

ENGLISH: *PARADISE ROAD*

‘Conflict has only negative effects on people.’

Conflict in general is an inevitable part of all of our lives. It presents itself in many ways and forms, right from the school yard up to world wars. Often, when the term conflict is used, it is seen to have a negative connotation, highlighting that its consequences are always bad and only miserable and that there is nothing fruitful or productive that is derived out of it. While there is some truth to the above mentioned statement, it is not always that conflict yields nothing productive. There are positive outcomes, although they are quite often outnumbered by the negative outcomes. Even in our day-to-day busy lives, the qualities that we embody as people to deal with conflict are highly valued. These qualities develop as a result of encountering conflict and they come to our aid in the most difficult times. In a large scale conflict situation such as a war, no doubt there are negative outcomes but there are also far more positive outcomes than what we think. On an individual level, it develops our appreciation and gratitude for things that we normally take for granted; our sense of identity is strengthened and it also helps break barriers between fellow victims of conflict and enables friendship. There are many more to this list of what positive effects conflict can bring to the general mass of people. However, because of the overwhelming negative effects both on the physical and emotional level of people who have underwent such extreme forms of conflict, the positive aspects that it can bring about are underestimated and minimised.

Conflict has the power and the potential to unite people, regardless of race, gender or social status. When going through a difficult phase such as a situation of war, conflict being the common thread of the all the victims’ experiences, makes the victims well able to relate to each other. This surpasses all the class distinctions and other superficial hierarchies that would have otherwise been strictly enforced. In Bruce Beresford’s movie ‘Paradise Road’, we see that how all the ladies at prisoner of war camp made lifelong friendships with one another, whom otherwise in their normal lives would not even be considered equals, let alone being friends. Adrienne, one of the main characters in the movie, befriends Margaret, who is a missionary through their shared love for music. Adrienne then confesses that she was always told to look down upon missionaries as they were considered to be much lower in regards to their social status. Together, they both indeed, made a whole world of difference for not only just the prisoners but also for many of the Japanese officers. Life was not the same in that camp after the introduction of the vocal orchestra, especially to the members that actively took part in it. Also, Rosemary and the Dutch girl, Helen become close friends and they both share similar attitudes for love. While there are many fights that ensue between the Europeans and the Dutch, Rosemary and Helen, however are maintain a strong bond of friendship. Their friendship went beyond the ordinary racial distinctions that many of the other women were caught up in. The ability to unite in all these women came about as a result of them encountering conflict. These examples show the power of conflict to unite individuals, and how only because of their unity could they survive the harsh reality they were faced with.

Our sense of identity is tested in times of conflict by making us go out of our comfort zones and where we are pressurized to do things, which we would normally not do or want to do. The test is whether while under pressure we still stand up for values or succumb to the pressure and compromise on our values, because that is the only other alternative. We see in Najaf’s memoir ‘The Rugmaker of Mazar-E-Sharif’ when Najaf and the others were tortured by the Taliban for apparently raising arms against ‘the defenders of the faith’; some of them were willing to accept and admit that they did fight against the Taliban, when they did not. Knowing very well, that this meant nothing but death, they preferred this much better than to survive and endure the terrible pain. Najaf however, was unwilling to accept something that he had not done. He endured the pain and whatever else that it took to stand up for his values, because that is the soul of his survival. This also draws parallels with the ‘Paradise Road’, where the women in the camp are offered the choice to either live at officer’s club as sex slaves or to starve and maintain their dignity. Some of them chose to live at the officer’s club because they genuinely thought that there was no other way for

survival, while some others chose to die rather than lose their dignity and yet others were flung between two worlds, confused. They were torn apart between whether to follow their moral codes or to be practical given the situation. Individual experiences of conflict here were not unique, but the way different people responded to the situation of conflict were very different and diverse. While conflict can bring out the worst in people, it can also very well bring out the best. This is shown when the some of the women decide to stand up for their dignity and moral values, be it life or death. As a result their sense of identity is strengthened. When they introduced themselves at the beginning of the movie, it was in connection with their families or their husbands and their occupations and this identity evolves and the women begin to see themselves as individuals and their identities separate from that of their husbands' or their husbands' work. While the test in this conflict situation is in itself difficult, just going through it, develops a strong sense of our identity and character.

Developing appreciation and gratitude for the normal life that we have, is a big learning from encountering conflict. The fact that we have ample facilities in our regular lives becomes a normality and there is nothing that we do in terms of appreciation for these conveniences that we have at our will. However, when these facilities are taken away by some means, we feel their absence even though we never appreciated their presence. Some forms of intense conflict, take away our conveniences by force, either by displacement or deprivation. It is then that we truly begin to realise how lucky we actually we were. In some cases, going through an intense form of conflict actually makes us have more facilities and conveniences in life. But even when we have it all, we never take them for granted knowing what we have gone through to get to where we are. Going through such challenging situations opens our eyes to the world outside and the suffering and pain in all of it. Najaf upon his settling in Melbourne after his arduous journey pays attention to all details and is extremely appreciative of it. Although Najaf himself was a kind hearted soul, conflict had played its part in moulding him to pay attention to such small and even insignificant details such as the way people walk. This is something that we would never even think of being something noticeable, but for Najaf, the way people walked without anxiety or without having to look over their shoulder meant a lot of things, which we perhaps will never understand and appreciate until we ourselves have been victims of such extreme forms of conflict. He notices these details and compares it with his previous experiences and is extremely grateful and appreciative for his life in this new country. Being thankful or content with what we have and being cautious not to take it for granted is a learning we all need to have, and this often facilitated by conflict.