

Quest for Identity and Cultural Reclamation and Realignment in Earl Lovelace's Oeuvre

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to conduct a cursory but critical investigation into Earl Lovelace's oeuvre. Earl Lovelace's impact in the Caribbean literary tradition cannot be overemphasized. His creative pieces reflects the motif of search for identity and self-reclamation. The cultural and traditional lives of the Caribbean people before the interaction with imperialistic power is emphasized in the creative outputs of Earl Lovelace. This paper analyses the literary deftness and creative imagination of the critically acclaimed writer from the Caribbean literary tradition. The Caribbean literary tradition is renowned for its reflection of the sociocultural history and reality of the Caribbean people. The core of literary documentations from this region hinges on the perennial search for identity and grappling with the reality that the Caribbean history is all about. Earl Lovelace presents different facets of these thematic preoccupations through his oeuvre. The paper concludes that Earl Lovelace's works amplifies his grasp of the quest for identity on which the Caribbean existence is premised. His works reflect the history, politics, culture, and tradition of the post-independence Caribbean milieu.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, Identity, history, Self-reclamation, Earl Lovelace

Introduction

The development of a literary tradition in a region whose foundation was laid by sailors, saltfish merchants, displaced criminals, yellow-fever victims, slaves in the cane-fields and maroon in the bush, is no doubt worthy of critical and scholarly interventions (Benjamin 2001:1). The Caribbean literary corpus, which this study seeks to beam a critical searchlight on, through the selection of one of her significant post-independence representative, is a tradition which draws considerable wealth of influence from the Caribbean historical milieu (Sembene 1993:2). Consequently, the literature of the Caribbean society is one which can be averred to have passed through stages of apparent silence to assimilation, imitation, and apology, and on to innovation, affirmation, and transformation. (Dance 1986:1)

The development of Caribbean literary tradition cannot be discussed without a recourse to the sociological and historical undertones that guides the construct of the tradition. According to Julia Udofia (2013), the events that shaped(s) the thematic preoccupation of this tradition includes:

- i. Slavery in the Caribbean
- ii. Abolition of slavery
- iii. Post-emancipation Caribbean (57&58)

Consequently, the evolution of Caribbean literature which can also be regarded as a literature of a faction of slave ancestry can be traced to the foremost epoch of oral tradition which incorporated folklore of the plantation era. (1). The literature of the Caribbean is peculiar for her assertive and unflinching resolve to identify with the struggle against the despicable motif of racism. Francis Williams, a Jamaican by descent but Greek by literary indoctrination, was one of the foremost writers who committed creative prowess into voicing their utter displeasure for racism

by advocating a common humanity of mankind (Harney, 2006:32). This gave impetus to other writers especially those of Guyana descent to document their own concerns and experiences. (2). This stage was also remarkable and memorable in the Caribbean literary history, as it marked the foremost period of the incorporation of traditional aesthetics like the indigenous linguistic and cultural codes especially in the poetry genre.

The trend did not halt at this point; the Caribbean literary tradition was constructed as a counter discourse to the sinister effect of the operation of colonialism on the Caribbean island. It is thus not misconstrued to aver that writers recognised the need to contribute their quota to the reconfiguration of the maligned Caribbean society.

This standpoint assumed by the writers to portray their milieu is lent credence to by what Plato regards as an *ideal republic*. This confers literary acts, as vanguards of to showcase the socio-cultural realities of their societies. This they engage in so as to: entrench the values; consolidate on the values and many a time, critically lampoon the vices. The Caribbean literary tradition is not alien to the literary configuration which exerts the ethos of societal realities in the construct of her literature.

In reconstructing the fast eroding cultural values, the Caribbean writer is saddled with the duty of showcasing the effect of the plantation and colonialist experiences on the social and psychological configuration of the Caribbean populace. The uniqueness of this tradition spurs from the concentration of the writers on social awareness. This position maintained in the Caribbean literary tradition which is evident in the literary outputs of this region can be said to be given considerable impetus by the historical experience of the Caribbean people. These variegated degrees of culturally and traditionally debilitating experiences i.e. slavery and colonialism, no doubt, contributed immensely to the thematic preoccupation of Caribbean literature. This study

will consequently, explicate these inextricable shades of Caribbean historical and sociopolitical development through the bibliographical consideration of Earl Lovelace's oeuvre.

Earl Lovelace's literary inputs have a considerable impact on the Caribbean literary tradition. This submission is buttressed by the qualitative and quantitative churning out of literary works that span from prose to dramatic texts and even seminal essays. His descriptive prowess in the creation of vivid representation of the realities of the post-independence Caribbean society is brought to limelight through novels like: *While Gods are Falling*; *The Dragon Can't Dance*; *Wine of Astonishment* ; *The Schoolmaster*; *Salt* and *Is Just a Movie*. Other literary works from Earl Lovelace include: *A Brief Conversion and other Stories* (1988); *Jestina's Calypso and Other Plays* (1984); *Growing in the Dark ; selected essays*(2003)

Ernest Hemmingway and William Faulkner's works were major childhood influences in helping Lovelace's crave for creative writing. He attributes these two literary icons as individuals from whom he drew a lot of 'self-education' (Logan 2009). Also, there is a peculiar inter-textual relationship between Earl Lovelace and his post-independence contemporaries. It would not be out of place to emphasize that Earl Lovelace's works were modeled from the works of the likes of George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul and V.S. Reid. It is thereby not impossible to witness the manifestations of the themes espoused by writers like George Lamming, V.S Naipaul, and V.S Reid, in their early post-independence works in Earl Lovelace's writings.

The perpetual search for cultural relevance and identity reclamation is another motif that recurs in the works of the writers of this period of Caribbean literature. Thus, the presentation of characters that are alienated from their indigenous cultural ethos as a result of colonialism and slavery is negotiated in their works. Essentially, there is a recurrent metaphorical depiction of the

struggle to establish a link with indigenous cultural values and belief system through their characterisation.

The literary works of Earl Lovelace is in concordance with this reality. He dwells on the pervading realities of his society in his literary outputs. Whilst establishing this dialectical relationship between literature and the society, Earl Lovelace employs the narrative style of incorporating indigenous traditions of calypso (novelypso) and carnivalesque (Thompson-Cage 1986). Although, due to the need to pursuit his educational career, he migrates to Europe; however, the unflinching resolve of Earl Lovelace to remain connected to Trinidad literary umbilical cord by constantly sending nostalgic signals to other Caribbean literary acts of the need to rise up to challenge of repositioning the frail entity. By so doing, Earl Lovelace, like Merle Hodge is able to create a vibrant literary niche for himself in the Caribbean Island. Consequently, Earl Lovelace has distinctively been able to endear his writing into the crux of the Caribbean post-independence literary tradition and by extension, the Caribbean literary tradition.

Earl Lovelace's literary productivity has been in concordance with the need to elucidate and critically appraise the Trinidad society. Thus, his thematic inclination and stylistic indoctrination adheres to the exposition of the multilayered degrees of postcolonial disillusionment. Due to the reality of the Trinidad experience (through slavery and colonialism) , it became evident that other areas of the Trinidad life need to be ventured into apart from the previous emphasis on the alluring spectacle of the calypso, soca music, mas-making as well as religious celebration. The need to explicate the degrees of disillusionment and imbalances conditioned by the twin debilitating engine of slavery and colonialism became very pertinent. In the bid to espouse this sensibility, remarkable efforts were made by writers to emphasize the

disruptive impact of the infiltration by the twin-engine of slavery and colonialism into the Caribbean existence.

Even with the thematic incoherence that some critics have noticed in his writings, Earl Lovelace as a dynamic literary act (testament of his dramatic and prosaic experimentations) has over the years able to depict through vivid imaginative prowess, the need for a Caribbean cultural rebirth. This is evident in the manner in which he churned out creative works to showcase this reality. At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that, Earl Lovelace was born at a time when the Caribbean renaissance was at full force. Deductively, the impact of this can be said to have been vastly responsible for his position in his texts, although a vast majority of his works and critical essays were composed and published at a period when the Caribbean mindset became nostalgic of his existence (postcolonial era).

However, even with this position, Earl Lovelace still maintains a degree of scepticism about the cultural reconfiguration of a traditionally maligned Caribbean society. He captures this reservation vividly when he submits in the interactive lecture and later published by Wasafiri and I paraphrase:

There is abounding difficulty for a writer to negotiate the present Trinidad still bound (despite independence) by the nefarious hangover of colonialism. The need to build a future in the present alongside the contradictions of the past is evidently herculean.
(2012:18)

However, even with this submission, Lovelace is undeterred in his vehement stance in his criticism of the disruptive elements of the Caribbean culture.

While Gods are Falling is Earl Lovelace's debut novel and it served as a major springboard which sets Earl Lovelace up for the immense recognition which heralded his subsequent literary

works. This critical acclaim is evident through the recognition of the text by the British petroleum Independence literary award. The focus of the text is that which seeks to put paid to the postcolonial disappointments and disillusionment in the Caribbean. From the purview of the contemporary Caribbean literary voice, the novel sets to digress from the focus of the first generation of Caribbean literary artists, who paid succinct attention to the theme of growing up in the West Indies as a way to talk about decolonization in the West Indies.

The text addresses the pepped up wishes of a writer, hoping to create a more accurate and vivid picture of his society, rather than the pretentious and warped angle it was being perceived. Earl Lovelace captures the inability or better put, the failure of the political class in ensuring a proper structuring of the Trinidad society. The novel emphasises the need for the political class or ruling class to act on the postcolonial delusional realities that betides the existence of the followers. The search for a true meaning of existence is a major thematic occupation in this novel. Moreover, Lovelace invents and presents his characters to suit this thematic preoccupation.

In consonance with the motif explored by Earl Lovelace in his creative outputs, *The Schoolmaster* elucidates the unfortunate situation that a budding culturally-upright rural community of Kumaca finds herself. This is captured to be the aftermath of the debilitating influence of another world. Earl Lovelace establishes the inherent cultural disillusionment occasioned by such infiltration. This is vivid in his portrayal of the struggle between the harbinger of the old tradition, represented by the sceptical priest and the new tradition, represented by other inhabitants in the community who myopically, sees education as a liberating and efficient tool for achieving developmental needs. Evidently, being a minority, the priest's well-thought advise on the need for the people to weigh the pros and cons of their decision, is jettisoned. The sinister nature of this development becomes conspicuous; when the schoolmaster contracted to aid the

development of Kumaca violates a young girl and in turn makes the villagers question their decision.

Earl Lovelace's presentation of the experience of the people of Kumaca, underscores the reality of the Caribbean experience. The metaphorical depiction of the struggle between the old and new cultural norms and the violation subsequently wrecked on the old tradition, portrays to a very large extent the effect of the short-sighted disposition of the old tradition (the old men except the priest) in allowing the new tradition erode the essence of their cultural beliefs. Moreover, Earl Lovelace exposes the nature of the lackadaisical action of the old tradition on the new and emerging generation. Evidently, the girl who bears the brunt of the action of the older generation was not even consulted in the decision to allow the new tradition.

Salt offers a concise bit of insight into the diachronic understanding of the events that conditioned the present reality. To a considerable extent, Earl Lovelace, traces the fundamentals of the present delusional state, especially with the struggles of the Trinidadians to comprehend the situation, by incorporating the mythological belief about Guinea John. He is renowned to be a progenitor of the Black people who, due to the greed (through salt consumption) of his descendants, was unable to liberate them from enslavement. The carefree position which the Trinidadians and the Caribbean people at large, assumed in the comprehension of their situation is what Earl Lovelace, metaphorically depicts herein. However, like prodigals who, through their sufferings and afflictions reminiscence on the virtual loss of the essence of their existence, conjure nostalgic reflections and seek to reconfigure their situation.

What Earl Lovelace has remarkably done in the construct of this literary piece is to showcase the lackadaisical and shallow-minded leaders who are meant to be torchbearers in the reclamation of the cultural aesthetics of the Caribbean Island which have been assumed over the

course of the years. Like in *While the Gods are Falling*, Earl Lovelace critically engages the readers to probe into the aftermath of the irresponsible disposition of those who were looked up to for altruistic leadership. Earl Lovelace admonishes the people of the new world, a region of diverse cultural and traditional beliefs, to engage a psychological rejuvenation of mind and perception of themselves rather than continue to persistently dwell on the past historical experiences they have been made to go through. However, they need to seek new ways of sailing forward through the turbulence of their collective existence. This ideology is vividly accentuated through the character of Alford.

The Dragon Can't Dance is a text which many critics have regarded to be Earl Lovelace's magnum opus. The reason for this reverence is not farfetched in his succinct depiction of the ideology of Caribbean cultural reclamation through the text. Consolidating on the literary inputs of the harbingers of postcolonial Caribbean literature, Earl Lovelace attempts a portrayal of how the West Indies society navigates through her cultural existence. This novel, no doubt a fascinating piece from Earl Lovelace as it engages a heart-rending probe of the psychological journey and struggles of a community to find the true meaning to their disordered existence (Puri, 2003:25). The depth of narrative aptitude in this piece is virtually impeccable as made evident by the novelist creative and informed narrative techniques and character identity formation or development.

The setting of the narrative itself showcases the abject condition of the inhabitants of *Calvary hill*. The despicable condition is however transformed to a joyous condition at the turn of the Carnival celebration. Through this carnival, the development of character experience is engaged. At such, readers are made to acquaint themselves with the experiences of these characters who all have unique lifelong hurts and aspirations. The hurts which are essentially disappointments

occasioned by stringent economic hardship transforms to impeccable joy as the carnival offer them the spectacle and chance to key into their dreams (Perez-Montijo 2013:2).

The dragon and the carnival spectacle in this narrative can be critically explained to indicate the significant and altruistic tradition which has a result of the twin engine of colonisation and post-independence disillusionment are stifled out of existence as a result of the dynamics of power, race and class distinctions.

Collaboratively, Funsho Aiyejina regards *The Dragon Can't Dance* as a quintessential carnival novel. He goes further to remark that, this serves as an underpinned factor in the novels of Earl Lovelace except *The Schoolmaster* which shifts away from the 'novelypso' tradition. Earl Lovelace has, to a considerable extent tapped into the richness of the Caribbean tradition of Carnivals aided by calypso music, soca music and in-depth cultural aesthetics. (2005:2).

In order to fully explicate on this literary tradition in Earl Lovelace's literary works, Aiyejina (2005) endeavours to critically appraise the underpinning pattern of the incorporation of what he captures as 'novelypso'. In Earl Lovelace's works except *the schoolmaster* which conspicuously deals with the ills of advocating for alien cultural norms and relegating indigenous modus operandi, there is a recurrent adoption of the chantwell narrator(1).

Through *The Wine of Astonishment*, Earl Lovelace opens up another shade of the underlying denominator that underpins the Caribbean experience. Herein, Earl Lovelace exposes the inability of the black to exceed and suppress the layers of undermining factors which the superstructure of colonialism has in place against their societal existence. Through the religious restrictions of the Baptist boys, the superstructure is able to repress their ability to stake a claim to their unabated existence in the Caribbean society (Perejoan, 2014:15). Like in *While Gods are Falling*, Earl Lovelace depicts the lackadaisical posture of the ruling political and economic class

to address this manifestation of class restriction for the collective good. The political class is presented in such a way which typify a section of people who decide virtually no attention whatsoever to the plight of this unprivileged masses. This is as a result of their wanton and lascivious desire for personal gratification and selfish enrichment. Earl Lovelace has been able to capture this class imbalance in the presentation of the ruling class which is ably represented by Ivan Morton in the novel.

Reflecting on this flaw-laden leadership, Earl Lovelace suggests ameliorative measures through characters like Bolo and Eva. He creates a unique Caribbean renaissance through these characters by asserting that the Caribbean people should seek to enhance the ability to influence their own destinies, rather than maintaining an unflinching resolve to vest their existence on a political class which more often than not, continue to disappoint the expectations of the people.

Joebell and America equally presents the consequence of cultural and traditional misappropriation. Misappropriation in this context is figuratively used to capture the effect of having a culturally-incoherent society. A society of wannabes, who keeps striving to acculturate the 'other' cultural norms, in order to manifest a sense of belonging, Earl Lovelace presents this society through the character of Joebell, who in a bid to pursue his wanton desires to acclimatize to the norms of the 'other' decides to incorporate the linguistic code which he has no proficiency whatsoever.

Figuratively, what Earl Lovelace achieved in this short story is to lampoon the Caribbean warped consciousness of looking to seek gratification for every endeavour of theirs from America. Deductively, he also seeks to foreground the need to exalt indigenous norms rather than an alien traditional configuration. From the consideration of Earl Lovelace's artistry, one is drawn to his recurrent emphasis on the essence of Caribbean literature. Therefore, he is able to maintain a

copious level of inter-textual relationship in his works and the works of his contemporaries. It is consequently not impossible to witness the manifestation of the perpetual search for the essence of being in his oeuvre.

The communal spirit which Walter Castle facilitates in *While Gods Are Falling* is what characterizes Kumaca community in *The Schoolmaster*. The inhabitants of this community are presented as people with a very strong bond to the cultural and traditional ethos of their community. “In a place like Kumaca,... everybody is one” (1979:95). The imminent disconnection or flirtation with modern ethos of civilization inadvertently, necessitates discord among a once united community. Dissenting groups who are culturally upright as depicted through the character of the Schoolmaster now suffer from identity crisis. In the same vein, *The Wine of Astonishment* lends credence to the perpetual struggle for person-hood (identity). Religious constraints herein conditions revolutionary strife for reclamation of self. “we is people, the police have to respect us” (1982:31)

The dichotomy between the characters of Ivan Morton and Bolo exposes different individualized quest for identity. Bolo’s unflinching resolve for reclamation of identity is identical with the resolve maintained by the inhabitants of Calvary Hill in *The Dragon Cant Dance*. Their passion to achieve personal worth opens a completely different reality of reasserting self in a wholly different terrain. Albeit this limitation, violence, music, rebellion and masquerading were means which some characters employed in achieving the assertion of self-hood. (280). Aldrick on the other hand is presented and characterized by Lovelace as being able to comprehend the communal rather than an individualized nature of achieving self-hood or person-hood. Innumerable critical claims and counter-claims have been offered to capture the essence of Earl Lovelace’s literary input. One of such critical attentions is Deepak T.R. (2014:1) where an attempt

was made to locate the experience of the cultural formation in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, as a depiction of the history and culture of the Caribbean in the postcolonial context. In the same vein,

Rahim 2006's grasp of Earl Lovelace's underlying inspiration for the construct of his literary and critical ideas is summarized in two unique ideologies. They are:

- i. Europe's colonisation of the New World, which brought diverse peoples together under severe conditions of systematized inequality.
- ii. The unique cultural shape this ingathering generated in Caribbean societies and the invitation its continued evolution holds out to citizens to create a different future, not only for them, but also for the world. (3)

By implication, Lovelace's resolve in creating a pride of place for a masses-centred existence and the emphasis on the pristine value of the indigenous traditional order is an ideology that runs through most of his works.

The history of the Caribbean society is based on slavery and colonialism. Thus, the Caribbean populace can be rightly adjudged to comprise people who as a result of displacement from their original roots had to seek solace or haven in the new world. However, the other part of the subjugating engine (colonialism) also displaced these people to some extent. At this point, the displacement incorporated cultural displacement and loss of traditional grandeur. The powers that be which includes, The British, The French and The Spanish world powers conditioned a burgeoning influence on the world by colonising a world, which was at this time still fashioning out a way of forging ahead in their multicultural and multi-ethnic sensibility.

The Trinidad Island formerly regarded as Iere (humming bird) officially became a British colony in 1802 after a military conquest. As a result, the effect this had on the language was the incorporation of the English Language as a lingua franca. This decision also affected writers who

needed to communicate efficiently with their readers. They could not strictly adhere to the creole code. However, this eventuality did not deter them much as the system of creolisation of diction offered them the platform to still accentuate their indigenous language in their creative outputs. Earl Lovelace's works are in concordance with this tradition of incorporating creole and some elements of the oral tradition into the construct of their creative works.

Earl Lovelace's grasp of the quest for identity on which the Caribbean existence is premised on his ability to connect with the readers through the depiction of the Caribbean life. His works reflect the history, politics, culture, and tradition of the post-independence Caribbean milieu. Therefore, his writings can be said to be of considerable import in the cultural reclamation and struggle for traditional renaissance of the Caribbean society.

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