



CARNIVAL AND EXPLORATION OF SELFHOOD IN EARL LOVELACE'S THE *DRAGON CAN'T DANCE*

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Abstract

The present paper will examine the nature of carnival and its role in exploration of selfhood and identities In Lovelace's acclaimed novel The Dragon Can't Dance. Carnival and music provide a venue for people, particularly those from underprivileged communities, to express themselves, defy society conventions, and explore the complexity of their mixed identities. Carnival serves not merely as a cultural festival in his works but as a powerful metaphor for resistance, identity, and community. In Earl Lovelace's novel The Dragon Can't Dance, where the Carnival becomes a lens through which the struggles and aspirations of the disenfranchised are vividly portrayed. Trinidad's Carnival, with its masquerades, music, and revelry, allows people to break out of their customary roles and forge new identities for themselves. The dragon signifies both a personal and cultural transformation, and his desire to participate shows his desire to break free from the societal and psychological constraints imposed by the colonial past, as well as his own feeling of social position and assertion of selfhood.

Keywords

Carnival, Resistance, Identity, Calypso, Selfhood, Postcolonialism, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The Dragon Can't Dance' is a novel written by Trinidadian author Earl Lovelace, Set in the vibrant and culturally rich backdrop of Port of Spain, Trinidad. The novel also highlights the significance of Carnival in Trinidad, a symbol of resistance, celebration, and a way for the characters to express themselves and their deep connection to their roots. Trinidad's Carnival is rooted in both African and European traditions, and it provides a platform for Trinidadians to celebrate their blended identities. Carnival becomes a tool for the postcolonial people to assert their selfhood and cultural heritage while also protesting the erasure of their history during colonial authority. Carnival, with its music, costumes, and acts, provides for the reaffirmation of cultural pride as well as the affirmation of people power.

Explanation:

Earl Lovelace, a celebrated Trinidadian writer, is renowned for his exploration of the complexities of Caribbean identity, culture, and history. Central to his narratives is the vibrant and transformative spectacle of Carnival. The novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*, is set against the backdrop of Trinidad's postcolonial society and paints a vivid picture of Laventille's residents, who are often sidelined by systemic poverty and social inequality.



It is carnival's power to subvert rigid, socially determined hierarchies that attracts Bakhtin to the carnival form. Bakhtin's interest in social carnival is confined to its "determining influence" on literature and literary genres. In Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, he says, "The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms, of a carnival type)—its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination—is one of the most complex and most interesting ...What interests us here is essentially only the problem of carnivalization, that is, the determining influence of carnival on literature and more precisely on literary genre" (Bakhtin, 122).

The Dragon Can't Dance is a novel of Lovelace which is set in Calvary Hill, a slum area on the island of Trinidad.. The island is defined by the annual carnival, which brings hordes of people to Trinidad. For a short time, the island is transformed, and the islanders come alive. It is carnival a big day on Hill. Every Carnival Monday morning Aldrick Prospect's memory is burning in his blood. A memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary Hill felt, and he puts on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with ancestral authority uphold before the people of his Hill. This tribe marooned so far from homeland that never was there home, but the warrior hood that had not died in them, their humanness was not determined by their possession of things. Aldrick had a desire, a mission, to let them see their beauty, to uphold the unending rebellion they waged. He wanted to show the city the open claws on dragon's hand, threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings.

Once upon a time the entire Carnival was expression of rebellion. There were stick fighters, and there were devils, black men who blackened themselves further with black grease to make of their very blackness a menace, a threat. They moved along the streets with horns on their heads and tridents in hand. They threatened to press their blackened selves against the well-dressed spectators unless they were given money. And there were jab, men in jester costumes. Suddenly they were all gone, outlawed from the city or just died. The dragon alone was left to carry the message, and he felt alone. The moment Aldrick steeped outside Carnival hit him and his heart grew big and suddenly he feels tall and proud. However, this year putting on his costume now at dawn, Aldrick had a feeling of being the last one, the last symbol of rebellion and threat to confront Port of Spain.

Because Fisheye was under orders not to misbehave, and Philo had given up his own calypsos of rebellion to sing now about The Axe Man. And full to brimming with furious tears, Aldrick felt again the fierce love and hope that he had. It is carnival a big day on Hill. Every Carnival Monday morning Aldrick Prospect's memory is burning in his blood. A memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary Hill felt, and he puts on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with ancestral authority uphold before the people of his Hill. This tribe marooned so far from homeland that never was there home, but the warrior hood that had not died in them, their humanness was not determined by their possession of things. Aldrick had a desire, a mission, to let them see their beauty, to uphold the unending rebellion they waged. He wanted to show the city the open claws on dragon's hand, threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings.

Aldrick felt again the fierce love and hope that he had. On Carnival ending, Aldrick thinks that tomorrow there is no Carnival though they wished every day was Carnival. The season of kings and princess was ending; costumes used today to display the selves of people were going to be taken off. What of those selves? What of the selves of these thousands? What of his own self?' On his way to home, Aldrick stumbles upon the Calvary Hill band that refuses to end Carnival and wants to continue dancing. The character Aldrick Prospect embodies this spirit of resistance and through his portrayal as the traditional dragon in Carnival, Aldrick symbolizes defiance and



strength. The dragon costume—crafted with painstaking care—becomes a vehicle for expressing the frustrations and aspirations of a man who feels powerless in his daily life. During Carnival, however, Aldrick transforms into a figure of awe and power, momentarily transcending his marginalization. Aldrick is a man caught between two worlds. He is a member of the Afro Trinidadian working class, yet he needs to escape the confines of his surroundings. The dragon dancer mask he wears during Carnival represents his desire to break free from the limitations of his existence and express himself in a more meaningful and uninhibited manner. Carnival, for Aldrick, is both a sort of release and a means of forging a new identity that transcends his daily hardships.

In the novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Carnival is portrayed as the only phenomenon that is able to bring the hill to life and corrupt everyday life in Trinidad. The power and soul of carnival, however, lies in calypso, the song that announce the new rhythms of the people, rhythms that climb over the red dirt and stone, break away rhythms that laugh through the bones of these enduring people. Carnival is that springs which makes hill alive. Right after Christmas young men get off street corners, with carnival now, they troop off street corners, desert their battlefield and territory, and turn up the hill to the steel band tent to assemble before steel drums cut to various lengths and tuned and fashioned to give out the different tones – bass, alto, cello – instruments that had their beginnings in kerosene tins, biscuit drums, anything that could sound a note, anything that could ring. Now, the steelband tent will become a cathedral and these young men priests. Carnival provides a temporary respite from the social constraints represented by Calvary Hill, allowing people to shed their burdens and assume new, often rebellious, roles. The hill's symbolic significance is linked to the larger theme of identity formation and resistance: just as characters strive to elevate themselves and transcend their limitations, Carnival provides a space for them to temporarily defy social and cultural expectations. Calvary Hill could be viewed as an antithesis to Carnival's liberating power. While Calvary Hill depicts the constant fight, Carnival provides the protagonists with a little respite from those struggles, giving them.

Carnival and Expression of Selfhood:

Carnival plays a significant role in the novel. It represents a space in which established social hierarchies are challenged and individuals reclaim their agency. Through the prism of Carnival, Lovelace investigates how Trinidadians resist cultural colonization and celebrate their heterogeneous identities. The dragon dance, in particular, is a powerful form of cultural expression and rebellion against the forces that seek to define Trinidadians in colonial terms. The call to the dragon during Carnival is a symbolic and vital moment that represents Aldrick's internal struggle for identity, transformation, and liberation. Carnival, as presented in the novel, is a powerful season of self-expression and revolt against traditional standards, during which the bounds of regular life are momentarily suspended. The "call to the dragon" is more than just a literal invitation for Aldrick to participate in the Carnival celebrations; it is also a deeper, more personal summons to confront and release his inner tensions and desires.

Carnival, as depicted in the novel, is a place where the roles and hierarchies of regular life are reversed. For Aldrick, it is a brief opportunity to transcend the class, racial, and gender expectations that define him. The appeal to the dragon thus represents a call to embrace his uniqueness, to transform himself into something better than his current self, and to proclaim his own voice in a world that frequently wants to quiet him. Aldrick's involvement in Carnival and adoption of the dragon character are not entirely liberating. They emphasize the complexities of his identity, as well as the tension between personal freedom and societal obligation. The call to the dragon can be understood as a cry for liberation, but it also forces Aldrick to confront the limitations of his dreams and the challenges of achieving true selfhood in a postcolonial society.



The dragon represents both personal liberation for Aldrick and the cultural and historical struggles of the Caribbean people. It can be understood as a metaphor for the collective desire of Trinidadians to reclaim their identity and assert autonomy after colonialism.

Conclusion:

Carnival is an important cultural event in *The Dragon Can't Dance* because it allows the characters to express themselves both individually and collectively, and Calypso is vital to this. Carnival, with its emphasis on celebration, emancipation, and metamorphosis, enables the characters to temporarily abandon their social roles and embrace new identities and provides a platform to assert their presence and challenge societal hierarchies reclaim their dignity and agency. Carnival temporarily transcend the constraints imposed on them Carnival, as a forum for social commentary, criticism and defiance as well as an exhibition of indiginious artistry, gives Trinidad a truly individual national identity. Carnival provides a platform for the novel's protagonists to address their personal conflicts and an opportunity to reflect on societal injustices and allows the characters to openly interact with their complicated identities, both individually and as part of a larger collective. They express their identities through music, dance, and clothing, asserting their agency and demonstrating their opposition to the historical forces that have produced their environment. Carnival is also a collective experience, bringing Trinidadians together to celebrate culture, music, and resistance and it can be viewed as a form of communal resistance to the social hierarchies, economic disparities, and colonial past and assertion of self.

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