

The Projection of the Quest of Identity in *The Coffee Dams*

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Abstract:

Man is a social animal who feels that a sense of stability, of security, of belongingness is necessary for his happiness. He must have his moorings somewhere in some home, in love and affection of his kith and kin. When this sense of harmony is broken and his sense of belonging is lost due to any reason, he suffers from a feeling of insecurity and loss of confidence. Ambivalence, dispossession of personality, dualisms, predicaments and quest of a person for his identity are common themes in modern fiction and we see that Kamala Markandaya's novels deal with variegated themes of identity crisis in which the characters try to affirm their roots. She has a commendable sense of predicaments of identity with which a modern man may be faced. S.C. Harrex states, "The philosophical quest involves a familiar web of dualism from which the Indian protagonist must disentangle his complex identity: tradition versus change, mysticism versus materialism, soul versus body, faith versus reason, and moral code versus free-will. On the other hand, the sociological impediments to self-realization are more immediate and down to earth" (65). This paper is a humble attempt to analyse the quest of identity in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffee Dams*.

Keywords: Tribal Tradition, Modernity, Change, Nature, Western Technological Development, Exploitation of Laborers, Identity Crisis.

The Coffee Dams is the story of confused and alienated mass of tribals who are drawn into the vortex of change resulting in the erosion of their native culture and tradition. The frenzied technological development and mechanization has played havoc with human life uprooting it from its traditional roots. The novel begins with the construction of a great dam to control and channelize a turbulent river in a hilly region in South India. The aborigines are thought to be immunized against the changes who have a deep instinctual relationship with nature from time immemorial. They suffer dispossession and annihilation of their cultural identity in the wake of materialism and modernization. The construction of the dam leads to intractable problems like exploitation of labor and commercialization of life. The novelist with her characteristic uniqueness depicts how individuals are caught in the dilemma between deep-rooted ancient Indian culture and invasive Western technology. The change is never good for the tribals as the editorial of *The Indian Express* says:

The reports of inhuman exploitation of the tribals especially their women, by privileged classes make painful reading. It has been going on in almost all places where the Adivasis have been brought willy-nilly in contact with the plains-people in the name of conferring on[them] the fruits of development. In the process of change, much of their natural habitat has been destroyed and their traditional source of living, the forest, depleted beyond recovery.

The rhythm of tribal life, which our poets have sung about, is now almost a thing of past. The alienation and deculturalisation of these communities resulting in large numbers of them taking to the vices of the modern civilization – trafficking in liquor, drug and sex – is itself a ‘tragedy’.... If this is progress, the Adivasis would have been far happier without it.(Prasad 183)

According to Susheela N. Rao, “The area of Southern India chosen by the novelist for this story is certainly a beautiful hilly woodland area justifying the vivid description of nature in the story, and the children of nature who live their life in content and in cooperation with powerful nature while the intruders want to change it, control it, and harness it for their own use (47).” It is seen that the changes affect the tribal world very much shaking it from its roots resulting into serious consequences. The tribals are innocent people who humbly accept any cataclysm whether natural or man-made. But tribal instincts also show some transformation with the new age and advancement. Bashiam “the civilized jungly-wallah” (CD 52) has been a representative of this change. “To his tribe he was a man who walked alone, sprung from them but no longer belonging, a man who put shoes on his feet and worked machines, whose feelings and desires they could not fathom” (CD 152). The old tribal chief is shown disconcerted to see his people”...are becoming money mad” (CD 84). His heart aches to watch the discontinuity of the tribal tradition. Even Helen, the English woman, observes that the tribesmen are changing. She thinks about this transition as, “Perhaps they contributed, with their humble acceptances; perhaps they were easily contented; but sometimes their loves and wants extended beyond and why not, she thought: they were creatures of the nuclear age however much it had bypassed them” (CD 53).

The British team, which includes chief engineers Howard Clinton and Mackendrick, work under the hectic schedule and face various problems like workers’ unrest, accidents and even vagaries of nature. Clinton is an unsympathetic, insensitive and opportunist person who understands the professional ways to manage the laborers. He does not fear about labor unions. He can go to any extent to exploit the laborers and accomplish his task. He rejects any idea of labor union in case of reduction in their pays: “ ‘Their writ doesn’t run here,’ Clinton said comfortably,’ in practice. We could sack the entire coolie labor force overnight and have a queue a mile long by morning if we wanted and they know it. Organized casual labor—it’s almost a contradiction in terms’ “(CD 63).

Clinton is aware of the simplicity, ignorance, poverty and gullibility of the tribes. He understands the power of money and knows that he can easily handle these people through its power. He is confident that these people living from hand to mouth would not

change even in centuries. He says: “ ‘Dock their pay and you will have them wrapping themselves round your feet’ “ (CD 63). This affirmation led Mackendrick to think, “Clinton was nearly always right, it was just that he seemed to miss out somewhere on the human level” (CD 63).

The policy of punishing the laborers with mass fines to compel them to reveal the names of the guilty proves unbearable to the tribesmen. But still they do not raise voice against it. This unjust exploitation of punishing even the innocents is calmly accepted. Krishnan, the leader of the Indian team of technicians and workers in the project, feels exasperated when he sees this servility: “Look at them! Lined up like passive cows at a backstreet Christian butchery! He had tried not once but thrice to call a strike and each attempt aborted” (CD 81).

Labor power is unorganized. They cannot resist this injustice. Clinton knows the weaknesses of laborers. He knows there is always a substitute ready in case the laborers go on strike. Clinton thinks:

Labor was another matter. Expandable. A second thousand to be had for the picking where the first thousand had come from. Emasculated, furthermore, by awareness of their crime. Strange, he thought, how much strength, conversely, people drew from flagrant injustice: muscles and sinews grew where puny arms had been. (CD 81)

Bashiam tells Helen that his people are habitual to deprivation and unfair treatment. The only thing that matters is that they are hurt emotionally. He says to Helen, “ ‘We are an emotional people,’ and ‘The spirit has been bruised as much as stomachs’ “(CD82). The condition of the tribals is miserable and very pathetic. The whole tribal community bemoans and starves. The atavistic instincts lose its place and these people also recognise the money power. The tribesmen are the flesh and blood embodiments of ancient culture but struggling on its last legs for survival. The tribal chief bemoans the exploitation of his people and criticizes their easy surrender to materialism. He says, “they are short of food too, whose fault is it, the jungle is full of game, if they relied on that and not on the money which comes and goes“(CD84). To find the way out of this cultural onslaught he suggests,”...it is also necessary to guard the inner feeling. Because, you see, one is shaken to pieces if there is inaction without and a hurricane raging within” (CD 168) but he knows that the modern civilization will prevent the tribals to do so.

The traditional life of the tribals is vulgarized. As they go away from their roots, their life is shattered. Nature has their life element and they go away from nature. Rao and Menon opine:

The loss of the traditional value of stable continuity and harmony is seen as too heavy a price to pay for the modern industrial progress. The self sufficient farmers and villagers, suddenly deprived of their means of income and their contented peaceful life-styles and forced to move to factories

and industrial areas, are not only exploited by the higher classes but also compelled to accept a new set of unstable commercial values contrary to the traditional certitudes of cultural stability and of human relationships.(101)

Krishnan disagrees with his foreigner team-mates on many vital issues. The differences occur due to the divergent Oriental and Occidental ideologies. He knows that the West is practical, unemotional and pragmatic. While talking with Clinton “He brooded, his dark unlined face like a carved god’s, while his subtle Brahminical mind delicately picked up and dissected the Western techniques of seduction, persuasion and coercion. It was the new guiding trinity as piety, gunboats and the way of Christ had been the old” (CD 60). The unpredictable nature of the river, vagaries of season and elemental forces such as monsoon, winds and jungle are incomprehensible to the Englishmen while the tribesmen are grateful to the river even though it destroys their settlements and their crops. They identify themselves with these natural forces. He thinks:

The Indian river, dark and turbulent, is wilful and irrational, unpredictable and uncontrollable like the unconscious. For the tribal people, it has a metaphysical character; the western technicians understand it only in terms of its strata, flow and course. When turned wild, Nature (here the river), respecting no human designs, flings away all the powerful machines and flouts all the sophisticated computations. (Chadha 53)

When the rains start immediately after the completion of the Dam’s construction, the fear exists that the village would be flooded. But the tribals who have better understanding of the vagaries of nature assure that the danger will be over soon. Finally the water level falls resolving the crisis.

In the beginning Helen and Clinton appear to be a compatible couple. They do not seem to interfere in each other’s privacy. Clinton feels proud of Helen’s individuality as compared to other English ladies in the camp. Later on Clinton dislikes Helen’s free mingling with the tribals. He feels that Helen should identify with Clinton’s dream project of construction.”It was as if they were walking on different levels: he on the overpass, she on the under. He had, as he said, an overall vision. She saw the detail: Das, and the birds, and the passions below” (CD 115). Gradually Helen reveals a separate existence and Clinton finds this drift unbearable. He experiences a severe shock when Helen rebukes him for compelling the tribals to evacuate their settlements. She even gets angry about the inhuman conditions in which they are living. Such violent reaction from her makes Clinton to think;

Clinton, bewildered, face to face with forms of violence he had not suspected in his wife, had nothing to say. In him was the same battered refuge to which from time to time they all had recourse, and into this he retreated. 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, get back quick, home to sanity, that's the drill. (CD 121)

Helen visits the tribals and gets a sense of fulfilment. She feels attracted towards Bashiam and hurries to reassure him by saying "Look at me. I've never been a memsahib. You're not some kind of freak to me. We're alike; we're freaks only to the caste we come from, not to each other" (CD 157). Her love-affair with him renders her a sense of unity with her own self which longs for freedom. Though Bashiam seems uprooted from his moorings yet he achieves satiation through his work. Earlier Bashiam leaves his roots but like Mira in *Some Inner Fury*, he has to return to it. He takes risk as a crane operator and strives to bring the bodies of his people. In this way he shows his sense of responsibility towards his clan as well as his work. Failure of Helen-Bashiam affair signifies the growth of the individuals and their realisation to identify themselves with social conventions and obligations. Helen's quest of self-realization is in her sense of community and universal belongingness, "The very success and strength of technology seems to cauterize human sensibility so much that Helen searches for an identity in a world where people have forcibly been torn from their roots" (Rao, Menon 100). Clinton suffers from a sense of guilt after Bashiam's accident. He suffers crisis of emotional alienation first from Helen, then from his own self. The novel focuses the concern of the novelist that even these members of the primeval clan are uprooted from their primitive culture, suffering the pangs of acculturation and alienation with the adoption of the vices of modernization.

Thus in the novel the persistent treatment of the loss of identity and the struggle to regain it is a proof of Markandaya's realization of the significance of the sense of identity. Unquestionably she has been able to affirm it in a forceful and precise way.

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