

## ABSTRACT

The Quest For Self and the Definition of  
Selfhood in a Degraded Context in the  
Four Novels of Earl Lovelace

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Earl Lovelace, a Trinidadian novelist belongs to the younger generation of West Indian writers. He was born in 1935, in the village of Toco. He spent most of his childhood on the island of Tobago, but returned to Trinidad for his secondary education. After leaving high school he held a variety of jobs: as proof reader, civil servant and forest ranger. His job as a ranger took him over much of rural Trinidad, and he has been able to make use of this knowledge in the background of his novels. He has had four novels published to date, While Gods Are Falling, (1965); The School-Master, (1968); The Dragon Can't Dance, (1979); and The Wine of Astonishment, (1982)

Lovelace's fiction falls chronologically into the post-independence period of West Indian Literature. Much of the prose fiction of this period evokes an ethos of despair. The

ennervation, ennui and disillusionment of the post-independence era have spawned the existentialist despair of Orlando Patterson's The Children of Sisyphus, (1964), the confining and paralytic ambience of Garth St. Omer's novels and the barren mimicry and placelessness of V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men (1967). Alienation, exile and void are characteristic of such writing, and they define a literature that embodies anguish, suffering and endurance.

A superficial reading of Lovelace's novels would seem to enforce such a vision of the Caribbean on his work, labelling it as another example of despair and resigned endurance. Lovelace writes about poverty, suffering, degradation, the abuse of authority, the destruction of meaningful values and a betrayal of the people by their leaders. The landscape of his novels is the Trinidad of the poor, unrecognised men and women struggling to assert their selfhood and humanness. It is the Trinidad of "bad-john" in the shacks and shanty towns of Port-of-Spain, of the raucous Carnival with its subliminal rites of rebellion, of isolated rural villages emerging from a limiting innocence into modernity, of Spiritual Baptists struggling to maintain their faith amidst official repression and communal degradation. Yet, in spite of this seeming concentration of lives tinged by hardship, Lovelace is not a novelist of despair and mere endurance. His fiction goes into and beyond the posture of endurance to argue for and evoke a landscape of being where the nature of existence and selfhood is explored.

It is the special quality of such fictional exploration that stamps Lovelace's novels with a singularity of theme and interest. Lovelace's four novels are all concerned with the quest for self and the definition of selfhood in a degraded context. This theme is dominant in his fiction, and enables his work to utilise certain ritual constructs that are themselves derived from the archetypal leitmotif of the quest. The religious and ritualistic nature of Lovelace's fictional world creates and is simultaneously created by two important vehicular aspects in his work: Carnival and the Baptist Religion.

The nature of the quest also demands some level of sacrifice. For Lovelace, man must lose himself to find himself, the ego has to be transcended and a man must accept his responsibility to other men in the process of seeking selfhood. Responsibility and recognition are key terms within the Lovelace canon and they are adjuncts to the theme of sacrifice. Another mode of sacrifice involves the shedding of a past state of innocence or naivete to enter into the wider world of contingencies, as shown by the communal example of Kumaca in The Schoolmaster, and the individual case of Walter Castle who sacrifices his own problems on the altar of communal involvement in order to regain a sense of values and meaning in life in While Gods Are Falling.