



Charles Dickens' "The Lamplighter" in the light of Ananda K. Coomarasamy's *The Dance of Shiva*

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Abstract: This paper examines Charles Dickens' short story *The Lamplighter* in the light of Ananda K. Coomarasamy's *The Dance of Shiva*, with a particular focus on the intersections between Western literary imagination and Indian philosophical sociology. Coomarasamy asserts that Indian civilization is unique in grounding education and social structures in philosophy, where the pursuit of moksha, liberation from the cycle of births and deaths is the ultimate goal. He also emphasizes the role of caste, vocation, and guild-like self-governance in maintaining social order and responsibility. Against this background, Dickens' portrayal of the lamplighters as a self-contained, ritual-bound guild can be read as a form of "guild socialism" that resonates with Coomarasamy's ideal of a self-governing caste system. *The lamplighters*, with their strict customs, moral discipline, and resistance to external disruption, parallel the Hindu conception of caste as both a privilege and responsibility. Through the tale of Tom Grig and his encounter with science, astrology, and social temptation, Dickens dramatizes the tension between tradition and modernity, community and individuality, science and superstition. This study argues that Dickens' imagined community of lamplighters reflects, in a fictional and satirical mode, some of the sociological principles Coomarasamy identifies in Indian philosophy, thereby offering a cross-cultural perspective on class, vocation, and social cohesion in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: caste, guild socialism, tradition vs. modernity, moksha.

Ananda K. Coomarasamy says that each race contributes something to the world civilization. Only in India, philosophy is made an essential basis of sociology and education. He says that Hindus grasped more firmly than others the fundamental meaning and purpose of life. The ultimate purpose of Hindu philosophy is 'Moksha' or ending the cycles of births and deaths. The Tamil poet Manickavasakar sings in his "Shivapuranam" seeking the blessing of Shiva to put a full stop to the cycles of births and deaths:

I was grass, weed, worm, tree,
Many trees, birds, serpent
Stone, man, ghost and retinue
Demons, sage, god
In the endless flora and fauna
Born and reborn.

Ananda K. Coomarasamy says that self-realization is essential to be liberated from the cycles. For self-realization, wealth (Artha) and the enjoyment of senses (Kama) subject to law (Dharma) are essential. The Hindu or Brahman view of life expounds the science of self or Adhyatmavidya. It asserts that by natural law ".... the individual ego is always, or nearly always, born into its own befitting environment" (Coomarasamy 15-16). It believes,

.... A shudra can do no wrong, a view that must make an immense demand upon the patience of the higher castes, and is the absolute converse of the western doctrine that the king can do no wrong. (Coomarasamy-16)

This doctrine of Hindus is well illustrated in the doctrine of legal punishment. The punishment of the *Vaishya* (the trader community) is twice as heavy as that of the *Shudra*. The punishment of the *Brahmin* (priestly class) is twice as heavy as that of the *Kshatriya*. The Hindu view of sociology reflects that responsibility rises with intelligence and status. But Coomarasamy says modern industrialism make *Vaishya* exploit *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Shudra*. Hence, the *dharma* of Brahmins which consists of study, teaching and realization is totally destroyed. Anand K. Coomarasamy thinks that castes' self-governing would create a just health society. The instinct of workmanship will lead to a very ideal combination of duty and pleasure, compulsion and freedom and hence the words vocation and *dharma* imply this very identity. Given the natural classes, one of the good elements of what is now regarded as democracy was provided by making the castes self-governing; It was secured that a man should be tried by his peers "whereas, under industrial Democracy, an artist may be tried by a jury of tradesmen, or a poacher by a bench of squires". (Coomarasamy-17) Further, Coomarasamy argues that caste as a body had collective privileges and responsibilities. Equality of opportunity exists within the caste. "Society thus organized" Coomarasamy says, "has much the appearance of what would now be called guild socialism" (Coomarasamy-17). In Wikie Collins novel *The Moonstone*, the celebrated Indian traveller gives his opinion about Indians. He says "The sacrifice of caste is a serious thing in india, if you like, The sacrifice of life is nothing at all" (Collins 83). Further, he adds Indians are wonderful people.

What Charles Dickens portrays in the short story “The Lamplighter” is Guild Socialism. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of 1989 defines Guild as:

Society of people with similar interests and aims, especially one of the associations of Craftsmen or merchants in the Middle Ages: the guild of barber - surgeons. (555)

Dickens says lamplighters are strange and primitive people. They rigidly followed the old ceremonies and customs of their ancestors. They married within their group of lamplighters. They betrothed their children in infancy. They are highly moral and reflective people. As Jews, they had many traditional observances.

....that they enter into no plots
or conspiracies (for who ever heard
of a traitorous lamplights?);
that they commit no crimes
against the laws of the country
(there being no instance of a
murderous or burglarious
lamplighter); that they are,
in short, notwithstanding their
apparently volatile and restless
character, a highly moral and
reflective people (Dickens 141)

Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* talks about a class called reddleman. He is a person whose business is to supply farmers with red colour to dye their sheep. Hardy says that the class is rapidly becoming extinct. Vern is a reddleman who travels the country with sheep marked by a red mineral called redde, a term for red ochre.

The *ethos* or situation of the short story is a tavern in London. The president or the chairman of the lamplighters is seated in the chimney corner of the tavern, which served as the meeting place of *Lamplighters’* time out of mind. The chief induces the curiosity of the clan by telling them of Tom Grig and his association with the stars. The vice president represented the clan by asking “And what had HE to do with them?” (Dickens 140). After such formality of breaking the ice, the chief raised his cup and said he drank for their health. The vice raised himself a little way off his seat and was sitting down again, recognised and returned his compliment to the chief. The chief narrated how Tom’s uncle committed suicide when oil lamps were replaced by gas lamps. When he died Tom got very drunk, spoke a funeral oration in a watch-house and fined five shillings.

The chief said one evening Tom went to a place near Canonbury tower in Islington, but the place is left to matter of opinion. Here the chief leaves the *ethos* to be decided by the individuals. He was on the ladder lighting the first lamp singing to himself. When the clock struck five, an old gentleman with a telescope threw up a window and looked at Tom very hard. Tom pretended that he was concentrating on the wick, yet he watched the old gentleman. The old gentleman had a great gown of bed - furniture pattern and he was not shaved. Hence, he had the look of a scientific old gentleman. Tom told him that if the whole Royal society was being boiled down into one man, he should have said the old gentleman's body was that Body. He told Tom that he was well versed in astrology and astronomy. According to his study of stars which he did six months before that exactly on that day at five afternoons a stranger would present himself, who would be the destined husband of his lovely niece, but whose birth would be enveloped in mystery. The chief told the clan,

There WAS a mystery about his birth-His mother had always admitted it Tom had never known who was his father, and some people had gone so far as to say that even SHE was in doubt (Dickens 146)

The old gentleman burst out of the house, shook the ladder, and Tom came down sliding like a ripe pumpkin into his arms. Tom asked whether she was a beauty and whether she had money. The old gentleman said she was very beautiful and has five thousand pounds.

Tom told the old gentleman he was hungry and was given venison, pie, ham and a bottle of very old Madeira, a white dessert wine. Then Tom was taken to a room where he saw a beautiful lady, Miss Fanny Barker, the niece of the old gentleman and his daughter Emma. There was a waiting maid. A half man and half boy named Galileo Isaac Newton Flamstead, the son of the old gentleman was also there wearing a boy’s dress. Tom saw the boy kissing Fanny and he was much upset. The old gentleman took Tom to a place where a crucible was boiling, a liquid preparation of Philosopher’s Stone. The room was filled with all manner of bottles, globes, books, telescopes, crocodiles, alligators, a child with three heads, a skeleton in a glass case, labelled “Skeleton of a Gentleman prepared by Mr. Mooney” and a ladder leading to the observatory. The old gentleman gave a paper to Tom and asked him to write his date of birth. With this paper he ascended up the ladder. Tom waited till midnight feeling very dismal and lonely. Tom saw the philosopher’s stone liquid and dreamed of putting sprats to turn them into gold fish for the first experiment. The old gentleman came down with the so-called gifted Mr. Mooney. He introduced him to Tom. Mr. Mooney put out his leg to shake hands. To bring him back to this world, the old gentleman gave electric shock from a battery. The old gentleman told Mr. Mooney to tell Tom the shocking news. The latter told Tom he would live for two months.

The doors were violently opened and Miss Fanny and Emma came in. Fanny knelt with a loving attitude at the feet of Mr. Mooney and Emma at Tom’s. Tom pointed out the mistake, but Miss Fanny said she loved Mr. Mooney. The son of the old gentleman cried women are false and hence he would not adventure in the troubled waters of matrimony. Mr. Mooney also said he would remain a bachelor. The old gentleman admonished Mr. Mooney and advised him to obey the stars. Tom said that he would marry Miss Fanny as he was to live only for two months. He also said due to the philosopher's Stone he would become the richest man on earth. The old gentleman was in rapture as Tom was in the same mood. He drew Miss Fanny towards Tom by little and little and joined their hands by force. The chief told the clan that all of a sudden the crucible blew up with the great crash. Everybody screamed and the room was full of smoke. The old gentleman told Tom he invested Fanny’s five thousand pounds in philosopher's stone. Tom let the young lady’s hand fall and said he would not marry her. The waiting maid set master Galileo as the chosen man for Fanny as at five that afternoon the old gentleman gave a rap on his head with his telescope. Galileo said his father was busy with the sun round which the earth revolves, but he never had taken notice of his son. They all talked together and cried together and Tom's condition was miserable.

Then Emma gave a suggestion that Tom could marry the waiting maid for the loss of time and disappointment with ten pounds as a kind of bribe to keep the story secret. Tom said as he was to live for eight weeks, he would marry her. Suddenly the old gentleman said he made a mistake in the bustle and Tom Grig would live for eighty seven years. Without another word Tom flung himself on the old gentleman's neck throwing up his hat, danced and referred the waiting maid to a butcher. The old gentleman asked him angrily whether he would not marry her. Tom said he would rather marry a mermaid. The old gentleman said Tom must face the consequences. With these words he drew a triangle with the liquid of philosopher's stone. The room swam before Tom's eyes and Tom found himself in the watch house. It was late at night and only in the morning he was brought before the magistrate. They fined Tom and Tom said he was enchanted. No one was ready to believe it.

The short story narrates how a leader of a clan tries to instill certain values and concepts in the minds of the people of the clan. He observes certain formalities in the meeting place to command respect from the clan. The age of Charles Dickens is the age of science. In sixteen hundred, Galileo challenged physics which holds the earth as a fixed object surrounded by movable once like the sun and the moon. But Galileo proved with his telescope that the earth is not the centre of the universe. The play *Life of Galileo* by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht gives a detailed picture of the Life of Galileo. The clan leader of lamplighters protects the integrity of the clan by saying scientific people are mad and things should not fall apart by believing such people. If they start going out of the clan by marrying some astrologer's relatives, they would meet an end like the end of Tom. Such behaviour would be expected from the children who have doubtful parentage.

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