

RELIGION: A MODE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN “THE WINE OF ASTONISHMENT”

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Abstract:

The present paper deals with an issue of ‘Religion: A Mode of Cultural Identity’ reflected in the novel “The Wine of Astonishment” written by Earl Lovelace in 1982. The theme chosen for this paper occupies a prominent place in the novel. For the colonizers, religion is a medium of controlling people of Caribbean islands and treating them as slaves. On the other hand, for the Caribbean, religion is the mode of identity, way of life and medium of binding people to one place. Earl Lovelace is a renowned novelist and scholar of Caribbean literature.

Keywords: *Earl Lovelace, The Wine of Astonishment, Religion, Bonasse, Spiritual Baptist Church and Prohibition Act.*

Introduction:

The present paper throws light on the theme of religion which is a mode of cultural identity in the context of the novel *The Wine of Astonishment* by Earl Lovelace in 1982. It is one of the famous novels of Earl Lovelace. He is one of the well-known novelists and renowned poets of the Caribbean literature written in the post-colonial period. The works of Earl Lovelace are an inseparable part of the new literature. Several issues regarding Caribbean culture, people and religion are explored by Earl Lovelace in his novels, poems and plays. Specifically, political failure, identity crisis, fragmentation of culture, a threat to native culture and religion are dominantly discussed. Earl Lovelace was born on 13th July 1935, at Toco, Trinidad, in the West Indies. After completing his educational career from 1977 to 1987 though he had his higher education from foreign nations. He worked as a lecturer in literature and creative writing at the University of West Indies at St Augustine and preferred to be merged down in the soil of Trinidad in the remaining part of life. Therefore, the issues of the Islands were more close to him than any other contemporary writers of the Caribbean islands. So, Earl Lovelace was the nearest observer of Caribbean society and its culture and the same is very deeply penetrated in his novels.

The Wine of Astonishment explores one of the important issues of Caribbean islands that were

very nearest and dearest to Earl Lovelace. An entire novel revolves around the People of Spiritual Baptist Community, a community church and the religious practices prohibited by the Colonial Authority by passing the Prohibition Act. The Spiritual Baptist religion and its practices in daily life are a kind of respectable and emotional affair for the Baptist Community. In fact, it is a fundamental right of the community but the cruel act of colonizers denies them to celebrate these religious practices in their daily lives.

The novel is set in Bonasse, a fictional village, which resembles the history of the Caribbean community and colonizers' relationships during colonization. By sanctioning the Prohibition Act in 1917-18, the exercises of worshipping in the Spiritual Baptist Church have been negated to the villagers of Bonasse by the colonizers. Gathering in the community church and having a discussion on the various community issues is a routine act of the villagers of Bonasse. However, the prohibition act does not allow them to do so. Even the community members are strictly warned not to practice ritual activities and practices which was a fundamental right of the villagers.

For the people of Bonasse, culturally, the Baptist church is not only a sacred place but a sign of self-existence, native culture, equality, unity, spiritual energy. Besides, the place is made for resolving problems of the community people. Hence, Earl Lovelace puts his views through this novel that by implementing the prohibition act in Bonasse the colonizers have refuted the existence of Spiritual Baptist which is a sign of cultural identity of the black people. Hence, the act has challenged the presence of local culture in the form of religion.

The novel is narrated by Eva, the wife of Bee. She looks emotionally towards the Spiritual Baptist Church. It shows her deep affinity for the church and community members' day to day affairs with it. Particularly, Bee, her husband, is a regular member who visits the church. The other characters, like Bee, Ivan Morton and Bolo, portrayed in the novel are also profoundly attached to the Spiritual Baptist Church. Each one is closely associated with it. Along with Church, Carnival, Stickfighting are the other characteristics which

have a religious base in the Caribbean culture. Bolo, one more important character of the novel, is a worker but he is a champion of Stick Fighting.

He thinks of himself as a king of the game and for him, it is a sacred game. Culturally, Stickfighting signifies to the warriors of Caribbean People:

"The whole village talk 'bout him. They say that in the stickfight ring, the gayelle, it don't have a man to stand up in front of him. They say he don't fight just to win battles for himself, for him stickfighting was more the dance, the adventure, the ceremony to show off the beauty of the warrior" (Lovelace, 1986, P.21).

The Bolo is a representative of all the Caribbean who used to love their culture and liked to sacrifice their life for the existence of Caribbean identity. While depicting the character of Bolo, Earl Lovelace says in "The Wine of Astonishment":

"as if what he really want was for people to see in him a beauty that wasn't his alone, was theirs, ours, to let us know that we in this wilderness country was people too, with drums and song, and warriors" (Lovelace 1986 P-22).

Being practiced the ritual traditions set by the Spiritual Baptist Church are the representations of the cultural stand of the Caribbean against the colonial government in Bonasse. Therefore, the ban on the religious practices in the Spiritual Baptist Church is the ban on the souls of black people. Their way of life is crushed due to this prohibition act:

"We have this church in the village. We have this church. The walls make out of mud, the roof covered with carrot leaves: a simple hut with no steeple or cross or acolytes or white priests or Latin ceremonies. But is our own. Black people own it. Government ain't spent one cent helping us to build it... we gather to sing hymns and ring the bell and hallelujah" (Lovelace, 1986, P-32).

It is the Spiritual Baptist Church that binds people of the Caribbean in a chain of cultures. Their regular visit to the church and celebrations of ritual activity in the form of prayers, ringing bells, and handclapping in the church may be irrespective, rude and uncivilized for the British government, but to the Spiritual Baptists, it is a soul and sacred act. Each and every action of the people of Bonasse gives them spiritual pleasure, psychological support and moral support from the black ancestors. So, their efforts to rescue the Spiritual Baptists Church from the English authority gives them a feeling of protecting their cultural identity. Identity is a kind of state or

uniqueness or distinctiveness of any human being which signifies similarities of the individuals or a group of people. According to American Heritage Dictionary, identity is *"The set of characteristics by which a person or thing is definitively recognizable or known: "The identity of the nation had ... been keenly contested in the period of nationalist opposition to Imperial rule"* (Judith M. Brown). It means a person always fights to protect either individual or group or cultural identity. In the novel, Bee under his leadership tries to oppose the colonial government against the ban put by them on the Spiritual Baptists Church and save the cultural identity of the Caribbean. For that, he employs a mild and modest way. On the other hand, Bolo uses violent and extreme modes against the English authority to save the Church and protect the identity of a culture. In the context of identity, Bill Ashcroft says in *The Empire Writes Back* that "More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of Colonialism" (Ashcroft, 1989, P-1). It means most of the countries that were colonized got political independence from the European colonizers but still the influence of colonization seems on their art, literature, costumes, language and way of speaking.

To conclude, to establish colonial power smoothly the European colonizers used several laws to prohibit the way of life of the colonized people. However, the colonized people either at the individual or group level fought against the colonial authority for protecting the cultural or religious identity. In *"The Wine of Astonishment"* Bee and Bolo have shown the courage to save the Spiritual Baptists Church from the control of the colonial government and guard the culturally religious identity.

References:

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