

**THE IMAGE OF DIVINE BAPTIST CHURCH IN EARL LOVELACE'S  
*THE WINE OF ASTONISHMENT: A POSTCOLONIAL REVIEW***

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**Abstract**

Earl Lovelace is one of the ingrained novelists of Caribbean literature. His work of art progress as a vigour to give authority to the 'Creole Culture' and 'Ethnicity' emanated out of the islands in the Caribbean. His novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* celebrated the Creole art practices around Carnival whereas his other novel *The Wine of Astonishment* celebrates another Creole establishment, the Trinidadian African-derived church of the Divine Baptists. In this work of art the Divine Baptist church acts as a symbol of obscurity from which the inhabitants desired to be discouraged by colonial establishments. It is distinguished and accredited as one of the sources that endorsed the formation of a fresh civilization away from the colonial restriction. In *The Wine of Astonishment*, the struggle displayed by Divine Baptist specialists, despite the exclusion and ferocity endured, is approved, feted and accepted as one of the landmarks in the history of Caribbean antiquity. So this paper will examine *The Wine of Astonishment* as a mark of progression of the Divine Baptist church from the postcolonial perspective. It also throws light on the other form of art 'the steel pan movement' which is created in the New World. On the whole paper typifies the endurance of the Trinidadian African-derived church organized with the advent of the steelpan as the striking demonstration of cultural subsistence, creolization and ethnicity of the Caribbean.

**Keywords:** Earl Lovelace, Divine Baptist Church, Postcolonial, Creolization, Ethnicity.

### Introduction:

The Caribbean history is a catastrophic history of slavery, indentured labour and racial miscegenation. It is a heterogeneous society. This society has historically never regarded as a meeting of people from different parts of the world to live harmoniously but it is a society into which men and women were amassed for only one purpose – ‘labour’. George Lamming has rightly pointed out that,

“Each race made a different journey to the Caribbean, with a different motive. Their heritage was different; their psychological encounter with white authority had different reverberations”. (Anthology of Caribbean Essays, 8)

Earl Lovelace has created superlative impact on the advancement of the West Indian literary expression by his ingenious practice of the morphological power. The facet of “voice” drives afar verbal abilities. One must understand the works of Lovelace as a tool for social transformation. He recognized himself as a subtle, insightful, arduous cross-examiner and schemer of carnival for thematic and artistic resolutions. His work of art rejoice as well as give cogency to the ‘Creole’ and ‘Ethnic’ customs that endured years of derision and exclusion by both colonial and postcolonial experts originated in the New World. Being a novelist he admits the emancipating and healing power of fiction which helps to accomplish an intellect of self that is very much existent in the culture of the *creoles* and *ethnic groups*. *The Wine of Astonishment* reflects a change in the county’s defiance towards the culture fashioned by the common populace of the region, concerning the motionless prevalent approach. Edward Brathwaite writes,

“New Ethnic groups such as Portugese, Chinese, Indians were introduced. New colourations into the black / white / coloured stratification; new numerical dispositions, new religions: Moslem / Hindu, new occupational specializations-cocoa / rice-farming and new cultural identities, problems and orientations were continuously introduced into the already fragmented world”. (Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 28)

The novel proposes to highlight the West Indian indigenous cultural practices and organizations to be acknowledged and prized as a part of the Divine Baptist church against the state of relationships. Lovelace identifies the endurance of the Divine Baptist church after many years of struggling against contempt, police cruelty and ultimately its prohibition as one of the stakes that withstand West Indian ethos.

In the New World many Creolized and Ethnic Groups born were advanced in silence and were at the core of confrontation and revolt against a plantation humanity created on vehemence. In order to safeguard the troubled parts of colonial humanities to assert their divinity, perform the cultural-political practices curbed by colonial force and to protect the health of the community are allowed by them. The most essential jargons of African-derived beliefs in Trinidad and Tobago are the Divine Baptists, also known as Spiritual Baptists and the Orisha or Shango. These are centered on syncretism of West African and Christian ethnicities. Rhoda Reddock opines,

“The Spiritual Baptist church, the most prevalent stream, “developed in the later days of the nineteenth century among the ex-enslaved who under the force of being Christianized sought to re-establish and continue their West African religious traditions”. (Reddock, 122)

*The Wine of Astonishment* is set in the village called Bonasse in the fictional Trinidadian during the period of World War II. It takes off with a description of its Divine Baptist gathering. In their self-effacing church, which is a symbol and home to their ceremonies, they adulate in the Baptist way:

“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...” (Lovelace, 32)

Spiritual Baptist belief was barred during the first half of the twentieth century by the British Colonial Government in a Black-owned and independent from any European church structure. As pronounced in the novel, police could capture consultants of the Spiritual Baptist belief for following their religion when the law was in effect.

“They pass the law against us that make it a crime on the whole island for people to worship God in the Spiritual Baptist religion. Now if we ring the bell that was against the law”. (Lovelace, 34)

The handclapping, sounding of the bell, dancing, yelling, humming and what the colonial regime would contemplate the most intolerable amongst the Spiritual Baptists performs considered as unendurable and rude. In the Trinidadian English Creole Spirit possession *catching the spirit* or *catching the power*, is one of the central features around which Afro-Caribbean faiths are concentrated. The populace surpasses their materiality in the ceremonial of spirit ownership by desirable feelings and the divinities marked themselves through the bodies of the originated. The spirit possession has been considered as one of the practices most battered and misused in a varied diversity of textual and visual stories. These stories, crisis and other aspects belonging to African-derived religions- are minimal features that Western productions have selected to put the center on in order to give a weakening image. Through this they have tried to alarm African-derived beliefs as a set of wicked performs.

In the novel spirit possession is not only shown as a practice in the Divine Baptist church but also takes extra facet through the character of Eva. She is the most important character and the wife of the Spiritual Baptist leader in the novel *The Wine of Astonishment*. Eva is the representation of a traditional Afro-Caribbean storyteller. She re-narrates what happens to all community members and leaders shown in the novel. Here the church is represented as a property of community and the novel reveals it is not the individual conception of Eva or the church leader, but it belongs to one and all. Merle Hodge opines,

“Eva’s is not a personal voice, but that at every turn the narrator acknowledges the community’s participation in the telling of the story. So Eva “does not so much retell episodes told to her, as yield to the voices of those who witnessed the action”. (Hodge, 276)

In this manner, the narrative expression not only stresses the significance of community but also highlights the spectacle of spirit possession. In the entire novel the character of Eva suits a multi-spoken storyteller often influenced by the spirit of other important charismatic personalities. It also highlights the universal view of the Divine Baptist church. In relation to the majority of belief schemes, every gathering forms a universal and democratic association where the individual is not exposed to a uniform hierarchy, but subject to individuality. The novelist Lovelace writes,

“Anyone can testify, anyone can dream, God can speak through anyone”. (Lovelace, 253).

The group of Shouter Baptists in Bonasse has to tolerate much misery and difficulties. Firstly the gathering is asked to go out of the village and secondly as a result, they are guarded to hold more passive amenities considered by softer chanting instead of ringing the bell and holding the authority. Besides, the novel portrays how the unity and members of Spiritual Baptist lessened intensely. Conversion to other important churches like the Roman Catholic Church or

the Methodist Church fetched various social and economic benefits to the converted individuals. Thus in the process of banning, the assembling of Bonasse observes how the number of disciples shrank slowly. With respect to the legal status, the prohibition made Spiritual Baptists specialists offenders. Thus, the novel demonstrates how an individual should remain as a practitioner for himself and follow his own faith destined to be overstepping the rule of the land. It should be an integral part of your identity, the one that recognized a link with the African culture, tradition, heritage and ethnicity. The character Eva relates how Bee, her husband and leader of the church, orders the public after the prohibition to interpret for them the hidden agenda hidden idea behind the prohibition:

“And Bee talk, giving us the history of the trials and tribulations we go through in this Babylon country, where no matter what we do to be ourselves they try to make us illegal, to cut us from our God and self and leave us naked without defense”. (Lovelace, 37)

Eva’s husband and the church leader Bee obviously comes to know that these are the actions that have ineffectively endeavoured from the day of their arrival into the New World. This clearly emanates their attempt to wipe out the Africanness in them. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Colonial consultants only prohibited African-based spiritual adoring but also other cultural and ethnical forms. They made to look at their origins were to be found in Africa such as stick fighting, dancing and humming were too loud and their respective performs bothered attired individuals. Creole conducts that emanated from the contact of the diverse cultures that were brought to the Caribbean, were barred in the regular pattern colonial scenario. Keeping this intact, the novelist Lovelace contends that the Spiritual Baptists like all other African organizations were considered to be seen as isolated. In order to bring the lit of their civilization, colonial specialists had to craft a gloominess in which their light could sparkle.

With thirty five years of prohibition, when the gathering in *The Wine of Astonishment* reassembles again, the numbers have reduced, but Bee rejoices their subsistence. Bee admits the enduring force that has made the gathering resist after the prohibition has been withdrawn after the first sermon. Bee orates about all the hindering situations which have not fared to scratch down the community:

“And Bee preach about the tribulation and about the running and dodging and hiding and he preach about the scattering of the people when we scatter like sparks from a fire to die, but we do not die, instead come back again to be here to praise the Lord and to magnify His name”. (Lovelace, 144)

The inner burning of the community did not saturate although the congregation had to bear all the hurdles. The first deal in the old Spiritual way after the withdrawn of the ban, even though associates of the gathering try their level best to get rid of the situation but no one has been able to achieve success at grasping the fire and the Spirit does not come in the anticipated way.

The worshippers are able to devote in the old way again with dancing, handclapping, chanting, making noise and bell ringing for the first time after the long years of prohibition but mysteriously the Spirit would not come as expected. Eva and Bee exchanged views on the possible reasons that could clarify why the Spirit did not come as expected on their way back home after the congregation. With greater dissatisfaction, grief and sense of fault, Bee and Eva along with the children decided to involve themselves in rehearsal session at the steelband pavilion. At this juncture they understand that the Spirit has not abandoned the community, as the gathering thought, instead it has been reconvened in the Trinidadian musical striking instrument made from a steel container:

“In the next yard there, with bamboo for posts and coconut branches for a roof, is a steelband tent, and in this tent is the steel pans, and playing these pans is some young fellows, bare-back and with tear-up clothes ... I listening to the music; for the music that those boys playing on the steelband have in it the same Spirit that we miss in our church; the same Spirit; and listening to them, my heart swell and it is like resurrection morning”. (Lovelace, 146)

The above ending lines of the novel make it very clear that the epiphanic instant unlocks a new and abstract ray of hope for the entire congregation. The new conditions of a past of prohibition and confrontation have now presented a new position in Trinidadian culture and ethnicity where the Spirit is also to be initiated. Here the novel suggests that similar Spirit the Divine Baptist celebrants have been grasping is now also exist in the steelpan drive. With this the Trinidadian culture has expanded further and also grips a new practice called steelband.

Till this point of time the steelpan was considered as the only instrument fashioned in the twentieth century in Trinidad. It was born exactly in Laventille, a hill overseeing the capital Port of Spain. This place was mainly occupied by African-descended populace at the foot of the financial hierarchy. Fascinatingly, the new nationwide gadget of Trinidad and Tobago went through a similar past to that of Divine Baptists. It was created and practiced by the common humanity, also tolerated prohibition and discrimination from the colonial supervision. Keeping this intact, the novelist Lovelace emphasizes that both the Divine Baptist church and the steelband have departed through related capabilities in their respective antiquities. With the Divine Baptist Church, the steelband crusade that emerged in the early twentieth century has endowed and remains to endow the common populace. It has facilitated to overcome the pessimistic self-esteem instigated by the deprivation and refusal they had been exposed to by the governing and affluent section of the human civilization.

Here George Lamming’s definition of the Caribbean writer holds good even for Earl Lovelace considering this magnitude. Lamming is of the opinion that the writer registers and infers the New World shaped in the Caribbean and provides logic of historical steadiness annulled by the colonial attitude. Therefore it releases the younger peers from a cycle of divine withdrawal and self-mutilation. So, the novelist Lovelace is in route with Lamming’s description of the Caribbean writer. Since his endeavour all through his works has been the inspection and authentication of what has been created by Caribbean individuals on Caribbean land.

### Conclusion:

On the whole, *The Wine of Astonishment* displays how the Divine Baptist church is a breathing evidence of the Caribbean people’s confrontation to the Colonial specialists’ effort at wiping out Africa tradition and culture from the Caribbean. It also acts as an attempt at imposing Divine withdrawal onto Caribbean populace ineffective. As as it is shown in the novel both spirit and divine dispossession are unsuccessful in possessing divinity. Finally it also disproves the well-known avowal by the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, V.S. Naipaul. He writes,

“History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies”. (V.S. Naipaul, 20)

In comparison, Earl Lovelace substantiates that West Indians have shaped a rich Creole culture and ethnicity to be gratified. He feels proud to by stand the result of the emergence of different cultures that were brought to the Caribbean. Hence, Earl Lovelace’s *The Wine of Astonishment* inspects, admits and rejoices about what has been fashioned in the West Indies and highlights that for Trinidadian culture and humanity to improve more, it is an awful need to substance all that has been generated. So the image of divine Baptist church in Earl Lovelace’s



fiction throws light on various issues from the postcolonial perspective which are significant to assert the status of the church and its followers for the fulfillment of their cultural and ethnical passions.

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