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# THE PROGNOSIS TOWARDS A CULTURAL WHOLENESS IN CARIBBEAN SOCIETY: A STUDY IN SYNTHESIS.

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## ABSTRACT

The Caribbean archipelago is a disparate region with many distinct linguistic and cultural differences but with a common historical experience of colonialism and slavery. Borne of this complexity from the distinct languages and cultural expressions, the people, desiring a common identity strove to create a homogeneous linguistic and cultural unity in spite of their variegated colonial and historical past. From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, this study attempts to project towards a synthesis drawing from the Creole cultural model advanced by Kamau Brathwaite, and supported by other writers and critics. Michelle Cliff, Louise Bennett, Raja Roa, to mention a few, deployed this concept in the use of dialect in their poetry. Furthermore, there are commonly held beliefs and expressions in music, social parlance, folklore, myths, rituals and the creative arts that command a common Caribbean identity and unity. These are geared towards forging an insistent need for the creation of a Creolised Caribbean society. Evolving from this cultural configuration of a common Caribbean consciousness, a shared memory with certain historical peculiarities in slavery, indenture and plantation experiences, the Caribbean man is assigned a distinctive role in the evolution of a monolithic Caribbean cultural identity.

**Keywords: Archipelago, Colonialism and Slavery, Linguistic and Cultural Unity, Postcolonial, Creole Cultural model, Cultural Configuration, Caribbean consciousness, Monolithic.**

## INTRODUCTION.

Some developing states in the Third World and the Caribbean societies are a conglomeration of diverse cultural, political, linguistic and social-ethnic entities, whose synthesis and harmonization into a unified political bloc poses seemingly intractable

challenges. The concept of being unified is what analysts and political philosophers have dubbed as "wholeness" in the Caribbean society, though others have used the word "national integration" also, maybe, to emphasize some extant idea or vision. This study adopts to use the word "wholeness", instead of integration, in line with Kamau Brathwaite's notion of unity and stability in Caribbean society.

Emmanuel Ihejiamaizu and Boypa Egbe have define national integration "as the building of a nation-state out of disparate social, economic, religious and geographical elements. This entails the translation of diffused and unorganised sentiments of nationalism into the spirit of citizenship" (180). This definition equates with this study's notion and concept of "wholeness" in Caribbean society. Cultural pluralism and the lack of an ideological definition is a major hitch to many nation-states' aspirations to prominence, political stability/unity and cultural wholeness.

Ever since their forced and tortuous exodus from their aboriginal homes in Africa, New World blacks have found themselves in a state of cultural and historical paralysis, resulting in a crisis of identity and what Derek Walcott calls "doctrine of humiliation" (cited by June Bobb, 111). In "Timehri", the essay Kamau Brathwaite published three years before the three books that make up his poetic opus, *The Arrivants: A World Trilogy* appeared, he asserts that "the most significant feature of West Indian life and imagination since emancipation has been its sense of rootlessness, of not belonging to the landscape; dissociation, in fact of art from the art of living" (334). It was a condition of alienation evident at all levels of society. Perhaps, it has its roots in the kind of childhood memories Brathwaite describes in *Sun Poem:* "not knowing the names of our flowers and trees /…/ we could only call our brothers robin hood/ or barnabas collins …/ (*Sun Poem, 20)*. The task and achievement of the first generation of post–colonial West Indian writers, he argues, had been to identify and analyse the fragmented consciousness

of the West Indians coming out from the crucible of plantation society. The task of the second generation, amongst which includes himself, is "having become conscious of the problem … to transcend and heal it" (345). It is heart-warming to note that Brathwaite accents that the task of achieving a culturally whole Caribbean society rests on him and his generation of writers.

Caribbean societies/nations are created from the crucible of the prolonged and excruciating experiences of slavery and colonialism. They survive today in a fragile state, threatened by external political, military, economic and cultural forces beyond their control. They have a desperate need for a coherent national ideology and cultural identity. In this respect, the Creole society model/thesis offers an approach to national integration by seeking to unite people of diverse origins in an all-encompassing ethnic-based context, with the development and creation of a developing Creole culture. The Creole cultural model is a projection of the ways in which "the conflicting influences of African and European-based practices and ideologies are seamlessly assimilated to produce a composite culture which remains mutable and open-ended" (Gilbert and Tompkins, 103). From this creation of a Creole identity and the vision of the society as a Creole community, shall evolve a synthetic mode of nationalism. Furthermore, another fundamental opinion asserts that in the West Indian socio-political history, there exist this crucial element that M. G. Smith considers as "the common culture without which West Indian nationalism cannot develop the dynamics to create a West Indian nation, …" (5/6).

Nationalism, according to Benedict Anderson, is to be understood in terms of "the large cultural system that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being" (19). Culture constitutes the representations and practices of ethnicity. Caribbean ethnicity is constituted by its Creoleness; and Creoleness has imposed upon Caribbean nationalism, European persuasions that have become hidden behind the veil of anti-colonialism. It has

served to hide features of the common identity in social and cultural practices that could have formed the bases of counter-discursive challenges to the hegemonic power control from the North Atlantic.

In spite of any perceptible differences in cultural realizations, it is still credible to say that the Caribbean is an integrated cultural region. Caribbean peoples themselves often speak as though the region was a seamless expression and community of common customs, beliefs and values. Expressions such as Caribbean foods, Caribbean music, Caribbean writing, Caribbean folklore etc, are flowingly and unceasingly used without being faulted. One may further put up a case based on aggregate knowledge and imagination, for each of these cultural forms as comprehensively and universally shared. For instance, Caribbean music as a generic type is variously associated with *salsa* in Puerto Rico, *son* in Cuba, *reggae* in Jamaica, *calypso* in Trinidad and Tabago and *meringue* in Dominican Republic. All these musical variations are marked by a common Afro-Caribbean rhythm in the use of drums and percussions, so that a unified musical region is established. In the same vein, what is considered Caribbean writing is the entire composite of the literature, both written and unwritten (scribal and oral), that discusses Caribbean history, cultural expressions, landscape, myths, folklores etc., in a peculiarly Caribbean linguistic and aesthetic forms and contexts.

The content of culture and customs attracts a wide assortment of practices which can be used to examine the claim of a core of shared values, artefacts and symbols. These include, but not limited to: music, dance, festivals, foods, aesthetics, architecture, visual art, writings, kinship patterns, attire, languages, dialects, folklore, myths, rituals, accents and material artefacts, etc. these factors are configured in to a cultural mould that gives a unique shape to the Caribbean mind. A prototype Caribbean person can be perceived as one who is a carrier of the common core of cultural consciousness that is constructed around these symbols and

practices; constituting a distinctive way of life. These cultural traits have been perceived by anthropologists to be mythical.

However mythical and imaginary these traits may be, they are adjudged as having evolved from the same environmental influences and through a similar set of historical travails and experiences in the Caribbean. Evolving from this cultural construction of a common Caribbean consciousness, a shared memory with certain historical peculiarities in slavery, indenture and plantation life, Caribbean man is assigned a distinctive role in the evolution of the contemporary Caribbean self. A distinctive history that commemorates a specific set of episodes and issues in sequences, in a people's life, is a salient factor in the analysis of a monolithic Caribbean cultural identity.

One salient way to appropriate the charge of a common cultural configuration is through an appreciation of the four-fold geo-political levels of conceiving Caribbean identity: trans-Caribbean, regional, sub-state and ethno-nationalist. It is through these models that analysts and ethnographers/anthropologists have given specific cultural shape and content to Caribbean identity. It is logical to argue that there is a trans-Caribbean self substantially forged into existence from a common history and environment, and embodying a set of unique cultural symbols and narratives.

In both his poetry and creative writings, Brathwaite focuses on finding the bases of a Caribbean unity. On discovering the things that hold the islands of the Caribbean together, he continually tries to bring his adjudged "submarine" unity to the forefront. Bridget Jones indicates that, Brathwaite offers "not a politician's glib regionalism, but a vision which honors carnival, vodoun, wood-carving, yam-growing, respect for elders, as facets of a coherent Caribbean culture, much battered but still creative, vitally sustaining" (87). Although always

acknowledging his specific grounding in his Barbadian or ("Barabajan") culture, Brathwaite strives to provide the picture of a holistic Caribbeanness in his works.

Edouard Glissant, the Martinican theorist and critic in his classic *Caribbean Discourse* he posits that, Caribbeanness, or *antillanite* is "a fragile reality" which is "threatened" because it is "not inscribed in consciousness" (221). Glissant's specificity avoids the essentialism that may be expected from such terms as "Caribbeanness". Caribbeanness is not some insubstantial, inexplicable connection between the people living in the same region, rather, it is specifically based on shared experiences: it is the bases of a consciousness. The sharing may not be conscious, but the idea is to make it conscious, to protect it by stating it. In Brathwaite's works, he strives to produce this statement of Caribbean unity.

In other words, representing Caribbean consciousness marks an attempt by any writer to raise a cultural dialectic. Glissant's consciousness is associated with what Derek Walcott in his poem called "Omeros" refers to as the "Prophetic song": "Now we heard the griot muttering his **prophetic song** (my emphasis) of sorrows that would be past. It was a note, long-drawn and endless in its winding like the brown river's tongue" (148), which signifies how all indigenes must restore the Caribbean nation within themselves. Walcott's poem makes a connection between representations of transcendental ancestry and its redemptive nature. For Walcott, the notion of a redeemed culture is satisfactory because the historical are interweaved in a colonial and post-colonial journey of repossession. Where "Omeros" focuses on cyclical realm (Western Imperialism/West Indian culture) of repossession, Brathwaite's poetry more extensively targets the achievement of repossessive culture in and of the Caribbean itself. Cultural despair in the Caribbean makes African heritage a necessity for his (Brathwaite's) personae: "in various dimensions of his work, Brathwaite has developed in somewhat different ways this perception of Caribbean unity grounded in shared African heartland" (Bridget Jones,

87). Focusing on cultural attrition, Brathwaite conflates literature and culture as spaces/sites in which West Indians can embrace their African inheritances.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study shall adopt and apply the postcolonial theory in the explication and synthetisation of the diverse issues discussed here. Postcolonial criticism/postcolonial studies is a kind of cultural criticism; it deal with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies. It establishes the binaries inherent in the concept of otherness, as propagated by agents of the metropole against the colonised people. Principally, the proponents of the theory interrogate the ways in which writers from colonised countries try to celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from the colonisers. Furthermore, the theory focuses on the way in which literature of the colonising culture distorts experiences and realities, and inscribes inferiority on the colonised people. In an essay entitled, "Postcolonial Criticism", Homi K. Bhabha shows how certain cultures misrepresent other cultures, with the primary objective of "… extending their political and social domination in the modern world order" (Rose Murfin and Supryia Ray, 295).

Rose Murfin and Supryia Ray attempt to clarify that "the term postcolonial is usually used broadly to refer to the study of works written at any point after colonisation first occurred in a given country, … *used more specifically to refer to the analysis of texts and other cultural discourses that emerged after the end of the colonial period … (295,* mine emphasis). Bill Ashcroft et al affirms that "the term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experiences of societies that were former European colonies" (168). Many Caribbean and Third World writers and critics have through their works sought to debunk the unsavoury stories and remarks by Western writers that had created dark clouds and shadows in the mind of their people about their history and identity.

The Postcolonial theory is also anchored on the concept of resistance: of resistance as subversion and opposition. This is about the rebuttal of every sense/act of detraction by colonising agency. This is related to the need for human dignity, liberty, individuality, self-esteem, etc., which have not been held in corresponding degree or manner, in the coloniser's view of mankind. This is one of the several and recurrent issues identified by M. H. Abrams in his definition of the term: "the rejection of the "master-narrative" of Western imperialism … and its replacement by a counter-narrative in which the colonial cultures fight their way into a world history written by Europeans" (245).

In the Caribbean, female writers like Louise Bennett and Michelle Cliff in their poetry have focused on the issues of language, identity, gender and race. Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming and other Caribbean writers celebrate the virtues of African cultures in the New World, with a view to establishing a literary aesthetics. This had been accented by many critics as Gordon Rohlehr, Glen L. Richards, Verene A. Shepherd etc.

**Cultural Dialectics towards a Creole Continuum.**

In an interview with Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite observes that unlike the African and European cultures that influence them "as a Caribbean person, we start with ruins and our responsibility is to rebuild those fragments into a whole society. We have always been concerned with the rediscovery of source, the revitalization of origins" (23). Elsewhere in his treatise, *Contradictory Omen*, he advises, "the idea is to try to see the fragments/whole" (7). This idea is related to Glissant's notion of layering fragments to create a Caribbean discourse and thus a Caribbean identity and wholeness. On his part, Brathwaite takes Glissant's theory a step further by highlighting both the fragments and the whole; thus we read him both as Barbadian and Caribbean.

Although writing on Brathwaite's relationship with jazz, Paul Naylor indicates that for Brathwaite, the subversiveness of jazz "arc[s] out from the local (Barabajan literature) to the regional (Caribbean literature) to the colonial (English literature) to a global aesthetics that reaches Africa" (144). This is applicable to Brathwaite's poetry. His works also follow the arc of the archipelago to embrace the entire Caribbean region. For Brathwaite then, one must nurture the local in order to nurture the regional, or global; thus Brathwaite's works can be simultaneously and intensely personal while reflecting sensitivity towards, and awareness of Caribbeanness. Gordon Rohlehr notes Brathwaite's belief in self-knowledge as a prerequisite for communal progress: "… Brathwaite believes that personal epiphany must precede the communal" (174). Before an artist can determine a collective identity, he must examine himself and his own identity, thus Brathwaite opens the door to investigating not only his Caribbean identity in particular, but all Caribbean identity.

Implicit in this self/community exploration, is the consciousness of history; Brathwaite's background in history makes him strategically prepared to delve into his own, his country's and his region's past. Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes that in Brathwaite's work "acknowledgement of the past becomes the basis of strengthening the present and opening out to the future" (679). Scholars are unanimous that by recognizing a shared past, Brathwaite sets the ground for collective Caribbean present and future. Glissant declares that it is the writer's duty to examine his people obsession with the past, a past that has to become history, and to "show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present" (64). This is precisely what Brathwaite tries to do in his works, especially, *The Arrivants,* where he explores the past and relates explicitly to his Caribbean present.

Brathwaite's reliance on history illuminates Glissant's concept of *reversion* (return). In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant details two approaches to dealing with the displacement he

sees as the Caribbean situation. The first, *reversion* (return), refers to a longing to return to the homeland. The second, *diversion (*detour), less clearly defined, but generally seems to incorporate ways of hiding the former culture within the structure of the new (Quasi-Creolization). Glissant presents Creole as an example of *diversion.* He indicates that neither of these strategies is mutually exclusive, but argues that:

> Diversion (detour) is not a useful ply unless it is nourished by reversion (return); not a return for longing for origins, to some mutable state of Being, but a return to a point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately be put to work the forces of creolization, or perish (260).

Brathwaite's poetry incorporates in a seamless union these twin forces of return and detour. He reaches back to Africa, which he portrays as the "point of entanglement", but without losing sight of the current Caribbean situation. In his essay, "Timehri", Brathwaite emphasizes that for Caribbean writers and critics, "[w]hat is important is the primordial nature of the two cultures [African and Amerindian] and the potent spiritual and artistic connections between them and the present" (350). Only by a return to the "point of entanglement" can we hope to possess the present and the future. It is here that Brathwaite hopes to discover a creolized "word for object, image for the word" (350).

Brathwaite's time in Africa reaffirmed for him the links between the culture here and in Caribbean. While living in Ghana, he recognized many African practices as similar to those he had seen in Caribbean:

> The most important event so far, I would think, in my life, to have gone there and to suddenly, no, not suddenly,

> slowly, realize that what I was seeing there in Ghana is what I had known back in Barbados… I began to say, I know this thing, I know this and I began to connect the Caribbean with the African experience (11-12).

For Brathwaite, these connections between the cultures confirm Africa as the "point of entanglements", providing some 'Timehri-like' roots, however tenuous.

The healing and regenerative influence of the African-rooted experience on the psyche of the West Indian in Brathwaite is brilliantly captured by Gordon Rohlehr. He indicates that this exposure impacts positively towards self-realization and moral-upliftment. He affirms that "in Ghana, Brathwaite gradually came to the conviction that a spiritual realization of Africa was a necessary stage in the movement towards wholeness and self-knowledge of the Afro-Caribbean man" (3). This ennobling process of the widening and deepening of the Caribbean man's consciousness is celebrated lusciously in his poetry as a reawakening onto literary tradition couched on folk-hallowed grounds. Brathwaite affirms further that "West Africa had given me a sense of place, of belonging, and that place, and belonging, I knew, was West Indies,…" (Qtd. Rohlehr, 12)

Brathwaite's desire in his creative and critical explorations can be characterized as a re-evaluation of those ex-African cultural imprints in the West Indies which have been discountenanced by Eurocentric school of thought and consequently repressed, or rejected by the mainstream thought and practice in the West Indies. Thus, Gordon Rohlehr's comment on the aim and purpose of the *The Arrivants* is also true of Brathwaite's criticism; he affirms that Brathwaite's entire body of critical and creative writing "… can therefore be seen as a work involving the slow reclamation of spiritual ground through the re-education of a Black mind towards the acceptance of its past, its face, and its ground" (21).

The reclamation of this spiritual and ideological ground provides the West Indian artist with the valuable resource to challenge and overcome his colonial "poetic precursors" (Harold Bloom). The reassertion of African cultural influence in the West Indies destabilizes Eurocentric representations of West Indies ontology and provides the possibility of artistically reconstructing European hegemony in the region. This is the valuable artistic and political potential which Brathwaite recognizes in the reclamation process. Without accepting the value of and the need for such spiritual and ideological reclamation, the West Indies is doomed to exist in a perpetual twilight of invisibility. Gordon Rohlehr acknowledges the political and ontological intent of Brathwaite's polemics when he states that:

> The entire point of *Rights of Passage* has been that void and a sense of "nothing" in Black history that have been the result of a failure on the part of black people, including creative writers who function as historians of sensibility, to place positive value on what has been created. The (Black) remains "invisible" so long as he refuses his own tradition of pain and craftsmanship (54).

Thus Brathwaite's continuous emphasis is on the revelation that refutes V.S. Naipaul's and James Anthony Froude's claim, and assert unabashedly that much was created in the West Indies by the marginalized people, who are truly the purveyors of their own history.

Rohlehr's characterization of West Indian creative writers as "historians of sensibility" is an important point which Brathwaite himself examined in his 'Metaphor of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez'. In this narrative that combines poetry and prose, Brathwaite addresses amongst other issues, the question of the West Indian critic's responsibility and relevance to the stability and growth of the West Indian society. He argues

that "… our literary criticism is really meaningless unless it is grounded in historical psycho-analysis; because what our writers are witnesses of – thanks to their especial sensibilities and powers of expression – is the effect of cultural catastrophe on the West Indian mind and action: …(237). From the quoted passage, it is apparent that Brathwaite strives to reassert the connectedness of the literary and the historical. He disdains ahistorical criticism which confers unqualified presence on the word, without due connect to the situations it seeks to explicate.

In the poem "Folkway", Brathwaite draws on the African philosophy of communality and the children's respect for their parents and the elderly, through which springs the bases of and essence for communal wholeness and advancement. In the poem, Brathwaite expresses poetic angst against Tom's children for their refusal to understand and appreciate the past to create a better future. They are rather angered at their father's subservient character, preferring a rebellion against the system that be-labors them. It is against these attitudes that Rohlehr advices that:

> In Akan philosophy which underlies the entire trilogy, there is no room for tribal amnesia. A child must reclaim the past by remembering his ancestors; the remembered ancestor then works for the well-being of the group. This is the only way that the past may be redeemed, the present may become meaningful, and the future bear fruit (31/32).

**Conclusion.**

The sense of despair in the disparaged psyche of the West Indians established in the denunciating remarks of V. S. Naipaul: "How can the history of West Indian futility be written? … History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (29), receives due redress from Brathwaite's call for a Creole cultural model, to assuage

the perceived cultural vacuity in the New World situation, and enforce a sense of wholeness in their psyche. Micheal Dash attests to the import of Brathwaite's affirmation of a sense of communion and spiritual value in the New World, when he avers that "Brathwaite's trilogy can be conceived as a demonstration of how a writer can emerge from such a despairing attitude to the Caribbean. *The Arrivants* can be read as a metaphor of a literary process, namely an attempt to redeem through literary means a world thought to be trivial and debased" (217).

Cultural regeneration falls in tow with flaming desire to assert communal and generational identity. The poet's role in re-creating a sense of rectitude from the past, what he Brathwaite would term "Wholeness", is in communion with Micheal Dash's summation quoted earlier. When Brathwaite wrote *The Arrivants*, obviously it was borne out of the need to fashion something torn and new from broken grounds of Caribbean history. This avowal and innovative spirit signals a restorative philosophy of history and art which takes fragmentation, catastrophe and trauma as both the beginnings of, and routes towards new sense of culture, place, nation and identity from a creolized Caribbean culture.

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