An Evaluation of Caribbean Postcolonial Culture in Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance*

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Abstract: The research article aims to explore the literary work of Caribbean writer Earl Lovelace, novelist, playwright, journalist and a short story writer. Many Caribbean writers focus on the urgency of going beyond contemporary literary schools of appreciation to illuminate and decode the genuine understanding of Earl Lovelace’s oeuvre. He belongs to the post-independence wave of Caribbean writers who have continued the West Indian literary tradition established by Naipaul, Lamming and others before him. His novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* is a descriptive piece of prose. It is written with the intention of depicting how the custom of Carnival Monday has degenerated from the tribal majesty of masked devils, to a conventional parade filled with sights and sounds pleasing to the eye. The novel depicts the existence of the people of Calvary Hill and the culture they create in the process of surviving. In this article an attempt has been made to locate the experience of the cultural formation in *The Dragon Can’t Dance*. It proposes to fill the gap in extensive analysis of this work within the active criticism and presents the history and culture of the Caribbean in the postcolonial context.

Key Words: History, Postcolonial, Culture, Carnival, Calypso.

Introduction:

Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance* considers the basic factors in the creative and historical worlds as a novel of postcolonialism and racial divergence. He admits a primary sensitivity to the events of the past in their different regions. It is the intensity and nature of his inner voice to the past which regulates the form of everything he has defined. In this novel, the places and the people are seen objectively through the artist’s eyes and subjectively in terms of their responses to them. This ultimately becomes the source of irony.
Any Caribbean novel cannot be taken into consideration without an insight into the Caribbean history for there is a constant overlapping of fiction and history.

The Caribbean fiction is unique and known for social awareness. Confronted by a society formed through oppression, slavery and colonialism whose values had never been defined before, the fiction writer had to rebuild experience. At the same time he had to create and recreate the standards against which such an experience is judged. The focus of Caribbean fiction is on the social, psychological, and ontological aftermath of what has been called the peculiar institution or on the historical events of the past.

The Caribbean islands were exposed by Columbus in the fifteenth century. The native Caribs and Arawaks were virtually exterminated within a century of this discovery. They have been undergoing many socio–political problems and economic exploitation of the poor by the rich section of society. West Indian history is conquered by social and political ‘white violence’ and ‘black resistance’. The historians are of the opinion that the first conquistadores of the Caribbean were of Maya extraction. They were unknowingly named as Caribs by the Spanish. Thus they called Caribbean. The Caribbean history could be studied with due respect to the pre-Columbian and the post-Columbian historical phase. History has always been a major concern in Caribbean literature exerting in Mark McWatt’s words, “an attempt almost obsessive influence upon the creative imagination of the West Indian writer” (McWatt, 12).

Many historians namely Eskimo, Beothuk, Aztac, Maya, Arawak, Carib, Inca, Chibcha, Toltec, etc believed the Pre-Columbian civilizations. An evaluation of the Pre-Columbian belief may be studied only if one studies the background of the migration origin of American Indians. The Caribbean people followed the long boats as a model for their migration. The migrations were not specific or systematic but encompassed a short period of time. One can notice only three major civilizations –Maya, Aztec and Inca. The deviant behaviour of these great Pre-Columbian civilizations could be traced to their pre-classical ancestors. The Toltecs in the case of Aztecs and Mayas, and the Mochica and Chimu for the Inca.

After the extinction of the Arawaks, Amerindians – the native Caribs, most of the lands stretching from the Bahamas in the North to the South American mainland were trespassed by Spain. The Portugese, the French and the British occupied after the departure of Spanish. Of all the notions that each country had headed towards the Caribbean it is
considered that the British expression was the most repulsive. The British people came to the
New Land with an intention of settling Unlike the Spanish, French and Portuguese.

The colonists from England arrived to cultivate the tropical farms of Europe. The
labourers were brought from Africa to work on the sugarcane fields. In the history of West
Indies the most significant event is the importation of the black slaves from the West Coast of
Africa. These were brought to promote the shift from tobacco to sugar plantation in the
islands. The switch over made necessary the infamous triangular trade which consisted of
journeys made from the ports of Britain to the West coast of Africa, the West Indies and back
to Britain. At every segment of the triangle, cargo was exchanged and the cargo transported
from Africa to the West Indies. What was commonly known as the Middle Passage was
human cargo – thousands of Africans were uprooted from their respective tribes in several
parts of Africa. They were brought to the West Indies for the sugar plantation. They were
treated and tortured in an inhuman way - the traumatic tales of which are narrated in C.L.R.
James’ classic book *The Black Jacobins*-

Africa, remember was the dramatic scene of the cruel and bloody origin of the
modern West Indies, the beginning of the island’s violent progress through what
Eric Williams called the broiling sun of the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations.
European greed, the motive force in capitalism was not satisfied with merely
physically wrenching a whole people from their mother continent, but further stifled
any possibility of a continuous culture on the part of the captives by denying them a
family life. Denied language and a common culture, deprived of political and
economic power, and without the corrective of an unbiased, an all-sided, educational
system even after ‘freedom’ was regained, the uprooted black population looked to
the white world for a pattern of life (*The Black Jacobins*, 1963; 405).

Thus, an opening in the Old world and an arrival in the New implicated on the part of
conquerors / settlers a journey with empire creation and colonial settlement. The colonies
were shaped into manufacturing workers as the point of founding Colonies was mainly to
secure raw materials. The colonial matters were devoid of an access to scientific and
technological knowledge. They were prohibited and not given axis to develop their own
industries. Cheap labour was acquired through colonial subjects. The colonies could not trade
with other countries except the ‘mother country’. A dislocation of geography, climate and
race played a vital part in the arrival of new world settlers – both black and white. It is a
minimal fact if one thinks that colonialism is very much a black and dismal experience. Here
one should understand that black as well as white experience although there is a qualitative difference in their suffering but black experience and agony is emphasized here.

After the eradication of the slave trade in 1807, the labourers were asked to work for the European-owned plantations were obtained from China and on a larger scale from India under an indenture system which guaranteed repatriation when the period of indenture expired. But such contracts were rarely pleased. Thus the current West Indian population consists of a mixture of races in varying proportions in the larger English-speaking independent countries of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, Guyana and smaller islands of Dominica, St. Lucia, St.Vincent, Antigua and Grenada. Edward Brathwaite says:

New Ethnic groups such as Portugese, Chinese, Indians were introduced. New colourations into the black / white / coloured stratification; new numerical dispositions, new religions: Moslem / Hindu, new occupational specializations-cocoa / rice-farming and new cultural identities, problems and orientations were continuously introduced into the already fragmented world (Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1971; 28).

We come across important local cultural and linguistic variations between the islands there are prominent similarities in the history of violation, exile, return, imposition of the English language and its related cultural values. Therefore, when the Caribbean won independence the children of settlers had become Creoles. They were the children of the colonists with a deep faith in their new land. The majority of the inhabitants were the lineage of the slaves and indentured servants who had mixed among themselves with the creoles in a knotted web of blood and relationship. As Ivan Van Sertima says:

The West Indian man is a restless and rootless animal. He has been torn up from Africa, Asia and Europe and flung down into the Americas. He is a mingle of many races and bloods, sensitive to many cultures and many influences (Caribbean Writers, 1968; 10).

In this way the Caribbean history shows light on the tragic history of slavery, indentured labour and racial miscegenation. It is a diverse society. Caribbean society historically was never considered as a meeting of people from different parts of the world to live amicably. But it is a society into which men and women were assembled for one and only purpose – labour. George Lamming has rightly says,
Each race made a different journey to the Caribbean, with a different motive. Their heritage was different; their psychological encounter with white authority had different reverberations (*Anthology of Caribbean Essays*, 1973; 8).

Every aspect of life in the West Indian society seems to be affected by the social, political and plantation needs of European capitalism. The reluctant slave whipped to work on the sugar plantations. The modern workers spent their limited income on imported cars and other items for nothing is much grown or manufactured in the West Indies. Most of the things are imported, designed to encourage the same western industries that got off the ground on the loot of a continent. As a mode of the development of the West Indies, since the Europeans first began to build their empires in that region, there had been a heavy emphasis on trade. Profit-making was not only the basis of the economic system but also as a reason of the whole European society established there. The most important driving motive was economy. Economics was at the base of other types of imperialism. Imperialism believed in creating, organizing and maintaining an Empire. Therefore, Colonisation was not only an act of civilization as the imperialists misconstrued but also a forceful act motivated by selfish interests.

Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance* is a novel in resistance to such a historical backdrop that I have mentioned above in order to value and make out the truth told in their tales. This novel should be studied as a postcolonial novel. It deals with the problems of post-emancipation of slavery and indentured labour of their respective societies – Guyana and Trinidad during the nineteen eighties. Lovelace viewed postcolonial writers as undermined the imperial perception created from the tension of their colonial legacy, new novels that generate new ways of perceiving human relationships between different races. The challenge for them as writers is to sliver the implied class and racial biases, de-mythologize the typical notions that threaten to describe them. Thus the postcolonial literature acts as an attempt to take us from homocentric to the polyphonic. It tells us about the dominance of a single culture into convergent cultures, from pure ancestry into hybridization, from the novel of persuasion to the novel of carnival. Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

The post colonial fiction helps to decolonize our imaginations by enacting various modes of escape from the mental straitjackets in which imperial habits of mind had locked them (Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, 1996; 63)
Lovelace honestly has made an honest attempt in this novel to reassert and restructure the wounded relationship between Africans and Indians by contemplating an alternative vision of creolization. Creolization is the transformation of traditional cultural patterns of Indians, Africans and Europeans as they made historical contact with each other. Ethnic and social differences in a hierarchical, racially-structured, plural society insure that Creolization cannot be reduced to westernization. Robert Young identifies an ‘unconscious hybridity, whose pregnancy gives birth to new forms of amalgamation rather than contestation’ or ‘the imperceptible process whereby two or more cultures merge into a new mode as Creolization’.


Earl Lovelace’s novel The Dragon can’t Dance is set in Trinidad where a majority of East Indians are found interacting with the descendants of West Africa and Europeans. In Trinidad, people are closer, more intimate and the inter-communication with the different sections of society is more rapid. Geographically speaking, the Indian settlement is found to a great extent inhabiting the countryside on the other hand the African settlement is found in the city. It is an aspect which is influential in providing the facts necessary for an appreciation of the peculiar conditions of life the novel drives upon. The novel is written with the motive of portraying how the custom of Carnival Monday has degenerated from the tribal majesty of masked devils, to a conventional display filled with sights and sounds pleasing to the eye.

In The Dragon Can’t Dance, Lovelace analyses a new insight on Caribbean literature by relating the gala of carnival to broader racial, ethnic and political issues. In his discourse to the sixth Annual Conference of the Association for the Teaching of Caribbean, African, and Asian Literature (ATCAL), Lovelace opines: “the colonized must accept some of the responsibility for the persistence of colonialism, for their role as ‘victims’. Therefore we should look critically at the process by which cultures are created. If we are adopting a moral relativism we are forced to ensure that we agree with our collaborators on the premises and these premises should be stated as a kind of prolegomena to multi-cultural education. One of the questions it must ask concerns what these collaborators regard as ‘primitive’, as ‘pagan’, what kinds of behaviour for example: would they like to see confined to carnival time when the untamed animals in us are let out of their cages?” (p.12) Lovelace seems to have gone through a short story he had written in which a Trinidadian barber cuts a boy’s hair and the haircut is shown as a kind of metaphor for the mother’s training of her sons who cannot be safely unleashed in the world as the young lions she observes in them.
Carnival is an important aspect of life for Trinidadians. The novel deploys the carnival to reveal the entire picture of the ritual, accompanied by the picture of song and dance, the costume, and the masquerade jump, celebration of the self and the novelist’s careful study of the nature of the self. The implication is that carnival must go beyond the ritual sound, which finally each generation must infer it in terms of its particular social and political set up and needs. A kind of change takes place since the movements change. The West Indian writer has stretched his scope of reference to include not only the classical world but also other areas not originally conceived by the Augustans such as the Medieval, Chivalric Romance, Steel drum, the Bible, and the Hollywood movie thus indicating the danger of bastardizing and perverting the whole tradition.

*The Dragon Can’t Dance* traces the changes that take place in the life of the country from the mid 1940’s to the early 1960’s. It does effectively by chronicling at the same time what happened to the Trinidad Steel band and the Trinidad carnival. Lovelace involves the readers from a time when the steel drums were hung around the neck and the players travelled on foot to the time of floats and platforms on wheels, to a time when the carnival disguises and costumes reflected the spirit of particular communities to the present administrative centralization and the take-over by the monied groups able to elaborate the most ornamental and splendid tradition. He very well draws the spirit of the fete through language to create a spectacle, the well-to-do groups craving to be spectacular thus leading sometimes to a removal of the people’s genuine self-expression and a breaking-up of the fashionable organization. The importance of steel band in Trinidad and competition for Sponsors is also very well delineated in the novel. Freed slaves celebrated Carnival not with ballroom dancing but with songs, street dancing, drumming, stick fighting creating a general street theatre. The emergence of steel band music became responsible for the official banning of drums and shacks that provided carnival its special music just as the rise of the professional calypsonian gave dimensions of theatre, spectacle and further rituals to make the entertainment complete. The Bands had rival groups, fierce competition which gave way to uninhibited abuse and criticism. The tents became stages for an often creative elucidation between performers and an increasingly knowledgeable and discriminating audience. In the course of time, the bands gained respectability. It also led to the formation of special bands, which performed throughout the year that became especially active at carnival time. Calypsoes were composed around the general theme of carnival bands. The singer of the
band emerged into the calypsonian. Thus the entire tradition of song, comment and provocation became part of an urban sub-culture.

Lovelace creates a carnivalised literature within The Dragon Can’t Dance to face and subvert the mock-heroic tradition to suit the needs of his heterogeneous, polyglot, multi-ethnic society. Mock-heroic form became an effective medium for irony which functioned concurrently at two levels—reader’s knowledge of the classics and the classical tradition of the epic heroes. The laughter evoked is largely the product of the reader’s perception and appreciation of the disparity between the past and the present—an incongruity that is glaring between the role assumed and the truth. The response of incongruity is laughter. The Mock-heroic form was identified explicitly with the writers of the eighteenth century who used the form extensively since it was in part a response to certain felt needs. The ethos of the age of the Roman Emperor Augustus was being imported into the eighteenth century English tradition. The form became for the English writer a way of escape from the stylistic rigidity imposed upon him. He continued to employ the classical and epic forms and language but within that convention managed to change his material, subvert the form to an entirely new use—that of humour for the purpose of irony and satire. In so doing, the poet was laughing at the pedantry and rigidity of rules, revelled in fantasy, absurdity, grotesque exaggeration and caricature. All these elements remain hallmarks of the form. Lovelace has given grand roles to his poor characters that come from the masses. In an ironic manner, he calls Sylvia as the princess. There is a purposeful reversal of roles as the common lives of the lowliest people could be a fitting subject for tragedy. As Miller says “The theme of the tragedy need not always be the nobility of great men. It is in the common folk that one observes a struggle for living life with dignity” (Miller, Arthur. American Tragedy 3). The characters are not the representation of deprived people but they are the presentation of self in them.

Lovelace is not witnessing and writing about a particular group alone but is concerned with a very human problem as personhood, selfhood of individual society. He thinks that a person cannot be obsessed with Africanness or Indianness alone but it is only one aspect of his complete personality. Lovelace explores the interaction between two major groups in the Caribbean—the East Indians and the West Africans. The East Indian’s objective and attitude to the island was determined by the nature of his arrival. The predicament of the West Indian Trinidadian in North America and East Indian in Trinidad is similar for both came to make money but ultimately settled down. Therefore, the Indians remained outsiders for various reasons. Lovelace says: “Unless each group is willing to accept the ‘other’, there can be no
fruitful interaction. The selves cannot meet or cultures cannot meet if one allows the danger of mistaking illusion with reality. The philosophic motive, which gives a dynamic presentation to the whole issue is that one does not know the other and it is possible only when there is a mutual distrust between two groups” (25). All the characters are important to the creative writer, no matter from what Nation, tradition, and cultural background they come. We have dialectic between cultures and people within the heterogeneous society. Pariag dreams to become a part of something greater in society than merely confining himself to his day to day aspects of life. He has been there for two years but people have not noticed and given him importance. They are not acquainting at first and exclude him out of their company. They simply notice him. Thus Lovelace raises the prospects of the person of East Indian origin being a member of the society. His novel allows for a re-interpretation of both history and cultural identity. He allows for a creative visionary response to reality. It is an attitude that derives from an acceptance of diversity, as a valuable source of new growth. By pointing to the subtle correspondence between the heterogeneous races within the West Indian historical and social situations, Lovelace calls for an openness to genuine human relationships between the cross cultures. His novel allows for a re-interpretation of both history and cultural identity.

Conclusion:

On the whole Lovelace has dealt with the racial conflicts in the novel very dexterously and the handling of the tensions between East Indians and Africans is impressive. By directing to the sensitive correspondences between the diverse elements within the West Indian historical and social situations, Lovelace bats for frankness to authentic human relationship between the cross-cultures. His novel rejoices over other’s novel by showing a way for a creative, visionary and true response to reality. It is an advance approach that derives from an approval of multiplicity as a valuable basis of new growth. Lovelace being a native and not an immigrant like others makes a true effort in exploring the natural problems, animosity, hatred, suffering that underlies the strained relationship between Africans and Indians. In the Caribbean phenomena it is the appreciation of the existence of the ‘Other’ be it Indian, African, Malaysian, Chinese, etc. It is the hour need to rebuild a human relationship that lies at the hub of re-framed society. Thus, The Dragon Can’t Dance seems to suggest the reader that carnival’s authentic expression has rendered self impotent in its capacity to fulfil its continual role in culture.
Reference


