

‘ALL O’ WE IS ONE’: COMMUNAL IDENTITY AND SELF ASSERTION IN EARL LOVELACE’S THE DRAGON CAN’T DANCE

The human is defined inherently as a group-bounded creature whose deep identity needs for belonging can only be met in a comparative, if not oppositional relationship of inclusion/exclusion with other groups. Identity formation and sustenance is relational, often oppositional and conflictual.—Ralph Premdas

The question of identity in human existence is a very delicate one, owing to the fact that it is the basic determinant of personal, interpersonal, and international relationships, which eventually drive the world. It has also become a recurrent issue in literature, especially the ones that have sprung from regions of the world with a fundamental rupture in their identity formation. The Caribbean are one of such people, and through literature, their writers have expressed what obtains in the islands, following their long history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance* is a good example of a Caribbean text with the issue of identity as one of its major thematic preoccupations, and this paper is set out to explore it using the critical lens of the identity theory.

Identity theory was properly ‘designed for the study of real human beings in their interactions in society’ (Akwanya 5), and, therefore, originally belongs to the social sciences. It, however, has been adopted into literary studies for the analysis of literary personages, since literature is after all an expression of the human situation according to the society that produces it, where literary personages play out in a literary society. In their ‘Past, Present, and Future of Identity Theory’, Stryker and Burke state that:

Identity theory has evolved in two somewhat different, yet strongly related, directions. Both are instantiations of a theoretical and research programme labeled symbolic interactionism,...having the goal of understanding and explaining how social structures impact self and how self impact social behaviours. However, the first concentrates on examining how social structure impact the structure of self and the impact of the latter on social behavior, while the second concentrates on the internal dynamics of self-processes as these impact social behaviour (2).

In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Lovelace presents a Trinidad setting with individuals in identity struggle, as a microcosm of what obtains in the larger human society. Here we have a community of a particular class of people in a poverty-stricken, anti-change environment who—following the Trinidad and Tobago motto: ‘Together we aspire; together we achieve—exist in a profound communal atmosphere (though without achievement). They have what may be called a collective identity.

What we have in the text is a community of individuals on Calvary Hill, who have been indoctrinated into a common will and attitude rooted in idleness, laziness, and complacency, just like the Alley dwellers in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley*. Because it is the common attitude on Calvary Hill, the occupants of the Hill become used to it and can hardly come out of this mental shackles even as individuals. We find characters like Aldrick Prospect, Fisheye, Cleothilda, Caroline and Sylvia who spend each year preparing for Carnival Monday, only to go back to planning for the next carnival season as soon as one is over. They spend so much time making costumes for the carnivals, and the steel bands and their calypso are the order of the day. When they are not working on their costumes, the ‘bad johns’ spend hours drinking in bars and causing troubles. This is the identity the people of Calvary Hill have as a community. They keep chanting the mantra ‘all o’ we is one’, and anyone who does not fall within their collective behaviour is seen as an ‘Other’. Pariag the Indian matches this description of an ‘Other’.

Before Pariag comes to Calvary Hill, he has existed among a community of people who, like those on Calvary Hill, have a collective way of doing things. His people have been enslaved in a sycophantic servitude in the hands of his uncle, Ramolchan, who, like a god, decides the fate of each member of the extended family. But Pariag with his self-assertive personality breaks away from this choking community of his to somewhere he thinks his individual existence will be affirmed. We are told that:

bound had if it unwilling	Ever since he was a small boy he had wanted to break out of this little village world where he had watched his brothers and father and grandfather work, still in that virile embrace to the sugarcane estate to which his grandfather had been the first to be indentured, renewing their indenture year after year as were an inheritance that no repeal of law could force them to relinquish, to step beyond the boundaries of the village, remaining to get hooked into
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the world of Romlochan, his father's eldest brother who by some miracle of work and luck had become the fastest growing business man in New Lands, employing one by one his relatives, not only giving them work and paying them money, but having a say in who should marry who, who should buy what property, and who at times the others should not talk to, living a kind of governorship of the clan, requiring them to be always indebted to him for some loan of money or some more subtle favour, as if it was only in a relationship of constant dependence they could express for him that love he felt they ought to owe him (78).

Among all the members of the clan, it is only Pariag who sees beyond what their 'little village world' could offer and decides to go out to Port of Spain and be independent of his tyrant of an uncle and the entire clan. No amount of persuasion could make him change his mind, and he finally leaves his village for Calvary Hill where he and his wife are the only Indians. This poses a fresh identity issue.

Pariag finds himself in a neighbourhood that seems to have stopped welcoming new members, for everyone goes about their businesses without paying attention to him. But he longs to be noticed. Their noticing him becomes a validation point for his identity. He complains to his wife, Dolly, 'They not seeing me, that is what it is. That is it; they don't see me'(91) Like Ralph Premdas observes in his 'Ethnicity and Identity in the Caribbean: Decentering a Myth', 'The human is defined inherently as a group-bounded creature, whose deep identity needs for belonging can only be met in a comparative...relationship of inclusion... with other groups' (3). But after two years of living on Calvary Hill, Pariag and his wife are still isolated.

Pariag's quest for identification prompts him to devise ways through which he can blend into the community, one of which is acquiring a bike. He presumes that the people the people on the Hill get excited about his success and finally come to notice him; little did he know that one of the factors that have kept the people closely knit is poverty. They abhor success; so that when Pariag's bike arrives, the entire Hill falls into a gloomy state of mourning. The long conversation between Olive and Cleothilda helps illustrate this:

‘Twenty years I live here’, Cleothilda said, speaking in the deep soft, straightening tone of an old car climbing Calvary Hill in first year. And it was one thing you could depend on was the equalness of everybody...Eh, Olive? Eh?

‘Maybe’, Miss Olive said, ‘somebody had a pot or two or a dress or two more than you; but everybody was one.’

‘Not that we didn’t have ambition’, Cleothilda said, ‘but nobody here look at things as if things is everything. If you had more money, you buy more food; and if is a holiday, you buy more drinks for your friends, and everybody sit down and drink it out, and if tomorrow you ain’t have none, you know everybody done have good time, and all of we was...’

‘One’, Miss Olive filled in into the pause, shaking a triumphant index finger at the city (103).

This is totally contrary to Pariag’s expectations. He has expected that with this new bike, the people of the Hill will ‘see’ him. They see him now, actually, but in a negative way. Instead of being unnoticed, he becomes targeted as the common enemy of the people. His situation gets even worse because his new bike is smashed the same day he brings it to the Hill. Pariag becomes demoralized and has his wife, Dolly, as his only consolation and companion. But that fighting spirit in him does not die. He continues trying to assert himself, and before long, he manipulates the whole situation and buy’s Cleothilda’s shop, which has been the centre of attraction on the Hill. It is at this point that his self assertion yields positive result, since the people have no choice but to buy his wares and enrich him. And then, who does not want to be friends with the rich?

Pariag seems to be the only ‘Other’ in the text. But this is only in so far as he is not Creole. Among the Creoles on the Hill, there are also demarcations and discriminations according to how one identifies with the communal identity. One is considered part of the community so long as one is involved in the steel band and carnival fever, and also is lazy, ambitionless, and poor. Anyone who steps out of these boundaries to discover himself as an individual is isolated.

This is the case with Aldrick Prospect. First of all, it is pertinent for us to acknowledge the irony in the name of this character. One of the definitions of ‘prospect’, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is someone or something that is likely to succeed or be chosen. However, the character Aldrick is totally at the other end of the spectrum of this definition. He has spent thirty one years of his life making Dragon costumes and dancing on Carnival Mondays. He has no ambition whatsoever and takes life the way it presents itself to him each day. Let us hear from him:

‘No. Let me tell you anyway. You see me here, I is thirty one years old. Never had a regular job in my life or a wife or nutten. I ain’t own house or car or radio or racehorse or store. I don’t own one thing in this fucking place, except that dragon there, and the dragon ain’t even mine. I just make it. It just come out of me like a child who ain’t really his father own or his mother own... (110).

And this is not surprising because it is the common spirit on the Hill.

However, the bike incident is not only significant to Pariag alone. It also marks the turning point in Aldrick’s thinking; he begins to think outside the web of his community in order to discover who he is as an individual. He tells Philo,

They killing people in this place, Philo. Little girls, they have them whoring. And I is a dragon. And what is a man? What is you or me, Philo? And I here playing a dragon, playing a masquerade every year, and I forget what I playing it for, what I trying to say. I forget, Philo. Is like nobody remembering what life is, and who we fighting and what we fighting for...Everybody rushing me as if they in such a hurry. I want to catch a breath, I want to see what I doing on this fucking Hill. Let the Indian buy his bike (110).

He makes this deep existential reflection when his neighbours are pressurizing him to confront Pariag for buying a bike. He realizes that there is nothing actually wrong with success, and that the people of the Hill should face that reality.

This resolution of Aldrick’s, however, does not go down well with his neighbours, and they begin to see him as an enemy. The same thing happens when Philo becomes prosperous; he is attacked by the ‘bad johns’ on the Hill and banned by Fisheye from coming to the ‘Corner’.

One would have thought that Pariag's isolation is because he is Indian, but here we also have Aldrick and Fisheye who are discriminated against because of their self assertion through thinking better thoughts and becoming prosperous respectively.

It is also worthy of note that the individuals who become successful on the Hill attain success only when they have given up the struggle of self affirmation. Philo succeeds as a calypso composer only when he stops composing the truth about the condition of the people in relation to the government. Immediately he starts composing in praise of the leaders, he starts receiving higher patronage. Pariag succeeds when he gives up the quest to be noticed. He forgets about trying to get the people to 'see' him, and invests all his energy in his business from where he becomes prosperous. Even Sylvia becomes enriched by Guy as soon as she gives up on her youthful exuberance and agrees to marry him; there wide age difference notwithstanding.

In all, we see that they do not really have to strip themselves of their individuality in order to melt into a big whole. As Pariag observes somewhere in the text, there can be unity even in their individual diversity if they are able to love and tolerate one another. And as the women who deliver Dolly of her baby also observe: 'We have the same pains—Indian, Chinese, white , black , rich , poor. All o' we is one. All of us have to live here on this island' (149).

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