

NEW HISTORICISM IN EARL LOVELACE'S *SALT*

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Abstract

The paper undertakes a New Historicist evaluation of Earl Lovelace's *Salt* using the theory of New Historicism to chronicle and assemble historical events that have happened in the Caribbean territory, though not usually in the place and sequence presented in the novel. Using content analytical method, the paper examines the writer's appropriate use of historical materials in reconstructing and reflecting social reality with the following objectives; (i) to explore critical opinions, varied responses and reactions which *Salt* has sparked off over the years from among critics and scholars, (ii) to investigate what constitutes the problem of the Caribbean person both within and outside his territory, and (iii) to explore the usefulness of New Historicism and the extent to which it has helped to create a deeper understanding of the message conveyed in Earl Lovelace's *salt*. Findings are that *Salt* reflects an epoch in the Caribbean society and has thus succeeded in presenting a historical social event in the Caribbean. The paper concludes that since *Salt*, offers a sense of life observed and mediated upon in depth, it fits properly into the tenets of New Historicism.

Key Words: Historicism, New Historicism, Indenture, and Colonialism

Introduction

The Caribbean Islands largely consist of people whose parents were victims of slavery, colonialism and indentured labour which have combined to deny them the right to full political and social inclusion in the Caribbean society. These people, especially those of the African ancestry who were violently taken away from their ancestral homes are permanently deprived of the revitalising effect of their home cultures; something which the Europeans of the Caribbean depend upon to

survive their sojourns. The tragic past of slavery, indentured labour and colonialism with their unpleasant consequences on the Caribbean personality are some of the things that motivate many writers from this region to reflect in their works. Writers like Earl Lovelace, VS Naipaul, Samuel Selvon as well as Edward Kamau Brathwaite among others have concentrated their energies in creating works of fiction that properly document these historical imbalances of the Caribbean. *Salt*, for example, contributes to the revalorisation of Africa and its past as part of the process of building the Caribbean personality.

Christopher Oduma gives an insight into how writers interpret historical issues after colonial experience and how this affect colonial sustainability in our society when he says that:

Every writer and every artist is a sort of historian of his time, and the unconscious recorder of events in his society. Even when the writer reaches out to the uncharted areas of experience, the ingredients of his dream derive from the impacts of events around him. Thus, his review of life however affected in the creative process represents at one level, a confrontation with the reality of history. (11)

This means that every writer is a product of time, period history and season. In essence, due to the interplay between literature and society, the role of the writer in any society is to “function as the recorder of the experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time” (Wole Soyinka 18).

Literature, being a product of the society, “reflects truthfully the deep-lying process of the date to promulgate progressive ideas and to defend the interest of the progressive forces in the society” (William Raymond 3). It must be observed however, that literature does not only comment on progressive ideas but also on the negative aspects of human life, as well as entertainment. It is against this background that this paper painstakingly examines issues that affect the Caribbean and their efforts to overcome their privations which are mainly traceable to their historical past.

Theoretical Framework

New Historicism is one of the approaches in the interpretation of literature which arose in the United States of America with scholars like Stephen Greenblatt and JW Lever as its main proponents. Tracing its origin, Charles Bressler reveals that prior to the emergence of New Historicism, the 1970s, 1940s, 1950s and 1960s were years dominated by New criticism and its focus on ‘... interpretive process on the text itself rather than on historical, authorial, or reader concerns’ (179). According to John Brannigan, the basic tenet of New Historicism is that;

New Historicism approached the relationship between texts and context with an urgent attention to the political ramification of literary interpretation. In the eyes of new historicism critics, texts of all kinds are the vehicle of politics in so far as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and culture formations. (169)

Since literature reflects the society in all ramifications, including social, political, cultural and economic activities of the people in the society, new historicism examines how literary texts reflect and represent history. In other words, new historicism is “a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period” (Peter Barry 116).

New Historicism is a method that has challenged and resisted the assumption and goals of traditional historicism. Proponents of this theory, most of them literary scholars, deny, for example, that no one ever knows exactly what happens at a given time and place. Therefore, all that can be perceived is what has been handed down in artefacts and stories, making history a narration and not a pure, unadulterated set of precise observations. Thus, all history is subjectively known and set down, coloured by the cultural context of the recorder usually the person of power, thus leaving untold, the stories of those who are powerless. Victor Shesa has pointed out that Wesley Morris used the term New Historicism in 1972 “to designate a model of literary criticism

derived from German historicists, such as Leopold Vinson Ranke and Wilhelm Dilthey, and American historians such as Vernon I. Parrington and Van Wyck Brooks” (124). Stephen Greenbelt is credited for slipping the term into circulation in its current sense in his introduction to “The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance; a special issue of *Genre* (1-2), devoted to what was already billed as a fresh departure in critical practice” (Ryan Kiernan xiii). The term is therefore, restricted to:

describing groupings of critics and theorists who have rejected the SYNCHRONIC approaches to culture and literature, associated with structuralism and who have attempted to provide more adequate answers to various problems associated with the tensions between aesthetics and historical approaches to the study of a range of different sort of TEXT”. (Paul et. al 188)

Given its origin and nature, one may consider New Historicism not as a theory but as an eclectic theoretical basis for analysing cultural practices that go beyond the scope of the structuralist methodology in studying cultural institutions. However, new historicism, even though emanates from structuralism and post-structuralism, tries to be distinct in its method of application. It seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era. The theory assumes that every work is a product of the historical moment that created it (Julian Wolfreys 189). Greenblatt is of the view that:

Literature has a historical base and literary works are not the product of a single consciousness but many social and cultural forces. In order to understand literature, one has to take recourse to both culture and society that gave rise to it. Literature is not a distinctive human activity hitherto believed, but another vision of history. (118)

New Historicism, therefore, gives room to the reading of a text, regarding the context of its formation, accepting other historical sources outside of the literary text to prove its relevance in analysis.

Since "New Historicism is based on the assumption that a literary work is a product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition, the "new historicist, therefore argues that literary texts cannot be read and understood in isolation" (Tiwary and Chandra 79).

The advocates of New Historicism believe that themes and characterisation that develop in any text are those which were common in that given period of time. Moreover, it is said that because literature is the creation of man as well as history, it is no more objective but subjective (Hisham 1). This means the fact that literature deals with history does not necessarily mean that such literature is dealing with historical facts alone but deals with facts that are transformed into fiction.

New Historicist Evaluation of Earl Lovelace's *Salt*

In a bid to understand the forces that propelled Earl Lovelace to write, an attempt is made to examine Chezia Thompson Cager's comments on Earl Lovelace when she says that Earl Lovelace has established himself as one of the most known literary talents in the Caribbean. "As a writer and storyteller, his novels explore the effects, the significant social, economic and political changes that the late Twentieth century Trinidad has on the lives of individuals and communities (2). An evaluation of historical events in the Caribbean region shows that these changes hinge on the economic structure, class formation, conflicts and contradictions of colonialism, slavery and indentured labour in the region. Lovelace witnessed these changes first hand because he spent his early life with his grandparents in different parts of the Island. He utilizes these experiences in his exceptionally individual account of his people in his text.

Salt is a narrative which continues to deepen the thematic preoccupation of Lovelace as a writer of the New Historicist tradition. The novel begins with a mythic figure, Guinea John, the ancestor of black people in the Caribbean who is said to have tucked two corn-cobs under his armpits and flown back to Africa; escaping the death sentence imposed on him for his role in an unsuccessful rebellion. In

fleeing, he left behind his family in captivity because he “refuses to pass on the knowledge of flight to them” (3). His descendants, who, due to ignorance, have eaten salt and have grown too heavy to fly, remain behind in Trinidad and struggle to settle account with history by trying to either establish a place for themselves or to escape to foreign lands. Lovelace tries to firmly plant the story in concrete issues that evidently reflect the history of the blacks in the Caribbean. For example, the myth of Guinea John which sounds fantastic is also painstakingly embedded in the efforts of the legendary nationalist’s offspring to overcome their privations which are mainly traceable to their historical slave past. The novel presents the ancient legend in a wholly original voice by evoking voices from the past to recreate history. While looking at the past, the novel is also able to bring all racial groups which are involved to present themselves and their views about the future of their country.

The novel explores historical issues of racial disharmony among the disparate races in the region: slavery, colonialism, transplantation, uprootment, quest for self-actualisation, alienation, disillusionment and exile among others. The protagonist of the novel who is called Alford is a black school teacher turned politician who filled with passion and wit, tries to liberate his people in the Caribbean Island of Trinidad in which the novel is set. While teaching, Alford discovers the submerged presence of Africans in the culture of the Caribbean region, and thus embarks on a reclamation which involves a process of challenging and confronting the colonial culture which overlays and literally suppresses the African culture.

In his quest to give his people the capacity to learn and reach high levels of life that go beyond the colonial standard, Alford embarks on an aggressive protests against the school system in Cascade which puts the black community in a disadvantaged position. For instance, the educational system enforces a dependency on foreign institutions for continuity. This system makes it mandatory for pupils in the Caribbean to register and pass the College Exhibition Examination before advancing to British Universities, because the Caribbean region has no tertiary institutions. However, since the standard of education

in the Caribbean is very low, especially among the blacks, and continuity between the two levels is often institutionalised, only an exceptionally able and rigorously drilled pupil is guaranteed qualification for an exhibition class. Unfortunately, an African or Indian pupil who manages to get to the required standard still has to overcome the invisible glass ceiling which colour prejudice places in his/her path by the predominantly white selection committee. In addition, such a brilliant student has to compete again for one of the few Island scholarships available for British Universities. What is obvious about this exhibition class is that it is designed to restrict other racial groups to the lower stations of life while the whites continue to occupy the upper station, which is a clear issue of inequality confronting people of the Islands. The problem of exhibition examination is also satirised in VS Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* where Biswas' son, Anand, is placed on a special food diet of milk and prunes as he goes through strenuous training for the exhibition class "from morning to evening for almost two months" (416). Such revelation shows the predicament of both students and parents to overcome what seems to be a herculean task.

As Alford discovers the evil machination of the College Exhibition Examination system, he vehemently opposes it because he believes that if this policy is not reviewed, the Caribbean child may not acquire western education and therefore burry his identity forever. His first attempt to draw attention to this evil is his complaint to his school head teacher, Mr Penco, who declares his innocence and helplessness. Alford takes his complaint to the ministry of education headquarters in Port-of-Spain after discovering the helplessness of his school head teacher. At the ministry of education, Alford goes directly to the office of the Director of Education but the director would not see him because of his busy schedule. His secretary asks Alford to come back "on the 17th of June. It was then the 27th of March" (78). Alford proceeds to the office of the minister of education after his futile attempt to meet with the Director of Education but is informed by the secretary that the minister is not always available on such short notice

without an appointment. The entire week, Alford goes from office to office but “found nobody of a rank capable of making a decision available to him” (78).

The only remaining recourse is the Newspaper and the public. It is while Alford is at *The Standard* to speak to a reporter that his eyes catch an article on the Civil Rights struggle of Dr, Martin Luther King, Jr, with photographs of his inspiration, Mahatma Gandhi. From there, it becomes clear to him what he would do to get the attention of the authorities (79). Thereafter, Alford resolves to follow the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, by embarking on a hunger strike in front of the office of the Minister of Education. Though he had never fasted before, he resolves to start his fast the same way he had started everything else; alone and uncertain. Through this scenario, Lovelace has drawn from a historically verifiable incident to tell his story because Mahatma Gandhi actually went on hunger strike in India to protest against colonial policies while demanding for independence for his country.

As planned, Alford begins his fast in Port-of - Spain under the samaan tree in front of the ministry of education with his first placard that reads; “STOP THE COLLEGE EXHIBITION EXAMINATION” (81), while the story is captured on the front page of *The Guardian* newspaper thus: SCHOOL TEACHER BEGINS FAST TO THE DEATH, BLASTS COLLEGE EXHIBITION EXAMINATION “(80).

The other day, Alford appears with another placard with the inscription; “EDUCATE NOT DISCRIMINATE- SAVE THE CHILDREN- HOW MANY FAILURES FOR THE SUCCESS” (81). From the very beginning of his fast, many people accused him of trying to embarrass the government while others accused him of seeking cheap popularity, especially through his choice of wearing “Hindu clothes and Orisha turbans” (81). After thirty two days of his fast, it becomes impossible to ignore him and what he is doing. Consequently, the opposition leader in parliament moves a motion to have the College Exhibition Examination law debated and amended. In a swift reaction, the leader of the ruling party in parliament raises a counter motion informing the house that; “such a debate would be premature because

government had already set up a One-Man Commission of Enquiry into all aspects of College Exhibition Examination and were awaiting his findings" (86).

Anxious to bring to an end a story that has already peaked because of its media coverage and attention; the people interpret the action of the government as a triumph for Alford and therefore urge him to bring his fast to a dignified end. At a press conference organized by Angela Vialva, surrounded by Dr Kennos, Mother Earth, Calvin Salandy, and Calvin Rodriguez, Alford George expresses happiness to the people for their support. The reflection of the sustained quality of Alford's struggle against the historical facts of enslavement, colonialism, exploitation and domination, which are deliberate plans by the white to prevent the black Caribbean from improving their condition from enslavement to freedom, are some of the concerns of the novel which have New Historicist inclination. The intensity of the support Alford enjoys from school children, women groups, faith based organisations, the unemployed, and even Indians during his thirty two day hunger strike is enough testimony that the Caribbean people are not happy with the deliberate plan by the coloniser to confine them to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

The novel continues to present a horrible and difficult experience of the Caribbean as victims of slavery and the deliberate attempt to obstruct their onward march and struggle for agency, as Alford returns to Cunaripo with a sainted aura of celebrity to the discovery of yet another problem. He is suspended indefinitely for allegedly "abandoning his post of teacher without official permission" (87). However, the champion's doggedness is evident as the suspension does not achieve its desired results. Instead, it is quickly lifted when the various groups, once again, mobilise to support Alford against what they say is another attempt to punish their children. In this regard, Calvin Rodriguez addresses a press conference where he publicly condemns what government is doing and describes it as a cowardly and crude attempt to separate Alford George from his political base and take away his means of livelihood. He declares their support for the

victim, insisting that; “the people would not be hoodwinked by the gymnastics of reactionary bloodsuckers who have defined their path as standing to bar the doorway of a people’s liberation” (Salt 97). To avoid such a confrontation, Alford’s suspension is quickly lifted unconditionally. The novel thus plausibly presents the process by which the Caribbean personality has fought for both personal and communal freedom.

The overwhelming support which Alford receives during his hunger strike against the College Exhibition Examination motivates him to resign from teaching and join active politics. His representative stature and experiences in life are representation of what many Caribbean in his category go through in this multicultural, multiracial and highly stratified society. The comment of the prime minister while trying to lure Alford into politics, leaves one in doubt about the genuineness of his intentions when he directs that:

... get hold of that fella from Cascuda, that young illiterate who’s been showing off his mouth about democracy, about change-flooding the prime minister’s office with a set of reports. George, yes, Alford George. I want him close to me where I could see him. (119)

The intention of the prime minister is not to make use of Alford’s fresh ideas; rather, his intention is either to cage or devise a means to rubbish his future political career. Alford is therefore worked into an aggressive political system and is allowed to prove his strength through his actions. Rather than be a plus for him, his opinions on race relations, reparation, land redistribution, education, decision making for the ordinary Caribbean and the role of the parliamentarian as representative of his people and not his boss account for his undoing. As a candidate, he chooses a theme for his election campaign with the title; “Seeing ourselves Afresh” (122).

After winning the election, Alford becomes a cabinet minister. Unfortunately, he is not able to implement his idealistic policies, failing to fulfil his campaign promises of reparation and land redistribution

which are core issues that are associated with the history of slavery and colonialism. His attempt at reparation for his people does not receive the support of the Indians because, the Indians perceive the policy as an attempt by Alford to empower the blacks. Unfortunately, Alford does not get the desired support and cooperation from the prime minister who tactically removes and replaces him with Rattan Ramjattan, an Indian, citing the need to give a more multiracial image to the party before the next round of elections.

While defending his decision to remove Alford from office, the prime minister explains that the plan by Alford to give out government land and to make purchase of private land for members of his black community is against the democratic principle of the National Party that had kept the country stable and its various races living in harmony since independence. Alford believes that reparation would bring a new connection between then and now. While his plan for reparation and land redistribution fails, his black community is not happy with him for his inability to carry out land reforms to empower them. Similarly, the church is also against him "since his talks concerning carnival as religion" (131). He goes back to his people for the first time in three years since he became the minister but is not able to get a quorum for a meeting.

The attack on Alford by different groups gives us a hint about the relationship between Caribbean politics and racial issues. It is worthy of note that the prime minister has a number of opportunities to address the issue of reparation, land redistribution and education which would improve the condition of the blacks and prepare them to achieve self-belief from which their advancement could take off. However, he is reluctant to implement such policies because he realizes that when people have access to land and are educated, they become enlightened and consequently demand or fight for their rights. Education, which is a powerful weapon in the Caribbean people's lives, has its positive and negative consequences. Through education, Alford is able to come into contact with other people who influence his life. It is also through the process of education that Alford joins politics and

begins to understand the magnitude of the ever increasing problems of his people. He takes steps to correct this historical imbalance but he is blocked and eventually “removed as minister and cabinet member” (253). Funsho Aiyejina shares a similar view when he says that, “Education did an alienating job on him [Alford]. That same education or the process of education forms the basis of his contact with others’ (15). This comment, while acknowledging the alienating effects on the Caribbean nevertheless, appreciates education as a mobiliser as well. In the end, all groups resolve to keep Alford at arms-length. He has to decide after being sacked from cabinet whether to remain in the party as a back bencher, or resign from the party, or better still, join the opposition. Alternatively, he could form his own political party with a different ideology and approach. Yet crucially, “Alford wonders if he really made the best choice of a vocation” (130). This question reveals Alford’s misadventure in politics as he doubts if politics is the right calling for him.

Alford fails to understand that the political terrain in the Caribbean “is like a mine field that one needs to have enough experience to walk through” (189). In his reasoning, reparation and land redistribution would remove fear in his people. Nevertheless, what he fails to understand is that fear is a tool of manipulation, developed by the Caribbean political class with vested interest. The Caribbean political leaders and actors are afraid that any attempt to open the people’s closed doors through reparation and land redistribution means opening up opportunities for all; thereby lessening the power they wield. The Caribbean political class is afraid of change, while parodying it, since only confusion can keep them perpetually in power. For this reason, they are against any programme which they believe will yield freedom to the people. Besides, what frightens the political leaders the more is that when people become free, it is always difficult to effectively control them. Alford is thus blocked by the machinations of the political class from redeeming his promises to his people and reclaiming their self-respect which had been destroyed.

Alford is lured into the National Party (the ruling party) without considering his ideological differences and his earlier disagreement with it over its policies on education. He believes that as a minister of Social and Environmental Rehabilitation under the office of the prime minister, he could influence things better as an insider. Instead, he becomes a traitor to a cause over which he had invested much energy, time and resources.

It is at this point that one is able to realise that the Caribbean political class, which has foreign backing, cannot be easily dislodged in the Caribbean political arena. Rather, they will fight to maintain the status quo. While reflecting on the indifferent attitude of some Caribbean political class towards reparation and land redistribution, it is discovered that any Caribbean leader who attempts to return the black man's property that were illegally acquired by the former colonisers that "will be the last election he will ever win" (191). The prime minister knows this well and visualises the pressure that will fall on him if Alford is allowed to implement land reforms which he (Alford) believes will free the blacks from the victimhood that has strangled all of them in the Islands. Though Alford is sacked to pave the way for the re-election of the prime minister, the fact remains that Alford actually stumbles on the truth; that to save yourself, you have to save others as well, but he is incapacitated by both external and internal forces in spite of this laudable idea.

Sadly, Alford is not able to create any meaningful impact on the lives of his people during his three years as a cabinet minister. He expresses his level of frustration when he says that:

I have forgotten my mission. I have become part of the tapestry of pretence of power. I, who ought to have been one to disturb the numbing peace, have now become the keeper of that peace. I have joined the gang of overseers that help to keep this place of plantation... words that had easily slipped off my tongue, Africa, Revolution, reparation, land distribution, decision-making are now all coated with explosions and I no longer want the explosion. Not a new statue has been raised, not an old one razed. (130)

The above passage reveals Alford's level of frustrating experience while serving as a cabinet minister for three years. During these years, he is not able to change anything he met on the ground in spite of his sound ideas. He reluctantly acknowledges that it is easier to sprout slogans than to be effective in governance. His stint in politics, rather than improve the lot of his people, leaves things the way they were before he came in. His problem is that he fails to weigh the implication of reparation on the whites and Indians, so he is frustrated and is subsequently rejected by his party, his people, the whites and the Indians. Beyond the historical fact of land ownership involving the blacks in the Caribbean, we could extend this metaphor to mean that the life of the Caribbean in the region is work in progress.

Conclusion

Through this Historicist reflections, the reader is availed the opportunity of appreciating the true Caribbean situation, especially through the penetrating presentation of scenes and situations that affect the Caribbean. The political class that assumes leadership after independence in the Caribbean is not prepared to provide the needed dividends of democracy for their people. The Caribbean region is thus in danger of underdevelopment as its leaders lack vision, and are fond of stirring up hatred against the few elites who question their style of governance. This is because appeal to race and colour begin the essence of a situation where there is lack of power, shared values, competence and resources. The reader observes that though the career of the Caribbean politician who refuses to connect to the West is short and ends brutally, due to the antics of the coloniser, the ex-colonial Caribbean person is still a child who wishes to be mothered by the west.

Through New Historicist reflections, we discover that owing to its colonial heritage and legacy of slavery, indenture and colonialism, the Caribbean society lacks a unified national identity. While the European colonisers refuse to accept the reality of absolute freedom, for the Caribbean even after independence, the two dominant communities of Africa and East Indians only have one thing in common; the shared rejection of European domination. While African

slaves whose ancestors had been brought into the Caribbean territory successfully create a new culture for themselves, the Indians hold tightly to their Hindu and Asiatic traditions. All attempts at change and integration for a United Caribbean are very difficult. It is in this sense of absence of a true national spirit and lack of opportunities for the Caribbean people that they escape or try to escape into Europe and the United States of America in search of personhood. For those who choose to remain at home like Alford, the clash of values impedes their search for survival.

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