated Western civilization on Val when she makes the last effort to take him away from the wilderness of India. In reply to her frantic entreaties, Val says confidently: "The wilderness is mine: it is no longer terrible as it used to be; it is nothing". And the Swamy adds a rejoinder, "Even this wasteland may have something to show, other than what you have seen". Because of her western aggressiveness she miscalculates the real mettle of Val when she separates him from Ellie and makes her to commit suicide. She, like colonial Britain, adopts the policy of divide and rule when it comes to Val and Annabel too. Even her maidservant Mrs. Peabody understands, "Youth calls for youth.".

Caroline continues to remain the typical representative of her race in her pride, possessiveness, egotism and cunning manoeuvres. Val becomes conscious of the possessiveness of Caroline yet he is unable to break away from the spell till the catastrophe of Ellie's death tears his magic curtain aside. Val complains of Caroline's bourgeois pomposity to Anasuya:

"She does not care for me. She cares for only what I can do, and if I do it well, it is like one more diamond she can put on the necklace round her throat for her friends to admire; but when I do nothing I am nothing to her, no more than a small insect in a small crack in the ground.".

1. Possession, p. 228
2. Ibid., p. 215
3. Ibid., p. 55
She is capable of "a forcible possessing which had established nothing so clearly as that there could be no reasonable relationship merely a straddling of one stranger by another with little out of it for either."\(^1\)

Caroline showing her fangs and clawing Val and Annabel apart, exercises power over the other characters. She draws and pulls the strings like a puppet master. Yet her power over them stems from their allowing her to have it. Despite their power, Caroline is by no means happy or have a sense of fulfilment. She is like those rich women who flock to the Swamy in the Indian city, so aptly described by Anasuya:

"...all with a less evident common factor of subtle deformity—the pinched, drawn mouths of permanent discontent, the out-thrust bosom and shoulders of an unrelenting aggressiveness, the painted, shadowed wary eyes of people exhausted by their evolutionary more from being women, happy to surrender, to women, doomed to conquer, like those distant sea creatures that look their first steps on to land to collapse gasping upon the beach."\(^2\)

If this is to be the evolutionary direction of woman in regard to the attainment of selfhood, then there is little chance of fulfilment, personal or social.

In Ellie, the novelist portrays a Jewish girl of twenty years, who looks crippled and aged because of the

1. Ibid., p. 70
2. Ibid., p. 99
cruel inhumanities she has suffered at the hands of Nazis in concentration camp. She is described as a victim of "European crime in European confine."\(^1\) Ellie is like any innocent girl whose grinding poverty makes her an easy prey of man's appetite resulting in the destruction of her humanity. For want of courage, she loses her individuality. Annabel is another woman who suffers the loss of her identity. She is a distant relative of Caroline. She lives in a flat with two girls. It is the art that brings her near to Val. Annabel represents the liberated and uninhibited English girl of the 'fifties'. She is a rebel who turns down "her family's traditional plans for organised displays in the marriage market"\(^2\) and leads a free life. Annabel develops a liaison with Val and hopes to marry him. The young lovers find a big obstruction from Caroline in their way. Caroline does succeed in separating them. She very cunningly exposes Val's affair with Ellie in the presence of Annabel. Caroline picks out the clipping of a newspaper that published in four lines about the suicide of a pregnant woman who is Ellie. Val is frozen, numb with horror. Caroline promptly blames Val for the tragedy: "Of course it was Val's child. You don't blame him for not wanting it." It's shocking sensation shakes Annabel violently,

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 73
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 188
she wants Val to disown it. "It can't be true - say it's not true. Val. Or is it? Is it the truth, 'Suya.' And finding Anasuya helpless, Annabel turns to Val again crying and pleading since what she hears is contrary to the image she holds of Val in her mind.

"Val, please, please - I don't want to know anything more, only that...she killed herself for that. Val, please..."

"The child was mine," Valmiki spoke thickly. "But she never said - I didn't know she would - was going to kill herself."

"Emotional," Caroline murmured. "Unstable. Foreigners are. Dear Annabel, you must realise they aren't like us...you would never be able to rely on one of them."

"You let her go," said Annabel. Her eyes were wide, tearless, fixed in a rabid contemplation of Valmiki. "Your child, and you simply let her go, you-"

However Val breaks silence to explain his role in the tragedy.

"I did not do everything I could... I meant to go after Ellie and see that she was all right. I meant to, I talked about it a lot and I worried endlessly but in fact I did nothing because it was easier not to. Can you understand that? It's the easiest thing in the world to let that happen, it only becomes impossible afterwards, afterwards it is the unforgivable. How could you? How could I? Well I did because I wanted the whole thing to end without bleeding me. I knew that was impossible. I had been told it was impossible but I tried. Hundreds of poor sods do. Like me. I didn't want to think what sort of an end it would be for..."

1. Ibid., p. 206
her. "I didn't want to think at all. I didn't want to know."¹

But Val's apologia does not satisfy Annabel's coldness and anger, the whole thing looks to be shaped by what characterizes male-chauvinism.

"You ran away," she said again with a kind of cold vengeance. "You got her into trouble and you got out quick before the whiff of suicide could offend your nostrils and curl up those holy eastern sentiments of yours about the sanctity of life. Well, so much for them. So much for decency. More bloody fool I to have thought you had any because how could you, you aren't like us. You wouldn't even know what decency means."²

Val's moral conduct and the distortion as Caroline created to break him away from Annabel rouses her indignation, which leads to the ultimate separation of the two. Caroline explains 'emotional unstability' as the sole factor of Ellie's death but what of her own role and of Val's in the tragedy? Thus it is man's inhumanity to man that blights a woman's predicament outside the impersonal absurd forces.

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