

## **The Postcolonial Domination in the Dragon can't Dance (1979)**

### **and Salt (1996) by Earl Lovelace**

Serigne Mbaye KANDJI

*Department of English*

*Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Sénégal*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the theme of postcolonial domination in Earl Lovelace's novels: *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt*. Rooted in the reality of Trinidad and Tobago, these stories offer a profound exploration of the lasting consequences of colonialism and power relations in a postcolonial context. It highlights how, after independence, Caribbean culture and economy remain trapped under Western domination. It describes the lasting impact of colonialism on the cultural identity of the characters and their communities. It explores how the colonial legacy continues to influence their beliefs and practices. I examine the glaring inequalities that persist in post-colonial societies. It paints a vivid picture of the economic imbalances weighing on the Caribbean development

**Keywords:** post-colonialism, domination, culture, disparities

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**Résumé:** Le présent article examine le thème de la domination postcoloniale dans les romans *The Dragon Can't Dance* et *Salt* d'Earl Lovelace. Enracinés dans la réalité de Trinidad et Tobago, ces récits offrent une exploration profonde des conséquences durables du colonialisme et des rapports de pouvoir dans un contexte postcoloniale. Il met en lumière comment après l'indépendance, la culture et l'économie caribéennes restent piégées sous la domination occidentale. Il décrit l'impact durable du colonialisme sur l'identité culturelle des personnages et de leur communauté. Il explore la manière dont l'héritage colonial continue d'influencer leurs croyances et leurs pratiques. J'examine les inégalités criantes qui persistent dans les sociétés postcoloniales. Il brosse un tableau saisissant des déséquilibres économiques qui pèsent sur le développement des Caraïbes

**Mots-clés:** Post-colonialisme, domination, culture, disparités

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## **Introduction**

Earl Lovelace, a renowned Trinidadian author, has been celebrated for his profound exploration of postcolonial themes in his novels. Two of his most notable works, *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt* offer a vivid portrayal of the enduring impact of colonial domination on the Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. In the wake of colonial rule and the subsequent quest for independence, Lovelace's literary lens illuminates the complexities of postcolonial existence, capturing the struggles, triumphs, and enduring challenges faced by the island's inhabitants.

*The Dragon Can't Dance* traces the changes that take place in the Caribbean from the mid 1940's to the early 1960's. The novel explores an identity crisis in the post-independent era of Trinidadian people and the struggle for selfhood through carnival. In *Salt*, Lovelace, the Trinidadian it explores the more contemporary problem of imagining nationhood. This novel deals with colonial and neo-colonial independence of Trinidad and about the whole African Diaspora. It traces the Emancipation period in the mid nineteen century until the period post-Independence. The context of hardship characterized by oppression and its multiple forms in Caribbean motivate us to deal with the issue of European postcolonial domination in the Caribbean. In *Caribbean History: From Pre-colonial Origins to the Present*, Tony Martin presents a survey of Caribbean history from the advent of the Europeans to World War II. Martin shows the European colonization, domination and exploitation and resistance of Caribbean peoples. The book introduces Spanish colonization in 1492 with the entry of Christopher Columbus, and the attendant introduction of enslavement of the first the native population. In *The Post-Colonial Studies Readers* Bill Aschroft states that

It is also because all post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination and independence has not solved this problem.

The development of new elites within independent societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations, the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous people in settler/invader societies (Aschroft 1995: 2)

This oppression revolves around how Caribbean people are culturally influenced by the western domination and how they are socially and economically discriminated. A postcolonial literary framework will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of the history of the region depicted in the novels. It investigates

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the effect of European colonialism, independence movements. The study will use a combination of historical contextualization, character analysis, and textual exploration to unravel the intricate depiction of postcolonial domination. The first section will show how Western world imposes its cultural domination and denies the Caribbean culture. In the second section I intend to talk about the economic disparities that prevail in the Caribbean region.

## **I. Western Cultural Domination**

The term culture can be defined as totality of a society with all its manifestations. In contact with foreign groups, culture tends to be associated with race and then becomes an instrument of affirmation of one's identity. Generally considered as the best way people use to give life an adequate framework and meaningful aspiration, the Caribbean culture undergoes western influences.

The western cultural domination is a very recurrent theme in Earl Lovelace's fiction. Belonging to the post-independence wave of Caribbean writers who continued the literary tradition, Lovelace shows us in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt* how western culture dominates the Caribbean Islands in general and Trinidad and Tobago in particular. In fact, in *The Dragon Can't Dance* Lovelace illustrates the custom of carnival Monday degenerated by the mask devil. The Old carnival was characterized by wearing horns. The sounds such as "tinkling", "cracking", "lashed" install an atmosphere of cacophony. But the carnival they assist is influenced by sponsors. The Old Carnival is swept away. It is now changed by the global capital and tourism. This situation urges the protagonist of *The Dragon Can't Dance* Aldrick to say that:

I is a dragon. I have fire in my belly and claws in my hands; watch me! Note me well, for I am ready to burn down your city. I am ready to tear you apart, limb by limb". They grinned nervously and rushed hands into their pockets to find coins to offer in him appeasement. But no. No. He refused the money... He wanted them to know that he would be threatening there, a breath away from them (Dragon 124).

Aldrick is disappointed by his dragon. He no longer believes in it because his ancestral heritage loses its values. In *Salt*, Lovelace mentions the way Christians reject carnival and parallel it to the devil. As a matter of fact, "Pastor Peter of the Tabernacle of Righteousness and Light fresh from an evangelical crusade across the island appear on the television condemning Carnival as devil worship and calling on all true Christians to keep their distance from it if they did not want to put their souls at peril" (Lovelace 1979, 90). Western religious

groups (Catholics and Anglicans) in Trinidad associated carnival and calypso music with darkness. Bill Schwarz argues that “In this moment Britain’s empire, much ideological work was expended in organizing colonial life by differentiating those domains of social life which could be considered to have been touched by light from those which remained in the thrall of darkness” (Schwarz 2008: 15) Mr. Guy in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* mourns how European competition of carnival influences Aldrick. Aldrick realizes that the dance of dragon through which he seeks to represent Trinidadian identity and to win over Silvia is a hollow performance, an obsession or frivolous distraction from socio-economic realities. He shows the reader the time when steel drums were hung around the neck and players went on foot to the time of floats and platforms on wheels to the time when carnival disguises and costumes reflected the spirit of a particular community. Lovelace goes back to the story of the celebration of carnival in the past because he witnesses the influence of the western culture on carnival. The local elites continue the colonial politics of undermining local cultures. Some of Aldrick’s fellows no longer partake in carnival events when Johnson and Fullers began sponsoring their steelband. For these boys, the true renegade spirit of masking as timeless warriors of generations past

The western influence on Trinidadian music is not much related in *Salt*. But in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* Lovelace relates how the calypso that continued to be the main musical form in Trinidad and Tobago has changed. The calypsonian finds it difficult to produce their songs and keep up with the competition on the market. The calypso becomes no longer an act of rebellion and the calypsonian loses his sense of warriorhood. Philo decides to sing about what people want to hear rather than to sing about social issues. As the narrator says, “Philo had given up on his own calypso of rebellion to sing now about the Axe Man” (Lovelace 1979: 121). This provides carnival a new special music like the rise of the professional calypsonian gave dimension of theater, spectacle and further rituals to make the entertainment complete. The tents became stages for the performers. So this has created a knowledgeable and discriminating audience.

If the popular culture produced in the Caribbean is resulted from a continual resistance of the subordinated groups to cultural domination, it has never been perceived as positive by the western world. In *Salt*, the local culture and its relation to European models is made explicit through the role played by the protagonist Alford George. As a school boy, he tells us that “he was already dreaming of one day going out into the vastness of the world” (Lovelace, 1996: 27). So, the fact of entering the vastness of the world shows his interaction with the western culture. That is why Alford adopts the western culture that allows him to affirm his

self. And also the fact of going every morning “in a red, white and black tracksuit marked Trinidad and Tobago”

(Lovelace 1979: 128) denotes the influence of white culture on the Trinidadians.

Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance* and *Salt* mirror the ongoing Western cultural domination in the Caribbean. The Caribbean islands have no promise future and cultural development because of the power of European cultural influence. Lovelace depicts the neocolonial state that derives from a history of colonialism in which European countries exerted cultural domination upon Caribbean Islands. This cultural domination in the Caribbean during the colonial era continued until after Emancipation. Lovelace’s characters are forced to appropriate the way and values of the colonizing culture. In *Salt* Alfred George thinks that the European way of life good. By following this European mode, “his elocution, his vocabulary, the agreement of his subjects and his verbs, his Hazlitt, his Keats, his Shelley, his Browning, his knowledge of wines seemed to be of little use here” (Lovelace 1979: 54). In *the Wine of Astonishment*, the character Ivan Morton rejects Eulalie and goes with “a light skin” lady. Ivan Morton and his new girl accept the white cultural norms, when they go to church, they walk slowly. The narrator says:

her white veil falling over the stiff black curls on her pressed hair, her two carful knees  
barely bothering the cloth of her dress hanging down to her ankles. If it was Eulalie walking  
by the side of Ivan Morton, her chest woulda been jumping and her bodyline rolling to  
make that white dress dance and sing and the grass stand up and coconut tree bend down to  
say good morning (Schwarz 2008: 50).

The above passage is a bitter indictment of the deplorable situation of post-colonial Trinidad, the lack of historical awareness among its people, all of which is a legacy of British colonialism. I argue that this attitude of Ivan Morton and his wife is rooted in the settlement of the American base in post-colonial Trinidad. The characters of Lovelace’s fiction accept the western cultures because they have no choice.

Colonialism has dictated its cultural rules to the Caribbean people. Lovelace claims that, years after Emancipation, British colonizers repressed African- influenced forms of music by banning the beating of drums, censoring calypso. Music as a cultural and communal practice is very telling in his novels. Practiced by the Spiritual Baptists with its raucous musical style of worship, music is legally banned in the early part of the twentieth century. The Caribbean community attempts to maintain faith but this faith receives challenges from colonial society and its policies, including corruption. An outstanding example is the banning of Canboulay

from French “cannes brûlées”. It is a precursor to Trinidad and Tobago carnival; the calypso music is derived from this festival. After Emancipation in 1834, the British Government ban the participation of Indentured labours and freed slaves in the masquerade carnival events. This gives birth to the Canboulay Riot in which the British police crackdown the celebration of carnival. This riot opposed Afro-Creole revellers and police which caused deep resentment within Trinidadian society toward the government’s use of power. Lovelace parallels these events in his fiction to the late 1990’s, a period marked by violent clashes between the politicized steel band and toughs known as “bad john”. The stubborn people also known as bad john not only do they have sympathy with their community but also they are rejected. The colonial government and the religious power in Trinidad turn their back to Fishey and Aldrick because they represent a threat to them. Carnival and calypso are synonymous of darkness Fishey and his friends in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* assert their manhood and act out the aggression that colonialism has nurtured in them. The steel bands are sponsored and commercialized and people are quitted down. Lovelace declares:

When they appeared on the road with new pans and emblem and waving a new flag:

Sampoco Oil Company Gay Desperadoes, well, he nearly went out his head. Gay? Gay Desperadoes. That was the end. And instead of the little fellars pushing the pans, you had the sponsors: the sponsor’s wife and the sponsor’s daughter and the sponsor’s friends a whole section of them. (Lovelace, 1979: 68).

This sponsorship is also noted in *Salt*. When Moon is given land in the Bandon he exploits it fully as a famer. He becomes a successful businessman and opens hardware. Then he starts sponsoring stick fighting at carnival. Lovelace has honestly made an attempt in *Salt* to reassert and restructure the wounded relationship between Africans and Indians by contemplating an alternative vision of creolization. If East Indians interact with African descendants and Europeans in the Caribbean one will find the influence of the power which is the European’s. So even if creolization is an aspect of the Caribbean identity, it is on the other side a hole through which western culture filters Caribbean culture and dominates it. Lovelace believes in the importance of cultural practices like carnival. He sees this culture corrupted by the “capitalist logic” and the tourist attraction. In his essay “The Emancipation-Jouvey Tradition and the Almost Loss of Pan”, Lovelace expands the Post-Independent Trinidad on this:

When we woke up to the realization that we were independent and that independence meant

having a culture that we could call our, we discovered that all we had that might be termed indigenous or native was what had been created or resembled and maintained here by those at the bottom of economic ladder...Independence was to face with the questions: How were the people of this diverse society to access these native elements of what was now being seen as fueling a culture which all of us were to share? How was this society to authentically access cultural institutions that grew out of the struggle in particular circumstances by ordinary Black people for their self-affirmation and liberation? (Lovelace 1998: 58)

Lovelace shows the mechanisms used by the colonial power to suppress all cultural beliefs of Trinidadian society in particular and the Caribbean in general. Those mechanisms are ideological and repressive colonial apparatuses developed by the French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser. He identifies the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) as a method by which organizations propagate ideology and mentally control individuals. Althusser cites religion, law, politics, trade unions and the family as part of the ISAs the State uses to control people. He puts Education at the top. And this is “what the bourgeoisie has installed as its number-one, i.e. as its dominant ideological state apparatus is the educational apparatus which has in fact replaced in its functions the previously dominant ideological state apparatus the church” (Althusser, 1989: 175) This is the way ideas get into our heads the colonized people and have an effect on their life so much so that cultural ideas have such a hold on us that we believe they are our own.

In *Salt* Lovelace shows how education, alienates the minds of Afro-Trinidadians. Up to the age of six, Alford is dumb. Lovelace symbolizes this period of the absence of Trinidadian culture that would connect Alford if he had not been impacted by colonial British system. So his (Alford) childhood is then spent in an emulating English culture; a culture that disconnected him from his own. Born in a plantation where his father works, his family is connected to no culture. The motivation of Alford in school is to better have contact with the English culture under the detriment of his own. And this is very telling when he prepares himself to leave his island for England which for him is the centre culture. Not only does he reject his culture but he also starts naming “Thebes, Athens, Mesopotamia, Constantinople, Great Britain, Ulysses, Bellum, New York, London” (1996:34), filled with his sense of magnificent world. Alfred George manifests his desire of going to England. In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, the police symbolize the repression of the colonizer on his subjects. This coercive

force appears on the first pages of *Salt*. Lovelace states that “to get a man to follow your instructions you had to pen him and beat him and cut off his ears or his foot when they run away” (Lovelace, 1996: 6). By torturing the indigenous, the colonial power hopes to maintain its hegemonic voice. Trinidadians are forced to bear the heavy hand of the white master because if they infringe the established order, they will be “rounded up one day, tried the next and sentenced the evening of the same day to have their head cut off and set on poles erected in front the Royal Jail and their headless bodies taken hung on chains miles away on the seacoast in Carenage” (Lovelace, 1996: 169). The British colonial master instilled their cultural superiority in the minds of Caribbean people. They criminalize the Caribbean culture. Lovelace argues that “every Black leader had to be seen as a madman. For white people to feel themselves human they had to make Black people appear to be beast. And they would push Black people on the defensive by an unending programme of propaganda that would reinvent Black people as demons largely unacceptable as proper human.

The postcolonial and neo-colonial state derives from history colonialism in which European countries exerted cultural domination upon Caribbean countries. This cultural subjugation of the Western world is not the only plight of the Caribbean people. These islanders also suffered from socio-economic domination.

## **II. Economic Disparities: A Postcolonial Bridle to Caribbean development**

Lovelace’s fiction depicts a capitalist economic system rooted from colonial master. After Emancipation, this system brought in Trinidad was so horrible that “if you don’t have you don’t count” (1965: 7). In *Salt*, with his so-called co-operative, Doctor Courtney profits from his good position to take people’s money. The narrator explains:

Courtney L. Bobb, the false doctor who come with this wonderful plan for everyday to put up money to form a co-operative that will buy goods and sell them back to people for less money, and buy land for planting, and... take people money, put advertisement in the newspaper organize a big sod-turning ceremony, invite the Minister of Commerce to give the future address, the priest to bless the spot and the school choir to sing for the dignitaries.

(Lovelace, 1996: 52)

This statement lambasts the neo-colonial economic policies. Lovelace shows the ways through which the British economic system is introduced in Trinidad. It is the same situation that he laments in *The Schoolmaster* by calling hypocrites those who profit from local population to better their conditions. Lovelace advocates that

“all they wanted was to take from you, not give” (Lovelace, 1986: 120) He criticizes the hypocrisy of schoolmaster who doesn’t care about the welfare of the Kumacans. He is quite a complicated figure who represents a dangerous combination of different features. Schoolmaster manages to manipulate the Kumacans who lay their hopes of better future on him. He teaches children to read and write, organizes the village council and the singing choir, and intercedes with the government for building a well for kumacans and a road from Valencia. However, he makes profit out of these activities and controls the villages. In *Dragon*, Lovelace explains the clothing of costume that exist both inside and outside of capital. The economy of the fictional Calvary Hill neighbourhood restricts fiscal exhibition but Lovelace uses clothing and costuming to articulate social condition and how he invokes neoliberal economics. In *Salt*, Jojo the prototype of the freed African slaves encounters problems to get land on which he had been working. What is strange is that, he has to buy this part of land. In their discussion, Carabon told Jojo that:

He had to have cash to pay. Jojo didn’t have money. Well, there has been a misunderstanding, the lawyers said. Perhaps you should apply to the government for other land. Of course, Jojo knew that that was no solution to the matter and that in any event he didn’t have the money (Lovelace, 1996: 183).

Jojo is trapped in the way the colonial master distribute land to their subjects. In this respect, Lovelace calls back the Cedula system of 1783. This capitalist system is not only found in *Salt*. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Franz Fanon gives an important part of the problem of land. Fanon defines Colonialism as “the conquest of a national territory and the oppression of a people” (Fanon 2004: 197). So the politics of a total Independence should be necessarily the politics to access land. Fanon suggests that to end colonial subjugation, the land that is forcefully taken from its owner must be given back. In other novels by Lovelace like *The Wine of Astonishment* and *The Schoolmaster* Port of Spain is presented as a frightening negation of rural values. In *The Schoolmaster*, Lovelace dramatizes the interaction between Capitain Grant and Benn. This interaction underscores the system that facilitated the guide’s abuse at the hands of Captain Grant. The latter refuses to accept Benn’s offer of his prized horse as a gift and considers it an object for sale. Thus, Grant should maintain the relationship between Benn and himself. By paying Benn fifteen pounds, Lovelace challenges the evil of that system’s reification of “the human person as an object of exchange in order to maintain at all cost, the illogical class/race hierarchy of its capitalist ethos” ( Rahim, 2006: 13). These novels poignantly depict the harsh realities of economic

disparities where marginalized communities grapple with poverty and the lingering consequences of colonialism.

## **Conclusion**

Lovelace highlights the cultural and socio-economic plight of Trinidad and Tobago. What we can bear in mind is that the western domination is rooted from slavery and harsh colonialism but also from the so-called Emancipation that does not give Trinidadians in particular and the Caribbean in general a total freedom. This article ultimately suggests that the postcolonial condition is marked by ongoing challenges and a search for meaning in a rapidly evolving society. These novels serve as a lens through which readers can understand the struggles and aspirations of the marginalized in face of cultural and economic challenges. The characters' stories and experiences provide a poignant commentary on the enduring impact of these disparities on their lives. Lovelace's works compel the readers to reflect on the broader issues of culture, economics, and social justice, making them important contributions to the postcolonial literary landscape.

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