

Retention of Cultural Identity in Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*

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Abstract

Claude McKay is one of the significant writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He is an African-American short story writer, poet, novelist, journalist, autobiographer, and essayist. He is well known for treating themes like identity crisis, color, culture, race, education, love, social injustice, colonial domination, sexuality, politics, gender, music, history, and class discrimination in his literary compositions. *Banana Bottom* is a bildungsroman novel. The novel gives an exact picture of the Jamaican folk culture through the young Jamaican peasant girl named Tabitha Bita Plant. In *Banana Bottom*, McKay focuses on the cultural consciousness of the transnational proletarian Bita Plant. Moreover, the novelist aptly explains the social life of the village girl in England and Jubilee in Jamaica, and portrays her as a rebellious person who is proud of her folk culture. Bita is adopted by a white missionary couple who wish to establish their ability by transforming a rebellious black girl into a cultured Christian. She is given an opportunity to study in England. However, her black folk cultural pride rejects the hypocritical nature of the white Church Mission. Through the novel, McKay strongly rejects the famous theory of white supremacy and dark inferiority. This paper mainly focuses on how Bita Plant rediscovers her identity through the retention of her Jamaican folk culture wherever she migrates, as depicted in *Banana Bottom*. Moreover, the novel highlights the differences between the white culture and the black culture, and also skillfully depicts Bita's assertion of her cultural identity.

Keywords: Cultural identity, folk culture, transnational proletarian, colonial domination, cultural consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Claude McKay is a renowned Jamaican writer of the twentieth century and one of the pioneers of the African American literature. In the ordinary course of African American literature, the writings are like uplifting rather than realistic but McKay's writings differ from them for his literary outputs are more realistic rather than uplifting. Thus, in all his literary creations, he advocates the black folk to retain their distinctive black identity, and suggests retention of cultural identity as a means of preserving the African spirit and creativity in an alien world. In this background, Claude

McKay's third novel *Banana Bottom* (1933) depicts the Jamaican folk culture through the young peasant heroine named Tabitha Bita Plant. It also brings to limelight how the blacks are stimulated to rediscover their cultural identity through white's supremacy.

The article mainly focuses on how the novel's young Jamaican protagonist retains her cultural identity, as described in *Banana Bottom*. The novel presents the conflict between the Anglo-Saxon values and the Jamaican or African values. Bita asserts her cultural identity without losing her individuality. It opens with Bita Plant's return to Jamaica, her home land. Even

after staying in Europe for several years, acquiring the Western education, she is able to return to her roots. McKay approves that one cannot completely transcend one's culture. Bitá rediscovers her roots by retaining her cultural identity and cherishing the socio-cultural ethos of her Jamaican folk culture. The blacks become very furious and emotionally blast when greater preference is given to the whites on the basis of colour prejudice.

Uniqueness of Jamaican Folk Culture:

McKay depicts the folk culture of his native Jamaica in *Banana Bottom*. From a seemingly genuine background and through believable well-drawn characters, McKay puts the values of his Jamaican-African ancestry against what he believes to be puritan values of middle-class England amidst such activities as church-meetings, tea-meetings, picnics, barbecue dances, house parties, yam digging, pimento picking contests, revivals, obeah rites, religious concerts, and interracial labour disturbances.

McKay visions Jamaica as a paradise, where instinctual sensuous life without repression is given importance. Jamaica's landscape with its beautiful plants, flowers, and fruits becomes a part of primitivism. The fact that McKay consciously grew up with a strong African heritage is relevant to his years in Morocco and to the black consciousness replete in most of his writings. An awareness of Africa as the mother continent is vitally important to McKay's Jamaican fiction.

Rupert Lewis and Maureen Lewis in "Claude McKay's Jamaica," opine that *Banana Bottom* is largely set among Claude McKay's boyhood activities and incorporates the author's interpretation of those times. The comparison between *Banana Bottom* and *Green Hills* bears the evidence. One of the principal strengths of the novel is that "the social world is so live and completely understood. But the opposite of this is that much of the novel is taken up by reportage of social relations," (46) especially of rural life and Jamaica as a whole.

McKay sometimes falls into digression when he mentions farming problems in the novel:

The authorial voice that dominates

those sections speaks in good English

and well-modulated phrase lengths. Occasionally there is a high-flown syntax, but this is sufficiently counterpoised by a conversational and comfortable tone that saves the prose from turgidity. These formal patches and the accompanying semantic archaisms reveal the educational background of McKay as a British West Indian reared on English prose masters of the 19th century, through their novels and essays and through the Royal Primers. ("Claude McKay's Jamaica" 46)

The story belongs to the Jamaican period of the early nineteenth century. *Banana Bottom*, a bildungsroman novel offers an exact description of black people's life in England and Jamaica. The novel focuses on the life of a young peasant Jamaican girl named Tabitha Bitá Plant, who lives in Jamaica's *Banana Bottom*, a mountain village. She is adopted by a white Missionary couple, Pricilla Craig and Reverends Malcolm Craig, who lives in Free Church Missionary at Jubilee. Bitá returns to her native Jamaican home after spending seven years in England receiving a proper British education. She is afforded that opportunity by the Craigs, a White missionary couple residing in Jamaica, who send the twelve year-old Bitá abroad, with her father's permission, after she has been sexually molested by Crazy Bow Adair, a descendant third generation of a strange "Scotchman who immigrates to Jamaica in the eighteen-twenties. This Scotchman brings the vast mountain estate of *Banana Bottom*, liberates the slaves, and marries one of the blackest of them" (BB 2). Before the coming of this strange liberator, many slaves are allowed to cultivate a lot in the estate. The Scotchman sells these lots outright to the tillers and sets a policy of cutting up his thousands into small holdings for the blacks who want to buy.

White culture still remains on the island, sticking to the idea that the Emancipation Act was a terrible thing and the mixing of different human strains. They can point out the village of *Banana Bottom* as an image of decadence and

degeneration and the descendants of the last owner of the original estate.

Retention of Jamaican Cultural Identity:

Bitá is not like other natives who return to Jamaica, haughtily and arrogantly after attaining European education, and sometimes even despising the very West Indian village from which they received their early nurturing. As a consequence of having been abroad, she feels all the more urge to fondle and touch all the life she sees before her, including the native food. On the Emancipation Day, celebrated on August 1, a West Indian holiday, Bitá is allowed to leave the mission home of the Craigs to visit her father named Jorden Plant and Bitá's stepmother named Anty Nommy. On that occasion, Anty Nommy places before Bitá and her friends, an abundant meal cooked in the West Indian way. Bitá, falling enthusiastically into feasting, remarks that although she has been dining on native food in the mission, the Europeans prepare it in their own way, making it not just the same.

McKay describes Bitá's emotional responses as she feasts upon the richness and exotic simplicity of her Jamaican world: "Bitá mingled in the crowd, responsive to the feeling, the colour, the smell, the swell and press of it. It gave her the sensation of a reservoir of familiar kindred humanity into which she had descended for baptism" (BB 40). Bitá does not simply observe and appreciate the native culture, but despite those natives and Europeans who wish to place her up on a pedestal, she totally identifies herself with the peasants by becoming one of them. In the market, Bitá purchases a pineapple and totes it homeward on her head, despite the hysterics of Rosyanna (Craigs' cook), who tells her that cultured West Indians consider such an activity disgraceful. Although Bitá is aware that Priscilla Craig wishes her to wear European style dresses for special occasions, at the Emancipation picnic, she decides to go bandanna, the wearing of bright vivid colors. Bitá chooses a copper-red dress. She attributes her choice of a color that resembles the underside of a star-apple leaf, to her peasant

soul. She loves bandanna colours, like all the peasant folk of the West Indies.

Bitá's father, Jordan Plant, is a church leader and is well off by native standards by owning the best acreage of a small landowner in Banana Bottom. He is a friend of Malcolm Craig; it was sweet music to the natives to learn that, like any other healthy peasant girl, Bitá manages to fall in the sweet snare of the flesh.

Bitá's inclusion to assume a value system outside the perimeters of her western orientation coupled with her stubborn sense of independence causes conflict between her and Priscilla Craig. Mrs. Craig makes no secret that she and her husband hope for Bitá to become a proper lady and marry the Craig's Protégé, Harold Newton Day, a pompous, ridiculous young native studying to become a minister. It is the hope of Priscilla and Malcolm Craig that someday Bitá and Harold will succeed them as head of the mission, and in that way they will make their contribution to Christianity by elevating a Black couple to stewardship. But Bitá, a naturally free spontaneous soul despite her education, is repulsed by the sterile, conforming young would be minister and prefers the young flashy dandy, Hopping Dick, who comes calling on Bitá at the Craigs' wearing cream-flannel pantaloons, a blue-grey tweed cutaway, sporting tan gloves, and a gold-headed cane. Mrs. Craig, irritated by his colourful presence, remarks that he resembles a low peacock. But when she adds to his list of faults, the tendency to his inclination to speak broken English, thus defending the validity of a culture that approaches life differently.

Bitá seeks friendship only with Hopping Dick, a young fleshy black dandy man but also with others who live counter to western middle class expectations because of their freewheeling lifestyle and lack of sexual inhibitions. She prefers such people, and they in turn gravitate towards her and warmly encourage her to explore her native urges by attending gatherings, considered socially unacceptable by the mission as well as those aspiring towards a middle-class social status. At first, reluctant to attend, Bitá, in an act of defiance, agrees to

accompany her friends and finds herself caught up in the vortex of these Primitive celebrations.

It is at one such celebration that Bitá's native roots get revealed as undeniably strong and enduring. There is no doubt that the West-Indian passion of her soul will prevail over any tinge of Western affectation. Despite the fact that Bitá goes to her first tea meeting in an island equivalent to the rent party in Harlem where peasants sell rum, orange wine, ginger beer, and cakes to raise money for various pressing circumstances as simply an observer of the peasant spectacle of dancing and singing, the sound of the drum strikes accord within her and forces her body to respond. Not able or willing to deny the native longing within her, she abandons all restraints and dances with others:

Her body was warm and willing for that native group dancing. It came more natural to her than the waltzes and minuets. Bitá danced freely released, danced as she had never danced. Dancing down the barrier between high breeding and common pleasures under her lights tamping feet until she was one with the crowd. (BB 104)

To emphasize further the vibrancy and deep authenticity of Bitá's response to native music, as opposed to that of a spectator merely fascinated by the antics of the West Indians, McKay writes that Bitá, after dancing, glances at Squire Gensir, a wealthy English man living in Jamaica among the peasants. She wonders about the extent to which he, a Whiteman, is touched by the music. She wonders whether or not his response is merely cerebral, or whether his nerves and body cells are stimulated like hers.

Claude McKay's Ethnocentric Perspective:

Bitá's ethnocentric perspective makes it possible for her to release herself quickly from the missionary world of Priscilla Craig. But she finds that retaining her own identity means rejecting the principles that define Priscilla Craig, because Bitá could not see "the Christian exhortation: love your enemies" (25). Instead, she can see partiality and racial discrimination in the church mission. After that, Bitá finds

herself rejecting Priscilla Craig's general view of the world. After a while, she knows that it is time to leave the home of Priscilla Craig, because she feels a tremendous discomfort to live with a person whose attitude of life is alien to her. McKay explains: "the popular hypothesis of white superiority and dark inferiority and the 'survival of the fittest.' Let them be fooled and exploited by their own" (26).

Bitá's philosophy, one which underlines all her rebellious actions since arriving at Jubilee, is simply to be no one but herself. To Bitá, the greatest human tragedy is that of a person wishing to be something other than his natural unchangeable self. Not understanding Bitá's ethnocentric perspective, Priscilla Craig, an individual whose own instincts have dried up and who is actually a faithless missionary, who detests the people she serves, declares Bitá as "atavistic" for social redemption. Both Bitá and she agree that Bitá must return to her father's village.

Bitá's return to the home of Jordan Plant signifies the complete acceptance of her heritage. Despite her British education, which guarantees her a special place in Jamaican society, she consciously chooses to live out her life among the simple peasants. Even Jordan Plant, though troubled by his daughter's abrupt retreat from Jubilee, cannot help taking pride in her commitment to discover home. Her defiance has particular significance to him:

The presence of this only child, now a cultivated young woman, in his own home made him happy. She had grown out of that soil, his own soil, and had gone abroad only for polishing. Her choosing of her own will to return the refilled him with pride. (BB 234)

Bitá represents the culmination of Jordan Plant's life of richness and abundance. Through her accomplishment, he realizes an even higher sense of dignity among the peasants and White missionaries with whom he has been friends. Back home in Banana Bottom, Bitá is quickly absorbed into the traditions of her mountain village. One such village tradition is that of primitive religious practices. Bitá, once heard

confessing her indifference toward Christianity, is nearly pushed to the peak of her emotions by the Supple-Jackers, a primitive religious band that McKay describes as deeply rooted in the peasant culture. These Supple-Jackers manage to break into the evangelical revivalist temple where a cynical and religiously skeptic Bitá sits with her father and several others from the community. Once Bitá hears the unrelenting beat of their tom toms and sees the rhythmic swaying of their whips. She, like many others of the congregation, feels compelled to follow them out of the rear door of the church. Soon she is emotionally over taken by the power and energy of their religious rite that is African in origin. The drums beat furiously, people bounce and whirl, and as they faint, the Supple-Jackers pounce upon them with their whips. Bitá too falls under their spell. She draws nearer and nearer into the inner circle until with a shriek she falls down. In her frenzied state, her collective consciousness invokes ancestral images of savage rites, tribal dancing, and the clashing of triumphant spears. Later, a recovered Bitá admits that although she is affected by the Supple Jackers' magic for only one night, their religion is stranger and stronger than Christianity.

Another custom that Bitá throws herself whole heartedly into is that of the tea meeting. In Jubilee, she attends one, much to the disapproval of Mrs. Craig, but now she goes with complete freedom. McKay says that there is nothing to restrain her now from doing the things that do not go against her conscious. There is no one around now who makes her reject her native or peasant identity. She is free now to attend as many tea meetings as she pleases, and so she attends many. Appropriately enough, it is at one of these peasant gatherings that she meets the man who will later take her as his wife.

More than any custom or tradition, Jubban, one of the Jordan Plants' strongest and most trusty drayman, represents Bitá's unequivocal embracing of West Indian values. He is nothing short of an idealization of the Jamaican peasant. He symbolizes the strength and the nobility of the land, and he is at harmony and peace with nature. He has away of coaxing and

taming mules and horses, and making them work willingly. When Bitá first notices Jubban, she is taken back by his frank, broad, blue-black and solid jaws and his velvety indigo-black skin. He exudes a masculine confidence that Bitá so seldom witnesses in the world from which she runs. Appropriately enough, before Jubban makes his feelings plain to Bitá, he comes to her defence on two occasions: when Arthur Glengly, the mulatto son of a wealthy landowner, calls Bitá, who rejects his advances only a nigger gal and when Tack Tally maliciously repeats the Crazy Bow story about Bitá's rape. Jubban uses his fist to defend Bitá's honour. It is the peasant's way which is natural and strong. Unlike the other peasants, Jubban is oblivious to Bitá's education as well as pretentious social climbing world outside the village. He is a man at peace with his own integrity and West Indian identity. Bitá sweeps off her feet.

David G. Nicholls in "The Folk as Alternative Modernity: Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* and the Romance of Nature," depicts that McKay argues most notably in favour of "rejecting Christianity, colonial cultural ideology, and the return to folk roots as a path of autonomy for Afro-Jamaican peasants" (79). This autonomy is not only conceived as an antidote to the imperial mission's modernity, "but also as a means of resistance against the vagaries of the global consumer market and the incursions of low-wage immigrant labor" (79-8).

In *Banana Bottom*, the folk is located between two generic imperatives at the axis. In one folk romance, *Banana Bottom*'s village reflects the ostensibly timeless ideals and "collective identity of Afro-Jamaican peasant life. Here, people are economically self-sufficient and culturally regenerative, and every change is part of the synchronous cycle of daily existence" (80). The people, on the other hand, drive the mechanism of a naturalist plot. The novel traces Bitá Plant's inexorable falls are from her role as a highly educated Christian missionary in Jubilee to her marriage with a peasant farmer in her native village.

The marriage of Jubban and Bitá symbolizes McKay's reconciling of Western culture and the natural intuitive spirit. Despite the negative reaction Bitá receives from most of the bourgeois in Banana Bottom for Reverend Lambert refuses to the marriage of the two because he contends that by marrying Jubban, Bitá buries her talent and education in the mud, she settles gracefully into a routine peasant life with Jubban. However, Bitá is contented with him. She becomes used to his kindly-rough gestures, and they adjust themselves well to each other. They find a deep abiding earth-bound love, based not upon romanticism, but upon admiration and respect. They never say "I love you" to each other, but as Bitá reflects, the thing becomes a fact without declaration. Bitá finds such satisfaction in her union with Jubban. McKay writes that within her mind grows an intrinsic love that flowers out of the mind of her race.

The narrator also explains Bitá's deterioration as being driven by her instinctive or unconscious feeling for her folk roots. Yet, as the plot implies, Bitá's regression does not leave "her debased or in a state of monstrosity; rather, in succumbing to the diachronic forces of psychological determinism, Bitá finds herself savagely plunged into the romantic realm of folk romance" (80). By surrendering to instinct, Bitá discovers, perpetually, "the autonomy through which she can be true to herself and her Afro-Jamaican community" (80).

In *Bitá and Jubban*, McKay achieves a synthesis of the Anglo-Saxon and folk culture. Before Jubban, Bitá is contemptuous of her education, finding in it no meaning. But after discovering a secure place for herself within her own culture, she concludes that the purpose of education is not to dominate one's life so that one winds up seeking empty degrees and status, but to add richness to one's existence, whatever that existence may be. Bitá's realization that her education is an intrinsic thing within herself is reflected in her attitude towards Jubban. She has no desire to change him or make him other than what he was, or to force into him that grace and refinement local bourgeois types contend is necessary for a person of education.

Rather, she has a desire to share her learning with him, and to read to him. Jubban allows Bitá freedom to explore her intellect and express the fruits of her learning, reasoning that just as he excels in cultivating the land and bringing prosperity to their lives, she should excel in those activities for which she has been trained. Their union symbolizes a common spiritual bond: "Her music, her reading, her thinking was the flowers of her intelligence and he the root in the earth upon which she was grafted, both nourished by the same soil" (313).

Banana Bottom concludes with Bitá being awakened by the sound of cry from her backyard. It is the cry of her son, Little Jordan, named after her father, who is angry for Anty Nummy has prevented overstuffing his kicks and yells, Bitá sees that he is wilful and strong. He is certainly a loving testament to the rightness of her decision to come home.

Conclusion:

Without doubt, *Banana Bottom* is McKay's most unified novel. He achieves the synthesis of ideas that eludes him nearly all his life. But in this final work of fiction, he is still not prepared to abandon entirely the self-conscious point of view that plagues his first two novels. McKay's insecurity still requires the presence of a western intellect, other than Bitá's, to validate much of the ethnocentric judgments made by native Jamaicans. The approval of Squire Gensir, the British emigrant, only can grant authenticity and dignity to the native West Indian culture.

Squire Gensir's existence is a testament to McKay's inability to free himself from his colonial past since Gensir is nothing more than a fictionalized portrait of McKay's British mentor, Walter Jekyll. McKay's psychological and intellectual dependence on Jekyll during his early years in Jamaica is well documented. The fact that he invokes his presence in *Banana Bottom* shows that he is not yet psychologically prepared to detach himself from the sanctioning voice of his Western teacher. Consequently, what is otherwise a thematically unified novel becomes confusing

in its need to accommodate Gensir as McKay's cultural father.

Thus, Bitá herself looks at Squire Gensir as a man who has within himself by education and by birth, the flowering of that culture she had been sent abroad to obtain. Even in England, where she has an opportunity to visit some of the better homes of her school friends, she sees none of his refinement. To her, he is the quintessence of western civilization. Bitá and Squire Gensir's friendship and conversations in *Banana Bottom* depicted a very real sense, Squire Gensir is placed in an untenable position of teaching Bitá, to appreciate the nuances of her own native culture.

Finally, Bitá, who early in the novel is ready to embrace Jamaica as a homeland rich in color and tradition, later declares the island, a stark and lonely place, as she wonders at Gensir's desire to remain there: "She could not quite believe that he who had grown up a favoured child at the hub of mundane life could be satisfied with existence the rein that remote place. With her it was different. She was born to that rude and lonely mountain life" (BB 123).

Bitá, under the influence of the sanctioning western mind of Gensir, sees Jamaica not as a native but as an Anglocentric observer. When Gensir returns to England and eventually dies there, Bitá reasons that perhaps his final departure from Jamaica is best, since his high intellect and acute intelligence make it impossible for him to sink completely into the austere simplicity of peasant life. When Bitá is in the company of Squire Gensir or when she simply reflects upon his existence, she cannot see the synthesis between instinct and reason that she realizes at other times throughout the novel. Her plight is similar to that of McKay, who cannot escape the dominating influence of Walter Jekyll.

Thus, in *Banana Bottom*, McKay focuses on the Jamaican folk cultural identity of the young Jamaican peasant village girl. Moreover, he powerfully explains the social life of the village girl in England and Jubilee in Jamaica and portrays her as a rebellious person who is proud

of her folk culture. Bitá is adopted by a white missionary couple who wish to establish their ability by transforming a rebellious black girl into a cultured Christian. Therefore, Bitá plant is given an opportunity to study in England. Her black folk cultural pride rejects the hypocritical nature of the white Church Mission. Through the novel, McKay strongly rejects that the famous theory of white supremacy and dark inferiority and "survival of the fittest" (BB 26). Because the novelist asserts that let them be deceived and manipulated by their own. Thus, McKay in *Banana Bottom* highlights how the young Jamaican village girl rediscovers her identity through her pride of the Jamaican folk culture.

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